Recyclopedia is a book that does exactly as its title suggests: an encyclopaedia referencing, through recycling, various art forms. It is widely accepted that *Recyclopedia* pays homage and critiques the work of Gertrude Stein and the Language poets; however, this book extends beyond fanatical appropriation and intertextuality. Mullen twists and pushes appropriation and intertextuality, reaching new discursive limits, practically forming a genre of her own, redefining concepts of homage and critique. Through recycling historical subversive and experimental techniques, *Recyclopedia* is a uniquely familiar text that is equally (if not more) destabilising, and yet less confounding, than *Tender Buttons* or much of the work of the Language poets, making Mullen’s poetry immediately more accessible to a vast range of readers. Mullen employs intertextuality and appropriation to paradoxically commodify her focal points of homage and critique, and in order to introduce and centralise identities and oppressions that have been largely omitted by previous Avant-garde art movements.

There is no doubt that Mullen writes back to *Tender Buttons*, regarding the exclusion of race and questioning the possibility of discriminatory undertones. Frost discusses *Recyclopedia* in a manner that considers intertextuality, contestation, and commodification, she states that ‘Mullen's pun-laden prose poems take the domestic landscape of *Tender Buttons* and “trim” it down to a central trope: feminine clothing’ (1995, p. 12). She also examines how *Trimmings* exposes the language used by mass
media to commodify women (Frost, 1995, p. 17). I will use Frost’s analysis as a framework to further explore the manner in which Mullen favours metonymy over metaphor, focusing on differences rather than similarities to produce a text that, rather than fold in on itself, spirals outward. Furthermore, in this Steinian pastiche, I will consider how Mullen employs defamiliarisation as a convention rather than as subversion, drawing attention to the fact that all things, no matter how counterculture they may be, are eventually commodified. An additional point of interest is to observe how Mullen uses this, densely layered yet hilarious, irony to commodify the innovators of defamiliarisation, instead foregrounding race and oppression by literally dragging them out of the ‘shadows’.

The following poem provides examples of defamiliarisation as convention and metonymy over metaphor:

*A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plump recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large, pink dress* (Mullen, 2006, p. 11).

Mullen describes this poem as cannibalising Gertrude Stein’s ‘A Petticoat’ (Houge, 1999, p. 19). Here, Mullen appropriates Stein’s actual words: *A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm* (Stein, 1997, p. 13). This overt mirroring of Stein’s diction allows the reader to recognise the familiar in the strange, instantly allowing more penetrable reading and interpretation. Mullen’s use of appropriation
familiarises defamiliarisation, transforms subversion into convention, and commodities her predecessors.

It is natural, as readers, to seek out and focus on the similarities in signification; language, in its very nature, is metaphorical. That being said, *Recyclopedia* effectively directs the reader’s attention to associations and contiguities, rather than the similarities. Again, imitative of Stein, Mullen substitutes a part for a whole. However, Mullen’s metonyms are more obvious than those of Stein, making it easier for the reader to draw connections, even those connections of difference, contributing further to the heightened accessibility of this experimental text.

In the poem cited above the words *white* and *pink* signify two things. Firstly, the colour of skin; secondly, as Mullen explains, the colours white and pink signify femininity in the dominant culture (Houge, 1999, p. 19). These signifiers are additionally used, in *Recyclopedia*, to explore the overlap of fashion and pornography, a pertinent phenomenon. Specifically in this poem, Mullen considers how art and language historically underwrite this present day conundrum, while also addressing the commodification of both race and gender. A perfect example of how Mullen’s intertextuality and appropriation intersect and spiral outward can be found in the multifunctional metonyms *shadow* and *ink*. The one whose skin is *ink* remains in the *shadow* not only speaks to Stein’s ‘A Petticoat’ but also to Manet’s ‘Olympia’, addressing them as historical influences on present day advertising, fashion, and pornography industries.

Through metonymical descriptions of women in terms of what they wear (repeated throughout the entirety of *Trimmings*), Mullen critically focuses, extends, and transplants Stein’s polyvalent images, steeping them in the female representations of Manet’s controversial painting. The *white* woman wears *pink* as she is *naked*. The
shadow standing by is the black woman who wears her color, referring to the colour of her skin (she is ink), and the large pink dress she wears, all details accentuating the nudity in the painting. Here Mullen is questioning more than the ‘disgraceful’ sexuality or representation of the naked woman in the painting, instead she is examining the ‘disgraceful’ difference of how the two women are represented in relation to each other.

While the naked woman privileges ‘whiteness’ as the focal point of sexual desire, the black woman is ironically delivering flowers to her mistress and is portrayed largely as a background feature. Mullen directs our attention to how this scenario is replicated in modern day advertisements, fashion, and pornography, and how these scenarios stem from historical representations such as Manet’s ‘Olympia’, and Stein’s rosy charm. Recyclopedia critically examines these forms of racial omissions in art and contemporary society to illustrate how the Western icon of beauty is constructed around ‘whiteness’, and moreover how black women relate to this representation and construction of beauty.

Frost discusses how Mullen’s rewriting of ‘Olympia’ reaches beyond the feminist critique to examine the dynamics in representation of women of different race (1995 p. 20). This simultaneously challenges the ideas of race in the exploration of sexuality in Tender Buttons as a feminist text. Questions of race will always arise when reading Stein, in her obsession with the word white, which appears at least forty-four times in Tender Buttons, and the unforgettable cringe-worthy moment when she uses the term “nigger”. As Frost points out in regards to Mullen’s transformation of the signifier ink, ‘it is this most important "signifying" on Stein's text about the "rosy charm" of female sexuality, a celebration of the erotic that
nonetheless reveals considerable limitations to any black women reader, that produces the revisionist poetry of *Trimmings*’ (1995, p. 21).

In defence of Stein, who isn’t alive to defend herself, *Tender Buttons* is ultimately a product of its time, and it is plausible that at the time of writing Stein was writing only for herself, a white woman in a lesbian relationship with a white woman. I sincerely hope that Stein was not racist, and would like to posit instead, that Stein had never been sexually intimate with a black woman and therefore didn’t feel qualified to eroticise black women in her writing. What’s more is that Stein may have been writing exclusively about her life partner, Alice B. Toklas, who was, more likely than not, Stein’s muse. This idea is not excusing the omission of race or inappropriate racial slurs, rather attempting to present Stein’s work in relation to the era and conditions in which it was written.

*Recyclopedia* is a modern rewrite of *Tender Buttons* that reveals and incorporates many of the omissions of *Tender Buttons*, while simultaneously acknowledging Gertrude Stein for what she was: an experimental writer who, as a white woman in a lesbian relationship, wrote a revolutionary prose poem in 1914, *Tender Buttons*. It is indisputable that Stein produced a text that immeasurably influences the majority of experimental, female, and queer writers. While Stein can and should be critiqued, she should nevertheless receive the honourable applause that she deserves.

It is possible that the challenges and resistance Stein encountered, as not only a feminist but also as a homosexual writer, have been understated in order to make way for criticism. It should also be mentioned that not all social injustices are ever confronted in a single text. That being said, Mullen’s use of appropriation and intertextuality is nothing less than genius, as she adopts what has come before and,
rather than criticise, she recycles and extends it, subverting the dominant culture while tackling problems of race, gender, class, representation and commodification.

In this essay the manner in which Mullen commodifies Stein, is considered not as critique or criticism, but instead as a tool for extension, inclusion, and transcendence.
Works Cited


