

## Race Relations and Conversations as Hip-Hop Calls Out Anime In *TweRk* by Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

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The poetry of Latasha N. Nevada Diggs (2013) moves beyond the conventional boundaries separating music and text within traditional Western literature in her book *TweRk*. By both actively connecting and fusing music and text into this body of work she creates a text with a sonic element that moves beyond the boundaries of the page. Diggs (2013) further complicates the relationship between text, sound and visual media in her poetry which is a fusion of pop culture, rhythm, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and a multitude of languages (including various Caribbean Patois) making it difficult to categorize her poetry due to its polyphonic nature. Diggs's (2013) poetry ranges from references and direct quotes from hip-hop songs (such as titles and lyrics), as well as alluding to particular rhythms all while addressing stereotypes of sexism and combatting worldwide images of anti-blackness. I will discuss sound and its relationship to poetry, the role of pop culture in the text, and its interactions with *misogynoir*.<sup>1</sup>

Using Edouard Glissant's terminology for language and culture in the Caribbean being an amalgamation of sorts, what he called *Antillanité*<sup>2</sup> and viewing Diggs's (2013) representation of Blackness through a multicultural lens disrupts the monolithic narrative of Black identity. She invokes a pluralistic perspective on language with her use of Japanese, English and AAVE in the same poem. She also examines the duality of Black identity, what WEB DuBois referred to as double consciousness (DuBois 1961, 3) and alienation exemplifying the "twoness" the "two souls, two thoughts and two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (DuBois 1961, 3). Diggs (2013) shows that the double consciousness of Black people isn't merely an American phenomenon. It draws attention to world wide anti-blackness that exposes that Black people all over the world are aware of the way that they are perceived by society, versus the way that they perceive themselves. Diggs (2013) does this by drawing attention to the "acceptable" and popular forms of black face and racist iconography being used world wide in this excerpt:

**mista popo TM hollas @ jynx TM**

*In 2004, Viz began to downsize Mr. Popo's large lips digitally*

*Mista Popo,                      in the order of djinns to proceed—*

*from blue-black to purple to pink.*

*There was nothing less visible that this red tire poised to smile.*

*Lips disputed, disappearing, reappearing*

*Mista Popo adjusted his turban of starch white.*

*Mista Popo was determined to prevent Kami from tapping Jynx's ass  
before him.*

*Mista popo said: oh bodacious Zwarte Piet,*

*How does the butterfly garden thrive  
from my big ole kettle belly?*

*An extra scoot never too robust for my flying carpet.*

*So croon,*

*holla at me Jynx,*

*holla at me Jynx,*

*holla at me Jynx w / some soba on the side.*

*Mista Popo want that corn husky hair (Diggs 2013, 3).*

In the excerpt above she mentions multiple anime characters and K-Pop references which reveal an insidious interaction between the characters and the cultures that they symbolize. Her poetry interpolates images of cultural identity and racist iconography that are both engaging with and combatting cultural appropriation, sexuality and European/East Asian societal standards of beauty that are sounding off within the text. By including Zwarte Piet from the Netherlands in comparison with the image of Mr. Popo she is making an analogous claim to the historical representations of Black identity through that of black face.

In the first line of the poem, it states that “*in 2004 Viz began to downsize Mr. Popo's large lips digitally*” is a reference to the uncomfortable American gaze of the Japanese cartoon character and the way that his image is reminiscent of racist iconography and of a painful (and still

existent) racial struggle. Mr. Popo has large red lips and his skin is pitch black, he also wears a turban and flies around on a magic carpet. He is a combination of the racial stereotypes associated with both Black and South Asian people fused into one character. In the American version of the show, his lips were made smaller once people began to notice the similar appearance that Mr. Popo shared with racist caricatures of African-Americans in the form of Sambo Dolls. Not only did they change the size of his lips, but they changed the color of his skin which Diggs (2013) notes in line three of the poem above from “*blue-black to purple to pink.*” Diggs (2013) recognizes that the appearance of Mr. Popo’s image is not stagnant it is undergoing a continuous transformation as in line five he is described as “*Lips disputed, disappearing, reappearing*” which emphasizes that there are forces outside of Black culture that have the power to warp and distort Black identity.

Language is also a major part of Black identity as Diggs (2013) emphasizes the value of AAVE and Black popular culture which unlocks some of themes that may seem impenetrable to some. The title of the poem *mista popo TM hollas @ jynx TM* is also part of AAVE, which is a colloquialism, to *holla*<sup>3</sup> at a woman means that Mr. Popo is trying to engage in an exchange with Jynx that will ultimately lead to a relationship, but his only understanding of Black culture is through racist caricatures and problematic representations of hip-hop music. His expectations of Jynx result in his desire for her to play a role “stimulating the audience with bold and often sexy imagery” (White 2013, 613). Unfortunately Mr. Popo’s “perverted social and cultural representations from hip-hop culture...”shape Mr. Popo’s perception of Jynx (the character that symbolizes Black women in the poem) (White 2013, 613). His reduction of her to nothing more than her *bodacious* sex appeal and her Blackness is also evidence of Diggs (2013) working to reclaim the sexual identity of Black woman hood that has been displaced by a society that does not fully understand Black culture (hence the title, *TweRk* a term which has undergone much scrutiny under the gaze of white America). The way that the bodies, sexuality, hairstyles and skin color of Black women are appropriated within the domain of K-pop and Japan’s Shibuya girls excessive tanning, are placed in contrast against a society that values what Diggs (2013) refers to as *pastel* colors thus implying lighter shades of skin, is further emphasized in line 22-24 of the poem:

*Blessed Be your bleached pastel puikura kept.  
So we both know: your tan from Shibuya right?  
Now is your booty valley Honey or Janet Jackson?  
Is you is that face of flattery and kuragari or is you is my dark exception?  
Darky girl, where you get that cup size? Ain’t no Koreans up in here that  
buoyant.*

Diggs (2013) continues to incorporate Hip-Hop culture and rhythm into lines 13-14:

“ *holla at me Jynx,*                      *holla at me Jynx,*  
*holla at me Jynx w / some soba on the side.*”

This section includes the rhythm from the DJ Webstar song *Chicken Noodle Soup* which also has an accompanying dance of the same name which also invokes the past of minstrelsy disrupting the present temporality of the poem, in dance both the past and the present converge. It reexamines the minstrel tradition and Black culture interpreted by White people as well as its role in the Black community. Diggs draws parallels between this relationship, invoking past misrepresentations of *shucking and jiving* and further complicates that image with her use of the word “*soba*” in the last line above and the following line as well; “dazzle your wog eyes; wave your mickey gloves” (Diggs 2013, 4). The “mickey gloves” and the “wog eyes” of Mr. Popo are evidence that despite the fact that Jynx is a modern representation of Black womanhood, all he sees when he looks at her is a racist caricature, available for his enjoyment, to sing, dance and satiate his desires. Black womanhood once again is complicated as her body (Jynx) becomes a site multiple temporalities reflecting his present desires and the complex history of the objectification of Black women which is stemming from misogynoir, a complex fusion of racism and gender exclusion i.e. Sara Bartman.<sup>4</sup> at the same time (it is also reiterated that her body is a site of both commodification and desire based on the exotification of her Blackness).

The word *soba* as used in the poem is the Japanese word for buckwheat, but here the theme of race and racism implies that she is invoking the character Buckwheat (from the television show *The Little Rascals* thus further invoking problematic consumptions of Black representation) into the conversation around racial stereotypes and racist iconography. This use of hip-hop rhythms and American media in the text creates an interruption that amplifies DuBois’s (1961) concept of double-consciousness. DuBois (1961) attempts to make musical works that are used within *The Souls Of Black Folk* “independent of their performances and locations in history” this is also what Diggs (2013) is also doing with her poetry (Weheliye 2005, 320). She is disrupting the typical flow of the text by using media to disrupt the present temporal scope of race relations. By using modern media in the present (misrepresentations of Black culture in hip-hop) in communication with media of the past (the image of Buckwheat in *The Little Rascals*), Diggs (2013) is creating temporal echoes of racist images within media and their effect on the development of Black culture. Signaling and emphasizing how problematic perceptions of Black identity are reflected and reproduced. For example, the history of minstrelsy is an example of multiple reflections in a mirror. White people pretending to act like Black people, but unaware that their understanding of Black people was not genuine. The happy demeanor of slaves was performative as Paul Lawrence Dunbar stated most eloquently in his poem *We*

*Wear The Mask*.<sup>5</sup> Diggs (2013) “reimagines, and morselizes the supposed linearity of hegemonic time from the (aural)” and also the visual “vantage point of the oppressed” (Weheliye 2005, 336). Diggs’s (2013) combination and incorporation of hip-hop rhythm and media “remixes [her] own words...or rather engineers a dub version of [her] own texts...” with hip-hop music (Weheliye 2005, 333).

Diggs (2013) is also aware of sexism at work in hip-hop which is also a prevalent theme in the poem. In line fifteen she continues to emphasize the complexity of Black identity and representation in the following line; “*Mista Popo want that corn husky hair*” which implies that Mr. Popo desires Jynx because of her “*corn husky hair*” which can be interpreted as light colored or blonde hair. This suggests that he likes Jynx because she has an aesthetic of Blackness that he finds desirable once again reducing to her to an object, under his gaze, only found desirable because of her parts and not as a whole individual. In line seven it states that “*Mista Popo was determined to prevent Kami from tapping Jynx’s ass before him.*” This line uses colloquial language to describe that Mr Popo only values Jynx as a sexual object, once again as a commodity which further exposes and complicates what drives his desire and how the sexuality and identity of Black women historically, has been the site of desire, commodity and profit (Hartman 2008, 12). This reference to slavery suggests a reconfiguration of history in Diggs’s (2013) poetry which seeks to create a temporality in which the past is in flux with the present, constantly in motion disposing of the dominant linear conceptions of time. In *My First Black Nature Poem* Diggs (2013) links the struggles of slavery to stereotypes surrounding African-Americans and water:

*black folk don’t swim. we splash and cool off.  
we a ways forward from Splenda hint of Sengalese manliness diving off a  
ferry off shore from Goreé. that water got too much memory.  
we much prefer chlorine. that salt and fresh water our hypertension.  
and that ocean is curiously scary.  
and this lake is charmed and churning with tales from the deep.*

In this poem she links the stereotype of Black people not swimming with trans-generational trauma, another form of blood memory<sup>6</sup> in which the trauma of the middle passage and the horrors of the slave trade that existed “*off shore from Goreé*” are still being remembered and are being currently relived in the minds of African-Americans. She also uses trauma to link African-Americans directly to Goreé, to the history of Senegal and ultimately to the continent of Africa once again forging diasporic connections.

*TweRk* is also an active affirmation and a reclaiming of space as the text is routed and rerouted, inside and outside of sound, time and anime. This text requires more than a passive reader, but an active participant in the text because “*There’s also this interaction and interplay that’s still going on in the text. It’s not a dead thing. What you listen to or what you’re reading*

*is still moving and still living. It's still forming*" (Moten 2013, 113).

This text is a living, breathing, written expression of the polyphonic beauty and complexities of the Black diaspora. While rap music and other art forms that originated within the Black community are popularized and dispersed via globalization, this text examines the relationship between art, community, gender and race. Analysis of the text through the lens of media and sound studies problematizes the global participation in Black culture as it gains popularity and is eventually propelled into the realm of popular culture. It also exposes a troubling reproduction of past racist iconography embedded in contemporary media. Diggs (2013) suggests that there is a responsibility (as well as respect) that should be associated with participation in Black culture. Critical race theory elucidates the importance of intersectionality in examining not only double consciousness but proposes the addition of gender to the discussion of Black identity. (In which the representation of Black women is viewed as an additional or even a "triple consciousness").<sup>7</sup> This text continues to emphasize that while Black people experience anti-blackness within and beyond American borders, people throughout the world that engage in and appreciate Black culture should also be responsible that they engage in that culture.

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## Notes

- 1 Misogynoir: the intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny which is a combination of criticisms or insults directed specifically at Black women. Term coined by scholar Moya Bailey in 2010 at Emory University.
- 2 Antillanité: a political literary movement of the 1960's which focused on Caribbean identity being

an amalgamation of different cultures reflected in the language and literature.

- 3 holla: a flirtatious exchange
- 4 Saartjie Sarah Baartman renamed as the 'hottentot Venus' was a famous khokhoi woman exhibited as a freak show attraction in a European tour during the 19th century.
- 5 We Wear The Mask is a poem by African-American Poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1896).

“We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,— “

- 6 blood memory is a term used by playwright August Wilson to reference the act of “connecting yourself to something larger than your self” ([PBS Interview](#)).
- 7 Here I am borrowing from the DuBoisian concept of double consciousness. “Triple consciousness” would be seeing yourself through the eyes of white America, and seeing yourself as Black person, and then further complicating that by seeing the way that you are perceived as a Black woman. (This identity can be further compounded by seeing yourself, as a trans-woman, trans-man, etc.)