



PROJECT MUSE®

Sacrificial Limbs, Lambs, Iambs, and I Ams: Nathaniel
Mackey's Mythology of Loss

J. Edward Mallot

Contemporary Literature, Volume 45, Number 1, Spring 2004, pp. 135-164
(Article)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2004.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/168634>

J. E D W A R D M A L L O T

Sacrificial Limbs, Lambs, lambs, and I Ams:
Nathaniel Mackey's Mythology of Loss

Perhaps Wilson Harris is right. There are musics which haunt us like a phantom limb. Thus the abrupt breaking off. Therefore the "of course." No more than the ache of some such would-be extension. Still, I'm not so sure anymore. I'm not so sure all this recent insistence of mine on absence isn't couvade after all. (Please don't tell me you told me so.)

Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*

Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook* rejects easy classification, despite the temptation to screw the text into preexisting sets of literary acceptance. There are genres which haunt us, to echo Mackey's protagonist N., like phantom limbs; thus the gentle slide into academic pigeonholing, therefore the "of course that's what it is." Poetic in sound and image, the *Hornbook* is not poetry. While novelesque in narrative scope and concern, the text does not follow the parameters of a conventional novel, opting instead to slip within N.'s ongoing correspondence, a half exchange that, at best, half answers a handful of issues before the book concludes. Mackey himself shies away from referring to his multivolume *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* as "novels," telling Paul Naylor, "For a long time I was uncomfortable with them being called fiction and with the individual volumes being called novels, but I eventually got used to it" ("Interview" [Naylor] 651). To dismiss the argument of genre by claiming the *Hornbook* an epistolary fiction is to ignore a number of features of this narrative type. First, the lack of authorial intrusion in an epistolary work grants an immediacy of experience with those

who “author” the letters, so much so that the reader may suffer from the absence of an omniscient viewpoint; in Mackey’s text the question of distance between Mackey himself and the “N.” that writes the letters is constantly up for reexamination. Not surprisingly, Mackey offers scant explanation of how to distinguish between N. and Nathaniel: “N. and I have some things in common. We overlap. . . . Shared experiences. Some shared proclivities” (“Interview” [O’Leary] 46). Second, the tone of the text suggests an interchange of thought between N. and the recipient of the letters, the remarkably ambiguous Angel of Dust, without providing either the Angel’s letters or much assurance that interchange is actually taking place. Ultimately, the text seems to reject classification of any order, preferring to revel in the possibilities—more than in the full realizations—of a text that offers letters, song lyrics, convoluted diagrams, and accounts of dreams that rattle and hum meanings, a cacophony that somehow sounds correct.

Joseph Allen, attempting to find a prevailing structure to the multivolume work, argues: “The letters blur boundaries between fiction and theory, narration and critique, presence and absence, music and discourse. N., as well as the reader, must create theoretical cultural fictions to fill the perceived gaps of meaning among the letters” (205). The words demand such an aggressive mode of interpretation, in part, precisely because the Angel remains absent, a felt presence at every turn but with no speaking role. This silence seems appropriate for a text obsessed with absence, challenging its characters to see “what isn’t there” and to examine the means by which something is both instantly lost and constantly found. That we feel we have lost something recalls N.’s “ache of some such would-be extension” (*Hornbook* 1); remove enough layers, however, disentangle enough knots, and the past—or the present, or the memory, or whatever “phantom limbs” we’re seeking—may yet be found. Thus the plays on homonyms and synesthetic puns; therefore the “of course” of recognition sudden and sweeping. Interestingly, it is loss that makes possible the slippages between memory and rememory, between death and rebirth, between isolation and communion. This loss is often a transubstantiation of experience that presents metonymy in reincarnated form, as if the spirit of the amputated figure drifts to a new mode, or “plane,” of expression.

The suggestion of reality as a palimpsest of planes of possibility—each true at any given moment, with emphasis placed on the gaps between states as much as the states themselves—recalls the “thousand plateaus” model posited by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. All meaning, according to this model, rests on relation, the collision of planes of possibility that erode as they shift past each other. Extraneous factors can complicate or make impossible otherwise desirable connection; in Mackey’s case, these factors include distance, language, physicality, social constraints, and death. To “kill off” these constraints allows for more direct communication, and in the *Hornbook* sacrifice predicates survival. That something has been severed, importantly, does not mean that it remains forever inaccessible, but that it becomes another absent layer in the palimpsest of our existence, a phantom limb or lamb or iamb that replaces the real arm or body or word we knew before. Indeed, the introduction of a phantom limb, physical or textual or otherwise, may strengthen the body as a whole—the Angel of Dust may, arguably, assume a more potent narrative stance in silence; the protagonist may gain more potential with a name that’s only a letter.

The plateau model works for Mackey’s project in a number of ways. Musically, the model functions as a scale, the evocation of a single note the implication of an entire scale: one hears the note C but infers D, E, and so forth. Meaning is only truly generated either by the acknowledgment of the entire chord or by charting the progression of notes along a scale. Mackey’s penchant for adding a capital *D* to names that begin with *J*—a device fully exploited in the *Hornbook*’s sequel, *Djbot Baghostus’s Run*—reflects what can happen when a prior plane is revisited; molecules can shift over time and place, generating an altered past that suffers mediation but, nevertheless, refuses to disappear entirely. As bodies can possess phantom limbs, Mackey’s thousand plateaus include phantom planes, levels of meaning and discourse that remain temporarily silent only to reassert themselves later, a percussive undercurrent never heard but always there.

Still, Deleuze and Guattari’s plateaus project fails to fully explain Mackey’s epistolary enterprise. The original model resembles a stack of parallel planes, but N. finds that his world is not a smooth,

regular series of strata. Instead, his sense of order can become complicated by any number of outside pressures, including individual grief, collective infighting, racial discrimination, public rejection, distance, time, and history. These separate problems suggest that the texture of reality is much rougher than in a smooth, striated model, as each of these “outside pressures” can add another “plane” from various angles. The result, for N., is not a stack of planes but a geometric nightmare, a crazy quilt of self and environment. It is perhaps this texture of the problem of loss and recovery that leads Mackey to refer to his work as weaving, as warp and weft seeking a kinship but remaining, simultaneously, discrete threads. If the *Hornbook* and the *Run* are, indeed, indicative of a thousand plateaus, one might conclude that these planes *intersect each other*, complicating the goal of recovery but expanding the potential of something strange and wonderful in its own creaky creation.

Something Lost

The first sentence of *Bedouin Hornbook*—“You should’ve heard me in the dream last night” (1)—assumes familiarity with both “you” and “me.” In truth, we know neither. It seems shocking—given that the entire volume is written by N., given N.’s tendency to go on and on about himself, betraying his hopes and fears and insecurities, given his apparent project of writing as a kind of intellectual catharsis—how little we actually know about the narrator. One may assume that N. is male, that N. is black, that N. is heterosexual, that N. is part of a jazz-blues band, that N. is somewhat talented; but these “facts” are ultimately only assumptions. We cannot even claim N.’s name. If anything, the *Hornbook*’s opening words suggest the degree to which the narrator relies on an exchange of discourse, even though that exchange seems undercut by the Angel of Dust’s absence. This nonpresence opens a wide variety of possible identities for the letters’ recipient. It also places the reader in literary terrain virtually impossible to navigate: we have a writer we do not know, communicating to a blank recipient we neither see nor hear. We have word, but no world; text, but little context.

Furthermore, the relationship between the two is unquestionably complicated. One gathers as much from the opening section alone, which ends with N. edging toward severance:

I'm not at all sure this won't be the last letter you'll receive from me. As much as I hate to say so, this dialogue of ours seems hopelessly enmeshed in the very "ontology of loss" of which you've insisted I disburden myself. I know I've been known to cut you loose before, but this time I think I really mean it. I'll send tapes of the band, of course, but please don't expect anything more in the way of words.

Love,
N.

(3)

The suggestion of tapes to follow and the closing "Love" should signal that this break may be only temporary, and indeed some ten months later N. will resume contact, opening the *Hornbook's* second letter with an apology: "I'm sorry to have taken so long answering your letter, though I'd have thought you'd be the last person to be bothered by those sorts of questions" (4). This will hardly be the first time N. feels compelled to apologize for a lapse in communication; a quick survey of the dated epistles demonstrates that exchange either flowed heavily or hardly at all. *Djbot Baghostus's Run* begins on a similar note: "Sorry to've taken so long getting back to you. I've been meaning to write for some time but it seems one thing or another has managed to get in the way. . . . For the time being, though, I prefer not to talk too directly about what I'm doing" (7). While N. frequently apologizes for his failure to connect, later in the *Run* he'd "begun to wonder why I hadn't heard from you for so long" (48). That N. maintains a dialogue with the Angel is important, for he relies on the Angel as audience and critic. Letters frequently end with a request akin to "Tell me what you think" (*Hornbook* 16), only to complain in other segments that "(here you can say you told me so again)" (*Hornbook* 17). At certain points N. clearly feels that the Angel not only misunderstands him but unfairly manipulates his ideas; at other points he feels an absolute affinity: "Thank you for the tape. It's as though we shared a single set of ears. It's not only that I'd already heard the piece you sent (I have the record it's on in fact), but it's the very cut I like most on the album" (*Hornbook* 138). N. and the Angel even read the same

texts simultaneously, pondering the same questions: "I too was puzzled by the passage you point out in Bastide's book" (*Run* 74).

One could, arguably, infer from the name of his correspondent that N.'s letters are transcripts of drug-induced states, the Angel a muse of abuse that guides his intellectual "trip." That the Angel never speaks, lacks a "name," appears with inconsistent frequency, and is, at times, sworn off by N. suggests that the Angel may reflect an addiction and not an individual. Alternatively, one could just as easily argue that the Angel is a more traditional type of muse, one that creates magic out of dust, visits the recipient of divine art—in this case, N.—and returns to dust at the conclusion of N.'s "song." This would hold particular weight in the context of Mackey's ongoing poetry series *Song of the Andoumboulou*, where N. confers with the muse during the construction of his songs. Then again, the Angel could stand in for a specific outside friend and critic of Mackey's work, one helpful enough to garner the epithet "angel" while granted anonymity within the published text. The Angel could, obliquely, refer to Mackey's readers, the text then a dialogue with the readership in which Mackey's replies are supplied entirely in advance. Finally, Mackey could be conversing with himself, an example of what he might call "auto-constitutive stress" (*Hornbook* 61), in which a writer must rely on metadiscourse to make true progress.

Regardless of what self-referentiality might be traced in the letters, Mackey seems to insist that the Angel figure represents a need to reconnect with others, particularly individuals from the past:

I acknowledge in the very first of the Angel of Dust letters . . . the correspondence, the letter form, the sense of being in conversation with the dead . . . that one is writing beyond one's self or at least aspiring to write beyond one's self. . . . You know, in language we inherit the voices of the dead. Language is passed on to us by people who are now in their graves and brings with it access to history, tradition, times and places that are not at all immediate to our own immediate and particular occasion whether we look at it individually and personally or whether we look at it in a more collective way and talk about a specific community.

("Interview" [Foster] 54)

The palimpsest that becomes the Angel of Dust—the layers of possibility that refuse to collapse into a simple, static entity—parallels the realms of communication that can and do permeate our daily

lives, involving the living and the dead, the seen and the invisible. Curiously, to enter this palimpsest of communication requires both a wandering from the self and a dialogue with others. The latter is usually attained through song; while we may perform a solo, we engage in a tonal affinity by entering a realm of shared sound, playing to an audience that, although sometimes invisible, is always attentive. Mackey opens the *Song of the Andoumboulou* sessions with a curiously self-reflexive assertion: "The song says the / dead will not / ascend without song" (*Eroding Witness* 33). Dream sections of the *Hornbook*, like many of the performances, underscore the notion of songs as séances, either direct or inferred. The coexistence of the there and not there becomes at one point expressed in the musical paraphrasing practice of "dubbing": "In fact, the alternation between absence and availability, the evocation of something there but not there that one gets from 'dub,' was very much what Shango seemed to be after—a skeletal promise or a spectral insistence of a sort that the organ seemed to be played by a ghost" (*Hornbook* 87). In this light, N.'s opening words in the *Hornbook* might be not only a wishful longing for the Angel's company but a simple statement of fact. If the Angel represents both the dead and the living, who conquer verbal and physical distance to achieve a constant, if not constantly obvious, communion, the figure should have "heard me in the dream last night."

Because the dead seem irrevocably tied to the power of music performance, those who seek to communicate through the conduits of voice and instrument must offer a form of personal sacrifice. Pain bears promise, and N. eventually wonders if the pain in his brow—presumably caused by cowrie shells lodged in his head—is somehow necessary for his music to shine: "Are the attacks a self-sentencing conviction the music fosters and feeds, even if only as the occasion for a reprieve? Are self-sentencing conviction and self-commuting sentence merely symbiotic halves of a self-cycling ordeal? Do I knock myself down in order to be picked up?" (*Run* 18). The cowrie-shell pains are the latest in a long line of references to pain as the occasion of birth and rebirth, of bodily harm as the mechanism that allows the music and the dead to speak. The image of bloodletting as that which causes the pen to fountain occurs in the *Hornbook's* opening letter, where N.'s "thinking hovered around

the figure of a cloth-enshrouded, enormously protective Thigh. The needle pricked a vein and what blood flowed out was an ending, the ending of a song I went on to write" (14). The concept of veins as reflective of a continuum, a linearity of music and time, is echoed in the opening chapter of the *Run*:

In this, of course, he works the vein opened up by such people as Milford Graves, Sunny Murray and Rashied Ali. And by "vein" I mean exactly that, for what he does (or so it seemed to me that night) is insist upon a hemorrhaging, a dilation of one's way of looking at time. What struck me most was his playing's apparently absent yet all the more convincing regard for linearity, his having collapse and consolidation, qualm and quanta, find their way to one another.

(8)

A vein opening to allow a song to be heard conveys several messages at once: that both the dead and their song are somehow within us; that their appearance requires some loss, whether of bodily or psychological self, on our part; that music floats above bodies, space, and time. Images of blood and sacrifice become more fully realized in the composition N. entitles "Meat of My Brother's Thigh." The story concerns two brothers starving in the forest. To ensure that his brother can finish the journey, the elder secretly cuts away and serves part of his own thigh. Upon finding their way out, the younger realizes the sacrifice his brother has made and vows to serve him forever (*Hornbook* 89). Assuming that the elder brother symbolizes those people like Graves, Murray, and Ali as well as writing influences such as Wilson Harris and Amiri Baraka, N./Mackey opens up veins not only to the muse of poetry but to the muses of artistic ancestry as well. Sacrifice pays homage to the past, provides food for the present, and preserves ground for the future.

Barry Powell's work on ancient myths around the world suggests that sacrificial motifs—including castration and circumcision—indicate a transcultural belief that death was a prerequisite to life, that a pruning of the human body generated a smaller, tighter, more productive whole: "[F]or many peoples, sacrifice was necessary to appease the divine powers that ruled the world. Human beings were felt to be in debt to the gods and to the angry ghosts, who had to be bought off at any price. The value of sacrifice was gauged by the pain

it caused those who made it" (220–21). Powell concludes, "the continuing fertility of the earth cannot be separated from the inevitable presence of death" (237). Indeed, myths from Greece, Rome, ancient Africa, and pre-Christian Mesopotamia all share, though in variegated forms, rituals of sacrifice, practiced for a multiplicity of ends: to ensure a good harvest, to guarantee success in war, to save mankind. Osiris, an Egyptian god referenced in Mackey's prose, stands as a ready example. He manages to procreate after death; his postmortem, ubiquitous phallus ensures political power for the pharaoh; his coffin grants the world continual prosperity, bought at the expense of Osiris's own death and his wife's grief.

Osiris is not the only African figure to transmit energy and prosperity after death. Mackey's attention to "the creaking of the word" in Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* reflects an extended, complex relationship between N.'s letters and basic tenets of the Dogon peoples. A number of Ogotemmêli's teachings find echoes in the *Hornbook*, including the transformation from sacrifice to survival. As Griaule explains:

In all its different forms, whether of consecration, expiation, divination, purification, upholding the invisible or securing salvation for one's self, sacrifice for the Dogon had one unchanging effect—the redistribution of life-force.

But it was not simply a matter of taking a victim's life-force to put it somewhere else, or to increase the life-force of some other being, visible or invisible. The object was rather to create a movement of forces within a circuit composed of the sacrificer, the victim, the altar and the power invoked.

(131)

Although the Dogon model presents relatively static representations for the "nouns"—the victim, the altar, and so forth—it still requires rather liquid "verbs" for the magic and message to arise from Griaule's "circuit." Intriguingly, these verbs take the very forms Mackey uses in sections such as "Meat of My Brother's Thigh"—bleeding and speaking. In Dogon rituals of sacrifice, Griaule continues,

At the critical moment, that is to say, when the blood flows, the man utters a prayer, by which he invokes the power, for example the Nummo, and

explains what he is doing. The prayer is spoken aloud. It is therefore itself an expulsion of force, which follows the lines of the breath issuing from the speaker's mouth. This force serves, in the first place, to arouse the Nummo and, in the second place, to direct the force that flows from the wounded throat of the victim and pours out on to the altar.

(131)

If the sacrificed, sacrificed by, and sacrificed to provide what Griaule terms a "circuit" of transformation, blood and speech provide the conduits by which transformation occurs. Something lost, something gained: Mackey's epistolary works, in a fashion somewhat mysterious and somewhat metafictional, enact the same formula. The Dogon rituals of sacrifice, stripped of their precise, original context, become resurrected in a more universal form, one gained through N.'s willingness to pour out literal and metaphoric blood. In Mackey's interpretation, "[i]t's a transformation":

And it's a case in point of the fact that these traditions—the mythology, the lore—are not being gone to as some kind of fixed, given entity that one then has to have a subservient relationship to. They are active and unfinished; they are subject to change; they are themselves in the process of transformation and transition. They speak to an open and open-ended possibility that the poetics that I've been involved in very much speaks to as well. To see cracks and incompleteness as not only inevitable but opportune.

(“Interview” [O’Leary] 35)

Within the *Hornbook*, the something-lost-something-gained equation works in a number of ways. The pain of separation from a loved one becomes the occasion for song. The sacrifice of opening up a vein or “opening up” on a page becomes the catharsis necessary for genuine expression. The missing letters on a wall of graffiti become, for one of N.'s fellow musicians, an “enabling confusion concerning the singular and the plural,” a “vacillation between the claims of the one and the counterclaims of the other” (*Hornbook* 26); for another, this same wall of grammatical errata becomes “an invitation into an area of *uncommon* sense, and . . . the dislocations they visited upon so-called proper English were manifestly of an invasive, mediumistic order” (27). That something becomes verbally missing does not diminish the power of the message; if anything, the remaining phonemes and phonics gain areas of potential

power, exploring what isn't said by refusing to utter it. This may explain, to some extent, the silence of the Angel; by not allowing the recipient of the letters to reply directly, Mackey may be offering volumes of commentary in its wake. Certainly, the Angel's present nonpresence opens up a number of interpretive options, each expanding the text's ability to "speak."

Harryette Mullen, on the other hand, sees in the Angel's silence a much more politically charged statement, one in which absence is a gesture toward the oppression that has silenced African Americans for generations:

The accumulated images of castration/amputation in *Bedouin Hornbook* are related to the persistent association of African Americans with both coerced silence and strategic inarticulateness, although what Mackey investigates is the relative stress placed on either articulation or disarticulation as oppositional values within and between cultures. The discursive representation of the African as *alogos* in Western culture becomes, for Mackey, the background of a series of meditations on music, myth, mastery, and masculinity. Just as the individual seeking through literacy to distinguish himself from the "voiceless" mass learns the value of secrecy and indiscretion . . . so also the need, within traditional black communities, to shroud African spirituality in secrecy has contributed to the elusiveness, evasiveness, and enigmatic quality of African cultural practices in regard to a Western context of misunderstanding, oppression, and often deliberate distortion.

(37-38)

Like Baraka and Ishmael Reed before him, Mackey engages in occasionally optioned silence and coerced grammar to create an impression that challenges the world order of the word. For Mullen, "The supposed lack of precision associated with aesthetic and spiritual traditions of the African diaspora is transformed into a positive value, rather than a deficit. What might sound like faulty grammar or blurred pronunciation of standard English is . . . accurate in its signification of a profound difference in world view" (39). Self-sacrifice of word and gesture becomes, for Mackey, more than an outward motive; the cut and the shift stretch toward both cultural and personal bounds, while testing the limits of aesthetic expression. If poetry, according to Mackey's collection of essays *Discrepant Engagement*, represents "language owning up to being an orphan"

(234), it is music that both mourns and heals. Song becomes “wounded kinship’s last resort . . . [it] bears witness to what is left out of that concept of reality, or, if not exactly what, to the fact that something *is* left out” (232).

One useful exploration of music as an acknowledgment of something lost and something gained can be gleaned from N.’s meditations on the falsetto, a manner of singing in which the primary voice is deliberately muted to allow a higher register to take precedence, as if the lower key is sacrificed to recover it. “What is it in the falsetto,” N. asks, “that thins and threatens to abolish the voice but the wear of so much reaching for heaven?” (*Hornbook* 52). N. begins to think of the falsetto in terms of the moan or shout, two methods of speaking that manage to convey more in their wordlessness than more conventionally articulate methods could accomplish: “Like the moan or the shout, I’m suggesting, the falsetto explores a redemptive, unworded realm—a meta-word, if you will—where the implied critique or the momentary eclipse of the word curiously rescues, restores and renews it: new word, new world” (*Hornbook* 52). If history, as the Angel suggests, is merely a “manner of speaking,” N. could hardly be accused of “trying to outshout or shut history up” (*Hornbook* 70); a more complicated politics of voice and message is involved than simply offering a counter-discourse. On a psychological level, to begin, the falsetto reminds us of our other selves, our other avenues of language and song, which were always inside us but rarely outside.

The troubling of the voice precipitated by the invocation of the falsetto echoes a second phantom voice, the *duende*, defined by Mackey as “a conversation with the dead, intimacy with death and with the dead” (“Cante Moro” 197), one that only occurs when the possibility of death becomes evident. “The word *duende*,” he explains, “means spirit, a kind of gremlin, a gremlinlike, troubling spirit. One of the things that marks the arrival of *duende* in flamenco singing is a sound of trouble in the voice. The voice becomes troubled. Its eloquence becomes eloquence of another order, a broken, problematic, self-problematizing eloquence” (195). Mackey turns to the work of Federico García Lorca to more fully explain the sacrifice required and potential promised in evoking *duende*. One section of García Lorca’s *Deep Song and Other Prose* describes a flamenco

singer who, although technically sound, fails to truly affect her audience, a limitation she can overcome only by sacrificing tonality for more textual depth:

As though crazy, torn like a medieval weeper, La Niña de los Peines got to her feet, tossed off a big glass of firewater and began to sing with a scorched throat, without voice, without breath or color, but with *duende*. She was able to kill all the scaffolding of the song and leave way for a furious, enslaving *duende*, friend of sand winds, who made the listeners rip their clothes with the same rhythm as do the blacks of the Antilles when, in the "lucumi" rite, they huddle in heaps before the statue of Santa Bárbara.

(45–46; qtd. by Mackey, "Cante Moro" 196)

Mackey elaborates:

Lorca does not so much define *duende* as grope after it, wrestle with it, evoke it through strain, insist on struggle. He says, for example, that "one must awaken the *duende* in the remotest mansions of the blood." He says that "the *duende* loves the rim of the wound" and that it "draws near places where forms fuse together into a yearning superior to their visible expression." He writes, "Each art has a *duende* different in form and style but their roots all meet in the place where the black sounds of Manuel Torre come from—the essence, the uncontrollable, quivering, common base of wood, sound, canvas, and word."

("Cante Moro" 196–97)

Again, concepts of sacrifice find their potency from death itself. Both the literal word and the corporeal body suffer, bleed, even disappear entirely in order to find a modified, more energized form in reincarnation. For Richard Quinn, "*Duende* appears as the recouping of loss, a re-establishment of multiform collectivity. Absence, loss, limping, and impairment become abundance rather than deficit" (618). In this sense, the "absent" elements of N.'s letters become way stations of physical and psychic potency, generating multiplicity by killing singularity. The abandonment of the static body and word allows a host of tangential relations to sing along; the falsetto and the duende produce not synonyms but symbiosis:

This wooing of another voice, an alternate voice, that is so important to duende has as one of its aspects or analogs in poetry that state of entering the language in such a way that one is into an area of implication,

resonance, and connotation that is manifold, many-meaning, polysemous. One has worked beyond oneself. It is as if the language itself takes over. Something beyond the will, the conscious design or desire of the poet, is active, something that goes beyond univocal, unequivocal control. . . . Bound reference, univocal meaning, is no solution to the riddle of language.

("Cante Moro" 199)

This "riddle" challenges the reader to acknowledge that what is not is part of what is, that the seeming opposite actually reflects teeming homonyms of sound and sense.

In a similar vein, the members of the band discuss the relative worth of searching for a drummer, one that will provide an undercurrent for the others. The men of the group will spend a great deal of time in the *Run* dreaming of the mystical Djeannine, a shared dream-answer to a shared band problem. Aunt Nancy, on the other hand, argues near the end of the *Hornbook* that such a search is essentially unnecessary, that percussion is constantly taking place, "that the absence and/or presence of the drum could never be taken literally, that either was also the other as a genetically dislocated aspect of itself. This, she insisted, was the heterodox beauty of our conception, the hybrid (as against 'highbred') pedigree of our percussive concept, the resiliency which made such retrieval as Lambert proposed altogether redundant, not to say absurd" (134). Acknowledging that opposites are simply the flip side of "this side," the *Run* takes up the question of the relationship of opposites, of whether flip side is highly integral to the present state or only occasionally relevant; the inability to decide leaves N. muttering "flipside so near so far" (45) over and over again. What remains clear is that opposites are what make us whole, that absences make the present felt more sincerely, that the past is always with us and will catch up with us over the history of our futures. Sacrifice and pain can make us more acutely aware of what has been lost and what remains to be recovered. This does not mean that N. exhorts his audience to undergo self-mutilation for aesthetic gain, what the Angel calls "a thinly veiled romance of distantiation." Rather, sacrifice symbolizes what N. calls a "'broken' claim to connection" (*Hornbook* 34), a fragmented whole that speaks both to the entire group and to each disjointed

member. Here, N. visualizes the collection of parts as a “rickety bridge (sometimes a rickety boat),” the planks claiming at once a kinship with each other and a uniqueness of their own, an object that creaks its group song of longing and togetherness. N. begins to see himself as somehow floating above the texture of the rickety boat: “I felt my anchorlessness as a lack, as an inured, eventually visible pit up from which I floated, looking down on what debris looking into it left” (*Hornbook* 34). N. has now assumed the role of the book’s title—the Bedouin unattached to an overly deterministic sense of place, time, identity, or meaning, a wanderer of art and semantics. What remains to be learned from the *Hornbook* is the meaning of the title’s second word—what information can be gleaned from a hornbook for the wanderer, how that information can be accessed, and whether this “primer” is a self-contained unit or dependent on the reader-wanderer’s ability to see what else might be contained. According to Mackey, this process must come from recognizing and reclaiming a sense of the in-between:

The dynamic quality of a tone is a statement of its incompleteness, its will to completion. To hear a tone as dynamic quality, as a direction, a pointing, means hearing at the same time beyond it, beyond it in the direction of its will, and going toward the expected next tone. . . . We are always *between* the tones, *on the way* from tone to tone; our hearing does not remain with the tone, it reaches through it and beyond it.

. . . (how much does “limb” have to do with “liminal”?)

(*Hornbook* 15–16)

Something Gained

Consistently, *Bedouin Hornbook* and *Djbot Baghostus’s Run* present music as a tiered process of becoming—even in repeated performances of the same piece—rather than a fixed, static identity. Little wonder that music is commonly referred to as arrangement; the argument, according to N.’s band, is that the process of moving the molecules of music gives each note an electric, temporal charge, one that gains its strength only in relation to other notes. The musicians draw this conclusion when they read John Miller Chernoff’s *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*:

[Aunt Nancy's] preoccupation with "absence" and "presence" (more exactly with a coupling or a structured cohabiting of one with the other) no doubt recognized its pedigree in such passages as this: "*The music is perhaps best considered as an arrangement of gaps where one may add a rhythm, rather than as a dense pattern of sound.* In the conflict of the rhythms, it is the space between the notes from which the dynamic tension comes, and it is the silence which constitutes the musical form as much as does the sound" (Chernoff's emphasis).

I was even more struck by the point the book makes to the effect that polyrhythmic drumming implies an absent, additional rhythm, a furtive beat one's listening supplies or one's dancing echoes.

(*Hornbook* 144–45)

But while "[p]olyrhythmicity accents absence" (*Hornbook* 145), it's absence that makes polyrhythmicity possible, a symbiosis of sound and silence that allows each to exploit its individual power. The silences are golden, pregnant pauses that generate possibilities for the next note. Chernoff argues in his groundbreaking study that well-constructed rhythms in African music deliberately contain "absence" in order to foster a more collective "presence": "A good rhythm, if it is to enhance itself, should both fill a gap in the other rhythms and create an emptiness that may be similarly filled" (114). If another performer fails to fill this gap, the audience may do so themselves; in fact, "[i]n African music, it is the listener or dancer who has to supply the beat: the listener must be *actively engaged* in making sense of the music" (50). Everything in African music, from participants to rhythms to individual notes, gains its power only in the context of everything (and everyone) around it; gaps are not losses but invitations. Thus the "plane" each musical note occupies can never gain full autonomy, but merely a relational reality by means of the other notes; we may think we hear a single note but always mentally register an entire chord.

Mackey illustrates his chord-within-a-note concept at various points in the *Run*, as band members and audiences suddenly awake to the realization that repetition has birthed multiplicity. One example concerns Frank Wright, who performs "a tuneless, ultra-out wall of sound (no head, no recognizable structure), a raucous, free-for-all cacophony which at times had the feel of an assault"

(61). During the intermission, Aunt Nancy asks him to play “China”:

[He] said, “No problem.” The second set, however, went just like the first, equally tuneless, equally nonstop, equally without a head or a recognizable structure, coming nowhere near the melody line of “China.” The one difference was that about forty-five minutes into the set Wright let the tenor fall from his mouth and hang by its strap, cupped his hands in front of his mouth like a megaphone and yelled, “China! China! China!” He then took the tenor back to his mouth for another twenty or so no-letup minutes of squeaks, honks, moans, growls and screeches.

(62)

Wright’s composition, like all song, encloses every song within its invisible range; the audience may only hear certain notes but unconsciously recognizes the continuum of music as a piece unfolds. For Jarred Bottle, the chord of sound also includes place and sex: his girlfriend has recently become infatuated with a woman named China. That he and Aunt Nancy are composing a piece entitled “Not Here, No There” speaks to the world of difference—and, at other moments, the absolute irrelevancy—of tones and places. We hear a single note, but synesthetically we experience a world. Wright’s performance reverberates in N.’s monotonous “letter to the world” near the close of the *Run*:

I began by playing the same note, C, over and over again, a back-to-basics move or approach by way of which I underscored my start from scratch. I jumped octaves and varied placement and duration but the only note I played was C. I played it long, I played it short, I played it staccato, I played it spaced, I played it soft, I played it loud. C was my letter to the world.

The world’s reply was at first a cool one, almost no reply at all.

(178–79)

“The world” follows by bringing out, en masse, 3-D glasses to wear, the answer to N.’s single tone (although expressed in a chord of possible expressions) a chord of their own. The communion is not, importantly, a one-to-one correspondence, but an addition—or, more accurately, a recognition—of a simultaneous, parallel plane of thought.

Literary critics have already begun to theorize Mackey's works as systems of multiple planes; Adalaide Morris, for example, considers his writing "stereoscopic," "that is, like the optical instrument which creates three-dimensional illusions by bringing into a single focus photographs of the same scene taken from slightly different angles. The flash of depth—the stereoscopic moment—occurs in the instant the viewer's eye makes one picture out of two or more angles" (749). Somewhat similarly, David C. Kress suggests that Mackey's works again and again concern "the potential multiplicity of thought" (765) and the process of "becoming" (766). Kress even turns briefly to Deleuze and Guattari, who emphasize the vast promise of the rhizome (775). Indeed, the French philosophers' own multivolume project, entitled *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, shares much more with Mackey's prose than what Kress's analysis affords. *A Thousand Plateaus* opens, appropriately, with what appears to be a schizophrenic musical composition, a scale of jagged lines and wild loops that run over the page. Deleuze and Guattari's gesture speaks not only to the incompleteness of any one note in a chord of possible meanings but to the essential notion of movement along notes as that which generates meaning, a meaning constantly bound to notions of relativity. The crazy arcs and vectors that seem to distort the scale actually give it clarity, explaining the messy process of becoming, the journey to realization that music embraces. Each note, each horizontal bar of the scale represents a mode of thinking; meaning is generated in the space between the two. The French philosophers verbally describe their project as a study of plateaus of engagement:

For example, a book composed of chapters has culmination and termination points. What takes place in a book composed instead of plateaus that communicate with one another across microfissures, as in a brain? We call a "plateau" any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome. We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus. . . . Each morning we would wake up, and each of us would ask himself what plateau he was going to tackle, writing five lines here, ten there. We had hallucinatory experiences, we watched lines leave one plateau and proceed to another like columns of tiny ants. We made circles of convergence.

Each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau.

(22)

Translator Brian Massumi, in somewhat similarly convoluted fashion, explains:

In Deleuze and Guattari, a plateau is reached when circumstances combine to bring an activity to a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax. The heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist. Each section of *A Thousand Plateaus* tries to combine conceptual bricks in such a way as to construct this kind of intensive state of thought. The way the combination is made is an example of what Deleuze and Guattari call consistency—not in the sense of a homogeneity, but as a holding together of disparate elements.

(xiv)

In other words, plateaus symbolize modes in rhizome-like fashion, bringing us out of our static, incomplete sensations to more holistic forms of understanding.

In this context, it is highly appropriate for the jazz function of Mackey's text—the literal performances, the almost-connections between characters' dreams and desires, the constant invocations of call and response that infuse song with interpretive power—to become such a powerful motif; each performer, each dreamer provides another "plane" in what stretches toward a concept of the "holistic text." Each call, aware of its own incompleteness, asks for the response of a different, but related, plane, an opposition to deconstruct and reconstruct its own signification. Thus jazz soloists are expected not to repeat the exact melody, but to generate an altered same, a repetition with a difference. Thus N. seems entirely right to contribute only a "body and soul" murmuring to the Crossroads Choir performance; thus an audience can truly reply to a persistent C with 3-D glasses. The call and the response, while eroding past each other as planes and eroding each other as "witnesses," make the counterpoints that much more resilient. N. demonstrates the process early in the *Hornbook*:

"I don't know you but I know your father. I don't know your father but I know your father's father. I don't know your father's father but I know your father's grandfather. I don't know your father's grandfather but I know your grandfather's grandfather. I don't know your grandfather's grandfather but I know your great-great-grandfather's father. I don't know your great-great-grandfather's father but I know your great-great-grandfather's grandfather. I don't know your great-great-grandfather's grandfather but I know your great-grandfather's great-great grandfather. I don't know your great-grandfather's great-great-grandfather but I know your great-great-grandfather's great-great-grandfather . . ." And so on.

I was after something similar. Not so much a stutter in any precise sense of the term as a curve of articulation which whenever it asserted would instantly qualify, even contradict itself. That sense of a receding, self-correcting withdrawal into a cave of ancestors I found immensely attractive, a curious borderline stance between the compelling and the merely compulsive.

(23–24)

In the sense of "a thousand plateaus," N. here has called and responded to history, both as an individual and as part of a collective; each plane of possibility not only "erodes" the plane before but also completes it. The plateaus of prose invite both the performers within and the readers without to add their own plane, to participate in not so much a group stutter as a collective harmony, to add a limb to our societal phantom limp. Even the reader becomes implicated in the process of this universal enterprise, expected not to unlock all of Mackey's meanings but to produce a new plane in his/her own interpretive experience. The improvisation of "China" seems a failure only to those who insist that meaning resides in only one plane of thinking at one time; in truth China is a place and all places, a woman and all women, a song and all songs.

Our inclination should be to instinctively reach beyond any one understanding of China, to constantly stretch toward other plateaus. Our minds should be desperate for the counterpoints of both-and, acknowledging that either-or is a notion passé and pointless; our hands should be desperate for thumbs, oppositions that make the fingers work. N. elaborates on the motif of the hand and the thumb as an essential plane of counterpoint in his piece entitled "Opposable Thumb at the Water's Edge":

Its basic theme I'd put this way: Graspability is a self-incriminating thirst utterly native to every hand, an indigenous court from which only the drowned hope to win an acquittal. The piece makes use of two triadic phrases which I call utility riffs: "whatever beginnings go back to" and "an exegetic refusal to be done with desire." These generate a subtheme which could be put as follows: Thirst is by its nature unquenchable, the blue lips of a muse whose refusals roughen our throats with *duende*.

(Hornbook 43)

In a reply that is somehow both magical and inevitable, Penguin produces what N. calls "an extraordinary occurrence":

At that point Penguin (whom I'd vaguely noticed fingering an imaginary horn towards the end of the piece, and who, by the time I finished, had taken his oboe from its case, inserted the mouthpiece and wet the reeds with his tongue and lips) embarked on a solo in which he held forth on what he said was a rapport he sensed—"a shadowy congress" he called it—between Opposable Thumb and an extremely ancient, primeval Egyptian god by the name of Temu. In the course of his solo he presented an impressive, all but overwhelming rush of corroborative data.

(Hornbook 44)

Not to be silenced, Aunt Nancy and Djamilaa begin to "play" a critique of phallogocentricity—not countered effectively at all by Lambert's suggestion of the hand as a vulva enclosing the thumb/phallus—and produce "a symbiosis from which every horizon [that] had fallen away sought to extend itself" (Hornbook 49). In light of Deleuze and Guattari's planes of meaning, the opposition of the thumb becomes the necessity for discourse, any one avenue of approach only a start. It may be for this reason that the *Run* emphasizes that "have not" is, in essence, "halve not" (11)—a warning not to threaten the totality by disparaging any contributing singularity, a call to accept the completeness of being.

The *Run* often "breaks down" any seeming unit into dissected elements, to generate an accordion out of a single plane. Djamilaa begins this process in relating the search for a name to the striated meanings of a dream:

"Speaking of names though," Djamilaa added after a pause, "the dream I dreamt last night had a strange tripartite power. It was able to 1) name without announcing or announce in such a way that to announce was to

show, 2) show in such a way that to show was to tell, and 3) tell in such a way as to dictate its own reception, dictate and read itself at the same time."

(38)

Djamilaa offers her audience three planes of interpretation, each relying on a different mode of thought; the movement from one plane to another rests, in large part, on "verbing" from one to the other, on sacrificing the prior method of analysis, on stripping the self of the stasis of that thought process and recovering its traces in the next level. The tripartite method also allows for the certainty that, while dream, dreamer, and Djamilaa's audience may be working with the same materials or the same terms, their individual planes remain composed of separate elements, of dissimilar proclivities. Hence the need for telling "in such a way as to dictate its own reception"; hence Mackey's insistence that N. is neither the reader nor himself, but a figure "we overlap." Reception counts for as much as production in Mackey's world, unleashing the terrifying possibility that, even if we were all to understand the usefulness of the "thousand plateaus" model, we would not see or use the same multiplicity in the same way.

This conclusion finds further support within the context of Djamilaa's dream, appropriately subtitled "Synaesthetic Serenade." The record playing is "Pennies from Heaven," but the dream-character Penny "*could've sworn they were chanting, 'Penny's from heaven'*" (Run 39). Unlike the playful, chordal qualities of homonyms that N. normally employs, the distinction here becomes almost ominous: "*Penny had warned him against confusing the girl with the song he assumed she inspired, against the presumption of any across-the-board equation. She'd said it before and she'd say it again: PENNY'S wasn't the same as PENNIES. PENNY'S meant PENNY IS. PENNIES meant PENNY AIN'T. The difference was one her life depended on*" (40). The consequences of slippage become critical, begetting contradictory interpretations that strike to the heart of Penny's self-perception and Othered-reception. One choice among a sound plane of homonyms requires a move to another plane in a different system and in an opposite direction, and for Penny herself the implications seem far more than merely semantic.

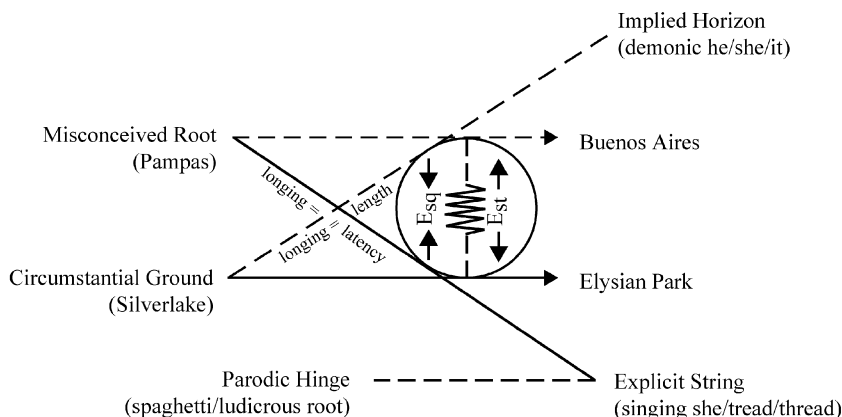
Djamilaa's dream continues to add at least three other planes to the "pennies" homonym. The speaker introduces a chord of temporality: "*Penny's was indeed a dance of near collapse and last-minute recovery, a felt advance beyond impairment and limitation which amounted to a meeting of the here-and-now with the hereafter*" (Run 41–42). She utilizes a second word chord:

Again the door hinges creaked. Penny's dance, the implied wind insisted, rested on a tenuous, tottering "chord" in which like-sounding
 IMPAIRMENT
"notes" were all sounded at once. EMPOWERMENT made for rickety,
 IMPEDIMENT
resilient limbs, each of which appeared stilted, possessed of a studied awkwardness; each of which, while crippled, was itself a crutch.

(42)

Finally, Djamilaa experiences a chord of emotion: "*What I felt was a lulling, alarming blend of complacency and pleasure—comforting and disconcerting at the same time. Never even in a dream had I thought death would be so playful, yet death, I reflected nonchalantly, was obviously what this was*" (42). The full song of her dream, then, is composed of at least four planes of analysis, each its own instrument and related to the others. Movement along and among planes, so widely and wildly demonstrated in the *Hornbook*, becomes in the *Run* only part of what's actually going on in the meaning of meaning, for any single set of plateaus is extended and compressed, dictating and dictated by other sets. Where the *Hornbook* often stretches one layer of meaning into an entire accordion, the *Run* reveals more of the according to.

A possible model of this new paradigm occurs on page 109 of the *Run*, a "Suspect-Symmetrical Structure of Misconceptual Seed's Parallaxic Dispatch" (fig.). At first glance, the diagram may seem to resemble the plateaus model, allowing one to move in a variety of ways from one plane involving "Misconceived Root (Pampas)" and "Buenos Aires" and a second that includes "Circumstantial Ground (Silverlake)" and "Elysian Park." But the diagonal vectors that connect these highly ambiguous plateaus suggest visually that longing not only moves one between planes but establishes its own striation of planes that stretch vertically. This complements the apparently



SUSPECT-SYMMETRICAL STRUCTURE OF
MISCONCEPTUAL SEED'S PARALLACTIC DISPATCH

more “established” horizontal lines and results in the circle of “Esq/Est,” itself characterized by simultaneous movement to and from the center vertically, back and forth horizontally. Even more frustratingly, the outward posts of the diagrams are all their own striated systems, such as the “demonic he/she/it” of “Implied Horizon.” Finally, the inability of any set of parallel lines to be constantly “dotted” or “straight” refuses the observer any chance to establish a hierarchy among systems; one does not know where to begin or how to proceed. Given Mackey’s ongoing textual conversation with contemporary jazz, “Suspect-Symmetrical Structure” might well be a reply to composer Anthony Braxton, whose compositions are “titled” by geometric diagrams. Early in his career, Braxton began assigning visual representations to particular sounds, a synesthetic process he has called “conceptual grafting” (Lock 3). The idea was to consider space and sound together; hence Braxton has described his Composition 96 as “an attempt to integrate horizontal structural formings into the forward space of the music” (Lock 4). By Composition 160, Braxton’s vision had become even more complicated, “Moving out of the science space and more into the poetic space. I’m no longer interested in a definition of music that’s only in one space” (Lock 1). Mackey’s diagram, in

contrast, presents a structure too convoluted to prove effective. Not surprisingly, N. himself asks whether any structure is “anything but an after-the-fact heuristic seed, a misleading, misconceptual sleep inside which to walk is to begin to wake up? Like it or not, we’re marked by whatever window we look thru. The stigmata, luckily, turn out not to be static” (*Run* 108).

One may argue, given the nightmarish quality of the diagram, whether the movement of stigmata is, indeed, lucky. N. seems quite reasonable, however, to point out the impossibility of locking a text into any closed schema. As richly complex as Deleuze and Guattari’s model may be, as much as it illuminates Mackey’s prose, the entirety of the text refuses to support it; too many factors, stemming from too many sources, stretching in too many directions, will not allow one single set of planes to contain the whole. For that matter, any conformity to form strikes N. as a twofold threat. First, there exists the danger of intellectually diminishing returns; “[o]ne way to state it would be to say that I’m troubled by the apparent fatalism intrinsic to form, the threat of a conservatism the centralness of ‘form’ to ‘conformity’ seems to imply” (*Hornbook* 77). All meanings, past and future, tend to collapse into a master-view of text; in this context, N.’s letters and the world in which he lives lose their unpredictability and vitality. The point of textual sacrifice, of course, is to kill the interpretive self of these stifling demands for structural sameness. Second, and perhaps more damaging, the pressure to re-form, but not reform, pushes everything that refuses to fit into the silences of marginalia. This tendency is condemned quite early in the *Hornbook*, as a crowd in a record shop demands that N.’s band recontextualize its aims within “the whole culture,” allowing music listeners to appropriately assign their contributions a rightful place. “All I can say,” Aunt Nancy replies, “is that the culture you’re calling ‘whole’ has yet to assume itself to be so except at the expense of a whole lot of other folks, except by presuming that what they were up to could be ignored at no great loss” (12). Othered expressions become either stifled or silenced entirely. In the case of the thousand plateaus, Aunt Nancy’s argument bears some truth; one must, after all, decide where to begin with the model, what direction the connecting tangents will travel and what single narrative might emerge in the end. “What,” asks N., “could

free the future from every flat, formulaic 'outcome,' from its own investment in the contested shape of an otherness disfigured by its excursion thru the world?" (*Hornbook* 100).

If one is still to use Deleuze and Guattari's model, one might begin with the acknowledgment that any one "flat, formulaic" set of plateaus is merely a single set—that a host of competing factors and complicated agendas, each with its own strata, function at cross-purposes, resulting in a multidimensional arrangement of meanings across time, space, words, and peoples. One example of this modified model can be seen in a dance group's performance:

Aunt Nancy, as we watched the dancers go thru their routine, whispered into my ear that she was struck by the interplay and the counterpoint between the upward thrust of the surrounding buildings and the dancers' answering exploration of horizontality, their insistence, variegated as it was, on "getting down." I in fact had been similarly struck, had taken note of the same thing.

(*Run* 110–11)

The reader immediately notices the performative matrix that brings together the horizontality of the dancers and the verticality of the buildings but somehow refuses to connect them. Instead, the upness and the acrossness of the competing sets of planes seem to suggest, if anything, a texture, a tapestry of threads of individuality and intentionality.

As Mackey asserts in *Discrepant Engagement*, "Creative kinship and the lines of affinity it effects are much more complex, jagged, and indissociable than the totalizing pretensions of canon formation tend to acknowledge" (3). The title of his collection of essays, he explains, comes from Wilson Harris:

It is an expression coined in reference to practices that, in the interest of opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world. Such practices highlight—indeed inhabit—discrepancy, engage rather than seek to ignore it. Recalling the derivation of the word *discrepant* from a root meaning "to rattle, creak," I relate discrepant engagement to the name the Dogon of West Africa give their weaving block, the base on which the loom they weave upon sits. They call it the "creaking of the word." It is the noise upon which the word is based, the discrepant

foundation of all coherence and articulation, of the purchase upon the world fabrication affords. Discrepant engagement, rather than suppressing or seeking to silence that noise, acknowledges it.

(19)

N. spends a fair amount of time in the *Hornbook* trying to come to terms with the creaking of the Word, and even plans a speech on the topic: “The sense I get from this is that a) we can’t help but be involved in fabrication, b) a case can be made for leaving loose ends loose, and c) we find ourselves caught in a rickety confession no matter what” (*Hornbook* 116). Our commitment—however willing or unwilling—to participating in the fabrication, to compulsive confessions and loose ends that refuse to fit, is twofold. First, we are all speakers and spoken to, all bound to a process of communication that seeks enough commonality to keep “Pennies” from “Penny’s.” But regardless of the breadth of our world-view, our struggles for accommodation, our models of complexity, someone or something will slip away, while exceptions will permeate inward. Second, we are all subject to the mythologies and mysteries of loss, rendering our lives not realms of solid experience but webs of connections and fissures; “[w]e not only can but should speak of ‘loss’ or, to avoid, quotation marks notwithstanding, any such inkling of self-pity, speak of *absence* as unavoidably an inherence in the texture of things (dreamseed, habitual cloth)” (*Eroding Witness* 50).

Mark Scroggins remarks in his work on “Septet for the End of Time” that a number of factors threaten to erode the variety of witnesses in Mackey’s work, each potentially seen as pressing down on the warp and the weft that give us identity while locking us within it. The self in Mackey’s projects, Scroggins argues, is “an eroding witness”: “the self can recognize its cultural, spiritual roots only as eroding traces in the works of others, and that recognizing self is in turn eroded, like the figure on the cover of *Bedouin Hornbook*, by the forces of history, change, distance, and time itself” (44). He later elaborates:

The speakers of these poems wake up again and again, not from dreams to waking “reality,” but from dreams to dreams, from one order of language to another—from an order of music to that of its mythic equivalent, and back again, from an order of death to life-in-death and death-in-life

... the orders of reality—orders which are as much spiritual as they are historical—are embodied and embraced in the culturally structured orders of speech. While these speakers may desire to awaken from the “nightmare” of history, their repeated awakenings are a reiteration of the self’s utter entanglement in the network of cultural traces that constitute it.

(45)

By the time the reader meets N., he has already well acknowledged the “network of cultural traces” that compose his own life; further, he is already on his way to recognizing the specific forces—time, space, history, and so forth—that constitute his subject position. Where N. succeeds is his awareness of two concepts: first, that significance is almost defiantly relational, verb-al, stubbornly refusing to hold the same meaning for all people at all times. The trick lies in inhabiting the fissures between planes, in seeing meaning as what happens in the cracks. Somewhere between two similar words—for example, “card” and “cord”—is the precise point of distinction between the two, the electrical charge that gives both their individual potency; somewhere within “cord” is a chord, an entire realm of sound and sense, silence and nonsense. Second, a wide range of elements threatens the stability and the success of our lives, leaving us with a life-cloth that lacks certain fibers, that speaks to its own incompleteness. The key lies in understanding the pressures on warp and weft, the absences that bring us power as well as loss. Gaps become places to invent, to lament, to howl; external pressures beget ex-pressions of grief and belief.

Mackey insists in his essay “Other: From Noun to Verb” that linguistic riffs and shifts merely echo the “grammar” of life that defines and confines our existence:

But a revolution of the word can be only a beginning. It initiates a break while remaining overshadowed by the conditions it seeks to go beyond. The shadow such conditions cast makes for a brooding humor that straddles laughter and lament, allows no easy, unequivocal foothold in either. Oppositional speech is only partly oppositional. Cramp and obstruction have to do with it as well.

(58)

In other words, the pressures of warp and weft are a highly intricate matrix of directional pressures, each with their own agendas but

often working together to make us fixed, static, marginalized “nouns.” Thus the need to “highlight the dynamics of agency and attribution by way of which otherness is brought about and maintained, the fact that *other* is something people do, more importantly a verb than an adjective or a noun” (51). Weaving, on a societal scale, can serve to bind any marginalized person or people within the centralized confines of power, economics, or artistic categorization. On an individual scale, however, the creaking that the word always allows—the interstices and fissures that make any fabric, literal or societal, a breathable, permeable structure—permits the artist the potential of reply, of producing a “difficult” or even “unreadable” work that both cuts against the conventional grain and argues that that grain is, for the marginalized, both “difficult” and “unreadable” itself. Thus the staunch resistance to academic typecasting, therefore the “of course that’s what it’s not.” Mackey and fellow writers may resort to sacrificial limbs to lament sacrificial lambs, to kill the sense of iamb to recover the I Am.

University of Iowa

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Joseph. “Nathaniel Mackey’s Unit Structures.” *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. Ed. Saadi A. Simawe. New York: Garland, 2000. 205–29.
- Chernoff, John Miller. *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- García Lorca, Federico. *Deep Song and Other Prose*. Ed. and trans. Christopher Maurer. 1975. New York: New Directions, 1980.
- Griaule, Marcel. *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*. London: Oxford UP, 1965.
- Kress, David C. “Middle Voice Moves in Nathaniel Mackey’s *Djbot Baghostus’ Run*.” *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 765–83.
- Lock, Graham. Liner Notes. *Anthony Braxton: Willisau (Quartet) 1991*. Hat Hut Records Ltd, 2002.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. *Bedouin Hornbook*. Callaloo Fiction Ser. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1986.
- . “Cante Moro.” *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*. Ed. Adalaide Morris. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997. 194–212.

- . *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- . *Djbot Baghostus's Run*. New American Fiction 29. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1993.
- . *Eroding Witness*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985.
- . "An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey." Conducted by Edward Foster. *Talisman* 9 (1992): 48–61.
- . "An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey." Conducted by Paul Naylor. *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 645–63.
- . "An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey." Conducted by Peter O'Leary. *Chicago Review* 43.1 (1997): 30–46.
- . "Other: From Noun to Verb." *Representations* 39 (1992): 51–70.
- Massumi, Brian. "Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy." Deleuze and Guattari ix–xv.
- Morris, Adalaide. "Angles of Incidence/Angels of Dust: Operatic Tilt in the Poetics of H.D. and Nathaniel Mackey." *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 749–64.
- Mullen, Harryette. "Phantom Pain: Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook*." *Talisman* 9 (1992): 37–43.
- Powell, Barry B. *Classical Myth*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998.
- Quinn, Richard. "The Creak of Categories: Nathaniel Mackey's *Strick: Song of the Andoumboulou* 16–25." *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 608–20.
- Scroggins, Mark. "The Master of Speech and Speech Itself: Nathaniel Mackey's 'Septet for the End of Time.'" *Talisman* 9 (1992): 44–47.