

2014

## "The Song Sung in a Strange Land": An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey.

Andrew R. Mossin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mossin, Andrew R.. ""The Song Sung in a Strange Land": An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey." *The Iowa Review* 44.3 (2014): 172-192. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7546>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## *“The Song Sung in a Strange Land”: An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey*

**N**athaniel Mackey was born in Miami, Florida, and raised in California. A poet, novelist, scholar, and editor of the literary journal *Hambone*, Mackey earned his BA from Princeton University in 1969 and his PhD from Stanford University in 1975. For more than thirty years, Mackey was a professor of literature and creative writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and he is currently the Reynolds Price Professor of Creative Writing at Duke University. His most recent book of poetry, *Nod House* (New Directions, 2011), continues the ongoing serial work of “Song of the Andoumboulou” and “Mu” from his previous collections. His next book of poetry, *Blue Fasa* (forthcoming from New Directions), continues in this vein through “Song of the Andoumboulou: 110.” Mackey is currently at work on a new poetry book, tentatively titled *Tej Bet*, and on the fifth volume of his serial work of epistolary fiction, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, tentatively titled *Late Arcade*. His awards and honors include the National Book Award in poetry for *Splay Anthem* in 2006, the Roy Harvey Pearce/Archive for New Poetry Prize in 2007, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2010, and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize from the Poetry Foundation in 2014.

This interview began as an inquiry into the twin figures of displacement and orphanhood that recur throughout Mackey’s work. The continual attempts to recover place and self are amplified by the ongoing and dual recognition of loss and placelessness, which creates a dizzying edginess to the work’s proffered consolations. Part survivalist’s tale, part discourse on the impossibility of return to homeland, Mackey’s work inscribes for his readers the ability of language to at once hurt and haunt our cultural present.

This interview was conducted as an e-mail exchange that began February 18 and concluded May 23, 2013.

Andrew Mossin: Reading your recent work in *Nod House*, I was struck by the voicing of displacement that runs throughout your poetry but seems to have reached in this new volume a revived pitch, a kind of calling out that is at the same time a calling in. I have in mind lines from “Song

of the Andoumboulou: 83,” where you write, “Orphans they saw themselves to be,” and “A newborn’s cry cried / abandonment.” I wonder if you could reflect on displacement and orphaning as insistent concerns across your poetry.

Nathaniel Mackey: Yes, these figurings of orphanhood and the figure of the orphan come out of feelings and thoughts and certain senses of things that go back a while. I wrote about them some in the essay “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol,” compounding “orphan” with “orphic,” lyric impulse with the experience of abandonment, loss, estrangement. Displacement figures in as well. There’s a reggae song by The Melodians, “Rivers of Babylon,” based on Psalm 137, that I remember: “How can we sing King Alpha’s song / In a strange land.” I was thinking about things like that and the black spiritual “Motherless Child” (mentioned in the essay), and I also had the importance of literal orphans like Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald and of institutions like the Jenkins Orphanage Band to African-American music in mind, not to mention Bach and others outside of African-American music. African-Americans, Jamaicans, and other New World Africans, of course, can be said to’ve been orphaned by the slave trade. It’s a figure that applies in multiple ways and at various levels—social, affective, cosmic, psychic—and I tried to get at some of that in the essay, which was a kind of taking stock of certain strains that had been running through my writing and thinking and through that of a number of writers, musicians, artists, and others whose work I’d been paying attention to. It was an essay that, more than any other I’ve written, drove me and seemed to write itself, insist on itself and insist itself on, arriving and advancing more in the manner of a poem than other essays have. It was a kind of crystallization, one that I’ve been harking back to in recent books, echoing the essay’s title in those of poems like “Sound and Semblance” and “Sound and Cerement” in *Splay Anthem* and “Sound and Subsequence” and “Sound and Sustenance” in *Nod House*.

I think figures accrue to and build on feeling, and it’s no doubt the case that orphaning speaks of and from an emotional disposition I’m both inclined toward and see applying beyond myself. The orphan is such an archetypal figure, recurrent not only in my work but in world culture, because it tugs at the roots of our sense of belonging and the mix of anxiety and solace that goes with that sense. In the passages you cite and across my work more generally, it reaches into Gnostic senses of a misconceived cosmos, Orphic notions of being abandoned into birth. As for the revived pitch you mention, that probably has to do with the

increase in displacement and the increased attention to displacement that typify the historical period we're in. It has to do as well, as I've gotten older, with my experience and increased awareness of the fact that we're all eventual orphans. Even in the best of circumstances, we someday lose our parents, as our children will someday lose us. So you get lines like, "Sad / eldren, eventual mystics, orphans / they'd eventually be" in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 71." There's maybe more to it, a lot to it, perhaps, and the poems themselves, especially as the work goes on, are something of a reflection on such feelings and figures, but these are some of the thoughts that come quickly to mind.

AM: Yes, and it's that sense of singing in a strange land that your work so often seems disposed toward. As you write in "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol": "Music is wounded kinship's last resort." You've been asked before about the relationship between music and your work, but I wonder if you could speak to this sense of the music you call up in your poetry and fictive prose as "kinship's last resort."

NM: Yes, it's *wounded* kinship's last resort. Perhaps all kinship is wounded, incomplete, short of its ideal, but the more blatant breaches of connectedness and fellow feeling seem especially salient. The conclusion of *Mississippi Masala*, a movie about nothing if not lesion, displacement, and conflict, with its implication that music can, if only for a time, heal division, is one of numerous examples of what's long been a commonplace notion. Albert Ayler's "Music Is the Healing Force of the Universe" is another. Wounded kinship isn't the only thing the language of music and the music of language attend, but they can and do bring a certain solace to it, mixing consolation and complaint with intimations of a more fully realized kinship. George Lamming said of the Barbadian villagers in his novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, "The word is their only rescue." I think that has wider applicability. The word is our rescue, whether spoken, written, sung, or nonverbally intoned, in part because the language of music and the music of language accent a tending-toward—"pointing-beyond-itself" in Victor Zuckerkandl's analysis of tonal motion, Ezra Pound's "tone leading of vowels," etc.—that might well be the beginning of kinship, or a therapeutic or cathartic analogue to it, at least. This is a suggestion poetry often makes, though not always in a celebratory way or at least not without being celebratory and cautionary both, haunted by the "only" in Lamming's statement. This is a predicament or problematic that my own work, whether poetry or prose, is much caught up in, as you note. The song sung in a strange land asks how can it be

sung in a strange land, lamenting lost connection and reaching toward would-be connection, tenuous connection perhaps.

There's a story about Lester Young I've cited before in which he calls the keys and pads of his saxophone his people. His listeners responded by wanting to join those pads and keys, that polity, that place, calling him Pres. Trumpeter Earl Cross, in a similar vein, said, "I would like to walk around the street looking like a trumpet." Poetry's place as wounded kinship's last resort is to be the country and kin the medium itself offers. The music of language and the language of music enact an estrangement of their own, an inoculative tack perhaps, maybe a compensative tack. I recall Robert Duncan saying at the Iowa Olson conference, "We *practice* displacement." The word wants to be its own realm, to enact and inhabit a land of its own, an alternate home of its own. This is another sense of Lamming's "only," as well as mine in "heads crowned / in / sound only in / sound" in "Sound and Semblance." This is an aspect of the solace it provides, a kind of removal, a fugitive impulse I've written about elsewhere, a tending-away. "Only" can be read as a limit but also as an added domain.

AM: Reading back into your work, I found this quote from *Bedouin Hornbook* that stood out for me in the context of the connection your comments suggest between provisional homeland and perpetual seeking. Here you write, listening to and reading the liner notes to Pharoah Sanders's solo of "My Favorite Things" on *Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard Again!*, "It's as though he drank water from a rusted cup, the tenor's voice such an asthmatic ambush of itself as to trouble every claim to a 'composed' approach. To me it borders on prayer, though prayer would here have to be revised so as to implicate humility in some form of *détente*—an uneasy truce or eleventh-hour treaty—with hubris, part prayer, part witch's brew." Can you talk about how you see your work as manifesting this connection between uncertainty and prayer?

NM: Well, I wasn't talking about prayer *per se* in that passage. I was using prayer as a foil, playing it against and folding it into a musical performance that doesn't sound or seem as obviously related to prayer as does Coltrane's "Dear Lord" or "Alabama" or Pharoah's "Morning Prayer" or "Let Us Go into the House of the Lord" or any of a number of others. I was trying to talk about something I heard in the circumspection Pharoah starts that solo with, the probity of his *sotto voce* tack or what wants to be probity, a kind of trepidation, it seems. I was trying to say something about the fury this gets into, a pitch of complaint

that would be hubristic in the context of prayer, and I was trying to talk about what I heard as prolixity and obstructed speech consorting, Pharoah seeming to've been gathering himself all along for that halting, hesitant statement of the melody toward the end. It was a numinous extremity I was trying to get at. Rudolf Otto's examination of the numinous experience in *The Idea of the Holy* had a strong impact on me when I read it in my late teens, and his notion of the sense of one's creatureliness as a part of that experience is at work in a later letter in *Bedouin Hornbook* that relates to the passage you cite. In that letter, N. dreams he's in North Africa with a group of Sufis who practice a form of prayer in which they mimic animals—bray like horses, bark like dogs, meow like cats, and so on—so as to humble themselves before and acknowledge their separation from Allah, the fact that to God, they're only as animals are to men. N. goes on to say something about this, to call it an inoculation of loss, mourning abandonment as though in advance, only to find that a piece of glass has gotten caught in his throat. He coughs as forcefully as he can to dislodge it, making the yelp of a barking dog. That yelp, taking the place of discourse, is N.'s submission to a certain animal abidance, to being "an angel on all fours," as Djuna Barnes puts it in *Nightwood*. I heard and hear a like abidance in the gruff, iterative insistence of Pharoah's solo, a not always joyful noise but a devotional noise nonetheless, an expectorant noise, as though he would cough up separation if he could. His and Trane's recourse to an expectorant or would-be expectorant grumble and shriek is an admission of the limits of knowing—agnostic and agonistic.

What this suggests is that prayer is an act of union or of seeking union that has to guard against presuming to have attained it. I've been influenced by listening to devotional music from Asia—the Bauls of Bengal, dervish music, Indian bhajans, Pakistani qawwali, and so on—and by reading devotional literature such as that of Ibn Arabi, Rumi, Mira Bai, and Kabir. One finds, in both the music and the literature, an always unsettled relationship between union and separation. I've recently been reading *Divine Flashes* by Fakhr-al-Din Iraqi, a thirteenth-century Persian poet. It's filled with passages like this one:

I want Union with Him  
He wants separation for me—  
so I abandon my desire  
to His.

Perhaps, as in the relationship between John Donne the cleric and John Donne the poet, poetry as a practice of displacement is prayer's way of standing guard or prayer's hedge against presumption, a way of remaining true to estrangement, keeping watch. Perhaps poetry is prayer's bad conscience. In my work, when prayer comes in, it's often qualified, as in the passage you cite or in "John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady," a poem whose subtitle is "belated prayer" and whose *via negativa* acknowledges limit and separation:

no sheet of sound enshroud  
the Fount of this fevered  
Brook becoming one  
with God's Eye, not  
a one of these notes

come near to the brunt  
of the inaudible  
note I've been reach-  
ing towards

I don't think I've written any other poems identified as prayers, even in the attenuated form specified in this one, though my work does, both poetry and prose, contain references to prayer and even prayerful moments. On the whole, however, I'd like my writing to amount to a long, iterative, would-be expectorant song of the sort I've been suggesting.

AM: That notion of prayer as a "not always joyful noise but a devotional noise nonetheless, an expectorant noise," suggests an incompleteness that is perpetual, a bodily interruption, a noise from within ourselves that can never find adequate release. And there's a reclamation and a losing at the same time going on throughout your work, an absorption in return that is also an understanding of return's impossibility, of "remaining true to estrangement." Can you talk a bit more about what kind of unity your poetry may be after, completion of what lost piece?

NM: I'm not sure I think about it quite that way. Maybe "union" is a better word than "unity," better stressing the act or the incidence of convergence, momentary conjunction or the movement toward conjunction—intermittent, hit and miss. It sounds, to me at least, less like a perpetual state. In any case, poetry seems to me to be less about unity than about

drift, the animate debris of some turning under, some catastrophe it commemorates and whose effects it keeps alive to outrun. In its very body and ways of being it does this: verse, trope, strophe. Maybe the unity of turning, the persistence of turning, is the unity my work is after or at least the unity it wants to make its peace with, as though, as with Iraqi, any other were not our lot. Jay Wright has written, “I wait for the turning to teach me.” Likewise, it’s not so much a particular unity or a particular kind of unity my work is after as an approach to unity taught by turning. N. writes in the letter I referred to in my last response, “The inoculation of loss proposed an ‘it’ to which one at best had only a differential access.” Turning, toward as well as away, is differential access, the “Verge that we wanted verge” in “Song of the Andoumboulou: 50” sampling Lorca’s “Verde que te quiero verde” with his “longing without object” not far in the background. I don’t think of my poetry as being driven by desire for a particular unity or for incorporation of a particular lost piece, amelioration of one specific loss or lack. While it does express desire for various kinds of union (romantic, social, mystical, and so on) and does refer to the transitory attainment of them, the underlying drive is a longing that outlives its ostensible fulfillments, reaching beyond its ostensible objects. Figures of circling come up in the poem I just mentioned, as they do elsewhere in my work, that of the ring shout especially (“we circled, an earthbound orbit / wanting / out we went up on, low Saturnian shout, / rings / we walked”). They symbolize wholeness or sought-after wholeness or the seeking of wholeness perhaps, but it’s a wholeness that can only be symbolized, not delivered. What they deliver is the persistence of turning, a willingness to go on turning.

AM: Much of your work seems drawn to this figure of a “catastrophe” that is and isn’t named, a state of “drift,” as you say. In your preface to *Splay Anthem*, you tell us that “even the gnostic indictment of history as nightmare and delusion carries a prescribed awakening which, if gnosis is to be gnostic enough, would have to allow it might itself be only a dream.” How might you relate this seeming tension between the spiritual and the material realms to the human experience your writing “turns under” from the “objective ordering of history” that your work also seems to shun?

NM: Yes, there’s tension and there’s also play. Drift is the tension and play between spirit and matter. Spirit wants to be unbound. It’s the tension between spirit and letter as well, the play between spirit and letter, the tangential way of knowing that the expression “you get my drift”





*House*, first occurring in “Song of the Andoumboulou: 71.” I wanted the wide range of meanings that apply to “lay”—from not being of the clergy or of a particular profession to the way a stretch of land lies or extends, from a line or plan of action to a simple narrative poem or ballad, from a quality or characterization of rope to the act of coition, from a melody or a song to a lair or a covert—to be active in and available to a reader’s understanding both of it and of its counterpoint with “unlay,” but race was not among them. In “Lullaby in Lagos,” “lay ghost” carries all of this as well as being a play on the name of the city (“Lagos’d”), which is perhaps where you find the racial reading you refer to. It’s also a play on Jack Spicer’s play on *logos*, “low ghost” (“It was / lay not low I thought as we / descended”), and it’s nearly homophonous with the Spanish word for “far,” *lejos*, a relationship that comes up later in the poem. A further parsing farther on, “It wasn’t lay, it wasn’t low, it wasn’t lie,” echoes “Lay low lie, we lip-sync’d, / salaam’d” in “Song of the Andoumboulou: 62,” both anticipating the “Aylelolay lolelay” of Puerto Rican jíbaro music that comes into “Song of the Andoumboulou: 85,” a signature feature of jíbaro music that Victor Hernández Cruz has pointed to as an example of the Islamic influence on Puerto Rican culture. I rehearse this net of connections and associations to say that the poems are not so much concerned with the concept of race as with a concept of heritage that’s multiply determined. I’ve long emphasized culture and society over biology and genetics, as in my essay “Other: From Noun to Verb,” where, whether social or artistic, othering rather than otherness is what gets attention. I don’t see that there’s been much change on that front or that the representation of race or the ratification of racial otherness has had much place in my work. I hope I can say this without it being confused with all the going on about a postracial society we’ve seen in recent years, which is at best a wishful way of claiming we’ve achieved a postracist society and at worst a devious way of arresting progress toward it. The social construct known as race continues to exist, as do its consequences, and to say that my work has not been greatly concerned with tracing the lineaments of that construct is not to say that it or those consequences have gone away.

In “Lullaby in Lagos,” to look a bit more closely, the “lay ghost” is the urban sprawl mentioned in the passage you quoted, the lay of the land seen from the airplane as it descends into Lagos, a sprawl from which plan or planning, lay, however much it once existed, has flown, replaced by a catch-as-catch-can accretion no architect or city planner is in charge of. The roofless buildings mentioned earlier in the poem, abandoned after an initial outlay of money was exhausted, embezzled, or rerouted

elsewhere, are signs of a disarray that has not yet been recovered from, and that's not about race, however much Europe's mobilization of the idea of race put it in motion. The "lay ghost" is a certain legibility or logos apprehended in disarray, and it goes on from there to be the lag between expectation and actuality, anticipation and arrival, preconception and presence, place and the music made in or about it, "as if" and "the / is of it." It suggests a ghosting or a spooking of experience or a noncoincidence of experience with itself, a lag or a noncoincidence that the "we" of the poem are hard-pressed to see holding sacred as well as profane potential ("lay ghost and holy"). A poem, as Robert Creeley pointed out, is a complex of occasions, and this one came, in part, out of a short visit to Lagos for a friend's wedding in 2007, which was my first and so far only trip to sub-Saharan Africa. I began writing it a week or so before I left for Nigeria, wrote some of it while I was there, and finished it after I returned to California, so it has somewhat to do with alternate and overlapping time frames, alternate and overlapping forms of travel, and mental and physical frames and forms, not without pathos and lament.

AM: You seem to be suggesting here a responsiveness to forms of social othering that include but are not limited to the construct of race. You also mention Jack Spicer and the connection to his punning on "logos," and as Robin Blaser, in his essay "The Practice of Outside," argues about Spicer's work,

Oppositions and polarities are basic to intelligence and...they reopen the entire range of the aesthetic as perception relating directly to the formation of public, political and social life. A heavy hand to lay on poetry, that delicate, pretty thing that has cost some poets their lives and sanity. The public, the political and the social are all forms of thought and experience, and according to Jack's argument, these must begin again, because we are inside the death of these forms, the "fix" of them.

Given this positioning of Spicer as a poet, particularly in respect to constructs of manhood, could you talk about how your work invokes this poetic heritage?

NM: That is a heavy hand to lay on poetry, and I'm tempted to say it's a meaning of "lay ghost" that might have been in play without me know-

ing it, a Shelleyan sense of relevance not yet laid to rest. It's a heavy hand to lay on any activity not literally and primarily involved in the public, the political, and the social, but it's true that many activities that are not immediately public, political, or social have impact in or implications for those realms and that we can include poetry among them. I recall reading "The Practice of Outside" with a good deal of excitement when it appeared in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* in 1975. I marked and underlined many passages in it, and, returning to my copy and taking a look, I find that the last sentence of the passage you quoted is one of them. It's an essay that I've quoted from in my criticism, and I should add that the emergence of the Republic of Nub in *Splay Anthem* probably owes something to the idea of "Image-Nation," the title of a poem series that runs through Blaser's *The Holy Forest*, the first of which I read around the time I read "The Practice of Outside," as well as to Olson's "to write a republic / in gloom." I've also written on Spicer's work in my criticism, not to mention cc'ing him in the very first "Dear Angel of Dust" letter I wrote. His and Blaser's place in the poetic heritage I draw on is pretty clearly specified, so I won't belabor it here. I do, though, want to focus on the use of the word "fix" in that passage and suggest an antinomy between it and "flux" that I think encapsulates the argument that's being made and the sense of a certain type of poetry's contestation of inhibitive constructs. A poetry of flux, which Blaser and Spicer wrote and which I think I write, wants to free language of its fixes or, if not free it of them, complicate them, keep them moving, to outpace, agitate, or outmaneuver the tendency toward fixity and stasis that a less reflexive use of language promotes. By implication or analogy, it wants to do the same for the public, the political, and the social. Blaser says that the way we use language is the key to our social forms. The recurrence of ideas of uneasiness, reversal, doubling, disappearance, incompleteness, and such throughout the essay bespeaks a resistance to closure that those forms attempt to overcome and by which they are themselves, inevitably, undone. A poetry of flux goes with that resistance. It unfixes, or at least it seeks to unfix. It is a poetry of commotion, to use another word Blaser likes; a poetry of disturbance, to use one that his and Spicer's associate Robert Duncan liked; a poetry of connivance, to use Édouard Glissant's word from one of the epigraphs to *Splay Anthem*.

I bring Glissant in to make the point that this poetry of flux that I feel myself to be involved in has to do with a heritage that isn't confined to Spicer and Blaser. I don't know if your question was meant to deal specifically with their reconsideration of constructions of manhood, but I'll

take it instead to the larger theme of personhood posed by Jay Wright, another poet in this heritage. The line I quoted earlier, “I wait for the turning to teach me,” resonates with Blaser’s characterization of Spicer’s practice as “tropic—in the turn,” but beyond that, I’m reminded of Wright’s involvement in what he calls “the search in these Americas for a breaking of the vessels, for a redefinition of personality, . . . the task, to use Wilson Harris’s words, of the redefinition of the person.” My point isn’t only that Wright is a part of this heritage and that Wilson Harris is a part of it as well, but that a poetry of flux is a poetry of changes, a poetry of change, that redefinitions of personhood are part and parcel of changes in life possibility that such a poetry implicitly seeks and at times explicitly seeks. It may not always lead or legislate à la Shelley, but it’s a point in a larger field of change, a more or less latent, more or less manifest advocate or agent of change. That’s how I see the poetic heritage of which I’m a part bearing upon the public, the political, and the social.

AM: Your comments here recall Duncan’s assertion in *The H.D. Book* that “reality is not only received but also created, a creation in which the poet, the language, the beings who have arisen in man’s possessive dreams and vision as far as we know them, all participate as creators of a higher reality.” I read your work from *School of Udhra* with this context in mind, particularly that book’s journey through multiple voicings of personhood, the language of a singular “I” slipping among and beside separate inseparable voices of he, she, we, and they. How do you see this range of selves showing itself in your work as a whole, as it explores the twinning and union that we discussed earlier?

NM: I agree that writing is more a creation or conjuration of personhood than a recording of it, that extensions of self intersect extinguishments of self in predications whose compass goes beyond the given or the apparently given. A character in one of Wilson Harris’s novels, *Black Marsden*, says of the “diary of infinity” he keeps, “My book is not autobiographical. I lose myself in it.” Such a sense is one I’ve wanted to be involved in. What you describe here is a certain way of working with pronouns that I began to get into in pursuit of that involvement, that desire, that sense—the treatment of pronouns as substantive and abstract both, the enjambment, so to speak, between corpuscular and conceptual senses, “they” not only “them” but “them-ness” or “they-ness,” “he” not only “him” but “him-ness” or “he-ness,” and so on. Such constructions as “They the receding we we might’ve / been,” “the we / he, she and I were

haunted by,” “the he she would’ve / otherwise wanted,” “the we we’d be” and “they the would-be we” occur and recur in *School of Udhra* and subsequent books, phrasing that troubles the work of demarcation that pronouns typically perform. I’ve been trying to suggest more porous experiences of self, to intimate senses, apprehensions, and aspirations that disrupt ideas of sovereign, discrete grouping or identity, ideas of isolate, bound entity or being. This has to do with the fact that in many ways we’re gotten to or gotten into by an ostensible outside or by ostensible others, and as well with a drive or desire to make such union more manifest. A passage in “Song of the Andoumboulou: 18” in *Whatsaid Serif* sums up a certain side of this desire, a frustrated utopic side that wants, as Jacques Lacarrière puts it in an epigraph I use, “to remove the very categories of I, Thou, He, and to become We”:

...Monophysite  
 lament, one we, Ouadada, that  
 we would include, not reduce to us...  
 He to him, she to her, they to them,  
opaque  
 pronouns, “persons” whether or not we  
 knew who they were...

“Ouadada” is “Wadada,” the reggae/Rasta word for “love,” given a French rendering to suggest the Maghrebi and other francophone African locales that the poems move through in this part of the book. It’s meant to close geographic as well as pronominal distance, to merge, as “to become We” would, such disparate venues as Kingston, Algiers, and Bandiagara.

It’s true that it’s in *School of Udhra* that this sort of assertion or suggestion begins to have a prominent place, but there are things that anticipate it in my first book, *Eroding Witness*. There’s the shared or adopted “I” of persona poems like “Ghede Poem,” “Ohnedaruth’s Day Begun,” and “The Phantom Light of All Our Day,” and there are lines like “All the gathered / ache of our / severed selves” in “Grisgris Dancer,” where the attendance to severance and severalness in the context of hoodoo opens a line of recourse to mystical, erotic, religious, and social understandings of multiplicity that informs the features and the thematics you mention. Given your question, I think of this “gathered / ache” in relation to Jay Wright’s “aching prodigal,” a figure and phrase that occurs in his first book, *The Homecoming Singer*, and that could be said to epitomize his work, not only the homecoming of the book’s title but taking leave, home-leaving, the ache of growing pains. The movement

out from the “I”-centered narratives of that first book is the redefinition of personhood we’ve been discussing, and with it, home gets larger and larger, more and more multiple, as does the self and the poem. From intersubjective transfer and dialogue to cross-cultural pliancy and play, various insistences and features come into such work. In my case, these include those I’ve already touched on and others, notably an ensemble ethic or impulse that’s most obviously at play in the formation of the musical band in the “Dear Angel of Dust” letters and in the band of travelers that’s come to be so salient in the poems, each of the two bands a cast and an act of casting that situate and infiltrate permeable, impinged-upon “I’s.” The range of selves and severances this entails runs the gamut, having to do with the various ways in which we find ourselves cut into and cut up, the various ways in which we deal with and learn to live with it being so—ontologically, socially, psychically.

AM: Moving from this sense of “selves and severances,” I wonder how you see these themes you’ve iterated above reproduced in what seems like an ongoing engagement in and probing of the disclosures, displacements, and repeated severances of the sensuality and eroticism of love. There seems here and throughout your work a worrying of this relation and its displacement, the waywardness of union between man and woman, men and women, he’s and she’s, of enforced re-recognition of “what would all / again and again / fall away . . .,” as you put it in “Far Over—‘mu’ *fourteenth part*—” from *School of Udhra*. More recently in “Anuncio’s Fourth Last Love Song—‘mu’ *ninety-fifth part*—” from your new chapbook, *Anuncio’s Last Love Song*, you write, “Scavenging love, love took its toll / or the dream of it.” Love’s “toll” here and elsewhere in your poetry seems instigatory and portending of other broken relations. Could you speak to how erotic love plays out in relation to other motifs in your work—its cosmological and mythological engagement, its ethical pull toward the kind of redefinition of personhood you allude to above?

NM: Love is one of the things I had in mind when I wrote of being gotten to or gotten into, cut into or cut up, in my last response. It’s a major thing inside my work and out, inside my work and pretty much everyone else’s, not to mention the world outside our work. That’s not news. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod calls Eros, in Norman O. Brown’s translation, “the most beautiful of the immortal gods, who in every man and every god softens the sinews and overpowers the prudent purpose of the mind,” which Charles Olson renders, in lines that have stayed with me, “love...

which unnerves the limbs and by its / heat floods the mind and all gods and men into further nature.” Such “further nature” bears upon redefinitions of personhood. Poet after poet, singer after singer, diarist after diarist have testified to a disturbance of self or an unsettling and an augmenting of self brought on by love, a vexation of self that mingles amplitude and depletion—a more complex, contradictory sense of self than social definitions tend to install and to insist on. I’m not sure what the ethical pull of this is, as it seems to complicate if not undermine the senses of personal containment that ethics resides in, a containment or would-be containment that led Olson to complain of the “substitution of society for the cosmos,” calling it “captive and deadly.” I’ve written about the competing claims of cosmic amplitude and social contract or contraction in my criticism, the essay on Wilson Harris’s *Ascent to Omai* and the essay on Robert Duncan’s Vietnam War poems getting into what states of inspiration and arousal do to humanist assumptions of personhood and the mores that go with them. I won’t go into that here, except to say that such concerns come up in my poetry and fiction, in, for example, the “Tilted sky, turned earth. Bent wheel, burnt / we. / Bound I. Insubordinate / us” of “Song of the Andoumboulou: 12” in *School of Udhra*.

Looking at this a bit further, the figure of cutting and that of the knife or blade occurring earlier in the poem touch on aspects of the cosmological and mythological engagement you ask about:

Saw myself bled, belatedly  
cut, inverted blade  
atop Eshu’s head,  
sawtooth  
cloth of an egungun,  
thunder whet the edge  
of a knife.

And what love had to do with it  
stuttered, bit its tongue.  
Bided our time, said only wait,  
we’d see.

The knife is the ritual knife of initiation, “instigatory and portending,” as you put it. The passage bears the influence of readings in anthropology and ethnography (not without a nod to Tina Turner), the great attention paid to rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood in that

literature, circumcision rituals and such. Jay Wright is again relevant, as he too has drawn on such literature, and there are certain texts we both refer to, Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols* on the Ndembu and Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* on the Dogon most notably. The blade and the cut occur more often and more explicitly in his work, the "cut of some other voice," the "cut into these conflicts," the "cut... / into this special kinship," the "cut...away from my mother," and assertions like "From every twoness cut from itself, / the scar gives rise to one" in *Dimensions of History*. In *The Double Invention of Komo*, there's the announcement that "Each word is my knife's / incision," after which we read of "mother of my cutting," "the knife's ethic / and ontology," "love's knife," "the exacting knife," and come to such declarations as "What is true is the incision. / What is true is the desire for the incision" and "I protect what attaches me to heaven / by every incision in every body I cast away."

In anthropological texts and contexts, the ritual knife wields a social mandate, a paring of identity in accordance with collective sanction, telling the initiate to leave certain aspects of identity behind and move on to others, to leave a certain identity behind and move on to another. It corrals a potentially disruptive sexual awakening and authorizes appropriate sexual identity and behavior. Turner writes that ritual is "a mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable," and it occurred to me that poetry is a ritual in which incision is the inscription of a person bent on converting that conversion (converting the desirable into the obligatory or at least accenting the difference between the two), a person wary of social obligation, the knife the nib of that person's pen. Here, the social-functionalist circumcision knife merges with the knife atop the head of Eshu-Elegbara, the Yoruba-Fon orisha whose supramundane power it represents. Pointing skyward and whetted by thunder, it brings the celestial into play, a strain of cosmicity into play. The truth of the incision is that we're cut into and cut up in multiple ways and on multiple fronts. The blade is multivalent, the cut a two-way cut, cosmic and social, a reminder and an augur of the rendings we're heir to, the vicissitudes of love among them.

AM: In a comment made by Olson about Duncan in your essay on Duncan's Vietnam War poems, Olson says of Duncan, "He's put on the robe," a reference to Duncan's assumption of a "public, more oratorical voice" in the poetry he was writing during this period. Without rehearsing what you've already written in your essay on Duncan and elsewhere, I wonder how you view the "risk of inflation" you describe in Duncan's

work in relation to your own practices as a poet. How do you balance the risk of “prodigal rift” with the concomitant urge to announce and celebrate that rift as an element in poetry’s cosmological cut into the poet—a cut then translated into the poem?

NM: The risk of inflation comes with the territory. I’m not drawn to assuming a more public, oratorical voice, but that’s not the only form the risk of inflation takes. Charles Ives wrote that music is “the art of speaking extravagantly,” and the same can be said of poetry, perhaps more pointedly, given that poems are constituted of words. I’d suggest that poetry runs a risk of extravagance that accounts for both the attraction and the wariness we feel toward it as readers and as writers. We think of it as a cut above other uses of language, a distinction we embrace but also feel anxious about, wary there might be something spendthrift about the poetic, something prodigal about it. It seems to me that a good deal of thinking about poetry and of calls for change in poetry has to do, in one way or another, with extravagance. Wordsworth’s promotion of the speech of “the common man” is a call for less of it, the Surrealist yoking of disparities wants more of it, and so on. It’s a tar baby either way, but especially so for those who want less of it or want out of it, the replacement of one form of extravagance with another tending to be the result. Spicer’s statement about wanting the lemon in the poem to be an actual lemon, while it would quell the extravagance of the “prodigal rift” between the word and its referent, is itself a riot of extravagance. Likewise, when Amiri Baraka makes the assertion that “poems are bullshit” in “Black Art,” knocking poetry off its pedestal both in diction and declaration, it’s only to make extravagant claims for the exceptions to that assertion beginning with the word “unless” and filling up the rest of the poem.

There’s not much reason to think it would be otherwise. According to testimony ranging from ancient myth to modern physics, we live in an extravagant cosmos that’s not bridled by humanist amenities, a fact of which we’re eventually symptomatic. This makes the question of balance a difficult one. Whatever balance is achieved is proprioceptive, felt in the body of the writing or the reading, but it’s not fail-safe, and I won’t presume to have captured it or to be able to talk about how. I’d feel a nervousness doing so that’s not unlike the nervousness in the passage the phrase “prodigal rift” occurs in:

Prodigal rift an aroused we tossed  
off, I was what was left. Talk made

my lips move,      fishlike...      I was  
the remnant I fought the feeling I  
was...

I do think about balance, which might only be drift and exchange at best. Extravagance verges on extraneity, the feeling or state of persistence outside some arrived-at union, a leftover, maybe hung-over, sense of rift and remains. Prodigality is a risk poetry not only runs but runs with, resistant or not.

AM: Part of what you seem to be addressing in your discussion here of Baraka is the responsibility that not only poets bear for this cut into the real, but the responsibility that readers must bear as well. How do you see that responsibility for readers of your poetry and fiction? In other words, in all the ways you put before your readers real rift, real displacement, real prodigality, what is it—if you can say—that you want your readers to do?

NM: Well, Baraka's a complicated case, of course, more than warranting the great deal of material that's been written on him and the great deal that's no doubt yet to come. I don't occupy anything like the agitative political space he's come to be known for, but he was one of my earliest influences and various aspects of his work continue to inform what I do. The title of the Coltrane poem I quoted from earlier is a line from one of the poems in his first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. Anyway, by extraneity I meant being extraneous, left out of group coherence, "tossed / off" by "an aroused we." I'm not sure a charge comes with it, much less a responsibility. It's more the space of a certain freedom, for better or worse, latitude that accrues to marginality, nervously pursued though it may be. That latitude or license comes at the price of apparent irrelevance, apparent unreality, hence the compensating claims to the contrary we often encounter. Baraka's "poems that kill" and Spicer's "My vocabulary did this to me" may well be related, both insisting that poetry can matter, that it can do something, that it can actually have an effect in the world. That this effect is lethal in both formulations may not be coincidental; it may signify the desperateness of a need to connect, to assert connection, to close the "prodigal rift" that situates poetry in relation to the larger society. Baraka is right, in a sense, that poems are bullshit. Spicer is right, in a sense, that nobody listens to poetry. Both statements have to do with a perception of poetry rather than poetry. Some of the poets in that generation, coming on the

heels of Auden's "Poetry makes nothing happen," kind of went crazy, rhetorically at least, trying to prove him wrong. I hope my reference to these two poets wasn't misleading; the extravagance or inflation of their claims to "the real" was exactly my point. I doubt that I'm innocent of extravagance, but I'm pretty sure mine doesn't take that particular form. I don't pursue my work thinking about the responsibility of my readers or with particular things in mind that I would like them to do. People who take writing seriously, as writers or as readers, do so for a reason, for more than one reason, "out of deep need," as Zukofsky says, and these needs and reasons vary. They vary from person to person, and they even, over time or with mood or occasion, vary for the same person. I can talk about rescue as I did earlier, following Lamming, as it's a sense I've gotten and continue to get from writing that matters to me, but I wouldn't say that readers bear the responsibility of feeling rescued or being rescued or that that's what they ought to do. To pronounce, in such a totalizing way, on what readers should do with my work doesn't appeal to me or make sense to me. If pressed, I might indeed say that I wish readers would find, if not rescue or respite (to get another "r" word in), some sort of rally of sensibility and spirit. But that would be a wish, not a command.

AM: I wonder how you might connect your work as a teacher of poetry, then, to what you say here. What is it you want to communicate to your students about this "deep need" to explore and move freely into and among poems—not in a totalizing way, but with that spirit of aspiration with which you punctuate your own work as a poet?

NM: What I say above, not just in my last response but in all of them, is already connected to my work as a teacher of poetry. I couldn't offer a better example of how I think about, talk about, and teach poetry than this conversation we've been having. My roles as writer, reader, critic, and teacher run together. I don't leave any of them behind when I step into the classroom; nor, of course, is teaching confined to the classroom. But it should be self-evident that deep need is something you can only teach indirectly if at all, by example or contagion. You simply offer students an opportunity to find that they have it. At the practical level, I've found myself going back to something else out of Zukofsky over the years, especially with students who are relatively inexperienced with poetry or who feel intimidated by it, and that's his statement that poetry affords a "range of pleasure...as sight, sound and intellection," his plainer version of Pound's *phanopoeia*, *melopoeia*, and *logopoeia*. I stress the word

“pleasure” and stress the word “range” and emphasize the sense appeal of poetry, sense not only as meaning, implication, and suggestion but as sensory apprehension—how a poem sounds and how it looks on the page, as well as what it reports regarding sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, transfers and exchanges among the senses, translation of sense experience into thought and idea and vice versa, and so on.

I agree with you about the reader’s freedom and the work he or she does in reading the poem, but I wouldn’t want what I’ve said to be taken as dismissive of the poet’s role, the poet’s concerns, the poet’s intentions, the poet’s points of reference and such. What’s on the poet’s mind or appears to be on the poet’s mind is indeed something we attend to in reading the poem. Readers want to know what they can about that, discern what they can about that, and part of teaching poetry is discussing that, even if it’s only a discussion of the possibility and the problematics of such knowledge, the limits of such knowledge, and the limited relevance of such knowledge. That’s also a part of what you do as a teacher; you acquaint students with the particular poet’s poetics, ideas, context, and so on. You don’t, however, do that at the expense of the life of the poem, what Harris calls “the innate life of the word,” a life that extends beyond what’s on the poet’s mind, what the poet intends. It’s that arena, the life or animacy of the poem itself, that the work and the freedom of the reader engage. I like to talk about that and to suggest that it’s the poet’s deep need for the medium itself that taps into that life and that animacy, that all artists have such a need for and a primary relationship with the medium or material in which they work. The Bahamian painter Amos Ferguson refers to his canvases not as paintings but as paint, signing them “Paint by Amos Ferguson.” Likewise, one of Roscoe Mitchell’s early albums is called *Sound*, one of Creeley’s early books is called *Words*, and Baraka has a story called “Words.” The medium and material of writing is language, and just as a good deal of what I do as a writer and as a reader is necessarily a matter of finding my way in language, a good deal of what I do as a teacher is encouraging and helping others to find their way, as readers and as writers, in language. I like to talk about this as the pursuit of *homo faber*’s dream, the dream of transformation, the word’s construction of the alternate home I spoke of earlier.