

Archive and Appropriation: *Dark Archive* by Laura Mullen

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Archive is practice. And through Archive we show humanity—or what ever it is—the consciousness of the future- the post human future—the intelligent slime mold poets of the future –we were not just slaughtering one another.

—Anne Waldman, *Feminafesto: Torques of Tongue & Archive & Anthropocene*

Dark Archive, Laura Mullen’s fourth collection of poetry, is a severe and uncompromising book that richly contributes to current interdisciplinary conversations about the use and transmission of collective memory as well as the ethics of manipulating documentary materials. A “dark archive,” a term from library and information management, is a fail-safe repository of data that is preserved in case of disaster; it is a closed archive that functions only as backup storage. Technically speaking, Mullen’s book is a “light archive”: a collection accessible to the public without restrictions. But if we metaphorically understand Mullen’s text as a “dark archive” while we consider the book’s dominant motifs, which survey the aftermath of disasters both personal and collective (the end of a romantic relationship; the death of Mullen’s stepmother, the painter Ingrid Nickelsen; Hurricane Katrina; the shocking murder of James Byrd, Jr.), then the book’s publication, an event that would mark the book-as-archive’s passage from “dark” to “light,” is at once a solemn acknowledgment of grievous disaster and a call for recovery. *Dark Archive* might be, as Anne Waldman would have it, a testament for use after the slaughter. If the book is at times difficult to grasp, it is because *Dark Archive* contains language oriented toward the posthuman poets of the future.

EMISFÉRICA

Mullen's poetic practice of the archive entails not so much a Foucauldian "formation and transformation" but a passionate presentation of *information* coupled with a critico-creative *deformation* (Foucault 2006, 146). By "deformation," I mean that Mullen adapts, redacts, and re-archives her source texts—which range from Wordsworth's canonical lyric "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807) to Tessa Rumsey's elliptical collection *The Return Message* (2005)—to create familiar echoes as well as defamiliarizing distortions. For example, the book's second poem "No Voice" alters Wordsworth's iconic first line into: "Wandered lonely in the voice of another who had no voice." "Cloud as Lonely," also from the book's first section, devolves the line "I gazed—and gazed—but little thought" (line 17) into the partially-filled template of "Pronoun verb—conjunction verb—and little thought" (5, 37). Absence—the absence of voice in the first example and the absence of the particular words that correspond to their parts of speech in the second—is conspicuous because Mullen's deformations of Wordsworth critique the fact that "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" erases the presence of Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy. The Wordsworth poem, as Mullen takes care to remind us, is based on a walk the brother and sister took in the Lake District. "Why erase that presence" asks Mullen in "Evaporation / Condensation," the short prose section that ends the collection; why treat, as she says in the poem "I Wandered Her Voice," "Sister as mist"? This suppression, which we can read as a synecdoche for the suppression of women in general, is another kind of historical disaster, and Mullen's remixing and deformative techniques attempt to condense what exists in certain texts only as residue. Mullen's appropriations, as well as being acts of poetic composition, are examples of performative reading in the way they radically revise and redress their sources.

The second and most "deformative" section of *Dark Archive*, "Turn," is a hybrid essay that contains prose reflections on the murder of James Byrd as well as poetic appropriations of Tessa Rumsey's *The Return Message*, which obliquely references the 1998 killing. Byrd's racially motivated murder in East Texas disturbed the nation because of the intensity of its bigotry and the brutality of its methods (Byrd was dragged behind a pick-up truck for three miles—to the point of decapitation—and dumped near an African-American church). At the beginning of "Turn," Mullen argues that Rumsey "seemed...to speak too easily and briefly 'the unspeakable'" when writing the following phrase in *The Return Message*'s opening poem: "he shifted from side to side to prevent the road from dismantling / His skin as he was dragged on / down the highway" (55-6). In response to Rumsey's perhaps gratuitous use of Byrd's death, which is quickly passed over in favor of an ornamental lyricism, Mullen deforms *The Return Message*, dismantling it by a technique of erasure, providing another kind of "return message." For example, Rumsey's poem "New World Cloud Forest" becomes, in Mullen's redacted version, "Word Cloud." This is the beginning of Rumsey's "New World Cloud Forest":

The question attached to this colonial cage: could you, like Audubon, kill your subjects.

To study them? I adored you until I captured you, at which point the acquisition turned.

EMISFÉRICA

To loss, as you began to resemble what I had become most familiar with: a mirror.
(Rumsey 2005, 29)

And this is the beginning of Mullen's "Word Cloud":

attached to cage your subjects

at which point turned familiar

with a mirror... (60)

"Turn," and *Dark Archive* as a whole, informs as it deforms; it is both performative and expository, documentary as well as conceptual. If Mullen relentlessly distorts certain source texts, she also incorporates relevant citations without alteration and earnest, first-person descriptions in a gesture of evidentiary illumination. Alongside the fragmentary "word clouds," Mullen includes and glosses a long, striking quote from Francis Renee Mullin, Byrd's daughter, in which Mullin demands that we imagine being put in her father's situation as his head was separated from his body, that we attempt to imagine past the point of imaginability. Similarly, alongside the reworkings of Wordsworth in the first section of the collection Mullen includes grave loco-descriptive poems of post-Katrina New Orleans.

The archive in Mullen's collection is not closed but rather constantly expanding: the book is impressive for the way it daringly draws on very different types of knowledge and the way it creates new ones in new combinations. The figure of the cloud, which appears, shifts, and reappears throughout *Dark Archive*, brings to mind the very recent invention of "the cloud," a corporate buzzword and popular metaphor for the set of technologies that enable computer users easier and more efficient access to the mega-archive that is the internet. Despite the seductive promise of an open, participatory archive made possible by the digital age, Mullen's book reminds us that the "Archive"—if we can even speak of such a totalizing term—is a complex and uneven chiaroscuro: some parts are in light, seemingly at our fingertips, while others are plunged in darkness. Nevertheless, Mullen enacts a bold poetic practice that shows us the myriad uses and possibilities of the "light archives" that are at our disposal so that we can ambitiously, if inadequately, confront both the archives that are beyond our access and the unarchivable memories of contemporary disaster.

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EMISFÉRICA

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