

Black Ekphrasis? A Response to Carl Plasa*

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In “Ekphrastic Poetry and the Middle Passage,” Carl Plasa repurposes Adrienne Rich’s assertion that for writers who are women, “entering an old text from a new direction” is “not just ‘a chapter in cultural history’ but ‘an act of survival’” (Rich, “When We Dead Awaken” qtd. Plasa 314). This obtains “When We Dead Awaken” Plasa suggests, for poets of African descent who identify as black, an identity that is fraught with awareness of the degree to which the tradition of European art has been inflected by Euro-American traffic in African bodies. The “acts of survival” that claim Plasa’s attention in this essay are twenty-first century ekphrastic poems by three black women poets: Elizabeth Alexander, Olive Senior, and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. In each instance, the black poet is responding to a work of visual art whose creator is white. In each instance, Plasa finds the poet thematizing the slave trade and its legacy in the western social imaginary.

Early in the essay he also claims to have a larger purpose, that of “correcting the biases intrinsic to much of the existing criticism on ekphrastic poetry” (Plasa 291). The existing criticism is biased, he argues, insofar as “the dominant analytic paradigm remains that of texts where both the poet’s gaze—and its object—are white” (291). But what are the biases endemic to a “white” analytic paradigm? Plasa

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/ekphrastic-poetry-and-the-black-atlantic/>>.

does not explain what they are, or how a “black” gaze approaches its objects differently. Is this largely a question of what the poet chooses to thematize in the painting, or are the dynamics, perhaps when the very premises, of the ekphrastic encounter somehow different? “What we see, we see / and seeing is changing,” observes Rich in a feminist poem from the early 1970s (“Planetarium”); is this the case when “we” are black, as well? In what follows I will speak to these questions and then close by calling attention to a book-length poem that takes a post-ekphrastic approach to the relationship between word and image. Such an approach, I will suggest, offers a compelling alternative to the more conventionally ekphrastic projects of the poems Plasa discusses.

In a footnote Plasa cites *The Gazer’s Spirit* by John Hollander and *Museum of Words* by James Heffernan as “influential examples” of the dominant analytic paradigm. These two books have indeed been influential, but in quite different ways. John Hollander’s approach does not yield an analytic paradigm for the ekphrastic encounter: his ostensibly more modest goal is to walk the reader through a “notional gallery” of ekphrastic poems (Hollander xi). And while his commentaries yield an expansive taxonomy of ekphrastic tropes and tactics, he does not proffer a theory of ekphrasis—e.g. why poets do it, what motivates ekphrastic writing. James Heffernan does address the “why” of ekphrasis, and so does W. J. T. Mitchell, whose highly influential theory Plasa has not cited. For Mitchell and Heffernan, as for Grant Scott, Wendy Steiner, Paul Fry, and others, ekphrasis is typically *paragonal*: it constructs a relationship of antagonism or rivalry between the poem and the visual text it reads or “envoices.” The poet, whose medium consists in words, envies and/or feels menaced by the painting’s or the sculpture’s wordless immediacy. The work of visual art possesses a “quietness” he is tempted to “ravish,” or else it threatens, Medusa-like, to “turn the gazer’s spirit into stone.”¹ At the root of the poet’s response, according to both Mitchell and Heffernan, is a stereotypically masculine hunger for “mastery.”

This hunger for mastery, Mitchell suggests, stems from anxiety—the fear and fascination—aroused by social others. Yet neither he nor Heffernan takes an interest in the ekphrastic forays of poets who have themselves been “othered” by the dominant tradition of European art. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux points out, however, in *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, that although “few poets of color appear in discussions of [ekphrasis],” it does have “a healthy tradition in African American poetry” (Loizeaux 173). In the work of African American poets we might expect a stance that is not only paragonal but “charged with racial politics” (173). And yet one of the things Loizeaux finds remarkable about African American ekphrasis is how “little anxiety [...] [it] displays [...] about word and image relations.” “From the beginning,” she observes, “the conception of the ekphrastic endeavor as a mutually helping hand runs especially deep in African American ekphrasis” (175).

In the light of a “helping hand” tradition of ekphrasis, the first of the three poems Plasa discusses, “Islands Number Four” by Elizabeth Alexander, appears susceptible to a different account of its project from the one Plasa proposes. “‘Islands Number Four’ is [...] a poem in which allusion plays a central role,” as Plasa points out (299). But that is not to say that allusion plays a central role in the painting, an abstract expressionist work by the Canadian artist Agnes Martin. The painter, while she might be intrigued by Alexander’s response, was in no way inviting or anticipating the connection Alexander’s poem makes between her painting and a notorious piece of abolitionist iconography. That is not to accuse the artist of not knowing what her own painting is really about. By connecting Martin’s painting with a set of images whose deployment of abstraction was de-humanizing and did enormous harm, Alexander’s poem sets up a relationship between poem and painting, word and image, that is expansive and surprising, thereby opening up a larger conversation about the uses of abstraction.

Allusion is an unstable device, as Plasa’s discussion of his second example also shows. “A Superficial Reading” is Olive Senior’s ek-

phrasis of a late seventeenth-century portrait of a female slave and her white mistress. Plasa's reading of both the poem and the painting is informed by his own deep knowledge of the tradition of representation associated with the Middle Passage. But is Senior's poem as fully aware of that tradition as Plasa himself? She has called attention to the visual image's "surface opulence," both in her poem's title and in its opening line (qtd. in Plasa 301). But is she meanwhile using allusion to foster a deeper reading? "How we read Senior's allusion depends," Plasa suggests, "on how her poem's speaker reads" a more recent painting to which he thinks the poem's ekphrasis also refers. If she reads that other painting "superficially," the poem's speaker "reveals the limits of her own knowledge" (Plasa 306). But what if these are the limits of the poet's knowledge, as well? If so, then Plasa is over-reading Senior's poem, just as Alexander could be said to be over-reading Martin's painting. Should this trouble us? Perhaps not; as an interpretive strategy that can expand an art work's field of reference in surprising, unanticipated ways, allusion has the potential not only to assert but also to disarm "mastery."

In the third poem discussed by Plasa, allusion is deployed both more conventionally and more explicitly by the poet herself. The painting Jeffers's poem reads is an unusual depiction of "interracial sisterhood": an eighteenth-century portrait of half-cousins brought up together in the household of a British earl with anti-slavery leanings. One of the cousins, Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay, was the illegitimate daughter of the earl's nephew and an African slave. Her given name affords an opportunity for the poet to hint at a tragic destiny for this young woman, even while ostensibly trying to fend it off: "Let her be. / Please." says the poem's speaker: "No Dying Mythical Queen / weaving a vivid, troubled skin— // but Dido, full of girlhood [...]" (ll. 27-31). The relationship between word and image is more conventionally paragonal here than in the other two poems discussed by Plasa: not only this portrait, but portraiture itself becomes subject to critique. Whereas the painting's "walled garden" fosters an illusion of protected enclosure and timeless immediacy, Jeffers's ekphrasis

brings history back into the picture: the history of women's, and especially black women's, dependence and vulnerability. The poem's epigraph cites the diary of a visitor to the estate who recalls that "A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies [...] Lord M [...] calls her Dido, which I suppose is all the name she has." Can the earl's "fondness for her," which his visitor says "he has been reproached for," protect his foster child from the larger society's more conventional view of her anomalous status in his household? The epigraph's language, attesting as it does to societal attitudes that were contemporaneous with this portrait, gives the lie to the poem's—and by implication, the painting's—aspirational present tense. "Forget history. / She's a teenager," says the ekphrastic speaker (ll. 15-16)—but history, as this poem full well knows, cannot be so easily wished away.

The visual texts these poems have entered are all paintings; all three poems are classically ekphrastic, in that each subjects a single work of art to a close, detailed reading. A more recently published poem in which visual images figure tellingly but differently is *Citizen: An American Lyric*, by Claudia Rankine. Rankine's book-length poem incorporates many different kinds of visual images—paintings, photographs, televisual news images, screen grabs, sculptural collages. The poem is not "about" these images: they are part of its fabric, in dialogue with the verbal text on either side of them. Some are also verbal texts, including an etching by the conceptual artist Glenn Ligon that consists entirely of one repeated line from Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to be Colored Me": "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (Rankine 52-53).² *Citizen* may thus be the harbinger of a new kind of traffic between word and image that will render traditional ekphrasis obsolete. Instead of using her words to read or "envoice" a single visual text, as ekphrastic lyrics typically do, Rankine stages less tightly scripted, more open-ended interactions between the visual and verbal materials of which her poem is comprised. Her practice is consistent with the "helping hand" tradition identified by Loizeaux, more so than with the "mastering

gaze” that other theorists have found to be central to the received canon of ekphrastic poetry.

How people of color are seen and at the same time unseen by whites is a central theme of Rankine’s lyric meditations, many of which explore “the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color” (Rankine 24). There is thus an obvious thematic continuity between *Citizen* and the poems Plasa discusses. Arguably, however, an increasingly promiscuous intermixture and interaction of verbal and visual texts is a quotidian experience for twenty-first century readers as well. One of the thoughts Rankine’s book provokes and leaves us to struggle with is that we may have come to a place in the history not only of race relations but also of word-image relations in which it is no longer useful to hypostasize a gaze that is “white” or “black.” We see ourselves as others see us: “And you are not the guy and still you fit the description” (Rankine 105). Every black or brown person has the experience of “feeling you don’t belong so much / to you—” (146). And is this not everyone’s quotidian experience, to some degree? Another suggestion Rankine’s poem pessimistically broaches is that “All our fevered history won’t instill insight” (142). If she is right, then we do stand in need of a post-ekphrastic approach, one that, if not post-racial, is premised on hybridity.

In *Citizen*, the traffic between word and image has “suffered a sea change / Into something rich and strange.” Has Rankine’s poem thereby sounded the death knell of ekphrastic poetry as such? I would be interested in what Professor Plasa and other readers think about this.

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NOTES

¹Keats begins his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by apostrophizing the urn as "Thou still unravished bride of quietness." "To turn the gazer's spirit into stone" is a line from the poem Mitchell suggests we think of as the "primal scene" of ekphrasis, Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci" (172). I have said some of this already in my Introduction to *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler* (cf. esp. 21-26).

²"This appropriated line, stenciled on canvas by Glenn Ligon, who used plastic letter stencils, smudging oil sticks, and graphite to transform the words into abstractions, seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies" (Rankine 25). This ekphrastic comment is fuller than Rankine gives to most of the visual texts her poem incorporates; the etching itself does not appear for another twenty-five pages.

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