

Edward M. Bury
Professor Jennifer Ashton
ENGL 540
April 30, 2018

The Commodification of “Blackness” and Poetry Presented as Propaganda

A series of momentous events took place in the 1950s and 1960s that helped give shape to the modern Civil Rights movement in the United States, leading to a watershed explosion of debate and discussion on the status and role African Americans would play as the nation moved toward finding its moral footing in the post-World War II world. Fast forward six decades later, and the conversation continues; only today, a growing cadre of African American writers, performers and scholar-activists communicate in ways that transcend marches and speeches, that bypass the established political and legal systems, as well as conventional poetry and prose. These modern commentators embrace contemporary literary disciplines – such as graphic-focused and extended-length lyric poetry – to advance the discussion on the position of African Americans in ways not done before.

Writers like Douglas Kearney, Claudia Rankine and Fred Moten clearly address what they maintain are instances of continued racism and what it means to be black in America during the twenty-first century; in doing so, they also tackle what can be defined as a commodification of black people, a process where mainstream values identify and later possess and control “blackness,” but without any true engagement in black lives and culture. These writers attempt to rewrite and clarify the definition of “blackness” during a time of escalating racial divide in many cities and towns across the nation. One strategy employed to cut through the clutter in the digital age is the inclusion of what can be considered propaganda-inspired design techniques– a

combination of a provocative and easily-identified graphic focal point supported by relevant messages and commentary. To expand on this premise, a 2009 Kearney poem from *The Black Automaton* collection will be explored to identify how the work addresses the commodification contention and encapsulates the fundamentals of propaganda.

In the essay, “Invisibility and the Commodification of Blackness in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure*,” Scott Thomas Gibson maintains that twenty-first century American perceptions on the intrinsic value of “blackness” were subjugated to beliefs that resulted in -- to employ a marketing expression -- the best value proposition for both blacks and whites.

Unlike modernist invisibility that manifested itself in the fissures between Black and white in the biracial social taxonomy of the United States throughout most of the twentieth century, contemporary generic and aesthetic categories generate sublimated forms of invisibility that give the appearance of legitimizing heterogeneous African American subjects while simultaneously and subversively regulating the available range of supposedly ‘authentic’ Black representations. In this process, the rich pluralism of Black culture and aesthetics gets reduced to a few subgenres that prove most economically viable and palatable to white and Black consumers alike. (1)¹

These commoditized subgenres clearly are identified within this “*vox novus nigreos*,” or “modern black voice,” and the emotions, perspectives and experiences depicted meld together to deliver a singular postlyric statement within the “I,” the “you” and the “we” voices – the collective exclamation from experimental black poets of today. Anthony Reed points out in a chapter within the critical anthology *Freedom Time* that a cohesive message is imperative for the body of writing to truly be effective: “The ideology of the stable voice ... is one backdrop

against which black experimental writing works, seeking to break the common sense link between poetry as personal and group expression without claiming some reified notion of the ‘universal.’” He goes on to state that some experimental literary works by modern black poets “exemplify what I see as a broader trend of using the visual arrangements of words and other graphic elements to rework ideas of personal testimony or witness into more supple concepts and to introduce forms of address that intend audiences and communities in process.” (97)²

One caveat for the belief behind this “stable voice” or collective body of work, Reed says, centers on taking uncharacteristic literary steps that can help shape a new dialogue on the larger conversation related to the modern black experience. Or, to address these unconventional literary techniques from another perspective, the creative sojourns made by writers like Rankine and Kearney are *needed* to better define their body of work since their collective voices may not be heard or recognized otherwise. “Claudia Rankine’s and Douglas Kearney’s postlyric poetics represent a dialectical interpretation of the lyric mode, presenting a voice suspended between ‘I’ and ‘we,’ centered and diffuse at once,” Reed writes, adding, these postlyric works “break the hermeneutic circle of lyricized and racialized reading.” (p 97)³

The “Propaganda” Process Personified in Kearney’s *The Black Automaton*

The close reading of one representative Kearney poem, “The Black Automation in Tag,” will serve as an example of modern black poetry that purposely shatters literary boundaries to define, codify and reinterpret the black voice at a time when “being black” can help fuel economic interests, while conversely, casting a shroud of misinformation on the lives of African Americans. But first, consider some thoughts on how the works are inspired by techniques

steeped in the centuries-old process of propaganda. Mention the idea of a work of propaganda, and one conjures up a decidedly one-sided perspective of a persuasive communication, the message often driven by a dramatic photo or graphic that dominates the senses, figuratively grabbing the reader by the lapels. Often the subject of discriminatory, erroneous or even hateful subjects and topics, recent examples of what could be assuredly defined as “propaganda” in the twentieth century are deemed effective mediums to drive home messages that benefit or enlighten.

Stanford University scholars Johnnie Manzarria and Jonathon Bruck identify a myriad of communication mediums – yes, including poetry – now infiltrated by and serving as the vehicle to dispense messages of propaganda. As noted in this passage from a digital essay on persuasion to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, the concept of a propaganda-driven message has become quite ubiquitous -- and possibly undetected as even being propaganda -- given the plethora of communication options today:

While propaganda is most evident in times of war as in the poster, it is constantly being used as a political and social means in even less obvious ways to influence people’s attitudes. Modern propaganda uses all the media available to spread its message, including: press, radio, television, film, computers, fax machines, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing, handbills, buttons, billboards, speeches, flags, street names, monuments, coins, stamps, books, plays, comic strips, poetry, music, sporting events, cultural events, company reports, libraries, and awards and prizes. It is most likely that some of these media uses are surprising, but that only serves to show how easy it is to not even recognize propaganda as such.⁴

Kearney himself also touched on the subject of propaganda in his poetry in a comment from an online Poetry Society of America question and answer post, where he recognizes how the concept of propaganda can become a substitute or an adjunct in a broader perspective: “Of

course, propaganda is often transparently metonymous with an actual political body. In these ways, propaganda is essentially an advertisement. It may have dynamic, unforgettable language and artfully rendered images, but it's advertising. I used to be an advertising copywriter, so perhaps this view is too idiosyncratic.”⁵

Working in a creative field like advertising, where he learned basic applications of graphic design software for client work, Kearney gained the artistic skills that allowed him to produce poems that challenge standard formats for presenting the printed word.⁶ Throughout the singular-frame poems from *The Black Automaton*, Kearney knowingly employed the dramatic conventions of propaganda by incorporating greatly enlarged fonts that appear to be stumbling across the page, bold and heavy braces that compartmentalize phrases or stanzas, arrows that connect and draw the reader's attention along unconventional literary guideways and words and phrases disfigured by a sweeping “x” mark.

The initial impact of Kearney's poems to the reader is to grasp and captivate, much in the same way a colorful propaganda poster was designed to enlist those in its presence to join a movement or refrain from taking an action. But then, once the reader delves into the poetry itself, the juxtaposition of words and expanded scale punctuation marks and symbols delivers in brittle harmony vignettes of life as experienced by African Americans in modern society.

Unraveling the Message Behind “The Black Automaton in Tag”

Tag,” Kearney makes a powerful statement on perceptions the commodification of “blackness” through much more subtle graphic treatments. The work is dominated by the ultimate derogation to African American people, displayed in an enlarged serif font and presented in all capital letters. Each of the six letters in the dominant word is staggered, out of alignment and adorned in some locations with asterisks that function as individual forces to propel the word in a zig-zag manner. This position of the word {NIGGER} functions as the headline or billboard of the poem, the crucial component that delineates the work as an example of poetic propaganda.

Framed in vertical braces (which physically and symbolically constrain the word, and in essence, African American people) of the same size as the letters, the headline balances two phrases that contain the third-person pronoun “IT,” purposefully presented in an upper-case format, thereby functioning as interchangeable subject and object within other works from *The Black Automaton*. Reed points out that by this technique, “Kearney explores the moment of individuation as one of alienating isolation. Their respective poetics mark the unavailability of – and continued desire for – established modes of personal and racial representation and norms of poetic expression in the postsegregation era, understood as a new stage in the struggle against an increasingly globalized antiblackness.” (99)⁷

The asterisks refer to italicized “citations” that are positioned as though a footnote beneath the poem’s 12-line stanza, together the words phonetically spell out “nigger” in an almost comic fashion, sort of like an advertising jingle:

**en *eye*doubleghu*ERRRRR*

Note that the final element of the interpreted word – “errrrr” – was published in an enlarged font, perhaps the author’s way to mimic a growl full of anger and disgust toward those who use the derogation. From another perspective, the solitary large word {NIGGER} resembles the work of a graffiti artist or “tagger,” hence the inclusion of “Tag” in the poem’s title. Historically, graffiti was found on the walls of ancient Pompeii and has been used as an unsanctioned, unmonitored communications medium ever since, up to this day, especially in dense urban areas. One could argue effectively that graffiti is a method of propaganda since it communicates a singular message, often is unsigned or unattributed and disallows a meaningful method of response; in reference to this essay, Kearney is employing a hallmark of modern graffiti – the dominant word or phrase or idea – in “The Black Automation in Tag” because he understands its power and impact.

The phrase “[IT] don’t want to be called your ...” introduces the headline, while a long descending two-pointed arrow at right connects a concluding remark: “since that’s IT’S name, wear IT out.” This graphic sequence establishes a key element of Kearney’s poetic directive here: African Americans have long been denigrated by being referred to as “niggers” (hence the large font sized headline, a way to accentuate the slur, and in turn, the mistreatment); consequently, repeated references have become arbitrary or ineffective. And, from another perspective, the inclusion of being “called your {NIGGER}” could be interpreted as uneducated or uninformed efforts by the non-black world to understand what are the consequences of being called a “nigger.”

The full stanza within the poem floats within white space, clearly providing a narrative opportunity for the reader. Read aloud, one can image the lines being belted out in staccato rap/hip hop style, with even a smattering of rhyme (“heir,” “where,” “air”) starting with the third line. The opening line, “it’s best not to err and ER the A,” presents somewhat of a warning or challenge: Refrain from joining in or trivializing the use of the slang phrase “nigga,” which is a commonly incorporated derivation of the word “nigger” often used in African American and other ethnic minority speech, music and literature.⁸ Kearney goes on with the line: “if one must air the n_ _ _ _ _,” allowing the reader to complete the word as the “accepted” version of the ethnic slur in widespread use or the version that should be only part of the minority vocabulary.

As the poem continues, the tone and message becomes more sinister and forbidding:

the ER is a looming heir
of that gloomy era where
n_ _ _ _ _ s were in the air
in the best of knots. IT knows that
to *catch a n_ _ _ _ _ by the toe*
is a way to pick the very best one.

This allegorical description of the practice and time of horrific treatments of African Americans – the lynching of men and even women from the mid-nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century – is followed by a touch of sarcasm: “to *catch a n_ _ _ _ _ by the toe*/ is a way to pick the very best one.” Here, Kearney borrows the line from a well-known nursery rhyme to state that this horrible chapter in American history may be forgotten or trivialized in the twentieth century as non-African Americans freely employ the use of “nigga” as part of everyday vocabulary. Presenting the “*catch a n_ _ _ _ _ by the toe*” in italics not only stresses the phrase,

but it allows the reader to “sing along,” while the line suggesting the selection of “the very best one” harkens perhaps to another equally heinous historical chapter involving African Americans -- the slave trade, a practice where people were, indeed, truly commodified by being bought and sold, with the strongest and healthiest fetching the highest value.

The poem concludes with a quatrain that in essence offers a “rationale” of sorts to the conceptions of how African Americans have been treated, followed by Kearney’s manifesto and warning.

when the n _ _ _ _ _ is to end up knotted
in the air, IT knows by your inheritance
IT is going to be IT. The A may still be
IT, but IT’s ITS IT. See De Despair ...

The first line opens with an adverb that continues the fill-in-the-blank practice found in two other lines in the poem and again recounts the lynching of black people (“end up knotted/in the air”), then moves on to the decades-long legacy of ignorance of -- or passive acceptance for - - outright inhumane treatment (as embodied by public hangings, part of the “inheritance” directed to those whose ancestors participated in these atrocities) of African Americans. As an epilogue, Kearney writes: “the A may still be IT, but IT’S ITS IT. See De Despair ...” With these final lines, he’s saying: The use of the phrase “nigga” – note that the “A” is capitalized for emphasis ---- by a non-minority person may be thought of as acceptable, appropriate and even cool, as this usage brings one onto the same emotional plane or sphere as a person of color; but the hardships generated through decades of mistreatment actually compound

the conditions black American have faced for generations. And, the jumble-sounding “IT’s ITS IT” phrase relates back to the interchangeable use of “IT” as a subject or object noted by Reed – here serving as Kearney’s conclusion, proclaiming that the ethnic slur “nigger” holds the same meaning whether the final letter ends with an “a” or a “r.”

A Reflection: The Genesis of the Black Voice in American Literature

A century before Kearney and his contemporaries challenged literary conventions with provocative poems built around graphic design elements and extended lyric prose poetics, literature bent on advancing the growling conversation related to defining “blackness” and the resulting commodification of black people, many storied African American writers delved into the role people of color would play in American society. In the historical work, *The Prism of Race: W.E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and the Colored World of Cedric Dover*, author and historian Nico Slate recounts how Cedric Dover, a Eurasian man born in Calcutta at the turn of the twentieth century drew inspiration from the seminal black authors noted in the title of the book just cited. Slate was focused on exploring the impact prominent black authors had on the prospect of cosmopolitan literature serving as a binding and unifying force to advance people of color. As noted by Slate, poems by Langston Hughes linking the colonialism experienced by people in India to the oppression faced by African Americans in the early twentieth century were somewhat dismissed by Indian readers: “These were propaganda poems of the most obvious sort. The poems most often cited by Indians, however, were poems in which Hughes grappled with the nature of identify and belonging by writing about his own experience as an African American.”⁹

Slate goes on to offer a caution: “Put simply, we might argue, writing about one’s own experience is the surest path to successful literature. Writing to connect disparate experiences can too easily degenerate into propaganda.”¹⁰

From this observation, the concept of poetry serving as a propaganda force to better expose oppression was in effect for decades. But as claimed in this paper, Kearney embraced that concept -- somewhat knowingly -- throughout *The Black Automaton* to create a visual personification of oppression, employing modern software and incorporating street and rap-inspired language because these are communication vehicles of the times. Kearney and his contemporaries are using the resources that have evolved to speak to the always evolving national zeitgeist in a twenty-first century world of always evolving communication hyperactivity.

Works Cited

1. Gibson, Scott Thomas, “Invisibility and the Commodification of Blackness in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure*,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*. December 2010. P. 2. In this essay, Gibson maintains that *Erasure* is a rewriting, of sorts, of *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s novel that explored how being “invisible” related to being black. Gibson contends that aspects of “invisibility” remain in contemporary American literature and culture. A key conclusion: “...the pervasiveness of racist consumption” in modern literature does not compel Ellison’s “invisible man” to remain hidden, but rather compels him to publicly cast-off disillusion on what it means to be black.
2. Reed, Anthony, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, “Chapter Three, Between Now and Yet: Postlyric Poetry and the Moment of Expression,” 97. In *Freedom Time*, Reed presents extended interpretations of works from black authors

who have produced experimental poetry and prose that redefines boundaries. Chapter Three analyzes the use of the trend by some black writers to employ graphics and the placement of words visually to reinterpret the poetic voice. Reed draws a parallel between the graphic-driven poems of Douglas Kearney, which he calls “typographical experiments,” and the extended prose style of Claudia Rankine. Reed was most interested in “the ways both bind poetic subjectivity to contemporary events and media through allusion ... and themes of black vulnerability.”

3. Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*. 97.
4. Manzaria, Johnnie; Bruck, Jonathan, “Media's Use of Propaganda to Persuade People's Attitude, Beliefs and Behaviors,” https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/war_peace/media/hpropaganda.html. In this essay, the authors analyze the contemporary use of propaganda as a means to communicate a wide range of messages common in modern society. A key conclusion: Propaganda can be effective because we are susceptible to these kinds of messages on an increasing level today; poetry is cited as a way to transmit propaganda. The paper identifies 10 stages of propaganda, cites case studies and identifies ways to address propaganda. Given the rise of unmonitored social media and digital communications, one can state with some confidence that a preponderance of political news and commentary today is tethered in some form to the concept of propaganda.
5. Poetry Society of America, “Red, White and Blue: Poets on Politics: Douglas Kearney.” 2012. https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/red_white_blue_poets_on_politics/douglas_earney/ In 2012, the Poetry Society of America published an online series of question-and-answer interviews with 25 American poets. The focus of the series was to provide a forum for “diverse voices in the ongoing conversation on politics and poetry.” The interview with Kearney included a copy of “The Black Automaton in What it Is #3: Work It Out,” which appears in *The Black Automaton*. Kearney responds to questions involving the impact of politics in poetry, inspiration from other poets, the “responsibility” poets and artists have in engaging in politics, shifting political voices in poetry, and as noted: Differentiating between poetry and propaganda.
6. Spit Journal, “Interview with Douglas Kearney, by Karla Cordero, July 27, 2014. In this rambling and insightful online interview, Kearney shares thoughts on his poetic inspiration, which includes the influence of noteworthy stand-up comedians, who “developed a sense of timing, surprise, and fearlessness.” (One can argue that Kearney demonstrates fearlessness through his provocative poetry.) Further in the interview, Kearney notes that he gained his initial training in graphic design while in middle school, advancing to learn popular graphics programs while in college at Howard University and later as a temp worker. He employed Adobe InDesign to create works included in *The Black Automaton*.”

7. Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*. 99.
8. Wikipedia article, “Nigga.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigga> This alternate spelling and pronunciation of the slur is used in common conversation within many communities across America and has been incorporated into a wide spectrum of rap lyrics and song titles. The word is pronounced as “nigger” in some dialects. There even has been an attempt to trademark the words “Naturally Intelligent God Gifted Africans” and its acronym. Kearney never incorporated the word “nigga” in “The Black Automaton in Tag,” but he invites or perhaps challenges the reader to use the letter “a” in place of “er” within the three “fill-in-the-blank” lines within the poem.
9. Slate, Nico, *The Prism of Race: W.E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and the Colored World of Cedric Dover*,” 58. Published in 2014, this work explored the relationship between Indian Cedric Dover, a man of mixed English and Indian ancestry, and his interactions with leading black American authors and activists. As noted in a critique from The American Historical Review (<https://academic.oup.com/ahr/article/121/2/586/2582101>), “Slate analyzes exhaustively Dover’s “Colored Cosmopolitan” (18) ideology and efforts to reach out to black American scholar-activists whose ideas he utilized to map a global framework of struggle that involved India, Africa and the U.S.” For the purpose of this paper, the citation referring to the poetry of Langston Hughes as being “propaganda poems of the most obvious sort” support the contention of poetry functioning as the means to deliver a message with undeniable social or political implications.
10. Slate, *The Prism of Race: W.E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and the Colored World of Cedric Dover*.