

## Valerie O'Brien: On "S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T"

In *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, Mullen uses linguistic play (primarily puns, rhymes, and aural associations) to produce a vision of the supermarket as an environment of language, as Mullen herself describes it in a 1999 interview with Cynthia Hogue for *Postmodern Culture* (qtd. on *MAPS*). Blending high and low culture, the immaterial and the material, Mullen uses avant-garde Language poetry approaches to represent the mass consumerism of the supermarket. This technique enables her to recreate this sphere of materialism as one that is abstractly structured by language rather than by commodities. Mullen's supermarket (or *S\*perm\*\*k\*t*?) is filled not with products, but with language. The visual organization of the supermarket space is transformed into a site of linguistically driven associations and disorienting meditations on popular products. Unanchored, at times, from the material objects it describes, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*'s language emphasizes the inherent vitality of the linguistic realm.

However, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* is not comprised solely of verbal play; the familiar, fluorescently lit, aesthetically arranged domestic space of the supermarket also becomes a site of acerbic critique of capitalist consumption. In her interview with Hogue, Mullen describes the supermarket as the reference point, the metonymic reservoir of ways that we see the world and ourselves in it. As she notes in a 1997 interview with Farah Griffin et al. (*MAPS*), the letters missing from the supermarket in the title—U-A-R-E—recall the old adage "you are what you eat": our consumption, she argues, "construct[s] [us] as citizens" (Hogue). Thus, her sordid rendering of the products she features in *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*—petroleum, pest killer, cereal, pork, baby food, dairy products—translates to the sordidness of their consumers and American consumption culture broadly. Though the richly allusive *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* expresses a nostalgia for popular domestic products and cultural symbols that claim to uphold traditional American values, the poem immediately subverts this nostalgia by portraying the products and the dominant American ideologies they represent as irremediably sexist, racist, and imperialist.

Mullen selects products associated with cleanliness to highlight instead the grounds for their existence: the uncleanness of America's wholesome domestic spaces. This emphasis on filth is most conspicuous in the poem about pest killer. The section begins with the Raid advertising slogan "Kills bugs dead" followed by a parodic critique of it: "Redundancy is syntactical overkill." Mullen then suggests that the product (and also, perhaps this syntactic repetition) offers consumers "a pinprick of peace at the end of the tunnel of a nightmare night in a roach motel, where the noise of cockroaches infects the dream of those sleeping in the roach motel, but also the American dream." Near the end, the movement adopts the language of imperialism, parodically asserting the righteousness of the pest killer consumer's cause, affirming the supposed cleanliness of domestic spaces that the poetic imagery has already undermined: "We dream the dream of extirpation. Wipe out a species, with God on our side. Annihilate the insects. Sterilize the filthy vermin." Here, the American dream, "infect[ed]" with the noise of roaches, becomes a dream of mass extermination, absolute annihilation of the enemy.

Another poem in *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* abounds in porcine puns that critique Americans' gluttonous appetites for food, sex, violence, and money—concepts that easily bleed into one another. Using pork as a starting point, Mullen suggests that American consumers are the real pigs.

The double meaning of the movement's opening sentences—"Off the pig, ya dig? He squeals, grease the sucker."—suggest acts of violence, which transition into an idiomatic phrase evoking sexual voracity: "pour the pork." The playful masculine endorsement of this sexual gluttony—"Pig out, rib the fellas"—also illustrates the violence inherent in the sexual act. Later, the phrases "hog wilding" and "a pig of yourself" elicit visions of excess and a lack of self-control. The section's equally playful and perverse emphasis on flesh, particularly that of an animal culturally regarded as unclean and gluttonous, calls attention to American hyperconsumption, a kind of individualized imperialism of immoderate indulgence in commodities.

Later, Mullen reveals the contemptible politics of a product that seems relatively innocent—baby food. The "Adorable babyface jars" of Mullen's *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* perpetuate racism in their homogenous representation of infancy: "Pastel puree of pure pink bland blue-eyed babes all born a cute blond? Sterile eugenically cloned rows of clean rosy dimples and pamper proof towhead cowlicks." Product and uncritical consumers alike are implicated in this prevalent pattern of discrimination. Near the end of the section, the focus shifts from the food itself to a cruder, related product: the "durable superabsorbent miracle fibers" of diapers designed to contain the various forms of waste the product generates, "as solids break down," causing "a land [to fill] up with dead diapers with funky halflife." In this image of excrement, Mullen accomplishes her aspiration to "take" detritus and turn it into art, "recycling" the "commercialized, debased" language of the supermarket and repurposing it through the linguistic play of *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* (Hogue).

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**Poem:**

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