

THOMAS FINK

Questioning Modes of Renewal and Reconstruction: Evie Shockley's *The New Black*

The New Black, by Evie Shockley. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

The New Black, Evie Shockley's second volume of poetry, is full of lively and elegant formal touches. There are three examples of the gigan, a form invented by Ruth Ellen Kocher with villanelle-esque patterns of repetition, a thick x-shape comprising the alpha-alliterative "x marks the spot," the vessel-structured feminist poem "at the muse de l'homme," the Cagean "mesotics from the american grammar book," a sestina ("clare's song," alluding to a central character in Nella Larsen's *Passing*) containing long strings of adjectives and nouns and verbs that disrupt narrative flow, and a poem on Thomas Jefferson and Monticello in which the slow march of the Declaration of Independence's opening sentence in bold and italics on the right side of the pages ironically counterpoints recent and old news of the founding father/slaveholder's outrageously antidemocratic behavior on the left.

Shockley, who does not present us with a single capital letter in the book, capitalizes on punning and torquing of clichés: "if life hands you poverty, / sell pink lemonade. Yeah, mama says, and // don't forget your tutu is a bishop, and winks"; "having / funk here you were wish"; "a self of my former shadow"; "why are there so few / hybrids on the road? because / they can't reproduce." In large measure, though, I find Shockley to be a deeply traditional poet in a highly subversive tradition: African American letters, feminist wing. Strongly narrative and imagistic (at times ekphrastic) strategies serve sociopolitical aims that often animate her participation in "the continuity of African American poetry," to signify on Roy Harvey Pearce. Homage to foremothers is unmistakably central to this book: one of the three dedicatees is Lucille Clifton, cited for her "oceanic footprints," and "good night women (or, defying the carcinogenic pen)" memorializes

seven black literary figures, including Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and June Jordan, who battled cancer: "ripping hot and fierce down the night sky, / too quickly, more frequently than we can bear." In "celestial," Shockley honors Ella Fitzgerald, the woman with "the orchestra in her throat," (and see the intriguing historical note, 101), whereas in "owed to Shirley Chisholm," what is considered "owed" in this ode to the first black female Presidential candidate, "a woman who ate boulders / for breakfast," is, echoing Virginia Woolf, "a room—a trust—of her own: / the oval office: democracy's throne."

Shockley's admiration is not solely reserved for historical figures. Two poems meticulously, elaborately, and cogently describe the elements and overall ambiance of photos that feature African American children. In "womanish," two "tween" girls, "impassive pacifist and trickster / of self-defense" convey a sense of complex, carefully developed style: "the v of her fingers / leans on its side . . . / no curve breaks her mouth's cool / plane, behind and to her right, her / alter ego (and mine) pushes her lips / up beneath her nose and lets her cheeks / rise on her cheekbones. . . ." In the double-sided stack of rectangles comprising "go-go tarot," "the youngblood" (male) "sitting loose-legged on the tail of a mostly empty rental truck" beside "massive . . . stereo equipment" also occasions the poet's reflection on the inherent dignity, psychological strength, and creative potential of black Americans.

"Institutional racism" may seem like a catch-all phrase, but it is important to note the specific context in which Shockley engineers her continuation of protest and articulation of collective resources (including celebration and homage) in the African American literary tradition. When this book appeared, Barack Obama had served as President for a little over two years; the opening poem, "my last modernist poem #4 (or, re-re-birth of a nation)," the title of which tropes on D.W. Griffith's racist filmmaking, accounts for ways in which Obama can now be read as a signifier: "a clean-cut man brings a brown blackness / to a dream-carved, unprecedented / place. some see in this the end of race. . . ." Of course, "end of race" really means "end of racism," and Shockley continues the sentence with signifying serious humor to answer those who ascribe such gigantic significance to the 2008 election: ". . . like the end of a race that begins / with a gun; a finish(ed) line we might / finally limp across." If the marathon run to freedom—made necessary by how weapons (not guns used in sport) enforce race-based enslavement—has ended, the supposed winners feel extremely debilitated. But Shockley then offers another perspective, that race(ism) is not over: "for others, // this miracle marks an end

like year's / end, the kind that whips around again / and again: an end that is chilling, / with a lethal spring coiled in the snow." The "cold" of renewed racism is evident in the hullabaloo over Obama's birth certificate, Tea Party rage over the moderate President's "communist" initiatives like universal health care, and ceaseless obstruction of his attempts to reach consensus by Republicans in Congress. At the end of the poem, Shockley alludes to "Lazarus," who knows "about miracles: / the hard part comes afterward." The effect of the election "miracle" is extremely hard to sustain; the double prefix in "re-re-birth" indicates the need to keep repeating actions that, one hopes, will access the drive to freedom. Lazarus "stepped / into the reconstruction of his / life, knowing what would come, but not how." The historically charged term "reconstruction" casts a pall over enthusiasm about renewal, but its positive connotations are not entirely effaced.

The title of Shockley's book, of course, plays on "the New Negro" of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the fickleness that characterizes the fashion industry. Is Obama posited as a synecdoche for "the new black," one destined to align the Declaration's words, which are "better than" Jefferson, with egalitarian social policy? For Shockley, the situation is much murkier: "technology / provided other views of the weather. our own / were muddy. murk was the new black." Her book draws numerous comparisons between "the land where," earlier, "my fathers and mothers died on poplars in quarters under the lash" and Bush- and Obama-era manifestations of racism detailed in such poems as "statistical haiku," "to see the minus" [about the context of racism in the Hurricane Katrina tragedy], and "improper(ty) behavior."

The volume's second powerful poem on Frederick Douglass opens up possibilities for who and what "the new black" could be. "(mis) takes one to know one" begins: "i dreamed i told frederick douglass / barack obama isn't black, not yet!" Douglass immediately responds to the speaker with a "look" of "direct metal" and tells he not to "mix up *servitude and race*" or to suppose that a mother must be the defining parent. Douglass, who later reminds us that he was the 1872 Vice Presidential candidate on "*the equal rights / ticket*," supposes from a seemingly idealized 19th-century perspective that "*the president of the united states could / not be a slave to anyone or anything / except his own desires*." Then he shifts immediately to a contemporary social constructivist stance that permits agency within a hybrid subject position:

*but black? Answer
this: what is the story your president tells*

*of his life? that is the question. always,
some among us have chosen to be or
not to be what laws or customs inscribe
in our blood. race is not biology: it is
the way the wind blows when you enter
a room, how you weather the storms,
how you handle being becalmed. black,
white, red—colors, symbols, myths. i
never knew a white parent to stand
between a colored man and his destiny. (80)*

Obama rose to public attention partly because of *Dreams from My Father*, the autobiography in which he tells how he came to identify himself in Chicago with the African part of his familial inheritance. Beyond "symbols" and "myths" and even the self-representations in print, the *choice* of identification—echoing Hamlet's most famous soliloquy—can be found in action: how one interrogates and often challenges "storms" caused by "law or customs'" inscription. When Douglass speaks of "destiny," it is the intersection of striving for freedom and current social determinism. The "white parent" who does not, he asserts, constitute an essential(ist) dilution of "blackness" could be his own as much as Obama's. While the poem's dreaming "I" is probably judging the 44th President as "not yet" black because of his centrist positions that in the first half of his term had not improved conditions for African-Americans, Douglass sends a message of possibility. In the second of two long strophes, he first emphasizes the extent of change—his amazement at "*white men*" killing "*white men by the hundreds / of thousands freeing the negro*," regardless of economic motives.

The poem's closure re-emphasizes both social construction and individual agency in a way that can be applied variously to Obama's present and future: "*your president will be what / his country has taught him to be, will / do what his experience leads him to do. / don't mix up change with progress.*" On the one hand, the implicit statement about "progress" being a desired outcome, as opposed to mere "change," the single word that was most crucial to Obama's 2008 campaigns against Clinton and McCain, seems to suggest that the U.S. "has taught" the President not to make genuine progress and that "his experience leads him to" act cautiously to maintain his political advantages. On the other hand, the U.S. has a long tradition of dissent and egalitarian strivings, including the work of Frederick Douglass, that can teach a leader to challenge the current power structure if he sets aside

reactionary or status quo instruction. Further, Obama can draw on his experience as a community organizer in the black milieu of Chicago to take stances that accord with what the poem's speaker might call "black." If he gains a second term (and I write this in March 2012), he will have no more elections to lose; he can push for a "new black" (increasingly progressive) agenda. Perhaps *The New Black* signals an efficacious "new black" concept to be realized in the future—with luck, the near future.