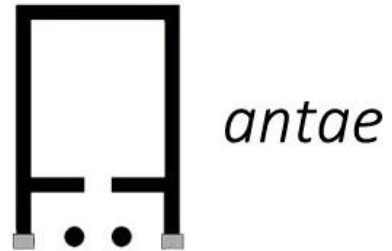


An Africa at Every Turn: Nathaniel Mackey's Layered Landscapes and Puns of Place

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An Africa at Every Turn: Nathaniel Mackey's Layered Landscapes and Puns of Place

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1.

As that complex of developments that we call “globalisation” continues to shrink and collapse our sense of planetary Place, serial poet and epistolary novelist Nathaniel Mackey’s works can be read as ongoing critiques of utopian One World dogmas. In his most recent volume, 2015’s National Book Award-winning *Blue Fasa*, this cartographer of obliquities continues to engage in puns of place by superimposing pivotal sites of the Black diaspora so that they can engage in bitter cross-talk and self-reference.

In Mackey’s Cubistic approach to locale, wordplay (as world-play) allows several sites to overlap and inhabit a single node on a trans-historic map. His jerry-rigged journeys ‘put one place/atop another’ so that history does not merely repeat but engages in counter-point and co-existence.¹ What is Moorish is un-moored and allowed to float free, as his Ur-site spins from Cairo to Cordoba to Nagfa to Muharraq along a Mediterranean Rim that is a wheel of historic misfortune.

This paper will survey Mackey’s ‘ecstatic elsewhere’ as a site that never stands still for complete nomenclature, and will provisionally locate him as an inheritor and an influence across several vectors of avant-garde poetics.² Mackey’s lyric lineage is equal parts Black Mountain (a school devoted in part to treating the written page as a kinetic “field”) and Black Arts Movement (with its attendant devotion to racial consciousness both achieved and imagined). He is equal parts transplanted West African troubadour (tapping into several veins of pre-diasporic lore and legend) and temporary West Coast sage (having long served as professor in California, investigating several of the fissures and fault-lines of the Pacific Rim). He has published scholarly work on several of his predecessors and peers, and such writings are an aid to mapping his own work—for instance: his coinage of “calibanistic” in reference to Kamau Brathwaite’s Caribbean uprisings, his interest in Federico Garcia Lorca’s pan-Mediterranean “deep song”, and his treatment of feminist/Imagist H.D.’s “desert measure” and “coastal way of knowing,” all from his second collection of critical essays, *Paracritical Hinge*.³

¹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Whatsaid Serif* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 2001), p. 30.

² *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 3

³ See Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

In terms of poetic pedigree, Mackey belongs to a telling continuum. Paul Naylor positions his serial verse as an installment-plan rejoinder to such “cross-cultural” world-poems as Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, Louis Zukofsky’s *A*, and Robert Duncan’s *Passages*,⁴ while Joseph Donahue similarly reads him as a bard attempting to suture together the now-severed super-continent Gonwandaland.⁵ In his interlinked saga, Mackey’s layered landscapes treat setting like an ‘Inn of Many Monikers’ in which locale and history are vertically stacked chords, the African scattering-of-tribes is treated as a primal scenario, and linear time is collapsed into a singular Present.⁶

For Mackey, “elsewhere” is an ever-advancing horizon, an Africa scattered and felt primarily as a mocking residue and a womb turned inside out. In an interview with Christopher Funkhouser, the poet claims that his cadences are ‘cut to my voice and my sense of placement and space’, and said “cuts” are slices of history used to illuminate both incongruities and continuums. He refers to his scholarly journal, *Hambone*, as ‘a kind of map’ connecting poetic predecessors and descendants into a wide-spanning constellation—his views on uprooted placelessness and alternative terrains are complemented by a vision of literary history as a virtual, Gnostic set of overlapping migrations. Mackey assures us that he does not proceed ‘with some mapped-out plan or some blueprint’, and yet his career in verse and prose is marked (if not fully charted) by several intertwined trajectories.⁷

2.

Mackey was born in 1947 in Miami, Florida, located on a peninsula pointing like a drooping plantain toward the Caribbean, and grew up in Santa Ana, a city named for the matron saint of travelers-by-water. He was educated at Princeton and Stanford and his academic career has wended from Wisconsin to California to North Carolina. Two of his most key poetic influences, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, wrote multi-volume epics devoted to a single city (Paterson and Gloucester, respectively), but Mackey, with his devotion to epochal vagrancy and transience, refuses to focus on a singular locale. In his work, the 1960’s Black Arts Movement rallying cry “Nation Time” is jumbled and annexed and safe harbor is always teasingly located just around the next bend in the trail.

Mackey’s poetic line typically abjures horizontal sprawl in favor of a precariously narrow and staggered vertical line where events are amassed in a historic heap. Here, the Middle Passage intersects the Spice Route; “east of La Brea” and “Antiphon Island” and “Moot Pass” are all

⁴ See Paul Naylor, ‘The “Mired Sublime” of Nathaniel Mackey’s Song of the Andoumboulou’, *Postmodern Culture*, 5:3 (1995). <<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.595/naylor.595>> [accessed 20 February 2016].

⁵ See Joseph Donahue, ‘Sprung Polity: On Nathaniel Mackey’s Recent Work’, *Talisman*, 9 (1992), 62-65.

⁶ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 19.

⁷ See Christopher Funkhouser, ‘An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey’, *Callaloo*, 18:4 (1995), 321-334, p. 328.

nodes along a “Lone Coast” that encompasses all coasts.⁸ Mackey won the 2014 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize for career-long achievement, but fears that too much attention paid to careers and canons runs against the grain of his own approach. The name of one of his collections of critical work, *Discrepant Engagement*, is telling—he is most energised when addressing the incompleteness and imperfections in our staking-out of territory. “Elsewhere” is Mackey’s home-turf because, in Donahue’s words, his verse ‘valorizes incompleteness, failure, deferral, and fugitivity’.⁹

Mackey made his academic name at UC Santa Cruz, and geographic crossovers are one of his trademarks. His verse not only bilocates but omnilocates as the Mississippi delta feeds into the Fertile Crescent, a mike-stand becomes a minaret, and the Caribbean and Antillean archipelagos are gathered into a single lyric landmass. His ‘chthonic stir’ is a swirling together of the geologic cauldron, and all of history is present at once in his overcrowded arenas of contestation.¹⁰

In an interview with Sarah Rosenthal published as ‘The Atmosphere is Alive’, Mackey discusses his pronominal braiding and superimpositions as a palimpsest of self-revising. His parents were Bahamians who moved to Panama to work in the canal zone that sliced apart North and South America, and he aims for a poetics of ‘seemingly endlessly altered states’, and has claimed that “Where are we?” and “Where are we going?” and “Where have we been?” are the key nodes in his verse’s productive self-quarreling.¹¹

Such quarreling is depicted in terms of rotation and recurrence. In a geo-poetic coinage from the 2001 collection *Whatsaid Serif*, ‘C’rib’ presses “Carib” backwards into a suckling’s “crib” and then Genesis’ formative “rib” and turns a word for a pivotal site in the Black diaspora into a cradle swinging from liminal space to liminal space.¹²

Suitably, Mackey imagines the scroll format to be preferable to the book format for its ability to be ‘unrolled/endlessly’, as if his ongoing serial tome were an Arabesque carpet able to span epochs. This is a ‘Sophic slide’ across eras in which Andalusia—Moorish, Muslim Spain—serves as a recurring emblem of cultural overlap. Mackey likewise imagines writing a ‘brine book’ sprinkled with trans-Atlantic salt crystals and a map woven together of scattered grasses.¹³ To accommodate his cyclic historical spaces, he imagines (in *Nod House*) inscribing a ‘book [that] bit his tail and became a/ disc’, a book, perhaps ultimately, as spherical as the very planet it seeks to portray.¹⁴

⁸ Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem*, (New York, NY: New Directions, 2006), pp. 57, 91.

⁹ Joseph Donahue, ‘Epic World’, *Poetry Foundation*. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/247676>> [accessed 29 February, 2016].

¹⁰ Nathaniel Mackey, *Atet A.D.* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2001), p. 103.

¹¹ Sarah Rosenthal, ‘The Atmosphere is Alive: Nathaniel Mackey in Conversation’, *Academy of American Poets*. <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/atmosphere-alive-nathaniel-mackey-conversation>> [accessed 20 February, 2016].

¹² *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 70.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 38, 39, 108.

¹⁴ As cited in the online *New Yorker*’s ‘Briefly Noted’ column by Ligaya Mashan, February 13 & 20, 2012 issue. <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/02/13/nod-house>> [accessed 29 February, 2016].

3.

In an article entitled 'A Poetics of Placing Estrangement', Davy Knittle discusses how Mackey's 'almost somewhere' is always 'a part of where we were', achieved by the use of what Knittle calls 'interstitial landmarks'.¹⁵ These poems do not leap from Nubia to Newark nor 'from the pyramids to the projects',¹⁶ but instead perform cinematic dissolving shots in which 'Granada/glimpsed in retreat' can melt into Shantiville or the Shard Café.¹⁷

This fragmented take on place is reflected in Mackey's page-layout itself, in which his ceaseless enjambment causes his poetic line to be forever rounding the bend of its own line-breaks. Characteristically, a four-word phrase like 'tossed/back and/forth' requires a full three lines to intone—this is a verse buffeted and compressed by storm-force crosswinds of historical anguish and lament.¹⁸ Mackey rarely extends his poetic line beyond three words, but his syntax is heavy-laden with connectives and conjunctions and prepositions, leading to a poetry (and a relation to place) both clipped and legato at once.

Mackey has been inspired by Ed Dorn's phrase "road-testing the language" and submits his own vocabulary to a battery of historic speed-bumps, swerves and ditches.¹⁹ When he transforms "Rastafari" into 'Insofar-I', he is using the distance-bestowing morpheme "far" to illustrate how "near" a pun can bring its objects of comparison.²⁰ A large portion of his poetic energies are spent discovering new ways to merge sites together: exhaust fumes from various modes of transport, dust kicked up by caravans, and smoke from various hookahs obscure the air in his Ur-scene, allowing him to blend and blur various places into one. The vehicle (alternately a rickety bus and a slave-galleon) his ever-transforming passengers ride upon is dubbed the "Not Yet Express", a vessel of indefinite postponement traveling toward some unknowable depot.²¹

According to such a plastic, Protean approach to location and locomotion, a drummer's cadence is a 'uterine hoofbeat' in an image that takes our primary place of origin, the womb, and distends it into an open plain capable of hosting a stampede.²² The nomadic wandering of an exiled people is a 'palimpsestic stagger' (the title of an essay from Mackey's essay collection *Paracritical Hinge*) that peels back the accumulated history of a terrain as it walks.²³ This walk

¹⁵ Davy Knittle, 'Nathaniel Mackey: A Poetics of Placing Estrangement', *The Operating System*. <<http://www.theoperatingsystem.org/3rd-annual-napomo-303030-day-14-davy-knittle-on-nathaniel-mackey-a-poetics-of-placing-estrangement/>> [accessed 29 February 2016].

¹⁶ Nathaniel Mackey, *Nod House* (New York, NY: New Directions, 2011), p. 4.

¹⁷ *Splay Anthem*, p. 108.

¹⁸ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 37.

¹⁹ See Stephen Fredman, 'Roadtesting the Language: An Interview with Edward Dorn', in *Edward Dorn Live: Lectures, Interviews, and Outtakes*, ed. by Joseph Richey (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 153-168

²⁰ Nathaniel Mackey, 'Insofarian Regress', *Boston Review Online*. October 7, 2015. <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/nathaniel-mackey-insofarian-regress>> [accessed 29 February 2016].

²¹ *Splay Anthem*, p. 20.

²² Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), p. 202.

²³ *Paracritical Hinge*, p. 59.

is verbally mimed by Mackey's own wordplay, in which "them" is clipped into a postponing 'then', "we'd" becomes a hardy 'weed' transplanted into ever-new soils, and "us" takes part in a vehicular coinage like 'b'us' just as "van" emerges out of the word 'savannah'.²⁴

4.

In Mackey's National Book Award acceptance speech, he discussed how said award encouraged him to realise that his traveling "we" was more inclusive than he had previously believed. This collective pronoun of belonging, Mackey claims, moves from coupling to group to Nation and back down again as his lost tribe looks for 'some alternative way of bonding' as new and alien territories slip and buckle under their every step.²⁵

In the preface to *Splay Anthem*, Mackey tells us that 'any longingly imagined, mourned, or remembered place, time, state, or condition can be called "Mu"'.²⁶ This place-name (the title of one of his volume-spanning serial epics) is a two-letter nub of a word overflowing with significance. "Mu" is a lost and legendary continent inhabited by our prosimian ancestors, the lemurs. It is also a Greek letter and pictogram for ocean-waves (forebear of our Roman "M") that carried slaves across the sea. "Mu" is likewise the source of the Greek *meson* or "middle" technical insignia of a spiraling Mobius process akin to Mackey's approach to region and history. "Mu" is oblivion in Japanese *kana*, a productive "non-being" or vacancy in Zen art, akin to the absence that haunts Mackey's arenas of discovery and dispute.

This notion of discovery keeps Mackey's poetics both productively fresh and historically disoriented. The poet's 'antipodal itch' is a seeking-out of opposing places, but also an urge to dissolve such opposition into historic amalgams.²⁷ Norman Finkelstein detects a 'Unity of All Rites' in Mackey's work,²⁸ a productive overlap between epochs and areas: in these epics of intersection, the word 'leavings' refers to both departures and new growths from a common trunk, and '[e]ntrances ad infinitum' are balanced out by ageless exits onto eternal, a-historic off-ramps.²⁹

These rapidly alternating entrances and exits cause Mackey's verse-lines to serve as migration corridors and merging-lanes that all eventually refract and bend toward intersection. Coinages like 'rebegun' from *School of Udhra* put the duplicating prefix "re-" into productive friction with the existential prefix "be-," forming a temporal spiral allowing Space and History to double back

²⁴ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 73.

²⁵ This speech was presented on November 15, 2015; the transcript can be read at: http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_nmackey.html#.Vtc0eJwrLIU [accessed 29 February, 2016].

²⁶ *Splay Anthem*, p. x.

²⁷ *Atet A.D.*, p. 38.

²⁸ Norman Finkelstein, 'Nathaniel Mackey and the Unity of All Rites', *Contemporary Literature*, 49:1 (2008), 24-55, p. 24.

²⁹ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 10.

and sprint forward.³⁰ Mackey concocts the adjective 'outlantish'³¹ to apply to his spiral travel around locality and time and reminds us that 'rung is both noun and verb' as he tolls his way along the diasporic ladder.³²

5.

Pound claimed that 'all ages are contemporaneous', but Mackey views all places as co-present as well.³³ He intensifies the hyphen in "African-American" by gnarling and overlaying his ancestral line and is intent on re-establishing the 'lost twin-ness' between both poles of the Middle Passage (Africa and the so-called New World) by folding locale in two and having its sundered halves meet.³⁴

These provisional efforts at healing are often attempted via homophonic overlays that allow Mackey to link regions grammatically instead of geographically: "Lagos" (an African capital) plays on "logos" (the classical Greek word for essence-in-utterance) plays on 'low ghost' plays on *lejos*, the Spanish word for "far". He refers to 'overlapping forms of travel' in a recent interview, where he also claims to aspire to 'close geographic as well as pronominal distance, to merge [...] such disparate venues as Kingston, Algiers, and Bandiagara' by finding intersections of historical and spatial recurrence.³⁵

The word "recourse" has a special (because over-literalised) meaning here, as Mackey's verse walks the wrecked courses of diasporic history in both directions. While the term "creolized" generally refers to dialects or cuisines, Mackey cross-breeds and creolises space by merging Here and There into intra-acting allegories in which one site cross-comments on another. The chains rustling in the hold of a slave ship become the rustling skirt of a flamenco dancer become a plectrum's brush along the strings of an oud. Gassire's lute meets Jimi Hendrix's whammy-bar and a balafon made of African rosewood meets Cecil Taylor's piano keyboard treated like 'eighty-eight tuned drums' while Mali's legendary Rail Band plays at a depot whose train-track is likened to the fretted neck of a blues guitar.³⁶

³⁰ Nathaniel Mackey, *School of Udhra* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2001), p. 11.

³¹ *School of Udhra*, p. 21.

³² *Splay Anthem*, p. xii

³³ Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York, NY: New Directions, 2005), p. vi

³⁴ *Splay Anthem*, p. xi.

³⁵ Andrew R. Mossin, "'The Song Sung in a Strange Land': An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey", *Iowa Review*, 44:3 (2014/5), 172-192, pp. 181, 185.

³⁶ See Val Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), p. 45.

6.

These tropes place Mackey in a West African *griot* tradition according to Joseph Allen, and frame him as an inheritor and gatherer of diasporic legends.³⁷ Acoustic echoing between severed terms is but one way to make such diaspora seem less scattered; Adelaide Morris, in fact, calls attention to Mackey's 'phonemic overlaps' in which sounds stack like chords and place names tilt toward one another.³⁸ In the early pages of *Splay Anthem*, the phrase "World release" suggests an effort to undo the stitches that keep spatial locales separated. Elsewhere, Mackey attempts to topple 'walls of an/extinct retreat' with the blast of an archetypal musical instrument that is cobbled together from a bop-era tenor sax, a ram's horn *shofar*, a bird-bone flute, and a seraph's heraldic trumpet.³⁹

Writing in the anti-tradition of the poet-in-exile, Mackey deals obsessively with the twin issues of homecoming and escape. He claims to prefer serial work that snakes and winds through multiple volumes and publications because it lends a feeling of just beginning spread across decades. More politically, '[i]mmminent departure [is] made more poignant' by the realisation that such departure is never fully possible because injustice cannot be outrun. A merciless sun tends to stare down on Mackey's omnipresent landscape, blurring vision into a dream of repatriation, but it is '[a]nyone's guess whose/world/it was' because we inhabit a reality layered in acts of invasion, genocide, and epic robbery.⁴⁰

These epical historic crimes are met with protest but also with a ludic creativity. Despite Mackey's lamenting and protesting of 'dislocated identity' and the quantum chasm between being and belonging, place is also a *play* with positioning, in which the distant can be pulled near via the polarities of meta-language.⁴¹ For all of Mackey's protest of diasporic dislocation across his many works, he is also giddily capable of ticking off concocted place-names like a docent on a mis-guided tour—a "Legbaland" that is limped through on bruised limbs, a city of "Quag" that is a bog of covered-over roots, a "Watusa" that accentuates its unknowable "what"-ness. Because of his notion of belonging to a never-quite-homeland, Mackey accepts prizes and awards with a wary reluctance of closure. Still, *Blue Fasa* won a National Book Award for its post-national, nation-building, nation-interrogating verse. Mackey's previous book, *Outer Pradesh*, won Yale's Bollingen Prize, named for a town in Switzerland where Carl Jung lived, ironic in part because of the book's post- and pre-Jungian racial archetypes.

³⁷ See Joseph Allen, 'Nathaniel Mackey's Unit Structures', in *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison* (New York, NY: Garland Publishers, 2000), pp. 205-230, p. 212.

³⁸ See Adelaide Morris, 'Angles of Incidence/Angels of Dust: Operatic Tilt in the Poetics of H.D. and Nathaniel Mackey', *Callaloo* 23:2 (2000), 749-764, p. 752.

³⁹ *Splay Anthem*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Blue Fasa* (New York, NY: New Directions, 2015), p. iv.

7.

For a large portion of his career, Mackey limned his contours of place from the liminal coast of California. His long-running radio program ran on UC Santa Cruz's suitably named station, KUSP, and indeed his wordscapes are forever on the liminal cusp of some new-but-recurring territory. The poet imagines a purgatorial people running in place on a treadmill caused by obstinate injustices and torments. This limbo is frequently portrayed in oceanic terms: when 'adrift/off Cantaloupe Island's/lotus/coast' history itself is unanchored and sites lap into one another like wayward waves. In the "Braid" section of *Splay Anthem*, one is 'taken in by/dreams' when one is not taken in by a homeland, and so one is 'never done/saying goodbye/once begun' because existence is a matter of moment-to-moment exiles.⁴²

This notion of inescapable exile causes a 'river of lies' to wind through Mackey's blasted landscapes, fed by countless tributaries and crosscurrents. This bobbing and meandering river of mendacity causes Mackey to write from the position of a 'fleeting guest', permanently afloat and unseated. The poet treads on 'in-between feet' because liminality is his impermanent address⁴³—'World be wet where we boat' is a prayer beseeching an environment to be hospitable to its travelers' mode of movement.⁴⁴ Mackey's 'planoscape' is both planar in its desert flatness and overlaid with ever-transforming plans, plots, and concoctions. In this world, one can be displaced in the flicker of a line-break and can be 'outside of Lisbon one mo-/ment outside Harare the next'.⁴⁵

Despite such a rapidly transformable notion of place, there remains the memory of 'plains we/spent millennia crossing', and so the Bahamian saying "By and by" is used as a recurring motif to portray forever-unfurling landscapes on which the "good" in "goodbye" curdles and the biding of time is a bait for new traps.⁴⁶ As Mackey walks (in a verbal gait frequently pitched between stagger and sleepwalk) across these books' plains, he gestures backward to unknowable ancestors and forward to some hoped-for oasis at once.

A cloven dualism between Here and Not-Here haunts much of this verse. Geographic polarities (if not precisely antipodes) like 'Bingle or Benares' crop up frequently, swiveling on a conditional "or" that propels forward and drags back at once.⁴⁷ The title of Mackey's essay collection *Paracritical Hinge* refers to his ongoing interest in liminal-yet-pivotal moments in diasporic history. When "Atlantis" and "East St. Louis" can be joined together with a mere "either", space is treated as a hologram in which each site is refracted in every other. Donahue

⁴² *Splay Anthem*, p. 6.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴⁴ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 71.

⁴⁵ *Blue Fasa*, pp. 3, 14.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ *Blue Fasa*, p. 15.

refers to ‘a world of voyages, departures, arrivals, encounters, visits to and from the dead, visits to and from paradise’, and indeed Elsewhere here is in part a matter of utter mobility.⁴⁸

The inhabitants of Mackey’s verse dwell in an ongoing condition of ‘There though I wasn’t’ and inhabit a ‘dreamless Atlantean/sleep’ in which the Middle Passage has both retreated from memory and advanced into a new reality.⁴⁹ Asked by Donahue about his perspective on home and arrival and recognition, Mackey answers that he has ‘repeated experiences of and senses of home’. This repetition is frequently more disorienting than reassuring, however. He refers to a ‘sense of arrival’ that is more important than any notion of security or belonging, and updates the Homeric Odyssey so that homecoming is less linear and teleological and more flickering and beckoning.⁵⁰

8.

In Mackey’s scheme, our very planet is a quicksand clutching at the feet of its walkers and an undersoil made out of lost idioms. In ‘Deep Trouble/Deep Treble’, Peter O’Leary notices how a word like ‘asafetida’, formed from a Persian prefix and a Latinate main-stem, is emblematic of Mackey’s favored ‘Islamic-Mediterranean milieu’, a cross-bred verbal recipe drawn from along his postmodern Spice Route.⁵¹ On said route’s animistic plain, ‘chorusing rocks’ sing and woo, forming a coral-as-chorale.⁵² Our native ground below our feet is a compost of terror in Mackey’s core-sampling assessment, a palimpsest of genocide and bondage, a layer cake of displacement and massacre.

To underscore the frustrations inherent to such a place, Mackey begins the sixteenth section of “Mu” with a quote from Anwar Naguib: ‘A boat that sails to heaven on a river that has no end’.⁵³ When all place is one, history itself is a mocking and undermining treadmill. Much of Mackey’s liminal work occurs aboard a slave-ship that flickers into a different vehicle with each successive lyric wave. A ‘heavenly city’ is hallucinated from the deck of said ship, only to dissipate and turn into a glum view from an ‘airplane window’⁵⁴ and other freely (and sometimes not-so-freely) associated scenes, until eventually Mackey and his cast of wanderers stand marooned in ‘the parking/lot/Low Forest had morphed into’.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Donahue, ‘Epic World’.

⁴⁹ *Blue Fasa*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Donahue, ‘Epic World’.

⁵¹ Peter O’Leary, ‘Deep Trouble/Deep Treble’, *Callaloo* 23.2 (2000), 516-537, p. 526.

⁵² Nathaniel Mackey, *Eroding Witness* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 11.

⁵³ *Splay Anthem*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Blue Fasa*, p. 23.

This caravan of souls is fleeing from and groping towards 'a place named No-Such-Place'.⁵⁶ Mackey's verse is vanguard in at least two senses: formally experimental and forward looking, and topically concerned with a scouting party seeking out new lands and territories. Frequently, his verse will capitalise a foreign word as if it were a place name, using stray terms in Arabic and Wolof and Swahili as grappling-hooks to mount the sheer cliff-face of accumulating history. The destination-marquee on his spectral tour-bus fleetingly displays coinages like 'Ouab'da', vowel-heavy concoctions lacking in consonantal contour and clear definition.⁵⁷ This 'omnibus hitlist' is a catalogue of half-invented points of interest, where N.Y. stands for Not Yet and neologisms like "B'Legless" feature quasi-Arabic apostrophes eliding syllables lost forever under sandstorms of dialect extinction.⁵⁸ This leads to a landscape of unrest, forever propelled forward and downward along the movement of these vertically situated poems.

9.

In *Blue Fasa*, Mackey refers to an 'intra-continental African movement', underscoring the fertilising the "spore" in "diaspora".⁵⁹ More tragically, the Middle Passage was an 'extra-continental uprooting' and so he writes of the fall of Wagadu (a West African trading empire that stands as an icon for a momentary Utopia) and an ensuing 'decline and dispersal'. He manages to regather the scattered motes of such a dispersal to some degree by way of a 'wandering "we"' who, for fleeting and ecstatic intervals, recognise their own faces in the refracting prisms of Displacement and Abandonment.⁶⁰ Mackey has quoted with approval Charles Olson's lines from *The Maximus Poems*, 'he who walks with his house on/his head is heaven', and finds paradise in an embrace of the provisional.⁶¹ He suggests that 'tones of lament' can co-exist with a 'devotional assurance', and that a paradise of place 'can be gotten to again', though the tollgates guarding said paradise exact a seemingly bottomless tax.⁶²

Mackey refers to the 'tonal field' of his work, where dark matter refuses to be rationally lit up and so must remain present only as suggestion.⁶³ This is frequently accomplished by way of telling puns: Mackey plays the anthropological terms 'emic' (from an insider's perspective) and 'etic' (from an outsider's point of view) against one another, almost implying that the vomit-inducing 'emetic' is a product of a disoriented wavering between these two words.⁶⁴ Similarly,

⁵⁶ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 43.

⁵⁷ *Nod House*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 45.

⁵⁹ *Blue Fasa*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* pp. iv-v.

⁶¹ Charles Olson, 'For the Birds', in *The Maximus Poems* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 43.

⁶² Donahue, 'Epic World'.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 36.

Legba, the West African limping god of the crossroads, is a recurring icon and actor because his mismatched gait is emblematic of a people with one foot each in two different realms.

In his own claim, what most pervades Mackey's body of work is 'the salience of movement, migration, transit, and nervous travel'.⁶⁵ The 'Atavist run' of his bus runs on a fuel of 'Chant down Babylon' intoned by its passengers, but said Babylon is forever finding new modes of half-detected camouflage.⁶⁶ Mackey alludes to Duke Ellington's coinage "Blutopia" to refer to a paradise forever haunted (and propelled) by anguish, and coins the name 'Nub' to allude to a "Nubia" clipped of its latter, alleviating vowels.⁶⁷ These neologistic tweakings of historic sites frequently allows for a greater intimacy between far-flung points of travel, and yet in recent volumes Mackey's postponed homecomings have increasingly been intoned in the irretrievably past tense, giving his work a more pained and panoramic feeling. He did not set out to become an epic poet, by his own admission, but the largeness of his landscape and the immensity of his sense of exile and elsewhere-ness have slowly turned his collected works into an amalgamated epic.

10.

Mackey frequently deploys a trans-historic musical lore as a means of mapping this epic, and occasionally performs his work accompanied by a nation-hopping ensemble of instruments: West African hourglass and goblet tympani and Chinese opera cymbals, Philippine gong chimes and Turkish frame-drums and the acrid, wheedling tones of a Persian *ney* flute. Some notes, like some places, 'refuse to be contained by any point on the notational grid', and so 'an Indo-Haitian Sufi nocturne with a Meso-Egypto-Mayan air' is needed to evoke and capture his positing of locale as an infinite amalgam.⁶⁸ Just as Mackey imagines a jazz composition capable of rummaging around the lower registers of a horn, his writing reconnoiters around the outer edges of our senses of belonging and homeland.

Mackey hence imagines writing a 'cavernous book' able to take in every species of refugee. The poet invents site-names rampantly, from a 'Loquat Cove' in which a fruit inspires eloquence to a 'He-and-She Strand' where even grains of sand presumably suffer from a 'lost twinness', to a 'Blue Sufi' lounge where the Delta goes dervish.⁶⁹ The very idea of a 'Traveling tavern' or a 'peripatetic bedroom' suggests that all 'stops' are themselves in transit and that rest and retreat

⁶⁵ *Blue Fasa*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 45.

⁶⁷ *Splay Anthem*, p. 108.

⁶⁸ *Bedouin Hornbook*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ *Whatsaid Serif*, pp. 54, 62, 20.

are mere figments.⁷⁰ Elsewhere, “atlas” becomes ‘at-less’ to underscore the impossibility of fully mapping or knowing any terrain.⁷¹

Mackey, through the mouthpiece of one his exiled wanderers, asserts that ‘compressed, all would be ours again’, but knows that such recovery is an ever-receding chimera. His sojourners are characterised as boxcar hobos (a noun standing for *homeward bound*) but also as pilgrims (keenly aware of the “grim” in “pilgrimage”) whose knit skullcaps are unraveled by the rutted terrain their bus rides along. The ‘most abstract/“at”/we’d ever inhabit’ is always with these travelers, because the clatter of chains can always be transmuted or echoed into a different sound.⁷² These leaps of historic logic and association are tokens of a perpetual alienation, but also deployed to forge lines of kinship with other travel-savoring writers along a kind of cross-generational trade road.

11.

Mackey’s ‘Soon-Come Congress of Souls’ never quite arrives, always suspended ‘one rung behind’ on Limbo’s treadmill, where ‘mooring’ (a pun between being safely harbored and being a migrant Muslim) is always in danger of being ‘marooned’ (a pun between being abandoned and being a historically militant Jamaican rebel).⁷³ This form of wordplay forms a truly “Fugitive” poetry—“Nathaniel” means “free offering from God”, but Mackey’s take on terrain is always historically taxed, charged and burdened.

Just as Mackey’s taste in avant-jazz prefers a vocalised, notation-defying sound in between the approved tones, he prefers an inhabitation in between official addresses. He envisions history as a hologram or a beehive in which each cell is a fractal rejoinder to the other and an African circle-dance that is a ‘uroboric strut’ because its tail is always in its own teeth.⁷⁴ This circular treatment of Scenario is a reassuring loop and a menacing noose at once. Similarly, a phrase like ‘the new ledge we/walked’ places a haunted line-break in between a precariously assembled collective pronoun and its verb-of-travel; Mackey’s enjambments are often tactical, beheading verbs of their prefixes and sundering cross-bred words in half in order to call wary attention to his language’s entangled roots.⁷⁵

Such roots, when traced, reveal telling puns: ‘Stick City’ is both a place made of frail timbers and a place adhesively glued to every other place.⁷⁶ Mackey deploys Kamau Brathwaite’s punning coinage ‘tidalectics’ to refer to a form of dialectics whose movement is like the lapping-

⁷⁰ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 65; *Splay Anthem*, p. 79.

⁷¹ *Splay Anthem*, p. 38.

⁷² *Whatsaid Serif*, pp. 92, 105.

⁷³ *ibid.*, pp. 96, 82.

⁷⁴ *Bedouin Hornbook*, p. 56.

⁷⁵ *Atet A.D.*, p. 50.

⁷⁶ *Nod House*, p. 85.

up of historic waves on a coastline.⁷⁷ This punning is not only verbal but locational; in ‘Song of the Andoumboulou 88’, the poet imagines one train pulling out as one is pulling in, and the liminal feeling that ‘we were in both’. Said train (which occasionally puns on the terminal syllable of John Coltrane’s surname) is ‘engineless/driverless, conductorless’, because it is a train of mental and figurative voyage whose boxcars house refugees and evacuees from Elsewhere’s ultimate outposts.⁷⁸

12.

Mackey tells of an exodus so ongoing it is only knowable in fragments, freely scattering subjunctives and conditionals to imply alternate routes and venues. In *Outer Pradesh*, a ‘state/known as fretless’ alludes to the unfretted neck of an oud and various West African lutes and harps that allow for more fluid fingering and a less stopped approach to chord progression.⁷⁹ Still, in an assertion like ‘not’s province the place we/now camped in’, the negating word “not” implies a pun on a “knot” in time and space, a convergence where Locale is self-entangled.⁸⁰

When history is irretrievably broken and dispersed, one mode of compensation is a reveling in particles and fractions—in his Donahue interview, Mackey states that ‘[w]e live in an exploded world, where the local exists as detritus and debris’.⁸¹ This traumatised vision of a planetary landscape, however is counterpointed against a vision of Locality that is layered like the geometric pattern on West African kente fabric or the darting polyrhythmic weave of Congolese soukous music. In ‘Said to Have Been Heard to Say Hush’, Mackey claims to write from a position ‘[a]t more removes/than there was ground for’ because his speculations exceed actual terrain and enter into a hologrammatic relation with space. The writer is a ‘tiptoe ghost’ treading on ‘feet I did/in-/deed speak with’, measuring his territory in a ‘pedestrian’ fashion, dancing denotative grapes into connotative wine and leaving bare footprints shaped like interrogating question marks.⁸²

In the poem ‘Irritable Mystic’, a ‘Low Forest’ is a region all underbrush and entanglement where we walk ‘ankledeep in damage’ as diasporic rubble piles higher and higher. Mackey’s ‘fugitive landscape’ is populated by pilgrims forever skidding in a circle around some imagined ‘African stonehenge’ and yet capable of rejoicing at the corners formed by the intersection between the latitude of ‘Hallelujah Avenue’ and the longitude of ‘Amen Street’. In this braiding-together of

⁷⁷ See Nathaniel Mackey, ‘Wringing the Word’, *World Literature Today*, 68:4 (1994), 733-740.

⁷⁸ *Blue Fasa*, p. 88.

⁷⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Outer Pradesh* (XX: XX, XXXX), p. 12.

⁸⁰ *School of Udhra*, p. 39.

⁸¹ Donahue, ‘Sprung Polity’, p. 63.

⁸² This uncollected poem appears on the Academy of American Poets website.

<<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/said-have-been-heard-say-hush>> [accessed February 20, 2016].

agonized sojourn and ecstatic pilgrimage, Mackey claims that our ultimate unity is that we are all 'eventual orphans', and uses this displacement as a conjoining motif.⁸³

13.

Ultimately, Mackey's sense of place is 'elegiac but also restorative', lamenting all manners of territorial loss but also turning the African diaspora into a form of dwelling that is a progressive verb and a stationary noun at once.⁸⁴ His devotion to Elsewhere favors the detour and the crooked path to any final homeland (one essay borrows its telling title, 'Destination Out', from a landmark post-bop album by saxophonist Jackie McLean).⁸⁵ This productive approach to postponement (and to "approach" itself) is accomplished by using "could" and "would" as hinge-words to sketch a Promised Land whose function is not palliative but beckoning-forward. Mackey frequently swears-allegiance-to and secedes-from said Utopia in a single line.

The poem 'Lone Coast Anacrusis' refers to a 'new Atlantis' that is the product of 'endless looking/else-/where' where "elsewhere" and "otherwise" are kin on an 'eroding precipice', a 'bluff' in both sense of the word—a *deception* and a *cliff*. 'We were there and somewhere else no/matter where we were, everywhere more/than where we were' is a typically convoluted syntactical steeplechase, in which Position refuses to stay planted.⁸⁶

In a *Front Porch* interview, Mackey refers to a need to 'embark upon slippage'. In his linguistic territory, such slippage is pitched between a refugee's panicked flight and a homecoming dance.⁸⁷ All inhabitants of all epochs are 'Tenuous Kin' in Mackey's extended family plot⁸⁸—his home turf is 'whatever place words talk us/into', and so his own poetic discourse is supremely alert to "where" (and "when") it delivers its own readers.⁸⁹ History is an 'unlit stairway' and so trans-temporal stumbling comes easy to us. Where a trek is always *jumping* its linear tracks, we are all 'opaque pronouns' because our Location is troubled and tangential: "I" can abandon "us" and join "them" in the flicker of a tweaked syntax, just as "there" can be beheaded into "here".⁹⁰

Mackey asserts that his songs 'are increasingly songs of transit', and deploys Charles Olson's 'all motion/is a crab' as an epigraph for *Splay Anthem*, performing vector zig-zags and karmic boomerangs as his poems blend together crisis-points of exile from the Spanish Expulsion to the Irish Potato Famine. These sore-spots of the human saga breed a 'lost tribe' that is plagued by

⁸³ 'Irritable Mystic' is likewise published on the Academy of American Poets website. <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/irritable-mystic>> [accessed 20 February 2016].

⁸⁴ *Splay Anthem*, p. xvi.

⁸⁵ *Paracritical Hinge*, p. 241.

⁸⁶ *Nod House*, p. 27.

⁸⁷ David Hadbawnik, 'Interview with Nathaniel Mackey', *Front Porch*, September 14, 2007.

<http://www.frontporchjournal.com/issue40_interview_mackey.asp> [accessed 1 March 2016].

⁸⁸ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 36.

⁸⁹ *Eroding Witness*, p. 39.

⁹⁰ *Whatsaid Serif*, p. 14.

'locality's discontent', limping nimbly along the 'line between "of" and "beyond"'.⁹¹ This separating line is more alluring frontier than final boundary, drawn by a poet who specialises in 'intersectional, liminal unrest'.⁹²

Along the origami folds of Mackey's counter-mapping, *saudade*, a Brazilian word for an African homesickness, seems to be an incurable ailment and an engine of energising movement. The very word "Africa" can be teased out into the verb "affricate," and indeed becomes an Ur-site of historical frictions, as the Gnostic conflict between Spirit and Matter is played out here as a conflict between adventure and arrival. Mackey has quoted Jean Toomer's statement on displacement, '[t]here is no end to "out"', as an epigraph, but conversely there is no edenic beginning to our quest for roots and no sacred center to our search for orientation. In Mackey's ongoing epic of exile, a line-break is a blind leap into new lands and ellipses are scatterings of sand-grains temporarily aligned... but soon to shift once again.⁹³

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