A=B=L=A=C=K=W=O=M=A=N POETICS

ERICA HUNT'S PROSE POETRY

TYRONE WILLIAMS

In her engagement with the Language School of Poetry and the legacy of Black and African-American poetry, Erica Hunt has attempted to recast the linguistic structures of cultural politics by eschewing normative literary procedures in order to "postmodernize" "black" themes and "blacken" neo- and post-modernist literary procedures. In particular, Hunt is concerned with the construction of a social fabric that overdetermines the normative in black literary production, whether the norm in question is methodological or thematic. Hunt's strategies cannot, however, be reduced to a rethinking of mere racial politics since they also involve a rethinking of the overdetermination of gender politics. In this regard, Hunt's deployment of "experimental" poetic procedures in order to reshape the overlapping but distinct social, cultural and political categories that constitute what we may nonetheless name in the singular—a black woman—is specific to the history of her generation which includes, among a few others, Harryette Mullen. I thus distinguish their postmodern black poetic strategies from that of a more recent generation of experimental African-American women that includes Deborah Richards, Duriel E. Harris and Dawn Lundy Martin, to say nothing of Claudia Rankine. Altogether these women writers of (to greater and lesser degrees) African descent, represent a tangent within Pan-African poetic production quite distinct from that of other black and African-American women poets like Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Elizabeth Alexander, Natasha Trethewey, and Tracey K. Smith.

The differences between experimental and mainstream tendencies within a generation of poets (e.g., Harris and Smith) has its analogue between generations, between those women poets who developed under the rubric of "black" and those who developed under the rubric of "African American," even if both generations acknowledge and articulate a necessary symbiosis between the two terms and the two generations. Insofar as a great deal of current mainstream poetry by African-American women poets like Alexander, Trethewey and Smith tends to situate itself within the norms of a putative "black" cultural tradition, Erica Hunt's engagement with the experimental can be read as pre-African-American[1] in relation to a relatively young generation of women poets (e.g., Smith and Trethewey) and non-black in relation to an older generation of poets (Clifton and Dove) since the work of these poets from two different generations deploy similar, normative poetic procedures. As is clear from the above, I am using the terms "black" and "African American" to differentiate both generations and modes of poetic production. I will attempt to spell out the reasons for doing so below. For now I want to re-emphasize the multiple lineages of Hunt's work. Insofar as it recalls and engages the "experimental" wing of the Black Arts Movement (e.g., the early work of Sanchez), Hunt's writing cannot be severed from a black literary tra-

dition. And inasmuch as it engages, as well, the Symbolist and Surrealist predecessors of and tendencies within the Language School, it cannot be severed from an important sector of international post-romantic poetics. Hunt's work deserves an extensive analysis that would treat all of its overlapping and intersecting vectors, but such a project is well beyond the scope of this essay. In this general, yet narrow, overview of some of Hunt's published literary work—*Piece Logic*, *Arcade*, and *Local History*—I delineate its relation to the work of both "younger" African-American poets and "older" Black Arts poets in terms of historical and aesthetic differences. This relation will also reveal certain connections between generational and political self-naming (colored, Negro, black, Afro-American, African-American) and aesthetic decisions. Finally, I claim that Hunt undermines the notion of a homogenous "black tradition" and "black poetics" in historically and aesthetically specific ways that are quite distinct from more mainstream projects out to achieve similar results. First, however, I want to address this question: What does it mean to call oneself colored, Negro, black, and/or African-American?

Each generation of African-European and African descendants in the United States has named itself according to a number of protocols: cultural renewal (e.g., The New Negro), social aggregate (e.g., colored people), political ideology (e.g., black power), cross-cultural history (e.g., Afro-American) and hip-hop revisionism (e.g., African-American). Though deployed according to successive epochs in the history of African descendants in the United States, these names are not solely generational. Because of what they signify in a given historical and political context, the terms are adopted or rejected according to both communal and individual needs and desires. And since African descendants are no more homogenous than any other group (racial or ethnic) living in the United States for more than two generations, all these names still survive, still are used, today. Stanley Crouch famously, or infamously, refers to himself and all African-European descendants in the United States as Negroes though he was once self-defined as a black militant. On the other hand, Albert Murray has always referred to himself as Negro, colored and, more generally, omni-American. What complicates the processes of self-naming even more is that the alleged political and cultural denotations of each term function as variables within the currency of racial and ethnic identification. For example, many hip-hop rappers and aficionados, who may identify themselves as African-American, will deploy the term black precisely because it still retains political and cultural power as an index of militancy and pride. And the term Negro, which took heavy fire in the context of the Black Arts Movement, is still, today, used as a term of insult, a putdown since it, along with colored, gets used chronologically (pre-Civil Rights and pre-Black Power) and politically (social, if not economic, conservatism).

All the above notwithstanding, if we think of a black generation as a reference to those young men and women who came of age in the 1960's and African-Americans as a reference to those young men and women who came of age in the 1980's, if black refers, still, to the blunt assertion of power and pride, if African-American refers to hip-hop-inspired boosterism under globalization and alternative modes of valuation, then Erica Hunt's work is situated amidst the clarion failures of social and cultural revolution and the encroachment of the public realm into the private, largely by way of a consumerist ethos.[2] In terms of contemporary literary producion, for example, black and African-American refer to the "publicizing" and literal publication of artists under certain houses or presses (e.g., the history of Third World Press vs. that of Graywolf Press) whose aesthetic valences reflect certain segments of the larger social, cultural and political landscapes. Thus Black and African American do not refer solely to the specific political or aesthetic allegiances of a given author; rather, these names refer, in this context, to the political and aesthetic effects of a given body of work. I am

interested in how these works work—or play—in and with their various intersecting and overlapping publics.

Consider, for example, the work of a Rita Dove which, like that of a Paul Laurence Dunbar and a Robert Hayden, is predicated on the premise that the transcendental qualities of poetry stabilize channels of exchange between fluctuating, developing cultures, be they Negro, colored or black, pre-modern, modern or postmodern. Like Dunbar and Hayden, Dove has written poems inflected and uninflected by what Stephen Henderson called black mascons.[3] The commercial success and critical acclaim that attended Dunbar's Negro-inflected "dialect" poems, first collected as *Lyrics of Lowly Lif*e, is analogous to Hayden's black-inflected *American Journal*, published a century after *Lyrics* and nominated for a National Book Award. Five years after Hayden's nomination, Dove would publish her "colored people"-inflected, Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Thomas and Beulah*. The fate of these poets' "standard English" or uninflected poetry, however, is instructive. Dunbar's most anthologized poems today, "We Wear The Mask" and "Sympathy," both written in "standard English," self-reflexively lament their eclipse by his then more commercially successful dialect poems. Hayden's poetry is as obsessed with the touchstones—both subjects and events—of black history as any Black Arts poet, but it is a poetry written in standard English and fairly traditional verse forms (free or metrical). Hayden's muted and short-lived acclaim within a largely conservative literary establishment clinched the case for two antagonists: those who had long felt his thematic concerns were too "black" to deserve the mantle of a major American poet and those who felt his poetic strategies were too "white" for an emerging cultural nationalism.[4] Dove's poetry, almost exclusively written in standard English, has had a better fate than that of Dunbar or Hayden, due in no small part to the homeostasis achieved by normative poetic procedures and methods which tend to countervail the complement of feminist and racial inflections. Unlike Dunbar, torn by anxiety between an established European literary tradition, a nascent Anglo-American literary tradition and an emerging Negro literary tradition, unlike Hayden, at pains to answer the call of European modernism in the figure of his mentor, W.H. Auden, to answer the call of black history severed from black power, and to answer the call of his Baha'i faith, Dove seems relatively secure, perhaps even placid, to the extent her work intersects and overlaps with black and non-black sectors of the literary establishments. Moreover, Dove has acknowledged the debt she owes to the Black Arts Movement, claiming that those writers' successful affirmation of black power in all its forms granted her the thematic and procedural "space" to treat both black and non-black subject matter under normative poetic procedures now "cleansed" of any taint of racial superiority.[5] Free, perhaps, of the insecurity and doubt about "Negro culture" and "Negro dialect" that plagued Dunbar, Dove can shuttle back and forth between black and non-black subject matter as befits her international stature as a poet. Unlike Hayden's confrontation with, and refutation of, what he viewed as a self-delimited poetics in the Black Arts Movement, Dove can acknowledge her debt to a poetics which is nonetheless refuted at every level of articulation and structure by her own, more normative, poetics.

Erica Hunt's poetic procedures also open out onto "non-black" territory, but unlike Dunbar, Hayden or Dove, Hunt's work is motivated less by the presumption of aesthetic transcendentalism than by a progressive politics that deploys avant-garde forms and methods to uproot politically retrogressive values within and without black communities (literary and otherwise). Hunt's apparent preferred term of self-reference in terms of race and ethnicity is black. Ditto for Rita Dove. Clearly, however, black means something quite different for each of these poets whose explicit subject matter is only occasionally gendered and racialized. For Dove, black, shorn of its cultural nationalist implications, refers primarily to a diachronic, generational category;

for Hunt, black, invested with Pan-African and cross-cultural implications, constitutes a synchronic political category. Both definitions differ significantly from that articulated by the progenitors of the cultural nationalist and Black Arts Movements.

As Aldon L. Nielsen has demonstrated in his important recovery of lost black voices,[6] the canonization of certain poets from the Black Arts Movement reflects a certain "lag" in terms of innovative criticism and archival research as well as a certain amnesia among groups of avant-garde poets (e.g., some of the Language Poets) and critics (e.g., mainstream black criticism). More important, a great number of painters, sculptors and poets—Kara Walker, Romare Bearden, Norman H. Pritchard or Julie Fields, for example—drew on innovative musics (jazz and blues) derived from both native and diasporic European, African and Asian traditions. Given, then, the widespread experimentation with form that characterized Afro-, Anglo- and Jewish-American literary productions at the inception of, and beyond, the 20th century, given the foundation (in part) of that experimentation in African, Asian and diasporic aesthetics, the valorization and canonization of black musics and musicians as innovative contributors, the erasure or marginalization of equally innovative black writers and plastic artists, points to the way both white and black critics of black culture tend to hypostatize the oral and musical traditions of Pan-African and Asian cultures at the expense of their plastic and written arts. Yet many of the poets and artists affiliated with, or influenced by, the Black Arts Movement—Nathaniel Mackey, Ed Roberson, Lorenzo Thomas, Julia Fields, Norman Pritchard, etc.—self-consciously traced their influences back to Asian and African writing traditions. Writing during a period marked by a renewed interest in Africology in general and Egyptology in particular, these writers meld form with content as they deploy hieroglyphics, jazz and blues motifs and forms (musical and verbal) and grammatical/syntactical forms derived from Black English to reformulate the limits of poetic utterance within Western literary history.

In Hunt's work we read a poetics crisscrossing a number of poetic traditions, movements and camps. If we ask the question that Toni Morrison reportedly asked—can you tell by the writing that the author is black, that an "ancestral" presence grounds and orients the work—it would be difficult for Hunt to always answer in the affirmative.[7] Certainly there are "markers" of race if by this we assume that if a writer deploys "key" terms, mascons, that "flag" race—black, the word race itself, especially in conjunction with the first-person pronoun (singular or plural)—then that writer "is" black (or Hispanic, Latina, etc.). Nonetheless, it is also clear that these markers are insufficient to mark Hunt as a recognizable "black" poet (her given name, presumably, the only real assurance that the author is female, this despite the markers of gender that certainly outnumber the markers of race, especially in her first two books). Yet, without denying the humanity of her subjects and narrators—in one revision, of Wordsworth, we read that a person is someone to whom another person speaks—Hunt confronts the problem of the interpellation of the body as subject in matrices—social, political, economic, etc.—that include both gender and race. What is interesting is the extent to which—as noted above—Hunt is willing to concede some ground, or more ground, to the pigeon-holes of gender than to race. I believe this is due to the different grammatical scales involved here. Gender is reproducible in grammar by both "proper" names, common nouns and pronouns while race is reproducible less by proper names, more by common names and not at all by pronouns. Simply put, it is more difficult to avoid invoking gender, much easier to avoid invoking race, in the English language. Thus, from the other side of the mirror, as it were, it may be easier to understand how the various critiques of race mounted by both integrationists and cultural nationalists within (and without) the Black Arts Movement could still succumb to heterosexist and misogynistic assumptions.[8] The "invisibility" of race at the level of the pronoun suggests, and an overview of Indo-European languages

supports, that gender differentiation is an essential component of their structures and developments. Indeed, it may be that only number surpasses gender as an essential element. The privilege accorded number and gender might help explain the specific channels through which Erica Hunt's work has been received.[9]

Nonetheless, in *Local History*, Hunt engages the problem of gender and number in language by deploying the first person singular and plural in indeterminate linguistic contexts. The photograph on the back cover, right beneath blurbs from Language writing experimenters Harryette Mullen, Charles Bernstein, and Ann Lauterbach, identifies Erica Hunt as a black woman. Still, given the multiple lineages of this work, it is difficult to find or surmise a referent for the "we" in the opening "Preface." In fact, each permutation of the "we" appears to refer to different constituencies: a couple, friends, women, experimental writers, black people in general, etc. One might respond that while such indeterminacy might hold for the multiple "we's" in "Preface," such is not the case for the "I" which opens the poem and book: "I was thinking that if the ceiling were mirrored we would have to watch what we say about what we feel." Regardless of how one interprets this playful but serious commentary on the indicative and the subjunctive, on the relations between standard and colloquial expressions, the "I" appears normative in its self-referential function. And so it is, a function reinforced in the other syntactical contexts in which it appears in "Preface." However, since this same grammatical function appears in the next two poems entitled "Voice I" and "Second Voice," it may be that this "I" has merely a narrative or generic function which cannot be "reduced" to a human referent. And that, I believe, is the point. Sometimes the "I" may indeed refer to the human being named Erica Hunt; sometimes it may not. And so it is for all the other single-number pronouns in this book, she, you and he, which may and may not refer to an "Erica Hunt." This indeterminate or flexible function of singular pronouns is not, as we know, unique to Hunt. Many people associate it with the Language Writing movement's usage of similar procedures to critique the integrity of a self, specifically its conflation with the first-person singular pronoun. However, a similar strategy can also be found in a writer like Zora Neale Hurston; her particular mode of stream of consciousness, often called indirect discourse, operates to meld what is often the delimited knowledge of third-person (singular or plural) narratees with the unlimited knowledge of a narrator posited, in terms of number, as infinite and, thus, omniscient. Hurston makes explicit what is already implicit in the general ideology of the omniscient, objective narrator function; no such function operates without implicitly, if not explicitly, taking a position, taking sides.

Thus structure and form themselves take on political and cultural functions for Hunt, and in this, of course, she is right in line with Language Writing procedures, though again, Nielsen rightly reminds us that for the Beats as well as the black art poets, form was always inextricable from politics. For example, it is not unreasonable or without merit to see that the division of the book *Local History* into three sections entitled "Local History," "Correspondence" and "Surplus" is analogous to the function of pronouns in Hunt's work: sometimes they correspond to the author or known "others," sometimes they correspond to an unknown other or others. The structure of the book might indicate that we are to read the pronouns as simultaneously corresponding to the author Erica Hunt and to unnamed others, except that simultaneity, a fixture of New Criticism, tends to occlude the temporality of reading. Better, perhaps, to say that "I" corresponds first to the author and then to others, first to the local and then to what exceeds the local, or, were one to begin reading, in medias res, the "we" or "she" might first correspond to unnamed others before the "I" that might or might not correspond to the author. Indeed, one might say that Hunt's three book publications, *Local History*, *Arcade* and *Piece Logic*, operate according to the same logic in terms of

poetic procedures. A certain clarity and accessibility characterize each succeeding book, yet everything hinges, literally, on the correspondence between Allison Saar and Erica Hunt which constitutes *Arcade*. It is fortuitous and significant that the link between what is posited and what exceeds it, between the restricted and the general, is a book that puts into play the visual and verbal ambiguity of the "black" (fe-)male body, an androgyny and racial indeterminacy reflective, perhaps, of both a hoped-for future (e.g., the reconciliation of black/non-black men and women into a neo-Black/Post-Black Arts Movement dedicated to both racial and gender egalitarianism) and too-present past (the violence that attends the black body, the pecking order of certain white bodies on certain black bodies, certain black bodies on certain black bodies and so forth). At the same time the visual/verbal play of *Arcade* alludes back to Hunt's picture on the back of *Local History*, a picture that effectively translates an avant-garde writing exploding normative black literary poetics into a black avant-garde writer exploding normative literary poetics. The photograph of Erica Hunt turns a general text into a specific book, writing into a writer, a b=l=a=c=k=w=o=m=a=n into a black woman. Like deconstruction, an interminable project due to the incessant re-entrenchment of metaphysics at every level of being, *Arcade* is an attempt to redress the most immediate (from Saar's and Hunt's perspectives) and on-going hypostatization of a black woman.

As the cover by Allison Saar suggests, *Arcade* alludes, perhaps first and foremost, to the Venus Hottentot, the subject of poems and books by black women poets as different as Deborah Richards and Elizabeth Alexander.[10] She is the black female analogue to Emmitt Till, by which I mean to recall not only victimization but also collaboration.[11] And in naming her black, I intend less a Pan-African gesture than a reference to the appropriation of an African woman by black and African-American poets, just as the Negro teenager Emmitt Till has been appropriated as the ur-symbol of black male emasculation.

Created by way of correspondence between Hunt and Saar over a two-year period, *Arcade* explores the terrain of the black body engendered in general as woman, or at least this is how critic Linda Kinnahan reads the second woodcut in the book. It shows a nude female figure with African facial and head and hair features (à la Grace Jones), hanging-upside down by her rope-bound feet. For Kinnahan the rope around the feet alludes to the lynching of black males as well as the violence perpetrated against black females. Thus the black female is figured literally under the mark of violence and metaphorically as an image of violence against black males.[12] While a number of Saar's woodcuts mount sexual and racial ambiguity as undecidable androgyny, Kinnahan's reading may be another form of violence against the black female body, forced to "represent" not only black females in general but also black males in general. If we read Saar's woodcut, however, as a singular instance of a black female hung by her feet because there is never a reason to hang her by her head (which, after all, has no function within American history), ambiguity may shift from the mode of death itself (lynching) to the autoeroticism on display. The right hand cupping the left breast, the left hand cupping the genitalia, may be read as affirmative (sexuality, perhaps even nursing, in spite of all else) and negative (this body is only sexual, only good for nursing).

Facing the woodcut on the recto page is Hunt's poem, "Coronary Artist (1)," first published in *Local History* as "Coronary Artist." In *Arcade* it is the first of three "Coronary Artist" poems and has been slightly altered in format. Since this poem contains several instances of Hunt's shifting between pronouns—specifically "I" and "we"—I want to look at the effect of Saar's woodcut on our reading of the poem. Entrenched in custom we tend to read texts—poetry or prose—as captions when they are self-

consciously juxtaposed with images. Like the cupped breast, the fondled genitalia, texts "nurse" images, bring forth an image's "meaning." At the same time, texts, like cupped breasts, fondled (or shielded?) genitalia, pleasure themselves, give themselves meaning. Since the particular poem facing Saar's woodcut was published in *Local History* three years before its appearance in *Arcade* we may be tempted to believe that the poem was written prior to the two-year period of exchange between Saar and Hunt that constitutes *Arcade*. In that case, then, we may be emboldened to read the poem as more than mere commentary or caption. Both verso and recto pages may be read as a kind of collage of pre-existing, self-sustaining elements. However, since we do not know when the Saar-Hunt correspondence occurred, to say nothing of the vagaries of the publishing industry which cannot assure a correspondence between composition and publication dates, we cannot know, in fact, when "Coronary Artist" was written. I raise this issue because of the first phrase of "Coronary Artist (1)"—"I dream excess" (13). The suggestion of autoeroticism in Saar's woodcut, along with the invocation of the exorbitant in Hunt's first sentence, might indicate that the woodcut means to be self-sufficient, that the surplus of self-gratification in relationship to the economy of hetero- or homo-sexuality, spins inwardly, toward, not away from, the selfsame body. At the very least Saar's female figure problematizes our desire to conflate Hunt's "I" with Hunt. On the other hand, the woodcut also makes it easier to conflate Hunt's "I" with Hunt when the "you" near the end of the text seems more self-reflexive in light of the woodcut and the first two sentences of the last paragraph: "You can smell the smoke answering the alarm. And then you can't smell anything over the family soundtrack, putting everything on hold" (14). Aside from the addition of the parenthetical "1" to its title, a "1" which resembles an "I," the above sentences are the site of the only difference in format between the two books. In *Local History*, the first sentence is set off by itself; in *Arcade* it is the opening sentence of the last paragraph. The respite of a space—during which perhaps to dream of excess—has been deleted in *Arcade*. And perhaps it is precisely the absence of even a momentary rest before the return of the family as accompaniment to a visual script (sitcom and drama no doubt) that point back to the necessity of autoeroticism, though such a reading turns an act by choice into a last resort. Just as important, the absence of black mascons in Hunt's text is less problematic in a book full of visual images replete with black mascons. And in case we had not read "family " as normative at the level of social organization, literary form and cultural/racial imperative, "Coronary Artist (2)" makes clear the ambivalence of belonging: "Who wouldn't aspire to become an alien in their own language for a moment to lose the feeling of being both separated and crowded by their experience?" (15). This desire to "stray from my lines" can refer back to a struggle toward articulation patrolled by the apparatus of the state and it can refer forward to a future which, by definition, cannot be delimited by any mode of the family—for example, the black community or the avant-garde community—and its competing claims: "I am sentenced to think in lines running away and toward radical/detachment, where "I's" lock" (39).

The figure of the family, of the female body, gets radically enlarged to the figure of the house in Hunt's 2003 chapbook, *Piece Logic*. For it is in the house that the family dwells, but here the family, like the house, is explicitly national in scope. It is not mere rhetoric that the family in the big house, appropriately named The White House, is the original family, the First Family. Here, Adam and Eve are reproduced every four years as the President and the First Lady. But in this house where there are no men or women named as such, only a male that presides and a female who is "first" (a formula that echoes, however unwittingly, the stations of Adam and Eve in Eden: he has dominion over the earth and everything that "dwelleth within," including the only woman begotten of man and the first sinner of human history), is other houses: "In a country that is not one but several" (1). Several, here, severs "house" and "family"

from one another as well as both from "first." Recalling in part the logic of George Oppen's 1934 excavation of capitalist atomization, *Discrete Series*, Hunt examines the "pieces" of "broken things" that both constitute and are contained within "The House." The poems of *Piece Logic* critique the logic of consumerism from without and from within. "She," "he," "we" and "they," certainly are figured from an "objective" and "scientific" position at the margins of the house but "I" remains here as an ethical denial of narrative omniscience and moral accession to self-incrimination. She, too, dwells in one of the many houses undergoing demolition.

Published in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, *Piece Logic* ratchets up the interdependency of consumerism, misogyny and state terrorism. Race as a mascon, as "black" or "African American," has been almost completely eradicated from the text and the cover (no photograph appears). In one of the few instances of a mascon's appearance—near the end of "Invisible Hands"—the phrase "give me some skin" (15) functions ambivalently in a poem concerned, in part, with the veils of ideology that disguise warmongers behind peacemakers, arms behind arms. Urgent, politically motivated and linguistically propulsive, *Piece Logic* even calls into question the presumptions of gender identity—"I don't even understand lactation" (5) says one narrator—as Hunt's work enters a poetic landscape in which the languages of capitalism and the critiques they engender can function unhampered by anything more local and specific than "I" and "we," "she" and "he." Of course, as the history of the 20th century demonstrated, the logic of consumerism threatens to overwhelm the "state," hypostatized as the "nuclear family." It is this tension that unleashes xenophobia, misogyny and state terrorism under the guise of a "return" to "family values." And this is true even if—especially when—the family in question is the putative "black" nation of Pan-Africanism.

Thus, as Hunt reminds us in the last line of the poem "A House of Broken Things," "the figure x" is always "practical" because it can function even when "turned on its head." This "x" is not capitalized, it may not be a mascon of the Nation of Islam, for example, much less the man named Malcolm Little, Malcolm X and El Hajj Malik El Shabbazz. In the lifespan of this one man we read not only a dialectical movement analogous to the publication history of one Erica Hunt, we read also the history of renaming, a phenomenon almost unique to the immigrant, however "voluntary" or "forced" his or hers immigration.

Is this line, then, is this poem, this book, *Piece Logic*, a critique of the nostalgia for what was lost, for what was broken (apart), an original family sundered from its history, its land, its Eden? Or is this lower-case x irreducibly undecidable, Hunt's erasure, at last, of the pronoun, of all those gender referents that organize the structures of reverence in the house of the Reverend, a house populated by all that is alphabetical melting into x? And what would it mean if x—and not z—were the end of an alphabet?[13]

Notes

[1] Evie Shockley sees Hunt's poetics defined more by her Caribbean heritage than the American culture in which she was born. See her paper, "Loss of Identity, Identity of Erica Hunt's and William Braithwaite's 'House' Poems," presented at Furious Flower: Regenerating the Black Poetic Tradition, James Madison University, September 22-25, 2004.

[2] In this context, Hunt's work is strictly post-black and pre-African American and

thus, in terms of its public and publication (with presses associated with Language Writing, women's writing and black writing, respectively, Roof Books, Kelsey St. Press and Carolina Wren) crisscrosses at least three "different" demographics and markets.

[3] Stephen E. Henderson, *Understanding The New Black Poetry*.

[4] Hayden's historical and all-too-literal dilemma replicates that most immediately of Melvin B. Tolson, a poet whose work, though strikingly different from Hayden's, was also viewed as both too "black" by the literary mainstream (because of its "content") and too "white" (because of its formal pyrotechnics) by black cultural nationalists.

[5] Dove made these comments at the Margaret Cook Poetry Festival on "diversity in African-American Poetry" at Miami University (Ohio) in the fall of 2003 and the Furious Flower conference on "regenerating the black poetic tradition" at James Madison University in the fall of 2004.

[6] Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant: African-American Postmodernism*.

[7] Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers*.

[8] See, for example, Michelle Wallace's infamous critique of the black arts movement in her *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*.

[9] See footnote 2.

[10] See, for example, Alexander's *The Venus Hottenot* and Deborah Richards' *Last One Out*.

[11] See Wanda Coleman's "Emmitt Till" in *African Sleeping Sickness*.

[12] Linda Kinnahan, "'Bodies Written Off': Economies of Race and Gender in the Visual/Verbal Collaborative Clash of Erica Hunt's and Alison Saar's *Arcade*," in *We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing*, 165-178.

[13] I allude here, of course, to Claudia Rankine's *The End Of The Alphabet*, a book whose use of the definite article signals its polarized, and thus conventional, oppositional discourse. My deployment of the indefinite article attempts to pay homage to Hunt's open-ended sense of alternative languages or, at the least, different lexicons not reducible to mere "opposition." Hunt's languages shuttle back and forth between an "us" and a "them," between a "he" and a "she," between an "I" and a "you."

Works Cited

Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Venus Hottentot*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1990.

Coleman, Wanda. *African Sleeping Sickness: Stories and Poems*. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1990.

Dove, Rita. *Thomas and Beulah*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon Press, 1987.

Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1896.

_____."Sympathy," "We Wear The Mask." *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Philadelphia: Hakim's Publications, n.d.

Hayden, Robert. *American Journal*. New York: Liveright, 1982.

Henderson, Stephen E. *Understanding The New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*. New York: Morrow, 1973.
Hunt, Erica. *Local History*. New York: Roof Books, 1993.
_____. Alison Saar, *Arcade*. New York: Kelsey St. Press, 1996.
_____. *Piece Logic*. Carolina Wren Press, 2002.
Kinnahan, Linda. "'Bodies Written Off': Economies of Race and Gender in the Visual/Verbal Collaborative Clash of Erica Hunt's and Alison Saar's Arcade," in *We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Eds. Laura Hinton, Cynthia Hogue. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.
Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers: (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, 339-345.
Nielsen, Aldon L. *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*. Cambridge (England): Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Oppen, George. *Discrete Series*. New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934.
Rankine, Claudia. *The End of the Alphabet*. New York: Grove Press, 1998.
Richards, Deborah. *Last One Out*. Honolulu: Subpress Collective, 2003.
Wallace, Michelle. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Verso, 1990.