

Harryette Mullen, professor of English and winner of the 2010 Jackson Prize for Poetry, uses her writings to explore globalism, the African American experience, women's issues, and a love of wordplay.

The Complexity of Emotion

By Meg Sullivan

They fill only a few shoe boxes, but the family letters, photographs, postcards and telegrams occupy a huge space in Harryette Mullen's heart.

The documents, which belonged to Mullen's maternal grandmother until her death two years ago at 94, are tangible links to a complicated family history that Mullen has only recently begun to unravel.

For instance, she discovered that her grandmother's father, a minister, was born into slavery—a surprise even to his own daughter.

"To even think about that ... I just kind of started reeling," said Mullen, a UCLA professor of English and African American studies.

Mullen has also uncovered family links to the pan-African movement led by Marcus Garvey, to the U.S. Colored Troops who fought for the Union during the Civil War, and even to the Confederacy. After fighting for the South, a white ancestor fathered 10 children, including Mullen's paternal great-grandfather, with one of his family's former slaves.

"This family history project has uncovered some stories that I would like to write about, but I still have to get through the emotion," Mullen said.

Still, if anyone is prepared for the task, it's Mullen, who has taught American poetry, African American literature, and poetry writing at UCLA since 1994.

"Mullen always acknowledges the complexity of blackness, femaleness, and poetry," said Malin Pereira, an English professor at the University of North Carolina and an authority on Mullen. "She makes meanings proliferate, and that is neat to watch."

Pereira isn't alone in her enthusiasm for the poet whose work explores women's issues, the African American experience, globalism, and a love of wordplay, including acrostics, anagrams, homophones, parodies, and puns.

Mullen's 2002 poetry collection, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. She received a PEN/Beyond Margins Award for her 2006 poetry collection, *Recyclopedia*.

And earlier this year, Mullen was selected as the recipient of the 2010 Jackson Poetry Prize, an annual award that honors an American poet of "exceptional talent who deserves wider recognition." Judges described Mullen's work as "brilliant and enigmatic, familiar and subversive. Like jewels, her poems are multifaceted and shoot off lights."

Mullen belongs to a generation of African American poets who came of age after the civil rights movement, said Pereira, who interviewed Mullen for a forthcoming book.

That generation benefitted from the successes of black poets in 1960s and '70s, but its members feel less pressure than their predecessors to articulate a political agenda, Pereira said.

"They feel free to explore their poetry and not feel like they have to conform to any prescriptions of what poetry should be," she said. "They take this moment and run with it."

With a wide range of styles and approaches, Mullen's work epitomizes this freedom, said Pereira.

"Her first poems were very narrative and accessible," Pereira said. "She's grown more experimental and complex. Now she has a very high stature in experimental poetry, especially as connected to

Exploring the Dark Content

*This dream is not a map.
A poem is not the territory.*

*The dreamer reclines in a barbershop
carpeted with Afro turf.
In the dark some soul yells.*

*It hurts to walk barefoot
On cowrie shells.*

Harryette Mullen: selections from *Sleeping with the Dictionary*

Eurydice

Can't wait to be sprung from shadow,
to be known from a hole in the ground.
Scarcely silent though often unheard.
Winding, wound. Wounded wind.
She turned, and turns. She opens.
Keep the keys, that devil told her.
Guess the question. Dream the answer.
Tore down almost level.
A silence hardly likely.
Juicy voices. Pour them on.
Music sways her, she concedes,
as darker she goes deeper.

women's issues."

Clearly, Mullen defies expectation. With a love of bright colors and intricately patterned fabrics, the author radiates cheer and warmth. She has a throaty, infectious laugh. No question about her sources of inspiration or process is too personal. Her answers are so clear and specific, in fact, that she makes writing poetry sound as simple and effortless as following a recipe.

"She's very playful and down to earth, as well as extremely intelligent. It's a wonderful combination," said Barbara Henning, a Long Island University professor of English and author of the forthcoming collection of conversations, *Looking up Harryette Mullen*, to be published in the spring by Belladonna Press.

Henning interviewed Mullen about the inspiration behind all 57 of the poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*.

"I was teaching about *Sleeping*," Henning said, "and Harryette and I are good friends, so I called her and asked if I could interview her about how she wrote the poems. I wanted to share her creative process with my writing students. She is so inspiring."

Mullen credits her parents' divorce during her childhood with compelling her to write and instilling a love for the written word. Her father, a social worker, moved to Chicago, while Mullen, her sister and her mother remained in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Whenever we would ask about him, my mother would say, 'Here's some stationery,'" Mullen recalls. "'Go write to your father. Ask him any question you want.'"

As the name of her best-known collection implies, Mullen often finds inspiration in her trusty copy of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. But she also plumbs less lofty sources—ad copy, newspaper text, and well-worn sayings.

"Often the inspiration is something very simple, very direct, very easy," she said. "But just because the reader is outside of the poet's head, it's not obvious."

"I think we all are poets,
if only in our dreams."


Sometimes she artfully alters existing text. An example is "Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language" in *Sleeping*. The text is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which targeted Chinese immigrants. Every place where the word "Chinese" or "Chinese immigrant" originally appeared, she substituted the word "bitter labor,"

which is the actual meaning in Chinese of the racially derisive term "coolie."

Mullen also is a great believer of keeping a notebook at her bedside so she can jot down dreams.

"I think we all are poets, if only in our dreams," she said.

Still, she worries that she may have hit a creative wall with her genealogical investigations, which she still hopes to mine for poetry, provided she can come to terms with her feelings about her discoveries.

"Poetry is that very primal need to deal with what is unknown and to try to make it somehow known," said Mullen, "even if it's known in an intuitive way and not necessarily a rational or completely conscious way." 

Harryette Mullen. Of her work, the judges for the Jackson Poetry Prize said: "Like jewels, her poems are multifaceted and shoot off lights."

