**An Interview with Harryette Mullen**

**by poet Barbara Henning.**

With Harryette Mullen’s dense, layered and playful poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, there is often a subtle question, almost present but not quite present, a riddle-like structure that leaves the reader wondering: How did she make this poem? . . . It was very curious and enlightening to the students to discuss and then hear some of the writer’s intentions, context, and the way she had constructed the poems. We of course weren’t searching for meaning, but instead aiming to help writers expand their own repertoire of tools for writing and to think about the reasons writers write the way they do.

Interview transcript:

BH: “Blah-Blah” and “Jinglejangle” are both alphabetical sound poems.

HM: These two were written together, or one suggested the other. I started “Jinglejangle” first. Then I started “Blah-Blah” a bit later. “Jinglejangle” is much lengthier because the language has many more of those ding-dong, chiming-rhyming words than words with exact repetition. They are both compilations. Whenever I would notice these words, in a conversation or in print, I’d add them to my list. “Jinglejangle” took much longer to compile. I kept adding items to “Jinglejangle” right up to the time I turned in the manuscript. “Blah-Blah” didn’t take as long because there aren’t as many of those words in English.

BH: You put Mei-Mei’s name in there.

HM: Because her name fits the pattern. (Laughter) I think in Chinese it means “younger sister.” Dada is in there too. It’s baby talk. “Blah-Blah” is like a baby learning to talk and “Jinglejangle” is that basic melodic impulse of chiming and rhyming, which we hear a lot in advertising and political slogans. Together they represent the DNA or building blocks of poetry.

BH: I was wondering if there is a relationship between these sound poems and say Aimé Césaire’s African sound poems (I’m teaching him this week)?

HM: Well, there might be. I hadn’t thought about it that way but definitely Césaire is a poet I admire, and I enjoy the language play in his poetry. He had a way of making fun of the language of power in his work, and he was conscious of how Caribbean and African people altered the languages of European colonizers.

**1**

BH: “Blah-Blah” appears in the middle between “Black Nikes” and “Bleeding Hearts.” Like a relief from the seriousness and the drama.

HM: Like a palate cleanser.

BH: And with “Jinglejangle” there’s the critique of consumerism and advertising.

HM: We have to critique and resist rampant consumerism, if only because it’s an unsustainable way of life. On the other hand, I’m often amused by advertising. We have to think critically when we’re bombarded every hour with messages that are designed to affect us at an emotional level.

BH: What about language play in African American speech?

HM: I’m interested in language, whether it’s literature, advertising, or speech. How I feel about it depends on what is said and what is the intention. The speech of African Americans reflects our historic separation from mainstream culture and our critical perspective on the language of power. As descendants of slaves in the land of the free, we’re accustomed to paradox and practiced in the art of laughing to keep from crying.

The complete interview is [here](https://eoagh.com/conversation-with-harryette-mullen-from-b-to-d/).