

by MARIA DAMON

*Most of my work aims to inhabit a "writerly" universe, whether I'm working in a critical or creative idiom. Sometimes I find that the more "poetry" I write, the more prosaic my "scholarly writing" becomes, but maybe there is no causality here, and it may not even be true. It is always relationship that inspires, whether it be the language of the writer I'm analyzing that infects inspirationally my own prose, or the relationship between myself and a poetic collaborator.*

*"A Vocation for Longing": Kinship, History and Absence chez Nathaniel Mackey*

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
a long way from home.

--Traditional blues

Art's Utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black. It goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real; it is a kind of imaginary restitution of the catastrophe which is world history; it is a freedom which did not pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all.

--Theodor Adorno

At a mid-1990s conference on cross-cultural poetics, there were four papers, all on different panels, treating the work of Nathaniel Mackey-the greatest number of papers on any single author on the entire program of 90 or so speakers (there were to be five, but the writer decided he'd rather read from his own work.) I attended two-on panels on contemporary African American poetry and "music/ethnography" respectively-noting that both papers dealt with the fiction-an ongoing epistolary series that treats the adventures of an experimental jazz band based in California as narrated by the band's composer, N., in a series of letters to an unseen interlocutor named "Angel of Dust"-and both focused on the same paragraph as a starting point for their elaborations on the importance of music

in Mackey's work. This must be a uniquely resonant passage, I thought; it addressed the gutterality of a bass clarinet (doubly guttural: initially disassembled, it looks like plumbing fixtures; also, of course, in its sound). When I later read *Bedouin Hornbook*, I realized that it was the first paragraph of the book, in fact the first paragraph of the entire still-in-process ongoing compositional series (called, for convenience's sake, "fiction") which now comprises four books. What's going on here, I thought: are these critics performing in-class close readings of first paragraphs of books they hadn't had time to properly reread in their entirety? As I read on through the two extant volumes, their choice became clear to me, not because it was a particularly exemplary passage, but because *any* paragraph might have done. In Mackey's fiction, the work is so fully realized in every sentence that each unit is a microcosmic holograph of the whole—so why not beginning at the beginning, as one would enter a cathedral through the front door (and indeed, the most recent installment of the series is titled *Bass Cathedral*). One is, when approaching Mackey's fiction, immediately divested of expert status, and must be initiated as any reader would, not through grand deconstructive insights that cause the work to implode, but through simply working one's way through its dense texture. The work is so ornately and fully realized that any section opens out onto the whole. I understood the challenge that faced the two paper-givers in finding, not an entry, but anything to say that the novels don't already make explicit. It is difficult to write about Mackey's fiction other than descriptively, because it performs its own analysis so well that the analytic mode seems redundant; the critic can't have self-serving moments of exegetic triumph in which s/he shows up the author as doing something unanticipated by him or opaque to other readers; the work is so discursively self-problematizing that it is hard to know how to enter its already undone hermeneutic circle beyond simply saying what one sees. So that is what I will do, focusing my efforts on the first two novels.

Although in *Bedouin Hornbook* and *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, the first two volumes of the series (entitled *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*), it turns out that the signal absence is not only that of the mother but also of the father (and in fact, of mother/father "rolled into one," to use one of Mackey's favorite colloquialisms), the sense of desolation as ground-of-being in Mackey's fiction and poetry is well, if starkly, articulated in the blues epigraph above. If the blues lyrics are minimalist, however,

Mackey's oeuvre is not; it elaborates (elaborately) a theory and practice of surviving abandonment as metaphysical reality, as ontology. Etymologically, the word Bedouin means simply, in Arabic, "desert dwellers;" in other words, those who live in a perpetual state of having-been-abandoned, deserted, desolated, disconsolated. A hornbook is, aside from the first syllable's obvious puns on the musical instrument, on gendered sexuality and on its abjection through cuckolding, a primer. So the first novel, at least, is a survival manual. At the same time, the work calls into question the ethics of that survival itself, and the appropriateness of having utopian aesthetic aspirations founded and/or foundered on the historical wreckage that manifests as absence and haunts the present with its irresolvable loss. The work explores, in other words, the ethics of aesthetic practice as response to trauma.

While I would love to claim kinship with Mackey, my aim is not to simply Hebraize his sensibility by observing its resonance with that of, say, Edmond Jabès, Paul Celan, Jacques Derrida; but rather to articulate that exilic sensibility as one of endless vanishing (what some have called "abstraction"), of Zeno's paradox, of asymptotic reality in which the ever-receding horizon is, simultaneously, increasingly (but illusorily) within reach but without point of arrival; traces of sound (guttural unutterable, "vatic" or "anagrammic scat"), of graph or glyph (book as portable homeland, garbled and marvelous graffiti, advertising slogans that turn out to be declarations of state oppression and racism), of fragmentary dreamwork are the shards of reality that emanate from a broken, jarred bottle that is the known universe. It's the hauntedness, the sense of being visited, and of those visitations' leaving only traces (in sound, sight, intuitive fleeting half-thought), but our nonetheless being convinced that we have been visited by an OtherWorldly presence, messenger, angel, a stranger/familiar, a "gnostic invader..." invading and messing with our gnostic apparatus (our means of knowing) itself. Abstraction-the ability and necessity to theorize-is the not inconsiderable gift of such a sensibility.

The sentences themselves, in Mackey's entire oeuvre, enact diasporic movement by endlessly deferring gratification, resolution, certainty; circuitry is both thematized and enacted. In the poem "Amma Seru's Hammer's Heated Fall":

...

A sideways look,  
word  
let out edgewise.

...

No  
life but what looking askance  
lets in , eyes momentarily exed,  
corrected, atavistic two-headed  
beast,  
one head we call Stride, the  
other Obstruct...

...

Turned  
head, inadvertent angle. Something  
said to have been said, lips  
welded, sparks flew...

There,  
though if other than for reflection  
none would say, wondering,  
coming forth, where they'd come  
from, edgewise informant, small  
axe,  
tall tree...

This sideways approach (the vernacular modality of which has been suggested by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his study of "signifying" as a foundation for African American literary theory and praxis) characterizes the fiction as much as it does the poetry, in which often the subject has been lopped off the beginning of the sentence and must be inferred; it can be done, but never with unerring certainty. And erring-wandering, divagating-is what the poetry as well as the prose is about-verbal circumnavigations in the direction of some flickering, undeniably present Absence that would burn too unbearably

if touched directly. Complex subjunctive constructions make everything conditional, hypothetical, unrealized and possibly unrealizable, but nonetheless present in its own hypothetical reality, establishing an "oblique rapport" with the reader (DBR, 34), and existing as a real dream can be said to exist, just as (as Jack Spicer said) the finger in a poem is a real finger pointing at the moon, or a lemon in a poem is a real lemon, like the newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. What is real in Mackey's writing is the writing. Jean Genet discovered he was a writer when, in 1939,

I was alone in the clink, in the cell. First I should say I'd written nothing except letters to men and women friends, and I think these letters were very conventional, that is sentences already fabricated, understood, read somewhere else. Never really felt. And then I sent a Christmas card to a German woman friend who was in Czechoslovakia. I'd bought it in prison and the back of the card, the part meant for the message, was grainy. And this grain had really touched me. And instead of speaking about Christmas, I spoke about the grain of this postcard, and of the snow it evoked. I started to write from that moment on. I believe that was the trigger. That was the trigger that can be documented. This doesn't explain my motive, but it did give me my first taste of freedom. I don't know what the deeper reasons were. ... (That) gave me my first taste of freedom. (White, 159-60)

The notion that freedom lies in not knowing how the sentence will end is crucial to a revolutionary and/or aesthetic agenda. This is the sensation of reading Mackey; each sentence is non-stop transformative, a rainbow (a real optical illusion) the reader/detective follows to some non-palpable but nonetheless "real" telos that is, however, not really reachable or even fully understood except through a feat of imagination, an inner achievement of feeling and apprehension. An etheric alchemy, a Hart Cranian metaphysics of metaphor. Token closure-provided syntactically by a period, or a linebreak-is not a relief, but an occasion for further engaged puzzlement. No terminus, just poesis. And this is the way his fictional band, the Mystic Horn Society, which changes its name at least once in each installment of the series, thrives artistically: through improvisation, through describing and theorizing, in sound, every concept, sensation, idea and emotion worthy of human attention. Each band member-N.,

Djamilaa, Aunt Nancy/Heidi, Penguin, Lambert and later Drenette the drummer-is a semiotician, analyzing and creating textures and texts in community with the others, nurtured by discontinuities and leaps of faith, the rough, dirtied buzz-the dissonance-of the Real in sound. Especially provocative is a scene in which they publicly and extemporaneously debate a brilliantly disturbing bit of graffiti: "Mr. Slick and Mister Brother are one of the two most baddest dude in town, and Sutter Street (BH, 33)."

Even the conclusion of *Bedouin Hornbook*, the section entitled "The Creaking of the Word," which attempts a soap-opera-standard narrative, dissolves into hauntedness, irony, the impossibility either of taking itself entirely seriously and of being lost wholly to unkind satire. A bone thrown to the conventional reader who requires a "plot" that contains sentences like "unbeknown to her, Flaunted Fifth lingered on the outskirts of town... (BH, 219)," the passage, an embedded narrative that has the flavor of fantasy, adopts an intentionally operatic, stylized "meanwhile, back at the ranch" type of movement between two "characters" who communicate telepathically but are tragicomically unable to actually establish contact: as Djamilaa dreams of him to a song by South Indian singer Kamila Kailasanathan, her phone is ringing unheard off the hook as Flaunted Fifth attempts to call her, his one permitted phone call after being arrested for indecent exposure, having been picked up by the cops for peeing in a vacant lot as he dreams of her (239). Even in this conclusion, N./Mackey can't descend into cliché, and ends up replicating the iterative journey that comprises the "outsiderness" of the books as a whole-a transformative mantra of loss and missed connections asymptotically (never quite) healed through the writing/playing-a romance manqué of wholism that can never satisfy quotidian tastes and aspirations because it so exceeds them.

In this ongoing epistolary composition the Black Atlantic goes West to the golden state. Mackey's invocation of the simultaneity of all African-diaspora cultures, whether bygone (as in the medieval "school of Udhra," a Bedouin poetic tradition associated with the seventh century poet Djamil) or contemporary (the experimental jazz scene of 1980s USA) resonates with Paul Gilroy's premise that New World African cultures have based their adaptive survival on a "politics of fulfillment" most urgently and eloquently bodied forth in their musical endeavors and achievements (Gilroy 38). "...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 (Gilroy, 36)." The map of this distance between the actually existing and the utopian dream, its representation and enactment in art, is Mackey's "asymptote," reaching into a past in need of healing and a future in need of being imagined; that reaching can only be achieved through embodying the present in all its fraught, wounded and thwarted beauty, its stunted but dynamic potential. In the poetry, this charged and aspiring thwartedness is anthropomorphized as the Andoumboulou, mythic people in Dogon tradition, rough drafts of human beings whose inability to be fully embodied attests to their progenitors' failure and "lost twinness" (SU, 1), frail Calibans who look like (and are) the product of incest and loss.

If the poetry explores the world of those whose humanity is in rough draft form, the novels revisit those who must keep living after humanism is no longer possible; they are distorted by virtue of their utopian transcendence, their survival of the shambles of humanism, rather than prefatory to it. The thwarted aspiration becomes alchemized, and roughness becomes the aesthetic ideal rather than a rude anticipation of classical beauty. In the novels the value of distortion and roughness is realized in the searing group and solo work of the community of musicians in the experimental jazz world. The practitioners of this music, and, I'd suggest, writers like Mackey who embody the music in another medium, are thus surfing the crest of that asymptote that brings them the farthest out, toward the so-obviously-there-but-ever-receding horizon of fulfillment. Gilroy continues, "Though by no means literal, [the content of this musical mode of communication] can be grasped through what is said, shouted, screamed or sung (Gilroy, 37)." Gilroy's emphasis on the non-literal is important for grasping the subtlety and difficulty of Mackey's work and the music that comprises so much of its narrative content. The insistence on dissonance and community in the rehearsal and performance episodes underscore this sense of the beauty of incompleteness, the false seduction of an easy "harmony" that must be resisted in favor of a rougher, more difficult sound and texture. "Transfiguration" (another term metaphysical term foregrounded and politicized by Gilroy), names an emergence of "new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial

community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors (37)."

Because of the unresolved and unresolvable nature of diasporic dispersion, the tragic breaking that has given rise to the "vocation for longing" which must perforce take a utopian turn (since healing can only be realized in moments of performance that transcend discursivity), the novels take place in a mode of "subjunctive abeyance." By holding any kind of solution at arm's length, Mackey utterly rejects the kind of "end-of-history" Hegelianism of, say, a Francis Fukuyama, a Christian-derived comforting parable of millennial salvation, a comforting aesthetic of harmony, consonance and tidy closure-while at the same time holding open the rapturous vision of grace (not necessarily Christian, but certainly spiritual) as a process one can enter into. Mackey's commitment is to an "exegetic refusal to be done with desire (BH, 52)," an affirmation of keeping longing (rather than hope) alive.

Instead of a straight path from here to there, movement (not "progress") and survival itself occur in the apprehension of minutiae-thus it is that all the band-members must be expert exegetes. Healing lies in tuning in to some utterance, an evanescent small truth/being/"the real" crept up on but always askance, aslant; not pretentious authoritative Truth, but some intuited, ungraspable (i.e., uncommodifiable) core (heart) essence (motile *being*), word (or as Hart Crane said, the "single, new word, never before spoken and impossible actually to enunciate" that his words were always fluttering on the brink of [Crane, 221]), or idea/feeling, mystically transformative and self-transforming (like the desert-home of the Bedouins, a vast changing same, as Jabès has so metaphysically documented; like the ocean, site of Middle Passage-a vast changing same)-that is simultaneously elusive, illusive, allusive and undeniably present. "It's as though the sound-not unlike a soul resisting incarnation -refused to be contained by any locatable, unequivocal point on the notational grid" (BH, 97). Wraithlike, spiritlike, unempirical, this "real" is manifested in the tastes, sounds, tactile sensations, odors, visions of everyday life and heightened through the multiform medium of imaginative musical performance.

*Mother Lover Brother Other*

...a myth is not merely a word spoken; it is a re-utterance or pre-utterance, it is a focus of emotion ... Possibly the first *muthos* was simply the interjectional utterance *mu...*

(Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis*, quoted in Mackey 1993, 21)

muh

muh

me muddah ...

(Brathwaite, "Nametracks," *Mother Poem*, 56)

Bottom lip against my teeth

like a rock but unsteady,

stutters

"Fa..."

as in fox, as in Fon, as in fate.

(SU, 11)

Similar to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, another great text of personal/historical loss and cultural trauma, which is interspersed with letters to her mother, Chinese characters for father and mother, man and woman, and dedicated "TO MY MOTHER TO MY FATHER," Mackey's novels search for a "usable," unwounded past mediated through the search for a father/mother. And while unwoundedness is probably too much to ask of any past, the search yields texture and meaning of its own. Much of this is subtle, as the novels are anything but plot-driven. *Bedouin Hornbook* concludes with a reverie on Djamilaa's part about her elusive Cuban or Brazilian (New World) father, whose role in her life was limited to the moment of conception in a one-night stand with her (Old World)

Mauritanian mother, and whom Djamilaa has never actually met; while Penny, Drenette, Djeannine are all names for the female drummer the search for whom fuels the "plot" of *Djbot Baghostus's Run*: mother as originator and holder of the heartbeat that supplies the structure around which music is built, that generates the pulse that gives birth to the music.

And the names themselves (here follows an intensely kabbalistic focus on letters and their affects, which some readers might find both undertheorized and overly speculative) contain each other anagrammatically, certain letters coded male or female, father *and* mother: Djamilaa, Djeannine, Penny, Drenette are women but their names contain skeleton keys for Father: Da, Jah, Papa, the DJ (disk jockey) who mediates and disseminates music publically; Djarred (or Jarred) Bottle, Flaunted Fifth, and Djbot Baghostus, fictive ghost presences in N's lectures, fantasies and compositions are male with male key-letters (Dja, Jah, Baba, Bo, Djbo, Father); Lambert, Penguin, N. (as well as *Nathaniel Mackey* and *Bob Marley*, the latter of whose death is featured as a signal episode in *Bedouin Hornbook*) are male but have coded-female letters in their names (Ma, Nana, Ama); Aunt Nancy has female letters but is so clearly intended to evoke Anansi the spider-trickster of West African and New World fame (who is usually cast as male) that her gender is, likewise, not so much ambiguous as doubled and all-encompassing (her "real name," we are told in passing, is Heidi, a male-ish [h, d] reference to the hidden or esoteric, but also a reference to HD, Hilda Doolittle, the modernist poet whose influence Mackey acknowledges); some of the bandmembers' names, like Lambert, Djamilaa, Drenette/ Penny/ Djeannine, and Penguin, have elements of both mother and father sounds -just as the names for the primary genders themselves foreground the other gender: the male-coded "f" in female, the female-coded "ma" in male. Thus the utopian vision is multiply gendered, androgynous, generative by way of male mothers and female fathers, internally cooperative and complementary; as the band strives to balance itself in terms of gender (the two-woman, three-man band must find another woman to be whole), it also strives to right/write history. And the band-members are psychically connected, as parents and lovers are: they have the same dreams, the same waking visions, and anticipate each other's musical moves in improvised performances. "Rolled into one" becomes the repeated colloquialism by which Mackey describes these multiple moments

of double movement, doubled sensibility, doppelganger experiences (one is, naturally, tempted to invoke Du Bois's "double consciousness," his term for the signal psychic condition of African Americans)-bifurcated and melded, seemingly contradictory sensations experienced in the same moment by seemingly discrete individuals. One can't help but think of the round, rolled-up yin-yang emblem, in which "opposites" or contradictory states (most conventionally figured as male and female, visually rendered as black and white) wrap around each other in a cozy and comforting double-paisley embrace (twin teardrop tadpoles), each containing a dot of the other in its widest area.

One could say that in European Enlightenment thought, the two most over-determined indices of identity are number/individuation and gender. Mackey, while offering what is in some ways a clearly gendered text, also muddies that distinction. Likewise, the assumption of individuality and individuation that undergirds all Western discourse (from medicine to law, to literature etc) is sorely tested within the covers of Mackey's books. When band-members have synchronous or telepathic experiences, when substitutability works so smoothly in the band's performances, one (so to speak) has to wonder what epistemologically organizing categories will fall next. The semantically and syntactically mischievous bit of graffiti mentioned above, "Mr. Slick and Mister Brother are one of the two most baddest dude in town, and Sutter Street (BH, 33)," is perhaps the most brilliantly pithy challenge to the A is not Not-A type of logic that rules the waves. Apparently over-determined by gender, this doubled person is not at all pin-down-able, nor is the site of his/their alleged turf.

If the search for a usable past is allegorized (however lightly) by an orphan's search for authentic parentage, the search for the future is mediated through the search for a lover, mate, or complement. N. and Djamilaa are lovers; Flaunted Fifth and Djamilaa communicate telepathically and romantically in the first novel's final sequence; N's compositions and improvisations often reach their turning point or moment of realization through some memory of a past relationship or fantasy of a future one; Penguin, as his mystical powers increase, falls in love with the band's new drummer Drennette in the later sections of *Djbot Baghostus's Run*. This is not to say that the search for a female drummer *merely* turns in to a search for love in the conventional sense, or that a band-

member's falling in love with her becomes the most important aspect of the narrative (although, as stated above, this does happen). In fact we are told of N.'s and Djamilaa's relationship in one throw-away clause ("Anyway, one thing, as they say, led to another, so we've been getting pretty cozy of late (Mackey, 1997, 24);" and Penguin's desire for Drennette takes the form of an ethereal and otherworldly as well as a corporeal, heterosexual yearning. Eroticism and romance are diffused throughout the music-making, prose-making process, occasionally expressed in heteronormative terms but not reified as such -it is not denied or downplayed, but is simply one aspect of the utopian hankering that besets and blesses the artist-protagonists; erotic love is a poesis, an evolutionary path, not a destination, though union with a beloved deity (as in Islamic mysticism) is a utopian state to be cultivated and, perhaps, even sustained for a few moments here and there, though those moments too are subsumed into a larger poesis of historical and metaphysical healing.

Also important here is the aforementioned kabbalistic (in the sense of letters having their own personalities, values and essences) sense that "namesakes" double for, spell, and emerge from each other in mystico-erotic interplay, as if the characters (not only the characters in the novel -the fictitious personalities, but the characters-the letters of which the novel's words are built) were connected not only with each other, but with past and future beings whom they mediate through their music, their words and their conscientious cultivation of the otherworldly, indeed their sense of indebtedness to it. The debt is considerable: What are you willing to give up to commune with the spirits? seems to be an ongoing challenge the work poses and rises to again and again.

### *Letters Made of Letters*

At the level of the letter, therefore, the series unfolds as a search for origins and futures in community, connectedness, continuity. This is why the novels have to be constructed as an *epistolary* series: a voice (N.'s) is "cast out to reel us in" (in poet Ed Roberson's words)-and to reel in some hypothetical, ardently-wished-for interlocutor who is real to N. but is never seen by the readership. The gender, occupation, relationship to

N., voice, appearance, etc.-all of the attributes we associate with standard "characters" in fiction-of the "Angel of Dust," N.'s correspondent whose side of the correspondence is hidden from us, remains unknown, a mystery. (For that matter, we learn very little along these lines about the band-members, though we see them interacting and are assured of their corporeal existence within the narrative.) Angel of Dust is colleague, contrapuntal foil, critic, ghostly guide, concerned friend: Death (as in "ashes to ashes, dust...")? Drug reference ("angel-dust" is street terminology for PCP, a street drug that makes its adepts violent, and the way violence is coded in the novels, a possible incitement to armed revolution as the foil for the aesthetic revolution foregrounded by N. and his fellow-musicians)? or "Angel" as in its etymological origins, "messenger," "dust" as in "sand," the Bedouin element? Or is it Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History," who enters the future backwards, gazing horrified at the pile-up of wreckage that is the past?

As N.'s letters become more and more frequent, less casual and tentative, longer and more urgent, we can believe that the asymptote is nearing the limit it will never reach-that the musical adventures of the Mystic Horn Society are bringing them within spitting/speaking distance of realizing the unrealizable (building a Heaven in Hell's despite, as per the politics of fulfillment and the politics of transfiguration)-and simultaneously we know that, since epistles bespeak distance, N. and Angel of Dust, immanence and ideal, may never be joined-but that the resonance set in play by their Zeno's-paradoxical rapprochement generates its own charged Heaven-in-Hell, dissonant buzz of incommensurability.

The epistolary and gender-ambiguous nature of N.'s relationship with Angel of Dust, the eroticism that colors some of the community's interplay, and the strong bond of camaraderie among the band-members all help point beyond conventional and institutionalized notions of human relations in order to suggest that it is possible to attain a higher ground, one based on spiritual principles, even in the troubled world of interpersonal projections and affinities. Giorgio Agamben's meditation on "substitutability" and individuation offers a perspective on the extraordinary sense of interchangeability, and simultaneous uniqueness, of the band members and their interactions, whether playing, arguing, theorizing, composing or enjoying each others'

company socially. While each contribution of each band member-N., Heidi aka Aunt Nancy, Lambert, Penguin, Djamilaa and Drennette -is creative and original, and each has his or her musical specialty-horns, violin, percussion, composition-there is no sense of mere "personality" difference or competitive tension among them; the usual scaffolding contrivances of "character development" and "plot" are dispensed with in order to stress-not some corny stereotypical "harmony" of togetherness, but-the mutuality, the collectivity of the project of cultural reconstruction/ deconstruction that is the *raison d'être* for the writing. In "Ease," Agamben offers this amazing model for spiritual friendship:

... the great Arabist Louis Massignon ... founded a community called Badaliya, a name deriving from the Arabic term for "substitution." The members took vows to live *substituting themselves* for someone else, that is, to be Christians *in the place of others*.

... According to Massignon, ..., substituting oneself for another does not mean compensation from what the other lacks, nor correcting his or her errors, but *exiling oneself to the other as he or she is* in order to offer Christ hospitality in the other's own soul, in the other's own taking-place. This substitution no longer knows a place of its own, but the taking-place of every single being is always already common-an empty space offered to the one, irrevocable hospitality.

The destruction of the wall dividing Eden from Gehenna [Heaven from Hell] is thus the secret intention that animates Badaliya.

(Agamben, 22-23; italics in the text)

Specifics of Christianity aside, this feat of being willing to exile oneself to another in order to create a space into which grace can come is, it seems, the essence of what the Mystic Horn Society's members do for each other-primarily through their music (trading solos, improvising their way collectively into altered states, debating during rehearsals, etc.), but also through their commitment to each other's beings-in-poesis, that is, their soul, or taking-place. In being so committed, the band-members are also committed to making space for all human beings past, present and future, to come into a state of transfiguration, to receive some holy host (a band of angels) into a life of suffering. That

"place," (the spatialized soul), and the host that will inhabit it, can only come together in fleeting instances of process, in improvisation. The point is to make that state of exilic, substitutional inhabitedness (to make oneself an empty space in someone else's soul) a way of life, and that can only be a community enterprise, one that vitiates the distinctions between Heaven and Hell as goals "somewhere else." (The process, for example, whereby school children or college students all claimed to be Fred Hampton, or Nelson Mandela, as they were asked to identify themselves during the arraignments that followed their arrests at political demonstrations-that process, that act of offering oneself as hostage for another's salvation, *is* heaven and hell, not simply a way to get there.) This is what letters of the alphabet perform by showing up in multiple places in contiguous or oppositionally placed words; they create ropes of interdependent, interlaced words that pull us to Heaven or hang us.

*"...Love Succeeds in Alchemizing a Legacy of Lynchings"* (BH, 62)

It is important in engaging these micro-readings at the level of letters not to lose sight of the macro-narrative that is history. This is literary writing of great rhythmic complexity, and, as "poly-rhythmicity accents absence" (BH 166), it points continually toward absence and specifically absence through historical catastrophe (like polyrhythmic music, and like the poetry of his friend Robert Duncan, Mackey's prose is at once dense and aerated, whole and holey). Violence and oppression subtend utopian flights of dissonant fancy, and the band-members are fully aware of the fragility of their vatic stance, just as Mackey is aware of the "outsideness" and unrecognized power of experimental literature in a world that thrives on a reductive materialism. Nonetheless, material conditions are the charnel ground of creation, and the moments in which this truth is acknowledged provide powerful contrapuntal effects in the texture of the prose. The challenge to and affirmation of art as legitimate labor is sounded throughout. Paradoxically, the disembodied Angel of Dust is given the first materialist word: s/he analyzes an early composition, "Opposable Thumb at Water's Edge," as a "projection of proletarian unrest" (BH, 66); and later, the Upper Room referred to in gospel is figured as "a surprisingly elastic, ever-expanding auditorium (like a longshoremen's hall, but infinitely more inclusive)" (BH, 79) (the mystico-phallic implications of "playing one's ever-

expanding instrument" here should also not be overlooked) –as if to say that solidarity around proletarian and class struggle in the classical Marxist sense is necessary but insufficient to include all forms of labor whose pain and exploitation needs redressing through the politics of "fulfillment" and "transfiguration" indicated by the Gospel reference—a spatialization of paradisaical aspirations.

But the novels' invocation of violence and oppression in the history of Black labor in the US (and "infinitely more inclusive" histories as well) goes well beyond invoking the unrecognized nobility of labor, and beyond advocacy of artistic production as legitimate work. The job of contemporary Black artists—those who have survived history's ravages—is to "alchemize a legacy of lynchings"—without disguising the provenance of the post-alchemized matter. The clause is used in connection with N's "marveling" at Al Green's vocal contortions that aspire to do just that; he sings about love as if he were being strangled, and makes you believe it's about love, even though you can hear the constriction of his falsetto. N's dubious terms—"I've long marveled at his goings on" indicate both a skepticism ("goings on" implies either fatuousness or disingenuousness; "going on" means surviving)—indicate that this is not a straightforward process and should not be read at face value. One can even wonder about the possibility of achieving such an alchemical transfiguration, even as one is doing it oneself. (There is not a moment, even in the most transported passages describing the band's improvisations, that cannot be verbally rendered; at the same time, it seems obvious that these moments cannot be discursively contained. In this, they seem to perfectly demonstrate Julia Kristeva's theory of the "chora" of staggering, stuttering rhythm as the precondition for poetic language and for thought itself.)

Though the books take place in the rarified world of N.'s cerebral musings and the band's exquisitely high level of evolved interaction, there is an underlying and at times overt appeal to the troubled relationship between aesthetics and suffering: "The flutist, egged on by the audience's response, for one extended instant fulfilled the most radical, far-reaching dreams of the otherwise oppressed (BH, 116)." "To what extent does circumambulation [a characteristic valued in the kind of music and prose the work exemplifies and thematizes] tend to co-opt rather than cultivate a collective 'roar' whose

weariness borders on revolution (BH, 133)?" At one point the band plays at a club named Little Big Horn, referring not only to the "small axes fell large oaks" potential of music to bring the walls of oppressive structures tumbling down, but of course to the site of Custer's last fall (BH, 141). An extended musical meditation on Lambert's part retells the Prometheus myth, in which version, "he contended, ... fire came into existence only after Zeus had Prometheus bound, [...] the inner combustion bred of bondage brought it into the world (BH, 145)." And in *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, a long passage occasioned by Betty Carter's remarkable facial distortions in concert explore the semiotics of the mask, in terms that echo Houston Baker's twin tropes of the "mastery of distortion" and the "distortion of mastery," the violence of cultural borrowings that take place in the "historical debris" (DBR, 156) of asymmetrical power relations, epitomized here by the phenomenon of minstrel-show blackface: "'To steal someone's face as if it were a matter of saving face sets the stage for an aesthetic lynching' (DBR, 156)." (One could read this adage as Mackey's terse comment on the branch, so to speak, of "whiteness studies" that attempts to recuperate minstrel shows as legitimate white working-class art. One could likewise read his brief gloss on Ernst Krenek's opera *Johnny Spielt Auf* as an equally pithy comment on the relationship of Jews and Blacks in the Euro-American twentieth century.)

While the argument in favor of a utopian, committed aesthetic practice as redemptive wins the day, there is also constant challenge to any glib assumptions about the ease by which such a position can be arrived at. The texts acknowledge the haunting, ambiguous responsibility of creating aesthetic pleasure/enlightenment at the cost of someone's (your own, your ancestors', your kins', or your enemies') trauma. Those who dwell in a perpetual state of having-been-abandoned are at least survivors, and suffer the guilt and obligations thereof. Perhaps the sharpest and most straightforward articulation of this paradox occurs in *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, when the band finally finds the drummer, the search for whom has been the plot's engine. In New York City (a movement east, toward an Afric-ambiguously mythic source) for a gig they're all excited about (New York, after all, being what it is to art, jazz, African American history, and so forth), they are emerging from a restaurant when a fight breaks out at the end of the block, and when they hear gunshots they run like crazy, only realizing when they are safely and sufficiently far away enough to catch their breaths and take stock that a woman has been running

with them. A conversation ensues in which it becomes probable (and then actual) that they have found their woman. N. muses on the irony that:

Here a man had been shot and lay dying if not dead and the best we could do was hope that the shooting had brought us together with the drummer we'd been searching for. (DBR, 115)

What are the ethics of creating song out of violence? This question leads to tropes also dominant in the work of Bob Kaufman, another West Coast jazz poet, whose fragments and aphorisms rise out of the detritus of street life and physical decay to sing anthems of wounded beauty -anthems whose beauty depends on their wounded quality, their reaching for a higher ground, their witty acceptance of the tragic Is and their yearning for the ecstatic Could Be. The Romantic figure of the Aeolian harp, the European balladic tradition in which the body parts of a dead woman (drowned or shot by her lover) are discovered on the beach, made into musical instruments and when played, tell the story of the murder; in some West African traditions, the talking drum made out of the body parts of the goat (Kamau Brathwaite details this process in poetry that Mackey cites in the novels); for Bob Kaufman, his head is his "cranial guitar, strung with tongues" inside which his mind rattles as if it didn't really belong there; his body parts are disassemblable as he is a "disposable" social element. The characters of Nathaniel Mackey's fiction, on the other hand, experience their instruments as bodily extensions (in this context, the "longing" for which one has a vocation is also an onanistic intransitive: an instrument "longs"-lengthens-as it is played) and metonymic left-over body part (the "phantom limb" amputees speak of feeling). Music restores the dismembered body, but precisely by telling the tale of the dismemberment and invoking the presence of lost parts; not by covering over the story or the chopped-off limb with facile, harmonious, palliative flourishes. And also, not by positing any certainty of a fixed point of holistic origin; there's no comfort in nostalgia here, as Susan Stewart also makes clear in *On Longing*, her poetic analysis of the gigantesque and the miniature (the characters in Mackey's fiction, for example, sometimes dream that they are of gigantic stature, and it becomes immediately unclear whether they are tall trees, or hanging from tall trees; the distinction is both crucial and indeterminable). Music-in-process evokes the half-formed

(the Andoumboulou); it also anticipates human forms as yet only imagined, and barely so at that. The dissociative legacy of those driven mad by oppression (Kaufman among them) is half-healed here. The energy, the movement, the drive for regeneration, lies in the "half-" of "half-healed."

*"Was there no way to be genuinely broken[?]. . .genuinely whole[?]"* (DBR, 54-5)

An extended passage describing such an interactive moment in Mackey's work might best illustrate many of the foregoing themes: the artist's task of paying homage to the dead, to resurrect them, channel them and perhaps heal their wounds retroactively, take their place so that they can join in the community of salvation; the virtuosity of psychic interpenetration that music is; the political unconscious that African diasporic culture is to European culture; the utopian possibilities of creative transfiguration of suffering, and the elusiveness of that insight (it is impossible to say that either suffering or redemption get the "last word" because it's a poetic relationship, not a dialectical one), the power of anonymity's voice, and the power of the subjunctive mode, conditional, potential, the mode of yearning. It must be noted that this, though it reads as a "climactic" scene, is one of many such throughout the fiction. No special structural status is granted these intense musical episodes; hence the novels cannot fall into the trap of conventional narrative, in which all the elements point toward one outcome arrived at through an authoritarian, never-deviating "build-up" that robs the reader, and the prose itself, of freedom:

Something about what Aunt Nancy was playing, even though I'd already recognized it as [Paganini's] Caprice No. 9, continued to cry out for identification. There continued to be something familiar about it, though what it was wasn't entirely that it was the Paganini piece. What it was was more obliquely familiar. There was some other piece of music, one whose name was on the tip of my tongue, the Caprice tangentially resembled and brought to mind. Aunt Nancy bowed as if she too had its name on the tip of her tongue, repeating the passage which most brought it to mind so strenuously she appeared to be out to break thru to it on sheer strength. This made it all the more elusively familiar, all the more

hauntingly within one's grasp yet still out of reach. She herself didn't seem to know what it was. The height of tangency and teasing kinship, whatever it was clearly had a hold of her. This we could clearly see. No mere mime of possession, this was the real thing.

It was Lambert who figured out what it was. Leaving the mike that he, Penguin and I shared and joining Aunt Nancy at hers, he put his horn to his mouth and began to play [Albert] Ayler's tune "Ghosts," looking Aunt Nancy in the eye -hers were glassy, glazed -as he did. This was it I realized at once. This was the piece one heard inklings of in Caprice No. 9. Lambert [anagram for Albert, with a female "m" thrown in for good measure], continuing to look Aunt Nancy in the eye, emphasized its aspect of ditty-bop anthem, ditty-bop strut, its ditty-bop meeting or blend of street wisdom with an otherwise otherworldly insistence. Several people in the audience, recognizing the tune, applauded. One woman shouted out, "Albert lives!"

...

It was heavy. The woman who had shouted out earlier again shouted, "Albert lives!" It was as if she too had taken a hit of "high would." Aunt Nancy, realist to the end, responded with a descending run which picked up on "would" but only to say, "Would that it were so." It was a run which ever so subtly resurrected, as it were, her distraught, melodramatic edge, putting one in mind of Ayler's death and of the East River in which his body had been found. Dredged, with its evocation of depth, came into complicating play with would-be height, "high would." Lambert by this time had let the head go to work on a grumbling low-register frenzy which both quoted and laid Albert to rest and even further made for a mix in which would-be height gave grudging ground. It ostensibly laid Albert to rest I should've said, for it was something, a weeping something -sob, ecstatic sensation and several other indescribable factors-I've heard no one other than Ayler himself do (though David Murray comes close). It so seemed as if Albert had taken hold of Lambert's horn that it was all I could do to keep from shouting, "Albert lives!"

...

Once again it was a wall we put forth, a wailing, structured rush of sound whose collective insistence took Albert's ditty-bop anthem into twisty, giddy

reaches possessed of a wincing, wounded quality Albert himself had often explored. Wounded anthem was what we now played, a taxed, exacting air whose implicative thread of capricious wind brought the man we'd seen shot on Fifth Avenue to mind. A second ghost had come to visit. Capricious wind and capricious wound by now ran as one. Anonymous breath embraced anonymous bullet.

Indeed, the spectre of anonymity had us by the throats, which made for a choked-up, croaking sound which groped as though blinded by the light it ostensibly served...

[At the end of the piece] Had we looked down to find we'd risen several inches off the floor we wouldn't have been surprised. (DBR, 123-6)

Ghosts rise and simultaneously are put to rest; spirits live, animated by the "cardiognostic" willingness of the band-members to take the place of these ghosts-here, Albert Ayler and the man whose death occasioned their finding Drennette their drummer. So that these deaths were not in vain, the collective energy of band and audience wrap around each other and find solace in the wreckage of history, in the splendor of myth, and in the process (*poesis*) of making art.

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