

The Rules of the Game: An Editor's Note

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The idea for this collection of writings and other utterances was initially called into being some months before the 2014 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Seattle. An off-site panel featuring a mixed-race group of writers and artists was scheduled to present a panel performance titled *Coon Songs, Kitsch, and Conceptual Writing*. The Frye Art Museum had agreed to host the event but canceled after one of the participants, who is white, posted an announcement on her Facebook page that included a real historical advertisement for a ventriloquist's show. The ad featured an image of a white man holding a ventriloquist's doll in one hand and a telephone earpiece in the other; the text read: "Special act for Children using Two Dummies: COLORED GIRL and IRISH BOY combined with comedy magic."

Although the presumption is that this image on the Facebook invite alongside the word *coon* in the panel's title is what prompted the Frye's cancelation, the museum director defended the move in a general way, saying "the potential to cause hurt and harm was just not an option for us." I was curious about this protectionist gesture even as the word *coon* was deployed not as a slur but was used self-consciously in this case to signal

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interrogation and critique. It was an intentional provocation, yes, but also an attempt to mine and uncloak America's ugly racial history as it continues to leak into the present. If it did not, would such language have such resonance, such power?

A small swirling of controversy arose around the loss of performance space, but that was just the beginning. If the coon incident was a drop of water, what followed was a tidal wave. Poets across the United States went to war about what is permissible, what is racist, and what kind of critique should bear down on those who use highly sensitive race "material," including but not limited to the bodies of murdered black boys, in manners that tread not so lightly. Kenneth Goldsmith was excoriated for reading Michael Brown's autopsy report in a conceptual poetry performance at Brown University, and a petition successfully got Vanessa Place (included in this issue) removed from an AWP subcommittee because of her Twitter appropriation of the black voices from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Still, in all the mayhem, in all the personal attacks on social media, there has not been much actual conversation about what poetry has to say, and can say, about race in the contemporary moment. This collection of poems and other utterances brought together for this *boundary 2* dossier begins with premises of bias. I assume that poetry in this historical moment that takes up race as a concern or poetry written by racialized subjects must, almost by necessity, step outside of conventional knowledges, languages, and approaches to the poem if it is going to say anything of any importance at all. Convention, really, is a killer. Our attachment to well-worn, sanctioned, and funded ways of thinking race—what it is, what it does—I submit, are not our own; they are spoon-fed to us by power regimes that seek to keep us dancing the same troubling jig, our mouths open and receiving, yet wanting.

I've been summarizing Erica Hunt here, when she writes in her 1990 essay, "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," "Dominant modes of discourse, the language of ordinary life or of rationality, of moral management, of the science of the state, the hectoring threats of the press and media, use convention and label to bind and organize us."¹

What innovation requires is a loss of faith.

What innovation proposes is new sight.

Refusal to play the game. Bad behavior.

1. Erica Hunt, "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), 197–212.

What are the rules of the game? Language, as it describes, documents, and facilitates life, is also one of the crucial avenues we take toward self-knowing, the senses of our selves—subjectivity. Outside my window, it is raining. A great lake of water has accumulated in the street that borders the U-shaped driveway leading up to my house. Dusk is falling earlier and earlier as it's December. Wind. Some broken limbs. Some deaths. "Race," we know, is that awful paradox—both a fiction and a radical embodiment. It is inscribed onto (and into) the body, forcing some into the category of "marked," while others remain "unmarked" or "neutral," as much as our lived embodied experiences dictate racial naturalness, racial certainty, racial difference. If there is a possibility for poetics and poetry that innovates something outside of this embedded dichotomy, together the writers and artists included in this dossier disrupt the rules, crack open the game, in a kind of collective disorganization, which is also a resistance, which is also creation, beginning.

In his poem, "The Blurred/Blurring," Douglas Kearney begins, "god we cry / because nobody do us like the body," pointing to the unfortunate locked bodily performance indicated by the body's exterior shade and an imagined interiority. Bhanu Kapil's "Race Drops for Ban" cannot get to the novel itself, and instead presents a metacognitive notational approach to the thing that wants to be written. Like Mallarmé's stunted elliptical posthumously published *A Tomb for Anatole*, Kapil's text succeeds in its inability. Hoa Nguyen negotiates the missing "homeplace." How to speak into absence from absence, her suite of poems ask. Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine preface their documentations, which are at once quotidian and extraordinary, with a statement whereby they articulate the "hope to document white supremacy's protean capacity to remake where and how race is felt." Fred Moten writes about Michael Brown's (and perhaps many African Americans' experiences with) "radical homelessness" as he was forced to negotiate the state's "war against its own condition." What many of these texts have in common is their irreducibility, their refusal to foreclose meaning, be nailed down, or shut up. There's an inherent messiness in that. I find beauty in this kind of uncontained disorder. In this unconventional beauty exists potential for new thinking.

Though this is the first time that so diverse a group of innovative poets (most of color) have been brought together to write within and against the thing we call "race," I do not proclaim this group to be definitive. It is nothing, however, if not timely. Everything is the same as it has always been. Black and brown bodies dragged to death, strung up, beaten and strangled, shot

dead; then the bodies left unceremoniously, like roadkill, element exposed, flies buzzing about. It can be difficult to imagine one's own self against what language cannot speak: the annihilated and discarded. No proclaimed protectors will or can help us. We need, as Erica Hunt says at the end of her short essay included here, "new tropes," "new rope a dopes." The poets in this cluster offer just these things.