

THE GRUNT

Douglas Kearney

Please play Branford Marsalis's recording "Berta, Berta" off *I Heard You Twice the First Time*—attend closely at the 1:40 mark.

Consider, next, "NG." But more "NG" later.

Here's a memory: poet and critic Duriel E. Harris at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference in Boston (2013). On the panel "Embracing the Verb of It: Black Poets Innovating," I recall Harris hucking a ruck of sound down the chuck well of her gullet—wet sound, flesh sound of hawked spit backed-up, the gag switch booting it back down against her breath.

Again, music: The JB's "The Grunt," which squalls out, hauls off on your ear, from scream to complaint, into *this riff, this riff*.

A riff I first heard here: Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads" (*It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*)—a song that begins with an indictment of an historic trauma that's still here, still now. The riff of the grunt rendered an alarm by The Bomb Squad.

The Grunt isn't talk. Perhaps it's the utter utterance, ancestor of mutter, mother tongue of sensation. Uncouth. Fuck sound, the Grunt, mouth stuffed with chewed food sound, shitting sound. A sound of struggle to take in and/or get out, dumb sound. The tongue that grunts is a slug of meat, not the agile quill of "the articulate."

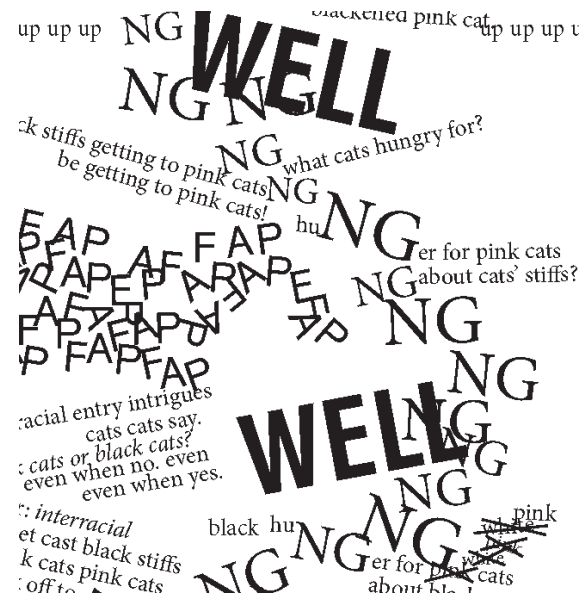
In this, the Grunt—an ambivalent and ambiguous *techné*—resists writing, shows up outlandish on a white sheet of paper, look at it, just look at it. It appears cut out into a stage direction—*she [grunts]*—or as a typo, *mm-MM, hhhuh, NG!* All that language and then that grunt—a gesture toward a signification of authenticity—a brass-tacks tactic that says listen to it, just listen to it.

But that's not why I'm interested in the Grunt. Authentic compared to what? Outlandish to where? No, I stay studying the Grunt for its capacity as a marker of resistance, because of its *dintelligibility*—or legibility as noise among noises and thus, its signal. I'm studying it and making studies of it, via questions of typography and performance, to ultimately locate it in a syntax.

The Grunt marks resistance—it is the prefix that means "too" and "two": it's too good; it's too hard; it's too much. And the two of the two are the "it" and the "I." *It's too much for me. It's too hard for me. It's too good for me.* To take in, to take on, to accept, to say no, to consider and, as such, too hard, too good, too much to let out. The Grunt a noisy signal of extremis.

But dintelligibility is, to some, ambiguous, as can be the Grunt—that "too" might be vernacular, a not-bad-meaning-but-bad-meaning-good, and thus a carnival somersault—but one that mis-lands. For the affirmative Grunt is a monomorphemic "in spite of."

The affirmative Grunt says: "It's too much for me *but* I'll go on." The affirmative Grunt's ambiguity: whom of the two does "in spite of" serve? And extremis in service of another is complicated. Heroic? Cowardly? Messianic? Servile? Massachism? NG. The affirmative Grunt signifies resistance and flexibility. It stretches to accommodate.



But to accommodate what? A dominance? Perhaps systemic, perhaps temporary, perhaps permitted? Yet, I'd speak here briefly about Speech as an assertion of dominance in the face of a Grunt that may not be affirmative:

Don't you grunt at me! Use your words.
 Don't talk with your mouth full.
 Say my name! Say my name!

These spoken commands rebuke grunts that resist an articulation. Yet they articulate—a double-jointed finger bends "wrong" but it bends. This is the Grunt that appears well-nigh zanily in the text. "Speak!" we read at it. In the sudden resolution of writing to a typeset sequence of letters, the Grunt on the page becomes typography. We see it. We sound it out. We become aware we are reading. The Grunt shunts us out of the text—imagining ourselves suddenly having a stereophonic experience, different somehow, than the lubricated silence of reading. A performance, thus a body, and bodies eat, fuck, shit—it's too much.

I am interested in dintelligibility and a syntax of Grunt. I think of grunt-on-grunt—a site in which resistance is interrogated. A police officer beats someone with a baton. The effort is strenuous. The batonier

grunts with it, abandoning words like "stop" or "no" or "please." The batoned, also making an effort, grunts—surrendering words like "stop" or "no" or "please." There is too too much here. The Grunts keep coming until one must stop grunting, and soon, the other, too. Fighting, fucking. The good Grunt syntax has the grunting end in unison. Asymmetric grunting becomes "stop hitting him, he's dead!" Becomes not cumming at the same time. Uncouth.

In a Grunt syntax, repetition features. Repetition can signify trauma through its compositional (re)enactment of some trauma's cognitive dynamic. Repetition can, when uninterrupted or regular, become typographic. The reader stops reading—looks for a change in the pattern of ascenders, descenders, and re-enters for new information—generally apparent as more and different letters ordered into legibility (writing).

My poem "Big Thicket" documents a rudimentary study of Grunt syntax. In it, "krak" is onomatopoeic, taken further from language through its sensually streamlined misspelling:

to Big Thicket we go we go gone **krak** is a buck shot
krak is fists boots bone **krak** the road kills **krak** a
 broke stick

Yet the text with which it stands in tension also repeats, breaking sentences into disarticulated units. Three men drag a fourth behind a pickup truck until their driving leaves him decapitated and missing an arm. A disarticulation. Too much.

In contrast, the poem "Well Hung" moves directly to the Grunt while maintaining the repetition and reconfiguration of the counter text. Legibility, here, is central to a more robust exploration visually and aurally than in "Big Thicket." And though I wrote this poem before hearing Harris's harrowing Grunt, her example has retrofitted the poem in performance.

I perform the Grunts live while allowing the language to play itself via a pre-recorded then shuffled playlist. Perhaps this is perverse in that it poses questions of articulation and makes me question my role in a poetry reading—precinct, it seems, of the smart NG.

This Grunt heralds vomiting. The "NG" is a grunt that in the din of signals signals sex, but also beating, asphyxiation, and the stammered syllable of a racist slur. Sex in this poem is foreplay for a trauma. Also perverse.

In Marsalis's recording of the railroad work song "Berta, Berta," the Grunt is a signal to the shaker meaning the hammer is coming down. An alarm. The cold steel is heavy and can kill, driving itself into flesh, and unyielding bone, too. The work is hard and can kill. It is too much for song and too much for language. But it shifts to please.