"Poetry/Fiction…the debate (debacle) continues to *Murmur*"
Jennifer K Dick

Laura Mullen
Murmur
Futurepoem Books, 2007

Laura Mullen's *Murmur* (Futurepoem Books, 2007) emerges from Futurepoems' tradition of publishing beautifully written, visually attractive books such as Jo Anne Wasserman's *The Escape* or Shanxing Wang's *Mad Science in Imperial City*. These are books which mix narratives of personal, memoir-like and invented experience, and which challenge notions of what to label as prose or poetry. Thus Mullen's book is a sort of murder mystery meets play on who the self is. She explores this through language (including her own name—transforming Laura to "L'aura" as one of the book's subsection titles). *Murmur* comes from a long line of poetic texts that deal with criminality and which find themselves categorized as "fiction" in many bookstores.

For Mullen, this categorization can be understood, given the techniques she uses and her own observation in an email that perhaps "the need to open up fiction as a genre might be part of that decision." However, she adds: "Oh the labels! (We are easier w/labels than language, that's for sure.) The labels and located (legible) bodies … go together in ways that seem dangerous to me."

Although Mullen manoeuvres in this work techniques traditionally relegated to the fiction writer, there has been a long tradition of poets who play nobly with police novel suspense topics, the genre of film noir, and action language in exciting ways. These authors, like Mullen, cash in on how intrigue and mystery captivate us, snatch us up, as it were, in their arms. For example, Ed Barret's *Rub Out* (Pressed Wafer, 2003), Laura Moriarity's *The Case*, Charles Borkhuis' *After Image* (Chax Press), Joan Retallack's *MemNoir* (Post Apollo Press, 2004) and one which Mullen frequently alludes to, Gertrude Stein's *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* (Pawlet, Banyan Press, 1948, re-published by the Creative Arts Book Company,1982).

As with genre novels, intrigue dominates these works. However page uses, and outcome, are often the differentiating factors. *Murmur*, for example, is a book parading through a vast scope of *non*line-broken and then line-broken pages, pages

in columns, pages with dual voices sometimes indicated by paragraphs in italics, pages which use all the sound devices traditionally considered to belong to "poetry": alliteration, consonance and assonance, subtle rhyming, etc. Mullen is in fact digging through syntax, grammar, noun and verb use, various landscapes and rhythms of speech, to unveil, as if to unveil what lies below the mass of M-words which form a solid block on one of her preamble pages:

> MemoryMarraigeMurderMotherMysteryMuseMarkerMenMereMis placedMemoryMarketMulledMonumentMendacityMisprintMr.Mrs.Mesh…

This amassing, this unveiling of a sort of "Monument' of or to "Mystery" or "Mother" or "Misplaced Memory" starts even before the official first page of *Murmur*. As the book advances into a bulk of clues and complots, it recalls what Claude Royet-Journoud said in an interview with Jean Daive:

> You find yourself with collections of accidents. You no longer know how to re-assemble them. Thus they are, truly, traces, clues, and you lose a lot of your own body attempting to retie loose strings, to tie the narration together, to relocate the narrative thread. At the same time, this suspense—which is both in the lines and on the page— provokes the writing and maintains this "unfindable" aspect you're talking about.[1]

As in Royet-Journoud's work, Mullen invites us forward via the writing and visual page use as if to uncover the origin of "the mess" being swabbed up in her other preamble section called "The Audience".   We are reading between the lines, into the book, perhaps digging up the planks to get below the floorboards in our (her, these characters') hidden homes of memory. *Murmur* thus moves us through pages and pages of landscape and language with a sense of uncovering, revealing, peeling back of layers—to get to…? The body? A crime? A landscape? A culprit? A self? A tale with a clear outcome?

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[1] Daive, Jean. "Un système latéral" entretien avec Claude Royet-Journoud. <u>Fin</u>, n°13 Galérie Pierre Brullé, Paris, 2002. Translation by Jennifer K Dick forthcoming as "A Lateral System" in <u>Verse</u>, 2007.

In fact, what we find is that, in *Murmur* as with Royet-Journoud's work, we are merely unveiling more layers, greater suspense, more hidden, buried clues to "crime" to "murder" to a body that remains "unfindable"; everything that makes up who we are, this "murmur" in the language disappearing on the final page of Mullen's book, blurring, as she writes,

> into letters and then strange markings, lines, squiggles, which only
> faintly resembled writing. In fact the book itself was slowly dissolving…
>
> (*Murmur*, 151)

Mullen holds us in suspension, as if permanently, not just section to section, when the book ends mid-sentence (151 pages after our investigation began) with the phrase *held open as if*, in this paragraph:

> her empty hands held out as if she were reading her own palms or
> another element sliding invisibly over her uplifted hands, a text which
> changed at every instant, which never ceased moving, held open as if
>
> (*Murmur*, 151)

As this shows, part of what distinguishes these poetic prose crime books from traditional genre fiction is the multiplicity of potential intrigues, victims and perpetrators of a crime, as well as what is not uncovered. Where they leave us. At a moment of *held open as if*. As Mullen has admitted herself, over email: "*Murmur* (in the weave of voices) won't allow the stabilities we expect to emerge to remain in place: no single victim, no single perp., no exactly decidable (meaning forgettable) innocence or guilt." Which is quite unlike traditional pulp fiction.

Such an elliptic search recalls work from Mullen's previous collection, *Subject* (University of California Press, 2005), in which Mullen's first collections *The Surface* (University of Illinois Press, 1991) and *After I was Dead* (University of Georgia Press, 1999) culminate in the force of *Subject*'s modernist desire to name, tag, specify, and a postmodernist realization that (or embodiment of how) that is impossible:

> Brush, as if inscribing there a secret
> Text, too dense to read, abraded

In lines between lines

Or the sound of the resistance...   (*Subject,* 75)

Or:

...(Under which: stopped—*at the lips*)/What?/ Taken apart so as
not / The way a name under another name is not / A body under
another body / (Memory), not...

(*Subject,* 89).

Mullen's language is constantly reaching across a gap—as in the above quotations,
where the words reach the lips and stop, cannot get out—are resisted, in lines
between lines. In *Subject*, those are white, unseen (unprinted) lines, but here in
Murmur they are lines pressed into a darker silence by the density of things keeping
clarity at bay, the multiplicity of voices, sounds which interrupt each thought or clue
in the moment of its emerging. The gap-lines in *Murmur* are lines of language rather
than its absence, a language stifling and submerging (the body, the book) us—a
submersion which echoes wonderfully the various aquatic landscapes that people this
book.

Whereas *Murmur* (though making use of this same attention to visual page
space and gap in certain sections, such as "A Noun's Meant", the latter sub-parts of
"Hesitation Marks" or "L'aura",) generally attacks the eye of the reader with a density
of justified prose paragraphs and their lack of horizontal blank space, poems in
Subject end in lines such as:

Held still there in a silence   Another silence   (*Subject*, 89)

In this line it is as if the silence had an echo, had to cross the gap between these
words to bounce back, too. Or, on page 88 of *Subject:*

(Perspective of bridges so the water was)   (   )   (   )

In *Murmur,* punctuation which contains nothing is also used on occasion, as well as the fill-in-the-blank gesture, as in for names on page 43 "Mr. _____ : I object to the world of art." However unlike *Subject*, where punctuation (backslashes, open quotes or parentheses that never close, brackets, or question use within other sentences as interruptions—jolting the reader, keeping them on their toes, and creating a staccato rhythm in many poems—) frequently functions to multiply schisms and potential meaning multiplicities, in *Murmur* Mullen primarily uses inter-paragraph fragmentation; voices layer each other like slips of fine rice paper. These papery voices allow us to guess at each submerged page (body, clue), although we're unable to read them completely.

     Murmur is palimpsest-like, yet the base meanings, the original text inscribed long ago and which we keep trying to attain, remains illusive. Much of this is thanks to the visually fiction-like pages and the impenetrableness of prose paragraphs. For example, in the "Forensics" section—which doubles up on this density—the pages split to have the main justified paragraph prose texts but also a subtext (fittingly, a text below the text, like a body underground). This subtext, a set of 5 footnoted stories ending mid-sentence, printed in a tighter, smaller, thus denser font, crosses along the base of five of the eleven pages in "Forensics". We have no air to breathe, no time to reflect visually on the page, but are constantly pressed into the words printed margin to margin. This accentuates, especially with the footnotes, a sense that we, as readers, function like archaeologists attempting to recover a sunken (lost) history. We seek signs in the autopsied body of text, as it were, that might indicate reasons for its demise. Yet, as we cross through and dig up evidence, as Mullen writes in one of the "forensic" subnotes, "Each 'truth' told seems to stand in briefly, inadequately for what already escapes: sign in the air for X behind which X...vanishes..." (*Murmur*, 60)

     How what "vanishes" is portrayed differently on the visual pages of these books; *Subject* forefronts punctuation disjunction and uses the physical gap, blank, *white* space, sometimes white mid-parentheses on the page, whereas *Murmur* relies on pulling the reader through maximally charged, densely printed pages, leaping along blocks of voices. Yet there is in both texts a linguistic, thematic gap implied by Mullen's use of stuttering, sound-shifting language. This language, like all of the other elements of her texts, moves towards and towards but never arrives at any stagnant or "false" conclusion, any fully pronounced phrase or "truth".

Mullen's stutter, instead of relying on the skills for horizontal gaps demonstrated so consistently in *Subject*, in *Murmur* branches out to explore its verticality. These vertical blanks (vertical stutters) happen between paragraphs, sections, voices—as most paragraphs in the book end mid-sentence. They serve to accentuate the constant drag on the reader who is pulled forward, caught in a suspended *as if*. Readers are propulsed consistently page to page, and down each page, by this verticality — just as they might be in a novel or crime film that slips from one frame of action to another. They grasp desperately, and with great pleasure, at clues — hoping to pull the narrative threads together, acquire sense, de-code. A rush happens in active fragments like photo-frames, which only give part of an event-in-process, ending in apprehension-packed ellipses. For example:

> ...a silhouette, extended hands tensed to measure what   (*Murmur*, 76)

> Where the head had been there was nothing but   (*Murmur*, 20)

> ...—that' s the story we   (*Murmur*, 109)

 Or, the following passage reveals what an entire tension-filled paragraph feels like in this book:

> He pulls back suddenly and searches her eyes. He says, "I can't
> tell whether or not I'm supposed to kill you." He rolls away from her
> and refastens his jeans, stands up. "I'm getting this feeling like I'm
> supposed to kill you, like you *want* me to." He picks his crumpled shirt
> up off the floor. "I'm not sure," he says, "but   (*Murmur,* 109)

These incompletions (stills, or stutters), as Mullen says in the line fragment which immediately follows this citation, "...serve to further the action" (*Murmur*, 109) Of course, sometimes Mullen's vertical ellipses are not there to accentuate a physical menace, but rather—again in a fiction-like strategy—to develop an emotional intrigue, as here:

> ...She's silent, thinking he might still want to marry her, someday, if

she's good now, if she'll *just*   (*Murmur*, 76)

The above passage is then echoed on the following page, with a parallel ellipsis:

...I wanted to know who you were, really. I wondered if you'd ever
been happy. Were you always afraid of wanting what you wanted,
he asks, or was it just   (*Murmur*, 77)

Every paragraph in the "Gravida Loca" section from which these last two citations
come, like almost every other paragraph in the book in fact, ends elliptically
interrupted. These gaps are consistently vertical, pulling between paragraphs, voices,
a couple, or the capacity to get to the end of a thought, speech, a word we have in us,
in our breath, our lives, a word which might be the clue to a crime or the key to
fulfilment.

We, the reader, are cast from one cut-off voice to another, persona to persona,
across this tumbling mystery in search of, like Poe's "Telltale Heart" (a title which
Mullen steals for one of her sub-sections) ticking under the floorboards, a murmur.
Murmur being sound, language, perhaps pre (infantile) and post-language as well; a
heart defect, the murmur of a sea or the heart's rhythm; what gets lost between the
beats. One could read endlessly into the possible motivations for Mullen's title, its M-
ness echoing all the words she packs at the beginning, (murder, mystery, mother,
motive), as well as her own last name. All of these potential decipherings of the title
contribute to the numerous intrigues, themes, sub-themes Mullen visits in *Murmur*
and which overlap like tides carrying away the evidence of someone's passage, a trace
of a foot printed on the beach.

These vertical gaps certainly create strong narrative tension, but one which
specifically stems from a more frequently deemed poetic device than one we might
usually classify as fiction. As such, *Murmur* again, as in all the ways previously
mentioned, continues to redefine the genres of fiction/poetry. For many of us, these
words have lost their delineations, and yet there still seems an unwritten line, a vision
of the way language itself gets used, physically placed on the page (in a disjunction),
which feels more consecrated to poetry or poetic space. On the flip side, other
language use feels more consecrated to the prose space: what frequently marks the
spaces of the text is visual page attention, how syntax plays a role in the sentence-by-

sentence structure of the writing, and how ellipses are used. More radical disjunction is still relegated to the box marked "poetry". Yet still in *Murmur* the prose paragraphs host some of the greater levels of disjunction, while the poetic sequences (such as "Tell-Tale Heart", pp 117-120) seem somewhat clearer because the perpetrator or victim is known, the language/sentences are completed, etc. Mullen's continued exploration of inverting fiction/poetry techniques thus pushes readers to re-examine preconceptions about the text, and what the "dangers"—to return to Mullen's own phrase —are of figuring it out, feeling we are in a place where pat labels suffice.

Once we have opened this 'Pandora's box', Mullen leaves us, not unlike one of her characters, wiping all traces of our previously perceived direction:

> ...It's a perfectly natural side of someone to want to survive
> and avoid the ending when it looks as though only one person
> could have done this. We all drank and looked very solemn. I
> wiped off everything I had touched.   (*Murmur*, 30)

In the end *Murmur* abandons us to be like someone drowned at sea; only a surface of waves apparent, and our knowledge or memory of the depths below, of their potential and refusal to reveal. The pages of the book thus remain unplumbed depths, whose surfaces mesmerize and captivate.

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