I spell even when they tell me to sit in the colored section . . .
Before me, what I do had only been a prayer on a black girl's tongue.
What more can I ask for? There's a revolution wetting my lips.

A. Van Jordan, from *MacNolia*

When I first encountered the phrase “the creaking of the word” in Nathaniel Mackey's *Discrepant Engagement*, I misread it as “the creaking of the world.” Dogon weavers in Mali, Mackey explains, rest looms upon a foundation they call “the creaking of the word” (19). Both the phrase and my misreading of it are electric with implication: the word/world (a world made of words, a word made world-sized) is a creaking contraption, a thing not quite solid, in danger of breaking. It makes audible the pressures that human creativity puts upon it. The Dogon phrase places this rickety, untrustworthy word at the foundation of material production—production specifically of fabric. *Fabric*, too, bristles with connotation: at its most literal and tangible, it is the material humans need to clothe—to protect—our vulnerable bodies. As a product of the spinning and weaving of fibers, fabric suggests interconnection and the complicated strength it produces. At its grandest, *fabric* names the matrix underpinning everything: the fabric of the universe, a phrase that suggests my misreading—world for word—wasn't so far off. And at the source of the universe's fabric rests the creaky, creaking word.

The word's crash-test engineers, standing by to creak it to pieces, are of course—like Mackey himself—poets. More people are writing and publishing poetry in the twenty-first century than at any previous time in history. People are writing traditional lyrics that
would look familiar to Wordsworth; people are filling up the discipline’s happy middle and probing its unexplored edges, testing poetry’s boundaries with theatre, music, sound, and visual and book arts. Via an array of new means of technological production, reproduction, and dissemination—both decidedly high-tech and high-tech in the service of low-tech—poets are returning to poetry’s aural, declamatory roots and introducing new kinetic, tactile, spatial, and non-sequential elements. The rise of the Internet has presented decided advantages for poets, whose relation to the market—and thus to expensive traditional printing and distribution channels—is different from, less comfortable than, prose writers’. That uneasy relationship has itself been both a disadvantage and an opportunity for turn-of-the-millennium poetry, which obsessively thematizes its anxieties about late capitalism and makes conceptual and formal leaps that defy genre (and thus the readerly expectations that make for reliable sales). Meanwhile, queer and speech-act theories have shown our identities to be not fixed categories but creaky, processual performances; postcolonial studies of the world and of the U.S. have revealed racism as a basic constitutive fiber of the fabric of the capitalist world order. Engaging word/world conjunctions as they play out in the twenty-first century, this dissertation investigates poets’ representations of Americans’ especially awkward relationships to concepts of performance and performativity when it comes to race.

All published since 2002, A. Van Jordan’s Macnolia, Fanny Howe’s Tis of Thee, and Harryette Mullen’s Sleeping with the Dictionary share a fascination with formal experimentation and with the relationship between the textual and the performative. They also share a focus on segregation that highlights how W. E. B. DuBois’s problem of the color-line continues to afflict the twenty-first century. That line is located, forty years after the Civil Rights Movement, not so much in law as in other places, including—crucially—in performances of language. To employ language that exceeds racist constraints, these poets exhaust, deform, and reshape received literary constraints. Their approaches to cross-genre abecedarian play insistently probe double consciousness and double voicedness—both as effects of and as potential tools against racist and other forms
of oppression, and as aesthetic aims in their own right. All three books construct or reveal complex relationships among aesthetic stance, audience, and the poet. The strategies they employ are in many ways typical of twenty-first century poetries that seek to carve space outside the first-person lyric tradition that dominates the poetic mainstream, but these strategies allow particular insight into the increasingly covert American language of race relations.

Taken together, these books comprise an instructive sample of the new, hybrid poetics that contemporary U.S. poets are building. This hybrid poetics—often radical both in form and content—preserves an index of 20th-century traditions like Black Arts, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Dada, and Oulipo without pledging orthodox allegiance to any single movement. Rather, contemporary poets adopt a variety of stances in interactions with their predecessors, cycling rapidly between satire and parody on the one hand and allegiance and homage on the other to represent and explore the twenty-first century’s complex, ambivalent relationship to its multiple cultural inheritances. Such richly woven stylistic interventions lend new vigor to the ongoing literary project of interrogating U.S. racial and economic formations, thereby opening new poetic avenues to the potentially liberatory performance of repetition with a difference—repetition with attention to repetition’s creaking. That performance generates identity—and that the recognition of identity formation’s performativity can deliver people from historical and institutional inscriptions of oppression—is a central tenet of twenty-first century critical discourse. Interrogating such tenets is a basic function of poetry, part of its defamiliarizing project. Yet, inevitably, poets often reinscribe the very pieties they hope to destabilize.