Reckoning with Remembrance: The Contemporary Ballad and the Black Tradition

…it was in school that I learned how to be an autodidact.

—Kevin Young

This talk has two main take-aways: first, the contemporary ballad functions as a distinctive kind of “document/monument”—a term John Guillory (2016) recuperates from the art historian Erwin Panofsky to talk about the object of humanistic study—and second, many contemporary black writers engage the ballad discrepantly, in the slash or “break” between documentality and monumentality. Guillory summarizes Panofky’s terms this way:

By “monuments,” Panofsky refers to all of those human artifacts, actions, or ideas that have urgent meaning for us in the present. By “document,” he refers to all of those traces or records by means of which we recover monuments.

For Panofsky, both documents and monuments are records that teach [docere], ‘recall to mind,’ and ‘warn’ [monere]: they are instruments of inquiry and products of cultural processes. His example is a fifteenth century altarpiece. What distinguishes them from one another is in part what we could call disciplinary boundary conditions like the ones Mullen’s “aesthetic apartheid,” Giscombe’s “mutating text,” Young’s “counterfeit tradition,” and Mackey’s “contraband studies” all speak to (see the second page of the handout). ¹ All of these terms name strategies that are pedagogical, autodidactic, self-reflexive, and, essentially poetic in their resistance to academic mastery and disciplinary territorialism. As the handout suggests, I think of these terms under the rubric of what Melvin Tolson wittily dubbed, after William Empson, “the eighth type of ambiguity.” Tolson meant racial and ethnic ambiguity; in my view, this ambiguity usefully situates the cross-culturality, sampling, mixing, and remixing these writers practice and sponsor, and speaks to their work’s characteristic assembling and

¹ Panofsky offers those between an art historian, a philologist, and an historian of medicine, all of which would interpret a given record as a different sort of object or monument.
dissembling, the disavowing and fictioneering, of “broken claim(s) to connection” central to how they remake the black tradition. These practices disrupt the racialized valences the “romance of orality” tends to take on in conventional accounts of the ballad’s place in this tradition, as well as the appraisal of the singular authentic black “voice” as the definitive feature of what Mullen calls the “aesthetic turf that exists for black writers.”

Against such accounts, these writers use balladry as a kind of collective, improvisational set of “recording practices”: their poetry is at once salvage operation and imaginative reelaboration of knowledge gained from repeated encounters with the parochial segregation of “poetry” and “not poetry.” They use the ballad’s transmediality—its existence as both text and tune—to open up a space between rigid notions of documentality and monumentality that undergird these determinations. And in this space, they make an unruly noise:

go ahead and sing the blues
then ask for forgiveness
you can’t do everything
and still be saved
update old records

---

2 The phrase is from Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986, 54).
3 The phrase is Maureen McClane’s. As Evie Shockley argues (2011) we can speak, in the black tradition, not only of a romance of orality, but also of vernacularity and musicality, of “the Black Aesthetic.” While I do read these poets as invested in what McClane (2008) calls the "trans- and inter-medial stakes of poesis," I’m trying to think about this investment as part of a larger effort to rework disciplinary constraints institutionalized in the University through the curriculum and the syllabus, as well as, as Mullen writes in *Muse & Drudge*, by "degrees and pedigrees").
4 The phrase is Mullen’s. Mullen observes (2012, 201): “One of the questions or problems for me is the kind of aesthetic turf that exists for black writers, and how black writers who do not fit into the notion of what black turf is can sometimes be overlooked or forgotten or go unread, because people require interpretive strategies related to their notion of the black canon, or what it means to be outside the black canon. There are certain examples, like Bob Kaufman, Melvin Tolson, LeRoi Jones (before he became Baraka) or Stephen Jonas. Robert Hayden, even… in some sense on the edge of a black tradition, because the black tradition is being constructed as based in orality, and as concerned with a black subjectivity in language that is speech-like." Throughout the interviews published in *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be*, Mullen repeatedly talks about using *both* orality — or “speakerly” — and writerly dimensions of the text. See pp. xiv, 10, 79-80, 179, 213, 202, 216.
5 The point is that it’s more than just a device. It’s more than just a trope. It’s almost like everybody has to, say, comb that moment into their recording practices, just to remind themselves, and to let you know, that this is where it is that music comes from (Undercommons 129).
tune around the verses
fast time and swing out
head set in a groove

felt some good sounds
but didn’t have the time
sing it in my voice
put words in like I want them

noise in the market
my mustang done slowed down
tore up bad now
put a ruination on it

—from *Muse & Drudge*, by Harryette Mullen

Tempting for the voice to locate its noise, to speak of or from.

—from "Afro-Prairie," by Cecil S. Giscombe

As Amiri Baraka (1963, 209) wrote of Miles Davis, the work of Mullen, Giscombe, and others doesn’t play the ballad, literary or otherwise, straight. They put a ruination on it. They make a noise in the market, a cacophonous effervescence that is essentially social and disruptive of the monumentalizing function of canons and curricula. In the largest sense, the kind of noise these ballads make is the noise of a collective demand, multiply voiced and multiply formed: to reckon and record, to listen and remake. In their work this demand gets situated and re-situated “around the verses”: it’s hearable but essentially unlocatable—“bluish,” as Mullen memorably puts it. And though it may not “speak of or from,” it does speak toward, with, against, and across, constituted as it is by the noisy knowledge others’ words variously make

---

6 In his discussion of the nature and structure of collective demands, Fred Moten (2013, 135) asks: “What if authoritative speech is detached from the notion of a univocal speaker? What if authoritative speech is actually given in the multiplicity and the multivocality of the demand?” Moten points to “the return to collective improvisational practices” as an instance of “saying ‘we are making a music which is complex enough and rich enough so that when you listen to it you are hearing multiple voices, multiply formed voices.’ Such an articulation rhymes with Mullen’s effort to “salvage and find imaginative uses for knowledge” (2006, vii) and with what Bryan Wagner (2009, 237) calls “the possibility of hearing the sounds of others in your own voice.”
The central demand of balladry for these writers is not negative—about deprivation, lack, what has been lost—but about what, collectively, to save, what to keep—and what, in Mullen’s words, to salvage and find imaginative uses for. “Salvage” seems such an apt word for the dynamic between documentality and monumentality in the balladry of these writers because it reminds us of the limitations, the broken connections, their discrepant engagement with the ballad lays claim to. Because the records of the black tradition are marked by historical suppression, both the potential infiniteness of documentality and the finiteness and ordering function of monumentality are thrown into question. One result is that works in the black tradition are both distinctively under- and over-monumentalized. Nevertheless, limits, gaps and incompleteness have always been imaginative sites of reckoning and creation. In the break between documentality and monumentality, this balladry of salvage and imaginative reuse happily breaks down the kind of total reversibility Panofsky theorized as definitive of the object of humanistic study. As objects to be realized in—or at the very least, imagined in relation to—a curriculum, these writers’ work suggests that such a fantasy will never obtain; reversibility is neither wholly realizable nor desirable. As in Giscombe and Mullen’s work, gaps and incompleteness are not so much definitive of the black tradition as its chosen, generative preconditions: part of what to keep, what to salvage.

Mullen and Giscombe’s discrepant engagements with the black tradition likewise remind us of the ballad’s discrepant position in literary and disciplinary history—how, for instance, the ballad has variously been interpreted as “illiterature,” “orature,” the obsolescing,

---

7 Wagner (295) links this “performance of meta-voice or the pursuit of an alternative voice” to Mackey’s “Cante Moro,” Moten’s chapter “Black Mo’nin and the Sound of the Phonograph” in In the Break, and the work of Lawrence Kramer and Robert Kaufman.
vulgar, streetwise other of “poetry”; or, more recently, as the core initiatory New Critical
genre of lyricization, training generations of undergraduates to be good, orderly lyric readers. ⁸
But at the same time, the contemporary ballad also contains within it a call to disorder: “every
border orders disorder,” Mullen’s poem asserts. The pun being, as Evie Shockley (2011, 103)
points out, “that borders not only organize disorder of various kinds, but demand it.” Mullen’s
bluish stanza—four inconsistently rhymed quatrains per page spanning 320 quatrains
disposed in a various, playful array of units—and Giscombe’s sentences—fielding questions,
recalling songs, less disjunctive than wildly conjunctive and mobile, moving “across the
junctions”—engage the ballad as a counterfeit form, an occasion for this disordering demand. ⁹

Giscombe’s two poems titled “Ballad Values” (on the first page of the handout) also
draw attention to the cultural valuation of ballads, fielding questions about processes of
authentication and the naturalization of aesthetic borders that have long played a role in the
determination of “good music.” As Giscombe (2016) defines the border town, so could we
define these writers’ ballads: “drop dead racial, multiply tongued, sexually difficult,
ambiguously urban, a figure for the poetic: fashion that.” This imperative, to “fashion that,” is
part of the collective demand the contemporary ballad takes as its occasion: to make a record
where there is none, to improvise a poem made of others’ voices, to decide what to salvage,
what to put to imaginative use, and what to do with that choice.

Underlying these writers’ use of the ballad is a theory of blackness as multiple and
multiply determined; as a generative force that denaturalizes and unlearns boundaries; that

⁸ I take the phrase “discrepant engagement” from Nathaniel Mackey’s critical study by that name. On the ballad
as illiterature, see Friedman. On the ballad as the key initiatory genre of New Criticism, see Newman.
⁹ Drawing on Baraka’s Blues People, Shockley (98) points out that “Langston Hughes, who brought the blues into
poetry, works with both [the] quatrain-based, eight-bar blues and the more familiar three-line [AAB] form. The
blues-inflected quatrain is perfect for Mullen’s purposes,” she argues, “because unlike the ballad quatrain, it is
not tied to the presumption of linear narrative.” In a sense, Mullen’s bluish stanzas counterfeit both the English
traditionary folk ballad and the classic twelve-bar blues.
unfixes; that wants, to paraphrase Houston Baker, to deform “mastery” and its unlearn arguments; to interrogate cultural and disciplinary constructions of blackness; to create alternatives. What does the gap in the “thin hedge” of Giscombe’s “Afro-Prairie” – the break in the enclosure, the absence in the historical record–call for if not this stepping through, “again and again,” into alternative orders, different modes of perception and reckoning?

Oren Izenberg (2013, 189) conjectures that “If the contemporary poet lives in a world in which it is not possible to be genuinely or permanently ‘expelled from the academies for crazy’ –a world in which the academics, like ‘Howl’s Moloch, embody the condition of knowledge itself, its economy of reason and unreason, its structures of hierarchy, its sanctioned forms of agency – then the artist’s inescapable relation to them must at least be marked by an imagined sense of unbelonging and constant passage…” This holds true, I think, for the writers under consideration here, all of whom have thought deeply about their intellectual and social formations and “the plight of the poet-scholar” from the positions they inhabit within research universities. That said, I think we can make some important if provisional distinctions. First, as writers who negotiate in particular ways how to be “in but not of” the University, their work blurs the boundary between the book to be read and the object to be beheld (to use Izenberg’s phrasing), but they are arguably as interested in blurring the boundary between the book to be read and the object to be heard. This boundary echoes in the other meanings of “record” in their work—LP, album, disc—poesis

---

10 Mackey at Duke University; Young at Emory University; Giscombe, formerly at Penn State University, now at U.C. Berkeley; Mullen at UCLA
11 I take the phrase from the opening paragraph of Harney and Moten (2013, 26): “To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.”
for these writers is not only about poem-making, but record-making.

Second, according to Izenberg (197), Susan Howe achieves “a curious sort of freedom only achievable – or legible – within institutions.” He points to Howe’s acknowledgement in Birth-Mark (1993, 2): “I have trespassed into the disciplines of American Studies and Textual Criticism through my need to fathom what wildness and absolute freedom is the nature of expression.” Yet different sorts of freedom and different dynamics of documentality/monumentality obtain when “unbelonging and constant passage” are taken not for their “imagined sense” alone, but as social and historical facts. Fugitivity by another name, unbelonging and constant passage are for these writers conditions of knowledge, poesis, and collectivity, and material features of the historical record. For this reason, the freedom of black cultural expression is conceived less in terms of “wildness” and the “absolute,” and more in terms of broken connections. Though arguably always entailing trespass into institutional and disciplinary boundaries and boundary conditions, balladry also surfaces in these writers’ work as flight, a trespass out. That is, while Mackey’s “contraband studies” (2016, 186) is about a smuggling into the curriculum different objects of study, the extracurricular materials their ballads absorb necessarily remain marked by fugitivity: they must be smuggled out, too.

If there is a fundamental distinction in the recursive dynamics of documentality and monumentality between the postmodern ballads of writers like Howe and Grossman, and those of Mullen, Giscombe, Mackey, and others, whose discrepant ballads engage the ballad’s particular situation in the black tradition, it may be that through the ballad these latter writers trespass not only into different disciplines—folklore studies, African American studies, black studies, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, lyric studies, musicology, and on—but out of,

---

12 See, for instance, Mackey’s manifesto “Destination Out,” in Paracritical Hinge.
and under, them.

A final observation: this institutional trespass is temporal as well as spatial. This is why I like to think of these discrepant engagements with the ballad as “reckonings,” because the word denotes both retrospection and prospection, a call to arrange and to heed, to account for the present in order to address a futural dimension, one that includes the future anterior and what Tyrone Williams (2016) recently called the “future interior.” This is a contemporary balladry for remembrance, to use Robert Hayden's phrase, that imagines the institutional conditions for poetry as spatially and temporally extensive (moving outward, into futures) and fugitive (as flight), and at the same time orients the practice of balladry toward a reckoning with how real institutional constraints on the present shape the forms of future meaning. Or as Margaret Walker put it, (2002, 184) these writers turn to the ballad “to write about the future that [they] do not see, but is evident in everything [they] do and hear.” The collective demand of these discrepant engagements with the ballad is thus not only to record and listen to the sounds of the past and present, but to make records capable of hearing in this past and present some future noise.

Bibliography
Mackey, Nathaniel. “The Far Side of Mastery.” Interview with Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Susan