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## Qualified Hope

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## RACE

NATHANIEL MACKEY'S *FROM A BROKEN BOTTLE*  
TRACES OF PERFUME STILL EMANATE

*Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around.*

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

On April 16, 2006, Jamal Woolard, a little-known rapper from Brooklyn, New York, who records under the name “Gravy,” was shot in his left buttock outside a Manhattan radio station. Although the police found eleven shell casings and many bystanders were present, Gravy was the only individual hit by a bullet, an incredible stroke of luck which immediately led commentators to speculate that the entire event was staged to raise Gravy’s street cred, not to mention his record sales. Such rumors were only fueled by the fact that an episode of the *Sopranos* had aired just weeks earlier in which a rising rap star pays one of Tony Soprano’s men to shoot him in the backside for precisely these reasons.<sup>1</sup> Whether real or fictional, the idea that anyone might countenance such self-inflicted pain points to a disturbing relationship between violence and black authenticity, a relation in which victimization functions as the necessary ground for asserting one’s own power and fearsomeness. Of course, from slave songs born of the degradations of field work to rap songs born of police brutality and economic inequality, black music has a long tradition of forging art out of pain, an argument that Simple, the protagonist from Langston Hughes’s “Simple Stories,” makes when discussing the source of Be-Bop: “Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club say, ‘BOP! BOP! . . . BE-

BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP! . . . That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys that plays it" (104).

Of course, such music does much more than commemorate violence and bemoan victimization. Instead, from a slave song like "Wade in the Water" to Gravy's own "FBI Warning," these creations provide instructions for both resisting and escaping violence while also envisioning better futures. Consequently, in describing black music as an oblique politics designed to point the direction forward, toward what he calls the "post-modern yet-to-come," Paul Gilroy contends, "In the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present" (36). As Gilroy's focus on the relationship between present and future here implies, the politics of artistic production are intimately connected to temporal experience, particularly the experience of violence and pain. Gilroy, in fact, makes an explicit connection between "being in pain" and a "personalized enregistration of time," (203) prompting his own work to investigate "the diaspora temporality and historicity, memory and narrativity that are the articulating principles of the black political countercultures" (191). Accordingly, because of violence and trauma, the domain of black politics has historically been and will continue to be marked by its relation to time. From Booker T. Washington's gradualism to W. E. B. Du Bois's demand for immediate equality, and from Martin Luther King's projective dream to Huey Newton's black nationalist call to bear arms against the Oakland police, the temporal horizon of political change has consistently defined the nature of the articulated politics, and vice versa. Writing to and about a postcolonial black diaspora that has retreated into isolated pockets of cultural nationalism at the end of the twentieth century, Gilroy's work articulates a new political vision by "bring[ing] a new historicity into black political culture" (190).

Why exactly might "black political culture" require a "new historicity"? Because, as Gravy's possibly self-inflicted wounds symbolize, black artistic production and its consistently future-oriented politics have collapsed in on themselves, mirroring the contemporary black subject in a temporal paradox that has both artistic and political implications: what is the best way in the post-civil rights era to negotiate between honoring the past's unjust traumas while envisioning a more just future? Should the past's violence ground future artistic production, and if not, then how can art produce a utopian future unmoored from past experience? Such are the conundrums facing the members of an experimental jazz band in Nathaniel Mackey's

*From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*—a series of epistolary novels entitled *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986), *Djbot Baghostus's Run* (1993), and *Atet A.D.* (2001)—in which Mackey suggests that the dialectic between historical suffering and artistic creation is particularly seductive, and suffocating, to African-American artists. These texts are composed of letters that N., the narrator, writes to a mysterious interlocutor named “Angel of Dust” between June 1978 and September 1982, and the letters roughly chronicle the band’s practices and performances, along with its search for a drummer.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly every musical performance described in the three texts evinces this double pull into the past and the future, offering various conclusions about the degree to which each should inform the other. Too much remembering and too much dreaming are equally shortsighted, and predicating a vision of the future on the pains of the past both instrumentalizes historical experience and articulates the future in terms of inevitable disappointment. N. discusses this conflict in a letter that describes the band’s nervousness about an upcoming gig in New York City, their East Coast debut. N. explains that the band members are experiencing “[a] thick itch along the floor of the stomach [that] spreads a sense of expectancy, an issueless urgency with nowhere to turn but on itself, an otherwise blank apprehension. It’s an itch which twitters between two like-sounding limits: futurity at the upper end, futility at the other” (*Djbot Baghostus's Run* 75).<sup>3</sup> Describing the effect this has on their embouchures, he depicts “[a] mix of qualms and hunger. . . . It’s as if, that is, the mouth were hooked in a dithyrambic embrace, one’s embouchure caught by contested claims of a spastic past and a rhythmic future, alternate claims of a spastic future and a rhythmic past. Shakiness reigns” (76). In the previous letter N. interprets this tension as a space where “revelation and recuperation lock horns” (71); and in a letter dated ten months earlier, he describes the beginning of one of his own solos as a “paradoxical plea . . . lecturing all who’d listen on the hopelessness of hope while at the same time indicting the presumptuousness of despair” (*BH* 121). Such paradoxical and apparently mutually exclusive choices inflect the present with a “hard-knocks epistemology”—a condition Lambert describes as “the Afro-anticipatory taste of disappointment, Afro-inevitable slap upside the head”—and strongly indicate the need for Gilroy’s “new historicity” (*DBR* 77 and 30).

On an almost daily basis, then, N. and his fellow band members struggle to produce music that forges an emancipatory relation to the future, but they are also careful not to become too liberated from the past. Just as various cultures of politics—the media, globalization, and 9/11—seek a relationship between time and knowledge that accounts for and makes sense

of the unique truths of temporal experience, so too must those invested in the politics of culture work to incorporate time into their understanding of the world.<sup>4</sup> In Mackey's texts, this task is particularly complicated because the form of time in which his characters are immersed stretches simultaneously in opposite directions. Mackey's texts and my chapter thus ask two complementary questions: what unique difficulties accrue to the black diaspora's attempt to situate itself meaningfully in time, and what unique experiences and resources can the black diaspora use to gain a more timely knowledge of its past, present, and future? I ultimately argue that Mackey does achieve an innovative formal solution to the temporal dilemmas facing post-civil rights era blacks: his texts both describe and produce a rhythmic temporality that negotiates the double pull of past and future on the black subject. More specifically, these three epistolary novels articulate the historical traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery; they explain that these sublime traumas vex the black subject's relation to both past and future; they contend that this double motion into the past and future empties out the black subject's sense of the present; and they fill in that missing presentness with a rhythmic version of time. Most of all, the highly equivocating syntax and self-contradicting puns proliferating throughout the letters incite a quivering reading experience in which this rhythmic temporality produces our own timely knowledge of the texts.

### *Keeping Time*

If there is a single plot extending over all three texts, it concerns the band's quest for its own rhythmic temporality, a quest most forcefully symbolized in their search for a drummer—someone who can, quite literally, keep time. Early in *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, the three male band members have an identical prophetic dream that leaves each believing that their future drummer will be named "Djeannine." Penguin, who evinces the most acute attachment to this prophecy, at one point breaks down in uncontrollable crying and explains, "It's odd to miss someone you've never met, but I do. I miss her" (79). This idea of missing someone you've never met marks the band's original decision to search for a drummer, a decision that stems from an argument between Lambert and Aunt Nancy over the role of drums in the band. In a solo performance for the rest of the group, Lambert lays out his case in favor of adding a drummer. To do so, his playing retells the Prometheus story, ultimately associating the fire stolen from the Greeks with the drums that were outlawed and stolen from slaves. In a reversal of the master-slave dynamic, Lambert claims that Zeus actu-

ally stole fire from Prometheus just as white culture stole black music and then, over the course of the twentieth century, proceeded to appropriate it as its own. In the middle of the piece, as he switches from saxophone to harmonica, he states to the group, “To articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. This danger affects both the content of a tradition and its receivers: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.” N. notes, “It sounded like a quote, but he neglected to name its author” (146).

Knowing this is a quote but not knowing that it comes from Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* mimics Penguin’s sense of missing someone he has never met. Moreover, the statement itself describes a condition in which history deeply affects the present despite the present’s apparent disconnection from that history; the structure defines an unavoidably present absence, just like the absence of drums in their band. Suggesting an ineluctable connection between drumming and the African diaspora, N. thinks that Lambert’s song advocates “a rhythmic umbilicality . . . an implied polity of a mystic-accentual assembly dealing in alchemized, neo-Africanized ‘weight’ (i.e., duration and pulse).” N. concludes, “The conspicuously absent drums . . . had a way of making their ‘presence’ felt” (148–49). While Lambert argues that drums would provide a much-needed return to African roots, Aunt Nancy, believing that the drum has become overdetermined in black music, claims 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 is why she prefers the band’s “come-as-you-are” approach to percussion (153). Lambert, however, is “fed up with scrounging around for roots,” charging that Aunt Nancy’s counterargument “revel[s] in deprivation” (154). Lambert and Aunt Nancy thus represent two strains of contemporary thought about the politics of black culture and its relationship to time: Lambert’s traditionalist approach elides the violent removal of drums from African and African-American culture and uses the drum to connect with a pretraumatic and prediasporic past. For Aunt Nancy, the violence of the Middle Passage and slavery necessarily entails that nothing will ever be the same again. Her “come-as-you-are” approach implies the futility of returning to the past—whether to the moment of trauma or to a pretrauma temporality.

According to Aunt Nancy’s logic, ontological and epistemological continuity between the pre- and posttraumatic subject remains impossible. Instead, the experience of slavery irrevocably changes the black diaspora, adding something to their experience that makes them nonequivalent to the black population living either before or during slavery. Similarly,

Gilroy's discussion of the "slave sublime" focuses on this formal element that is superadded during a sublime experience. In examining the black subject's relationship to modernity, Gilroy identifies the sublimity of slavery as an integral and inescapable event that ruptures the continuity of black subjectivity. Afrocentric reclamation projects like Lambert's, however, attempt to elide this "temporal and ontological rupture." Relying on traditional models of temporal continuity, Afrocentrism denies historical traumas, miring the black subject in bad faith. For Gilroy, all recourse to "tradition" functions as a repressive, compensatory mask that "provides a temporary home in which shelter and consolation from the vicious forces that threaten the racial community (imagined or otherwise) can be found" (189–90). Instead of the illusory African home from which the black subject is irreparably ruptured, Gilroy examines the unhomely home of the black diaspora, a home predicated on uprootedness, hemorrhage, and trauma—in short, an uncanny home.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, much of Gilroy's indictment of the Afrocentric movement takes aim at its reliance "upon a linear idea of time that is enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement" (190). Instead, Gilroy insists that a constitutive temporal uprootedness accompanies the geographical and spatial change that occurs in black subjects from Africa to Reconstruction, from one side of the slave sublime to the other.

But why refer to the traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery as sublime? Surely, aestheticizing trauma mitigates any effort to mend the pains of bondage and runs the risk of treating real-world experiences as abstract phenomena. And this danger would seem to run particularly high with the sublime, which is marked by a radical negativity that both entices and subsumes, offering the masochistic pleasure of surrendering our cognitive capabilities as its intensely present absence sets us epistemologically adrift. And yet, over the past several decades, scholars have been engaging the sublime as a productive interpretive scaffolding precisely because of its insistent negativity. Charles Altieri has argued, for example, that texts highlighting sublimity's traumatic incommensurability can "play significant corrective and projective social roles, even though (or precisely because) they are the kinds of texts now regularly treated as lacking social involvement" (117).<sup>6</sup> Altieri's formulation reminds us that the true stakes of the sublime experience belong to the future, which is why, despite disagreeing about whether slavery can or cannot be ignored, the debate between Lambert and Aunt Nancy reveals their common desire to adopt whatever stance toward time will prove most politically productive in the present and on into the future. In describing sublimity's projective potential, therefore, Altieri does not imagine a content-based projection of a better world but

instead highlights the unique formal properties that characterize the process of change such trauma induces. Accordingly, sublimity and its formal negativity frame any consideration of the present's relationship to the past and, in turn, its relationship to the future.

Thinking about the temporality of sublime violence marks an important turn away from a long history of essentializing claims that anthropology, through its intimate connection with colonialism, has made about the relationship between race and time. Indeed, the racist assumptions inherent in many of anthropology's conclusions about its subjects—what V. Y. Mudimbe calls “epistemological ethnocentrism”—have been as difficult to outrun as colonialism itself. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, an early-twentieth-century anthropologist claimed, for example:

Primitives do not see, extending indefinitely in imagination, something like a straight line, always homogenous by nature, upon which events fall into position, a line on which foresight can arrange them in a unilinear and irreversible series, and on which they must of necessity occur one after the other. To the primitive time is not, as it is to us, a kind of intellectualized intuition, an “order of succession.” (3, quoted in Adjaye)

Although the biological determinism of this position gradually gave way to a more culturally informed approach, the assertion of a foundational difference between African and Western concepts of temporality remained intact. For the cultural relativist, Africans had the capacity to think of time as Westerners did, but other factors such as religion, agriculture, economics, and origin myths led them to conceptualize time cyclically.<sup>7</sup>

This basic distinction between Western, linear time and African, cyclical time has utterly dominated any work on the relation between temporality and race. James Snead, for instance, extends the line-circle distinction to claim that the shape of Western time and history is just as cyclical and repetitive as that of black culture, but Western culture represses this fact. Snead simply reverses the privileged status that the West has historically given to linearity and progress, instituting a classification system of cultural forms predicated on the degree to which cultures “tend to admit or cover up” the repetition that lies at their core (146). Instead of flipping the dichotomy, Bonnie Barthold concludes that blacks are both severed from a point in their past when they had access to cyclical time and precluded from gaining access to the linear time of Western culture. Contemporary black subjects, she suggests, are trapped in an in-between time best characterized by “flux” and chaos (8). And Shelia McKoy agrees with Barthold's structural description of the relation between cyclical and linear time, but

she decides to make the condition of flux and chaos a bit more empowering. Naming it “limbo time,” she argues that its presence across an array of diasporic cultures makes it a powerful tool: “Ultimately, the validity of recognizing a concept such as limbo time enables Diaspora peoples to connect to a past that does not depend upon the Western notion of succession” (220). Each of these arguments, presumably progressive at the time, uses an identical assumption about the difference between African and Western temporal experience to reinforce the author’s political assumptions. Moreover, all of these models ignore the sublimity of slavery, wanting either to return to traditional cycles embedded in a pre-Middle Passage culture or to ignore the rupture of the Middle Passage in favor of progressing into the future.

The temporality of the slave sublime, however, forces us to consider temporal experience as something other than cyclical or linear—specifically, as an irreducible break or rupture. Moreover, the political imperatives of diasporic experience—the constant need to improve conditions on the ground—demand that we see this cut not as an irruption from time but as a unique form of temporality all its own. Unsurprisingly, this is how music in general and jazz in particular treats its own internal ruptures and breaks, or what musicians more commonly refer to as “cuts.”<sup>8</sup> When it comes to actual jazz performance, the cut takes several different forms. Sometimes, a cut will be a cut back to an original melody line or to some other passage already performed; in these cases, the cut obviously has an element of cyclical repetition to it. In more freely improvisational performances, however, the cut also designates a departure from the original melody or time signature, a flight toward something previously unconsidered. In other words, much like the uncanny, the cut can be its own opposite to the extent that it designates both a return to and a departure from a given musical line. Either way, as James Snead has argued, the break always enhances the rhythm and never debilitates it (151). Pursuing a more Freudian angle, Fred Moten highlights the duplicity of the cut, associating the cut of castration with the cut of jazz to make a claim similar to Snead’s. Moten describes “a cut or break that is easily reconfigured as an augmentation—something brought to the language one enters, by way of the language one has lost—that bears the lineaments not only of the most abhorrent and horrific deprivations and violations but also of the most glorious modes of freedom and justice” (178). In much the same way, the temporal rupture that constitutes Gilroy’s notion of the slave sublime cuts both ways: it does not dissolve temporality but instead accentuates and augments it, ultimately serving a projective rather than an ascetic function.

In sum, I am telling a story in which sublime trauma produces a supplement in the black subject, a supplement best figured as a “cut” in time that both pulls the black subject back to the past and propels her forward into the future. This double pull creates a vacuum where the present should be. Consequently, the present must be temporalized so that the paradoxically double move into past and future does not end in paralysis. And this is why the band needs a drummer who does not just keep time, but keeps a particular kind of time—a time that rejects and moves beyond the linear-cyclical duality. All of which suggests that the debate between Lambert and Aunt Nancy is not about content—about the presence or absence of drums in the band—but about identifying a temporality, a specifically rhythmic form, through which such content-based debates can be negotiated and decided. N’s description of an audition by a drummer named Sunstick—whom N. likes because of his ability “to rescind the punctuality of time, exacting a feeling for the tenuous, uninsured continuum the so-called beat thereby allows or is made to admit itself to be”—reveals just such an awareness of this distinction between the content and form of the drum (*DBR* 8). That is, the band actively avoids “traditionalist” drummers who might ignore the slave sublime and pursue the illusion of temporal continuity. Instead, they want a drummer whose time is always provisional—who acknowledges that time is exclusively linear or exclusively cyclical only under duress—because if time can still be rhythmic without having to be subjected to linearity or cyclicity, then it is free to delve into the temporal cuts resulting from the past’s sublime traumas without getting stuck there.

### *Sublimity’s Supplement*

In Mackey’s trilogy the sublime moment of trauma (the broken bottle from which “traces of perfume still emanate”) produces a supplement that serves two functions: first, the supplement always threatens the black subject with an uncanny return to the past moment of trauma; second, the supplement works as a compensatory object of desire (e.g., the search for a drummer) that propels the band and the plot forward into the future. The supplement thus functions like a toggle switch, moving the diasporic subject either forward or back. Both motions, however, are always asymptotic because the supplement can never be erased; neither repeating the past nor projecting the future fully absorbs the “temporal and ontological rupture” of the traumatic cut.

In general, Mackey's texts portray the supplement as a hauntingly present absence. For example, N. cites Victor Zuckerkandl's *Sound and Symbol*—an essay that Mackey also discusses in *Discrepant Engagement*—which asserts that “the dynamic quality of a tone is a statement of its incompleteness, its will to completion” (*BH* 21–22). This relation between notes parallels the relation between music and its listeners, which N. earlier describes as being haunted by a “phantom limb” (*BH* 7). In an interview with Peter O’Leary, Mackey describes this haunting as a process of “finding out what you have but don’t have. You have it in the form of a disposition but that disposition is not the same as the possession of it. So you have it as a reaching-toward-something.”<sup>9</sup> As both an internalized disposition and an externalized phantom, Mackey articulates this pervasive sense of loss as “a spiritual supplement to the world that both invests it with a certain urgency and divests it of any ultimacy” (38). Accordingly, the supplement’s haunting presence both propels and stymies the black diasporic subject.

Throughout the three texts this “spiritual supplement” frequently adopts a material form. For instance, cowrie shells, implanted in N.’s forehead during a particularly powerful musical performance in *Bedouin Hornbook*, buzz and rattle whenever N. treads too close to music or emotion that sublimely defies comprehension. Always susceptible to reactivation, when he advances too far, the shells cause him to pass out and lose his short-term memory. N. describes the attacks “as an inverse gravity in which I’m cut loose from every anchoring assumption, a giddy index if not an indictment of a tipsy world. I feel it as a weightlessness, a radical, uprooting vertigo, a rash, evaporative aspect of myself” (*BH* 125). Explicitly linking the supplement’s temporality to music, N. also associates his dizziness with the spinning albums he listened to as a child. The records leave records (i.e., marks and traces) on the young N., instituting a “repository of imprints which long ago went to work on me, set up shop (tenuous hope, tenuous heaven) in my perhaps too-impressionable heart (foolish heart).” Finally, N. identifies a broader socio-political genealogy to his musical dizziness when he suggests that this tension between hope and foolishness, which he diagnoses as a sense of “possibility parented by prohibition,” is an “old dialectical story” (*DBR* 19).

While discussing the fact that Sufis revere palm trees because they believe they were made from the surplus clay that God originally used to make Adam, Penguin reveals the urgency with which he and the other band members want to transcend this “old dialectical story.” Penguin sees the supplemental clay as evidence for an “aliquant” incongruity between the clay and Adam, an excess that serves as a “[r]emainder and thus reminder of what’s left over, what’s left out,” thereby “bl[o]w[ing] the lid off totalizing

assumptions” (*DBR* 151).<sup>10</sup> Such “lid blowing” might effectively resist an essentialist attitude toward race, but Mackey’s own comments suggest a more vexed relationship to the dicey work of balancing the supplement’s double move into the past and the future. In a 1992 interview, for instance, he resists any overinvestment in history, be it individual or collective: “You don’t want to see your wounds as the sole source of your identity” (60–61). Elsewhere, however, Mackey errs toward predicating advancement on trauma, parenting possibility with prohibition, when he claims that the “phantom limb” of music serves two important functions: it provides “a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality” (*DE* 235), and it serves “to concentrate a memory of injustice and traumatic survival, a remembered wound resorted to as a weapon of self-defense” (*DE* 246).

These complexities also appear in the fiction, as the band members rarely agree on the supplement’s proper function. During one performance, for example, N.’s playing tells of “canefields burning, sudden rousings out of bed, late night harvest, all-night labor. A reminder of past oppression if not a foretaste of burnings to come” (*DBR* 130). Within the performance, N.’s allusion to the historical slave sublime functions as a counterpoint to Djamilaa’s voice which “rode the wind of its ‘new day’ annunciation, annulling the asthmatic equation on which Udhrite aesthetics had up to then been based” (*DBR* 129). As N. explains, the performance is marked by a “contiguous incongruity between X-ray accessibility and semantic x-factor.” Assuming a transparent and easy progress that elides supplemental remainders, Djamilaa’s “‘new day’ annunciation” moves in the direction of “X-ray accessibility” while N. asserts the material remainder of past trauma as an irreducible “x-factor.” Djamilaa’s path wins out among the band members, but so much accessibility causes N. to pass out onstage in the middle of the performance, leaving him unable to remember anything about the show. He quite literally loses all reminders and remainders. The performance thus suggests that any meaningful (i.e., rememberable) motion beyond blockage requires the remainder or the x-factor; the song demonstrates the necessary interdependence of progress and regress.

After reaching an impasse in a libretto he is writing about the power of aliquant remainders, N. hallucinates an “automatic sax” that delivers the same message. Much as Penguin naively sees the supplement blowing the lid off “totalizing assumptions,” N.’s libretto engages aliquant excess as a one-way ticket to forwardness, claiming that “gap, that incongruity, obeyed a principle of non-equivalence, an upfront absence of adequation” (*DBR* 49). N.’s “principle of non-equivalence” seems better thought out than

Djamilaa's "X-ray accessibility," but here N. also looks for an "upfront," fast-track solution, just like Djamilaa. The alto in the hallucination cautions him, implying that what he posits as the upfront aptitude of non-equivalence actually reinscribes a new equivalency between incongruity and progress. Instead, the alto tells him that "aliquant excess provided not a see-thru advance but a before-the-fact Atlantean collapse" (*DBR* 53). That is, whatever advance the aliquant remainder achieves simply reiterates the same "old dialectical story" of presence and absence, identity and difference. We might even say that N. is forgetting Mackey's observation about the nature of the supplement—that it is a "disposition" that "is not the same as possession." In each of the above examples the characters treat the supplement as a thing, as an object that is either present (e.g., Penguin's "aliquant incongruity" and N.'s "semantic x-factor") or absent (e.g., Djamilaa's "X-ray accessibility"). If the supplement is actually a disposition and not a thing one can possess, however, then it becomes a matter of form rather than content. This is why none of the approaches described thus far, all of which treat the supplement as content, successfully resolves the double pull that sublimity's supplement initiates. Treating the supplement as a disposition, however, allows Mackey to think more complicatedly about its temporal form, which is what I investigate in the next two sections of this chapter, first in terms of the uncanny and then in terms of desire. Ultimately, I hope to show that Mackey, rather than seeing the supplement's double pull as mutually exclusive temporal motions, superimposes them, creating a version of time always collapsing in on itself. Like the musical cut, however, this collapse does not excise temporality; rather, it constitutes a new, augmented version of temporality, a temporality that Mackey's texts portray as rhythm.

### *Uncanny Returns*

An early practice session with Drennette, the drummer they find during their trip to New York City, reveals the vital connection between rhythm and the past. Each time the band plays one of N.'s new compositions, "Tosaut L'Ouverture," Drennette drags the tempo until she stops playing, "saying that something about the piece deeply disabled her, that she couldn't say exactly what it was but that her legs and arms had begun to knot up, her body to ache under what felt like added weight" (*AD* 39). A little detective work reveals that Drennette's incapacitation is a response to the composition's allusion to "Cyclic Episode," a song from Sam Rivers's *Fuchsia Swing*

*Song*. Apparently, Drennette has recently suffered her own “cyclic episode” while bicycling with her ex-boyfriend, Rick. After falling off her bike, she woke from a concussion with Rick cradling her head in his hands. Unaware of what had happened or where she was, Drennette hallucinated that they were lovers in bed and that the drops of blood trickling down her face were his kisses. This hallucination awakens her to the hope that their relationship can be rekindled, but it also forces her to admit that Rick does not share her desire to recuperate their past (*DBR* 147–48). In practice, then, Drennette’s “percussive spirit,” her ability to produce and keep the band’s time, is compromised by her “traumatic spill,” a trauma that N. describes as a “phantom cramp” evocative of the knotted limbs of slaves in a slave ship (*AD* 40–41). In the very first letter of *Bedouin Hornbook*, N. indicates that he sees nothing aesthetically or politically productive about such compromising traumas. Having previously pursued a return to the painful past intentionally, N. here forswears the “ontology of loss” and decides to stop working so hard just to “give birth to a lack [he] no longer ‘need[s]’” (9 and 8). Emphasizing his efforts to stop dwelling on the pain of history, N. tells his correspondent not to “expect anything more in the way of words,” no more letters, only taped recordings of the band’s performances. What follows, however, are more than three years’ worth of words, suggesting that one cannot maintain a consciously decisive relation to loss. Just four letters later, for instance, N. recounts a dream in which tears flood from his eyes because his brother Richard has returned from spending twelve years overseas. N. notes, however, that he has these dreams even though in reality his brother returned over a year ago, a paradox that suggests to him “a sorrow free of all cause, a sorrow previous to situation”; ultimately concluding that the “ontology of loss” is not so easily renounced, he admits that he cries for the more abstract and collective notion of “lost kin” (*BH* 21).

In instances such as these, history flares up, unbidden, dragging the subjects back into the past against their will. Knowing that the past has this uncontrollable tendency, one might be tempted to think that a conscious and intentional return to past pain could preempt any unwelcome returns in the future. All too often, however, even a chosen return to past pain—much like Gravy’s apparent self-wounding—only highlights the fact that one can never truly return home; instead, the return must always be asymptotic, approaching but never touching that original event that produced the haunting remainder. Paradoxically, then, choosing to return to the past effectively ensures that the past will continue to return of its own accord. Saidiya Hartman’s return to the West African slave ports taught her this very lesson:

One has come too late to recuperate an authentic identity or to establish one's kinship with a place or people. Ultimately these encounters or journeys occur too late, far too long after the event, to be considered a return. In short, returning home is not possible. Nor is this an encounter with Africa in its contemporaneity, the present is eclipsed by an earlier moment—the event of captivity and the experience of enslavement in the Americas. (762–63)

This state of permanent orphaning in which “the homeland is that which is always already lost” forces Hartman to ask, “[T]o what end is the ghost of slavery conjured up?” (763).

Taken together, Mackey's characters offer conflicting views on just how actively the contemporary black subject should participate in conjuring up that ghost. When they do intentionally seek such a return, they do so by staging uncanny repetitions and doubles. In an early performance, for instance, Djamilaa and Aunt Nancy double themselves visually (they dress identically) and aurally (Djamilaa plays doubly negating instruments, the Kashmiri “not” and the Iranian “nay” to transform herself into “Ain't Nancy,” Aunt Nancy's negated double). N. comments that these doublings, like uncanny puns that reveal what was there all along, make the men do double takes, rub their eyes, and realize that “quandaries [they] only now began to see had always been there” (*DBR* 11). Pursuing a similarly punning revelation of what was there all along, Penguin highlights his always-already fractured subjectivity by playing a recording by the Penguins, a vocal quartet, on his answering machine (*DBR* 153). Finally, Djamilaa demonstrates her own constitutive fracturing during a performance that she gives wearing shoes bolted into a concrete block. This visual pun connects the amputation of being “implanted” in a concrete block with the mental, emotional, and physical amputations suffered during slavery, a time when blacks were literally “im-plantated” (*DBR* 143). In each of these cases the pun's double signification allows the characters to intentionally conjure up the ghosts of the past while keeping one foot firmly planted in the present.

The difficulty involved in negotiating one's present relation to a traumatic past comes to the fore one evening when Penguin invites the band to his house for dinner. While chopping onions for the meal, a “Knife Ex Machina” grips Penguin with a “shamanic seizure” that compels him to chop and cry ceaselessly. This physical repetition turns into oral “repetitions and permutations of certain syllables, words and phrases” until he becomes stuck in a rut, a needle stuck in its groove (*DBR* 89–90).<sup>11</sup> Here the compulsion to repeat the past takes control of Penguin in the same

way that the “automatic alto” that N. hallucinates in an earlier scene comes to life to set him straight about “aliquant incongruity” and “remaindered excess.” In that scene N. air-plays the saxophone, thinking that he controls its message as he attempts to correct the intentional mistakes of the alto’s performance. This backfires, however, and “[i]t was as though automatic alto were playing [him], as if [he] were its axe, its instrument” (*DBR* 53). By refusing to let N. correct its intentional mistakes, the alto “critique[s] its own effortlessness,” contending that its seamless skills have not erased or ignored the historical trauma on which those skills were built. At the end of the performance, however, the alto admits that its self-critique “had simply replaced what it took to be artificial wholeness, artificial health, with artificial breakage, artificial debris” (54). The saxophone ultimately concludes, therefore, that it is just as hard to be genuinely broken as it is to be genuinely whole, a paradox that suggests that there might simply be no good way to deal with history.

In these two scenes of possession and repetition, Mackey argues that treating history as one’s axe—instrumentalizing it or using it to ground any progress in the present—will inevitably backfire, and history will return even stronger, transforming the subject into the axe of history. This occurs whether the past is being pursued or ignored—whether one chooses to be broken or whole—because both approaches imagine history as a radically detemporalized object or space. Indeed, as the characters in these scenes either possess or are possessed by history, they ignore Mackey’s distinction between a “disposition toward” and the “possession of” loss. N. shows an awareness of this difference between hypostatized and temporalized stances toward the past when he speaks of the need to “personify loss,” “to personify but not identify the resident hollow one’s apparent solidity concealed” (*BH* 195). To “identify” is to hypostatize, but to “personify” is to temporalize. Personifying loss makes it a dynamic force, not a thing to return to and recuperate, but a process intimately tied to the vicissitudes of time. Conversely, whenever the characters possess or are possessed by history, their movement through time becomes fixed and repetitive; they are instrumentalized automatons, removed from time and thus not fully human.

N. further highlights the temporal stakes of this problem when he interprets Penguin’s “shamanic seizure” as an “oblique discourse on rhythm,” an indictment of the group’s collective failure to “keep loss alive.” N. concludes that their inability to personify loss has prevented them from accessing what he describes as “rhythmic displacement,” an “echo of deferred fulfillment” that might allow them to “haunt and inhabit time” (*DBR* 93). “Rhythmic displacement” and “deferred fulfillment” speak to a quivering, rhythmic temporality distinct from the linear forward-

ness of Djamilla's "x-ray accessibility" and from the cyclical return of N's "semantic x-factor." Absent this more nuanced approach to time, the past seizes the characters in manic repetitions that ultimately detemporalize lived experience. But once they begin to personify rather than merely identify past loss, time begins to move in fits and starts. During a performance of "China," for instance, Djamilaa and Aunt Nancy literally personify loss by dressing the part, and their personification directly affects the band members' temporal experience. They arrive at Penguin's house "dressed identically, each of them wearing sandals, a white cotton skirt, a white cotton blouse and a white cotton headrag." Just seconds after their entrance, however, N. and the other men look up and see them dressed in a "black hat, black shirt, black pants, black boots, an empty black holster hanging below the right hip"; but after rubbing their eyes, they see them "dressed, as before, in white cotton." (*DBR* 9–10). N. describes the experience temporally: "What one saw took one back a moment in time." In this case they are able to "inhabit time," to be taken back in it, because the women, monochromatically costumed and playing an Iranian drum called a "not," have personified loss in both their dress and their drumming, which N. describes as an "insistent rush of binary negation" (10). The same temporal cut is activated during Penguin's "shamanic seizure," which "keeps loss alive" rather than treating it as a historical object. Just before Djamilaa calls him "Penny," N. tells us that "Penguin reached into his right pants pocket for his handkerchief and, pulling out the handkerchief, caused a penny to fall from his pocket to the floor." Again, the other observers see the same thing, although they also see the event transpire the other way, without the penny falling out of Penguin's pocket. N.'s interpretation of the event echoes his ideas about "rhythmic displacement": "Time, it seemed, had fallen behind by trying to get ahead of itself and now sought to correct or catch up with itself by including what in its haste it'd left out before" (*DBR* 96). In these slips or cuts in time the cyclical repetition of Penguin's "shamanic seizure" is transformed into a more temporalized version of history—an uncanny temporality, predicated on the cut, which constitutes one half of an overall rhythmic temporality that augments and strengthens one's ability to be in time.

### *Desirable Futures*

The other half of that rhythmic temporality emerges from the relationship between the present and the future. In an interview with Paul Naylor, Mackey characterizes the past as an insufficient grounding for an aesthetic

project and suggests that the future must also play a crucial role. When asked about the seriality of both his novels and poetry, Mackey states:

As for theorizing serial form, lately I've been more attentive to a dark accent or inflection running through its recourse to repetition, the sense of limits one again and again bumps up against, limits one would get beyond if one could. This qualifies if not brings to a crisis the form's promise of openness, possibility, advance. The form lends itself to a feeling for search but to one of insufficiency as well, to prospects of advance as well as to the not always happy fact of déjà vu. (653)

In addition to reiterating the idea that history must be personified rather than merely repeated (because such repetitions lead to “the not always happy fact of déjà vu”), here Mackey implies that the desire for advancement is just as important as responding to the call of the past. And as Djamila's drive toward “x-ray accessibility” has already demonstrated, the characters in *From a Broken Bottle* just as frequently pursue the future without paying any heed to the past's repetitive haunting. N. names the future toward which music's desire strains “heaven,” and as a qualification of Djamila's x-ray vision, he associates this desire with the conditional “would.” Not only does “would-be” proliferate as an adjective throughout the texts (as in “would-be heaven,” “would-be hub,” and “would-be high”), but N. also treats the word itself as a state or condition (“wouldness”) at which desire generally aims. During their performance in New York, for instance, Penguin's playing on the oboe, a high woodwind instrument, suggests a “wishful insistence” that N. describes as a “high would” (*DBR* 24). The pun becomes portable when, in *Atet A.D.*, Penguin describes his prolonged absence from the band as a retreat into his “wouldshed.” The private space where musicians have historically retreated to hone their skills here becomes the location for conceiving a more collective vision of future advance (6).

In general, however, and as the tentative provisionality of “would” suggests, this straightforward desire for possibility is too good (and too easy) to be true. During a presentation at a symposium on “Locus and Locomotivity in Postcontemporary Music,” for instance, N. interprets a song as a “marriage made in heaven’ between aim and object,” but the audience arraigns his interpretation for being “opiate” and “opportunistic.” Similarly, while Penguin's meditations on “high would” offer hope and possibility, the band also realizes that “would” “cuts both ways,” its hope and desire quickly bottoming out into a complaisant “would it were so” (*DBR* 124 and *AD* 25–26). In short, hope and desire advance only so far, as they too run

up against an asymptotic limit similar to the one that prevents the characters from seamlessly returning to the past. If, when one thinks about the past, the asymptotic limit is a function of the failure of return, here it is caused by the absence of a stable object of desire to direct any movement into the future.

In *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, N., Lambert, and Penguin's common dream about a sublimely beautiful woman named Djeannine illustrates desire's asymptotic nature. All three use exactly the same words to articulate their dream: "Beneath her white cotton dress she wore nothing. No slip, no bra, no panties. The sun's light, having stripped her of the dress, was a further nothing, so unseizably there as to make sight a fleet, far-reaching rendezvous. . . . I lay possessed and penetrated by shadows, drunk with a glimpse of silhouetted legs and the X-ray wafting of an imaginary musk" (*DBR* 20). The dream concludes with a kiss in which Djeannine fills each mouth with a "mint-flavored liquid" that quickly devolves into "nothing more than X-ray spit, spit-flavored spit," making each nauseated until "[m]y stomach began to convulse[;] . . . [a] gush of emptiness and air spewed out of my mouth and bent me over. I looked at my legs and saw through the flesh to the bones underneath" (*DBR* 23).<sup>12</sup> Although the peppermint spit sabotages the romantic encounter with Djeannine, the three men become obsessed with this dream, and "Djeannine" in all her emptiness and absence stands in for desire in general throughout *Djbot*.

As Freud, Lacan, and Žižek have all explained, dreams do not fulfill desire but create it; the dream is where desire receives its object.<sup>13</sup> In this case Djeannine and her "contraband heaven" clearly stand in for the men's object of desire, but to the extent that she merely reveals emptiness, absence, and nothingness, she does not give desire its object but instead exposes desire's object to be desire itself. Lambert's interpretation of the dream further emphasizes this conundrum. Maintaining that this dream only lays the foundation for the "Afro-inevitable slap upside the head," he sees Djeannine as "a set-up, the dream we tie to the sky, the match made in heaven" (*DBR* 30). In his critical work Mackey names this desire of desire *duende*: "*Duende* often has to do with a kind of longing that has no remedy, not simply loss, unrequited and so forth, but what [Federico García] Lorca calls 'a longing without object'" ("Cante Moro" 75). Periodically, the characters do reconcile themselves to the fact that their desire will never find its object. For example, Penguin wonders of Djeannine, "Who'd be foolish enough to think we could ever capture that walk of hers . . . the subtle, suggestive sway of her hips, a certain pelvic savvy? The pelvic perfume, the erotic musk it seems to toss into the air, is accessible, everyone knows, if it can be said to be so at all, only to thought" (*DBR* 89). Because never

truly accessible, this iterative rope of desire, this fantasy which “is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void,” is structured asymptotically (Žižek, *Sublime* 126).

Nevertheless, when not functioning as a “slap upside the head,” the asymptotic gap of desire also provides a second layer of temporalized “rhythmic displacement,” this time moving forward into the future. After all, even though N. passes out, the band’s collective pursuit of Djamilla’s “X-ray accessibility” proves to be one of the most successful performances included in the text, and during another particularly “moving” performance, the temporal displacement actually effects material change in the world as the band realizes after leaving the club that the entire building has been displaced an entire city block during the show. In her analysis of this transformative power of asymptotic desire, Adalaide Morris captures the specifically temporal form of Mackey’s engagement with incommensurability by referring to a line from Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Morris writes that Mackey’s “lack of adequation is not a failure but a release: a ‘difference [that] is spreading,’ the generative ongoingness and dispersal of punceptual thinking” (757). Although Morris’s description of the emancipatory potential of asymptotic form does not tell the entire story—we should not forget about N.’s hospitalization—it does provide the other half of the equation for Mackey’s rhythmic temporality. Crucially, when combined with the displacement of uncanny time, the resulting rhythmic time is effectively defended against the pitfalls about which “automatic alto” warned N.: the danger of reinscribing breakage and difference as a new form of identity. If Mackey only offered a “difference that is spreading,” then he would not be heeding the saxophone’s cautionary tune. But Mackey never allows difference-based identity to establish itself because the retrograde temporality of the uncanny is always present as well. Mackey knows that difference, like Penguin’s “would,” always cuts both ways.

Armed with this complicated understanding of the relationship between identity and difference, Mackey presents a doubly asymptotic motion that propels the diasporic subject forward into the future and pulls her backward into the past, as illustrated in figure 1. The point where the two asymptotes intersect—the temporal cut—is a present emptied of all meaningful temporality. But as we will see in the next section, this is also the time in which Mackey produces rhythm’s quivering temporality, effectively transforming the cut into its own version of temporality. In fact, we can see the beginnings of this transformation here, as the graph demonstrates that each asymptotic motion is actually predicated on the other because the same supplement, created through the slave sublime, fuels them both. In other words, past losses create the desire for a better future, and the drive

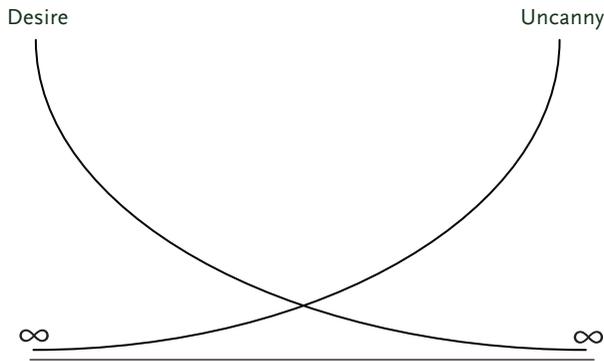


FIGURE 1

*Temporal Limits of Desire and Uncanniness*

to recuperate the past stems from the future's contingent uncertainty. If the horizontal line represents a time continuum, then the fact that the desire asymptote originates in the past while the uncanny asymptote originates in the future represents this mutual predication. In effect, the desire for a better future is never so strong as when one is confronted with the asymptotic gap of return, and the drive to recuperate the past is never so strong as when the asymptotic gap of advancement makes the desired progress impossible.

### *Filling in the Cuts*

Figure 1 represents the complicated situation confronting Mackey's attempt to retemporalize black subjectivity, to augment the temporal cut with a temporality all its own. His task is made even harder by the specific historical conjuncture in which he intervenes: a moment when the goals of the civil rights era collide with postmodernism's changing notions of representation, power, and truth. Madhu Dubey's groundbreaking work illuminates this collision, arguing that "problems of racial representation are taking exacerbated forms in the postmodern era" because developments such as "the end of legal segregation, expansion of the black middle class, and ascension of black elites to administrative and political power . . . have strained the idea of a cohesive and singular black community" (5). For Dubey, the civil rights era both solidified the need for and undermined

the possibility of a “cohesive community of racial interests” (30). Mackey makes a similar insight in “Destination Out,” where he describes a version of black aesthetics which, “[i]n the face of a widespread fetishization of collectivity,” “dislocates collectivity, flies from collectivity, wants to make flight a condition of collectivity. It says that ‘we’ was never a swifter fiction. . . . It says that only such admitted fugitivity stands a ghost of a chance of apporioning prodigal truth” (814). This impasse between identity politics and postmodernism even vexes the automatic alto when it asks, “[I]n a period haunted by (hemmed in by) artifice . . . [is] there no way to be genuinely broken?” (*DBR* 54).

The short answer is no. As long as the break opened up at the intersection of desire and the uncanny remains detemporalized, the characters only spin their wheels in N’s “old dialectical story.” For instance, whenever they find “every attempt to make a virtue of sorrow” arraigned and every utopic future “absconded with by this or that preemptive intervention” (*BH* 117 and 200), they unconsciously tend to enter into what N. describes as a “self-sentencing conviction and self-commuting sentence [that are] symbiotic halves of a self-cycling ordeal” (*DBR* 18). In short, the band frequently knocks itself down only to be picked back up, repeating the traumas of the past without moving beyond them and ensuring that there is, in fact, no way to be “genuinely broken,” much less “genuinely whole.” Despite their gnawing desire to “awaken or unlock the roar so apparently sedated by a shepherded ennui,” to “harvest (i.e., mobilize) the lion,” this “self-cycling ordeal” prevents the characters from filling in the temporal cut of their present and traps them in a stagnant, circular discourse of dialectical opposition (*BH* 133 and 80). Having learned the poststructural lesson that “inversion finds itself invested in the very assumptions it sets out to subvert,” N. insistently wants to avoid any “romance of resistance”: “I find myself . . . increasingly unable (albeit not totally unable) to invest in notions of dialectical inevitability, to read the absence of what’s manifestly not there as the sign of its eventual presence” (*BH* 28 and *AD* 120). Because such tactics of inversion ossify their terms of engagement, Mackey’s texts explicitly caution us against predicating any form of political advancement of them.<sup>14</sup>

Instead, Mackey contends that finding a unique temporality to fill in the aporetic present might be the only way to move past the wheel-spinning politics of dialectical opposition. He moves in this direction when, rather than seeing the double pull of past and future as a permanent state of self-contradiction, he associates it with a mobile logic of qualification. Whereas contradiction empties the present, qualification gives it temporal contours; qualifying instead of contradicting allows the temporal cut to

ment through breaking. Moreover, qualification provides a unique model of temporality that is neither cyclical nor linear. Rather than instituting an Edelman-like “self-cycling ordeal” or stretching forward into infinite Groszian possibility, qualification lends rhythm to being. Mackey makes this point politically relevant when he claims, “Our interest in cultural diversity . . . should lead us to be wary of hypostasis, the risk we take with nouns, a dead end that will impede changes unless ‘other,’ ‘self,’ and such are given the possibility of ‘infinite qualification’” (*DE* 276). Here, by describing qualification as an antidote to the hypostasis of nouns, Mackey grants it the temporality that inheres in verbs. In these newly temporal terms, the cut ceases to function as a mere mark of difference and instead becomes an opportunity for a highly qualified transcendence.<sup>15</sup>

For Mackey, the dominant culture’s appropriation of black music best represents the widespread absence of temporality in the articulation of black culture. Riffing on Amiri Baraka’s claim that white culture turned “swing” from a verb (something one does) to a noun (something one listens to), Mackey argues that black artistic culture should be moving in the other direction, from noun to verb, for explicitly political reasons.<sup>16</sup> He contends, for example, that the shift from noun to verb “linguistically accentuates action among a people whose ability to act is curtailed by racist constraints” (*DE* 268). This can occur because highlighting the verbal quality of living does not simply oppose spatialized demarcations of power but actually shifts the mode of political discourse altogether. This artistic “verbing”—in effect, a retemporalization of lived experience—suggests that overcoming oppression entails more than identifying a position of articulation. Instead, it requires adopting an active mode of being in the world. Music, particularly the Mystic Horn Society’s improvisational free jazz, would thus seem to be the logical place to turn for just such a fully temporalized form of black cultural politics.

But having no formal musical training, Mackey’s literary forms of expression cannot directly tap into the rhythmic dynamics of musical performance. As a writer, the need to personify rather than identify presents him with different constraints from those of a jazz band; after all, he cannot write only in verbs. Nevertheless, Mackey makes the most of his tools, using syntactical qualification to produce vibrations and rhythm in his writing which effectively temporalize his articulation of black culture. Experientially and thematically, this quivering derives from the traumatic rupture whose supplement simultaneously incites an internal tendency toward action and lingers as an incessantly haunting event, thereby producing a temporal model that is adamantly non-aleatory. Instead, much as I described reading in chapter 2, such rhythmic time manages to be simul-

taneously bounded and unbounded: rhythm obeys a forward-moving substrate of successive beats, but it also marks out time's internal relation to itself, the cadence or mode derived from the nature of the space between the beats of that persistent succession. As such, rhythm is both an unbounded forwarding and a bounded grouping of different tones of varying length—it “moves” precisely because of its constant quivering, forward and back, between its unbounded and bounded form—a feature N. describes as the simultaneity of “straightahead lope” and “fugitive tread” (AD 95). In effect, when transformed into rhythm, the doubly asymptotic pull into the past and the future that previously evacuated the present of any productive temporality comes to look more like a series of simultaneously forward-moving and recursively spiraling loops.

Although the texts' characters tend to get caught up in various forward and backward movements that are rarely synthesized into a productively rhythmic temporality, many of the descriptions of drumming throughout the novels do convey this rhythmic time. First, nearly every description of drumming in *From a Broken Bottle* is marked by rhythmic qualification. For example, Penguin shares a recording with the band in which the drums have “a way of stalking rather than stating the beat,” a style that yields a “rich polypercussive carpet into which collapse and eleventh-hour rescue were woven, stubbornly rolled into one” (DBR 87). Here the mutually antagonistic temporalities of uncanniness and desire that so plague the band are rhythmically synthesized (“woven”) through the temporality of drumming. Just as the band was taken with Sunstick's ability to “rescind the punctuality of time,” Drennette wins the band over with skills that elicit yet another weaving metaphor from N.: “Punch and propulsion complicated by slippage—well placed hints of erosive wear, erosive retreat—were the dominant threads in the rhythm-melodic carpet she wove and rode, the pushy-supportive rug which, even as she threatened to pull it out from under us, carried us along” (DBR 133). Again, rhythmic time simultaneously advances on the current of successive beats and accrues through slippages and erosions that highlight the constitutive role of the space between those beats. The advance provides the “pushy,” the accrual provides the “supportive,” and they combine to make music and its meaning “vibrational rather than corpuscular” (DE 20). Finally, N. describes bossa nova rhythms in which “longing, heavily tinged with regret, became complicit with a no-regret furtherance of itself or beyond itself, a self-possessed rhythmic advance which, when it was on, ran the line between ‘of’ and ‘beyond’” (AD 4). Here the rhythmic line between “of” and “beyond” represents rhythm's capacity to simultaneously signify forwardness and grouping, propulsion and erosion, push and support.

Not only does Mackey's work describe this rhythmic temporality, but its unique formal innovations also transcribe rhythm's simultaneously bounded and unbounded temporality onto that of the reading experience itself. In fact, in "Palimpsestic Stagger," Mackey describes a similarly temporalized dynamic in his own writing. Referencing Kamau Braithwaite's description of a "coastal poetics" that gives poems a sense of "to-and-fro," Mackey characterizes his writing style as a "conflation of coastal sand with desert sand, undulatory premises with ambulatory premises" (228–30). While the tide undulates, the Bedouin, wandering in the desert, ambulates. Significantly, undulation and ambulation are not precisely equivalent to circularity and linearity: the coast always changes, and the Bedouin has no fixed direction. Only a rhythmic version of time in which erosion qualifies forward progress aptly captures the combination of these two temporal motions.

While I hesitate to claim that Mackey writes jazz, he does go far beyond simply writing about jazz. Take, for instance, the sentence describing Drennette's drumming: "Punch and propulsion complicated by slippage—well placed hints of erosive wear, erosive retreat—were the dominant threads in the rhythmelodic carpet she wove and rode, the pushy-supportive rug which, even as she threatened to pull it out from under us, carried us along." As an example of the rhythmic qualification inherent in Mackey's syntax, this sentence is particularly exemplary because its own form mirrors the percussive mode it describes. The two qualifying clauses—"well placed hints of erosive wear, erosive retreat" and "even as she threatened to pull it out from under us"—not only describe the qualifications in Drennette's playing, taking a step or two back from its propulsive forwardness, but also manifest the same temporal experience for readers, acting as bounding qualifications to the unbounded advance that the sentence would otherwise achieve.

Something even more complex happens in a description of a performance by one of his favorite bands, the Boneyard Brass Octet. N. tells the Angel of Dust that the band manages to find its "voice in the most out-of-the-way places": "Their approach seems to be one of confronting themselves with an array of constraints which, by way of a finicky, almost fanatical syntax, they retroactively convert to the 'higher ground' of an at once belated but anticipatory access to the most radical imaginable future. Always on the verge of disintegration, each 'advance' turns out to have gone according to plan" (*BH* 98). In these two sentences Mackey performs the same tricks with his prose. The constraints he faces are representational—how can he adequately portray music and its different elements in words? Given these constraints, Mackey's prose perpetually hedges its

bets while nevertheless moving forward to make its point. In their continual qualification and syntactic detour (“appears to be,” “an array of,” “by way of,” “almost,” “at once . . . but,” and “the most”), the sentences are truly “finicky” and “belated”—one wonders if there will be a point and, if so, when it might arrive. At the same time, however, they move forward to the fanatical: even the list of qualifiers becomes increasingly assertive and stable until he can describe the imaginable future as “the most radical.”

In his interpretation of Wilson Harris’s *Palace of the Peacock*, Mackey notes that the crisis of representation—whether it be manifest as music’s attempt to represent heaven or prose’s attempt to represent music—requires that all assertion immediately qualify itself: “This is the ongoingness of an attempt that fails but is repeatedly undertaken to insist that what it fails to capture nonetheless exists” (*DE* 255). Here, the “ongoingness of the attempt” distinguishes this process from the asymptotically limited trajectories of uncanny return and future-directed desire. Whereas asymptotes emerge whenever time is treated as an object or space that cannot be reached, these “repeated undertakings” suggest a temporalized process that successfully personifies its goals. In his letters N. frequently describes such ongoing attempts to achieve wholeness and completion as “curves of articulation” (*BH* 30). As I have already discussed, the curve manages to move forward precisely to the extent that the cut makes wholeness unachievable *and* produces a temporalized qualification that resists the logic of contradiction, opposition, or negation. Mackey achieves the same effect in his prose, as the necessarily syntagmatic trajectory of each sentence ensures that no amount of qualification will keep the sentences from reaching their goal, while the qualifications ensure that the arrow never reaches its target perfectly intact. Instead, Mackey’s sentences curve, loop, and swerve into the meaning they convey.

We see an example of this in N.’s description of Djamilaa’s singing: Djamilaa’s voice “took on a quality of naïve but omniscient, blocked but open access to truth. . . . The cramped insistence of a nasality which bordered on regret slowly elicited a sort of rain—a rain, however, which was more like a desiccated spray or a suspended rush of infinitesimal powder” (*BH* 59). In the first half of this passage, instead of signaling a reversal or negation, “but” means something more like “also.” Djamilaa is no less omniscient or open for being naïve and blocked; what she “fails to capture nonetheless exists.” Similarly, one senses that the rain is no less wet for being desiccated, no less dynamic for being suspended. A cut or break intrudes as N. stretches to articulate voice and rain, but the qualifications that fill in the vacancy of that cut give it an additive rather than a negative quality.

While this accretive qualification rhythmically vibrates Mackey's prose on the level of syntax, he also pursues a similar vibration of the signifier through punning. The process by which one comes to understand a pun's meaning, much like the proliferation of syntactical qualification discussed above, requires a rhythmic temporality in which meaning grows out of a vacillation between two different yet related concepts. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Mackey views this as another way that language functions like music:

This engagement with music has partly to do with trying to free the sense of what language does and what writing does by invoking the example of music, where, especially in instrumental music, what we're listening to are by no means denotative sounds yet we have the sense that something very meaningful is being conveyed nonetheless. That fact serves as a provocation for language uses that cultivate apprehensions of meaning which are not carried at the denotative level, uses of language which get into areas of resonance and gesture that can be as meaningful and as expressive as the denotative functions of language. We hear a word and it denotes something, but in addition to that there are communicative and expressive properties that have to do with the tone of voice with which the word is uttered, the connection of that word to other words, rhythmically, phonologically and syntactically, and so forth. (714)

Drennette's aforementioned "cyclic episode" is just one example of such non-denotative associations that do not obey any consistent logic. Believing that "the roots of coincidence" lie in "etymology," the aural vibration between two words provides N. with more than enough grounding to build a meaningful argument about the connection between the music's allusion to Sam Rivers's "Cyclic Episode" and Drennette's bike accident (*BH* 89). Most mysteriously, the actual words required for the punning connection to make sense—the phrase "cyclic episode"—do not appear in either N.'s musical composition or in Drennette's lived experience. Although N.'s interpretation makes the pun clear to his readers, the effects of the resonance are achieved without the pun even being present; the rhythmic vibration is there prior to any attempt to stabilize its meaning by attaching two different meanings to the single phrase "cyclic episode." Like a phantom limb, therefore, the non-denotative resonance links music and experience without language mediating or pointing out the connection. A second manifestation of this vibrational logic occurs through what we might think of as a reversed pun; rather than bifurcating the meaning of a word or phrase, N. frequently takes multiple words and conflates

their meaning into a single logic. For example, the fact that “impairment,” “empowerment,” and “impediment” all sound the same leads him to argue that all acts of crippling also contain an element of support (*DBR* 42). A third punning logic can be seen in one of N.’s interpretations of Lambert’s playing during a show. He hears Lambert posing the following choices: “Eventual or eventful? Basis or bias? Composite or compost? Concept or conceit?” Instead of the connotative pun of “cyclic episode” and the aural pun of “impairment,” “empowerment,” and “impediment,” here the objects of choice obtain their logic from the simple fact that the words look alike, from metathesis (*BH* 48).

Much like the Boneyard Brass Octet’s performances, Mackey’s puns, deployed with the qualified hope that some tenuous yet meaningful connection will be made, tend to go according to plan. Moreover, they usually advance a political argument on which the band then elaborates. For example, one of Lambert’s performances uses a pun to argue that a hierarchically “tiered” society inevitably produces a “teared” and sorrowful one as well (*BH* 45); N.’s notion of both political and spiritual “ascent” contains an essential element of “assent,” which he later associates with funk and its music born of a certain “scent” (*BH* 66); “Fort Knocks” allows N. to make a claim about the inextricability of economics, the military, and racism (*DBR* 31); N. considers the etymology of “to sing,” “cant,” to argue for a connection between music and debility (“can’t”) (*DBR* 145); the band puns on “Nazi” (“not see”) to indict the blindness of tyranny (*DBR* 173); and Lambert likes to think of himself as a “lamb,” but he also wants us to hear an aspect of fugitivity, of being “on the lam,” in his nickname (*AD* 95).

Because Mackey assumes the inescapability of the slave sublime, his literary performance of temporality satisfies itself with such highly qualified, rhythmic quiverings operating on the level of both syntax and the signifier. He does not seek to know time in the same way as *Ada*’s Van, because he already knows that a certain gap or break inheres in any attempt to gain knowledge, be it temporal or otherwise. At the same time, however, Mackey’s texts make the critical claim that this gap, created by the double pull of history and the future, must not remain empty and detemporalized. For Mackey, although we cannot know the true nature of time’s aporia, we need not deny temporality altogether. Rather than knowing time, his texts perform the process of temporally knowing, a process that ebbs, flows, and wanders about, creating epistemological challenges but not representational impossibilities.

In terms of a more concrete political agenda, adopting Mackey’s qualified rhythmic temporality injects a new argumentative logic into some stale political debates. For example, we might use it to reconceive repara-

tion payments as an acknowledgment of the asymptotic distance between the present and the past rather than as an attempt to compensate for past wrongs. As such, reparation would not be an act of equalization—a recalibrating of the scales—but would instead function as a springboard for future change because those past traumas would no longer function as the historical limit that marks one end of the present’s rhythmic quivering. Similarly, rhythmic time would force the affirmative action debate out of the rigid divide between those who categorically support it and those who categorically object to it. Currently, those who support it refuse to acknowledge that it might someday be unnecessary for fear that it will be immediately ended, and those who object to it refuse to admit that racial inequality remains a problem for fear that affirmative action will never end. A logic of infinite qualification, however, allows us to imagine a model of affirmative action that could stop, but then start again if necessary, after which point it might once again be stopped, and so on. Crucially, such a scenario would not be just another “cyclic episode” or an “old dialectical story” because changing facts on the ground—that is, the fact of time’s passing—would both qualify and propel each decision to either start or stop the program. In general, therefore, this “new historicity” that Mackey’s qualified rhythmic temporality brings to black political culture challenges the black diaspora to animate rather than relive the past, to personify rather than identify its political positions in the present, and to reconceive the oppositional logic of “but” as a simultaneous logic of “also.” Only then, Mackey suggests, will its movement into the future be meaningful and productive.

By the conclusion of *Atet A.D.* (“A.D.” stands for “adaptive dance”), the band members have fully embraced this temporal mode, translating the rhythm of their music to the rhythm of their lives. Refusing to be paralyzed by contradictory options of “selling out” and “keeping it real,” the band makes the qualified decision to record and release an album, confident that their choice personifies the difference between the extremes rather than identifying rigidly with one side or the other. While N’s great trepidation about the record release constantly qualifies the decision they have reached, the fact that they do ultimately produce an album represents their own “rhythmic advance,” their own “adaptive dance” in which temporality itself constitutes the meaning of their message.