



An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey

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AN INTERVIEW WITH NATHANIEL MACKEY

by Charles H. Rowell

This interview was conducted by telephone between Charlottesville, Virginia, and Santa Cruz, California, on February 21, 1997.

ROWELL: When we, your contemporary readers, open the first pages of *Eroding Witness* and *School of Udhra*, we are immediately challenged. We have read much contemporary poetry, but we are immediately thrown off balance, because your poetry forces us, however gradually, to change our notion of what poetry is, one with which we have lived very comfortably. I am not referring here to the allusions or references in your poems. We know how to use the library. But your poems change the terms, it seems to me, of what a poem is, what we generally know the poem to be. I wonder what you would say if some of your readers—especially uninitiated readers—asked you to provide them with a guide that would assist them in the reading of your poems.

MACKEY: I don't know if I can because I'm not exactly sure what the terms most people bring to poetry are these days. I might be presuming if I distinguished my work from what I took to be those terms. Could you say a bit more about what you take it the typical reader brings as a model of poetry to the reading experience?

ROWELL: As you know, contemporary poetry, as opposed to fiction, has a very small audience. That small group of general readers is familiar with a particular kind of poetry, most of which has that autobiographical or confessional bent—that is, the first-person voice which almost echoes the reader's or someone whose experiences the reader recognizes. In other words, the familiar first-person voices of contemporary poetry usually recount experiences or issues that seem everyday and immediate. Your poems, on the other hand, operate from a site that is not immediately familiar. In that sense it is different from the contemporary poetry we regularly read. Your poetry operates in an epic field, in a cosmic field, a field beyond what is immediate in our daily lives. We do not associate ourselves with the first-person voice in your poems. Your poems take leaps. Your poems inhabit spaces that we don't immediately know. They are spaces of the spirit. They are spaces in meditation. They are spaces in musical frames. They are spaces beyond this physical landscape. They are spaces beyond time. What is the uninitiated reader to do? After all, you're providing for us a new way of reading the world. And that new way, we don't know until we get locked into the text. But can the general reader go that far without help?

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MACKEY: You're right that the confessional or autobiographical mode is a disposition that many writers of poetry write out of and many readers read with the expectation of finding. But it's also one that has been, at least in my reading of 20th-century poetry, critically interrogated by the theorizing and the practice of a good number of poets. I write informed by the fact that there is a strain, especially in 20th-century poetry, which does not presume that the poem is the vehicle for representing and revealing the travails of a discrete first-person subject, with consistencies of tone and voice and perspective and with constraints upon what that voice can chart, both in literal spatial and temporal terms and in terms of what that single voice can believably be taken to know or to be able to utter. There are a number of different senses of poetry in circulation. While there may be a dominant model, a model that most readers would be expected to bring to the poem, the models that I've been most engaged with as a reader, as a writer, as a teacher and as a scholar haven't been that mainstream or dominant model. I have to pause a little bit to even think about what my practice is and what it must look like in relationship to that model. But you're right. I haven't been concerned with prioritizing a plausibly autobiographical "I" in the poem. That has a lot to do with my initial senses of what was possible in poetry, with the reading I was doing that drew me into wanting to pursue writing poetry of my own. Among the modernist poets that I was introduced to as a student there was, in T.S. Eliot, for example, the insistence upon the impersonality of the poet and the collage-like effects that he uses, especially and most famously in "The Waste Land," to dislodge the univocal speaking voice that dominates most poems and anchors most poems in the sense of a secure, stable and discernible first-person speaker. So I see a long tradition, a pretty widely recognized tradition, behind the sorts of things that I'm doing and the sort of approach that I'm taking. It's not that I was terribly influenced by T.S. Eliot. I'm just saying that it goes back, if not beyond Eliot, to at least as canonical a figure as Eliot, so that there's a sense in which what I'm doing is not that beyond the pale. It has come down through other poets that I've been interested in as well, whose names I could go into and probably will in the course of our conversation get into. But, for starters, let me say that I wonder, really, at this point in the 20th century, in 1997, how radical and shocking it is to open a book that's not presenting poems that offer a discrete picture of a discrete narrating voice that tells bounded stories of a believable sort about the doings and the travails and the triumphs of the person whose voice one presumes it to be.

It depends on the disposition of the poet. If it's a sense of who the writer is that the reader wants, it says something about the sensibility of a particular poet that he or she would choose this option, the one that I've chosen. It speaks to my concerns. One of the things that poetry has become for me is an instrument to articulate not simply my personal experiences and my emotional reactions to those experiences but also my engagement with intellectual matters, with philosophic, aesthetic matters, with world traditions of various sorts and local traditions of various sorts. It's become something that allows me to express, to the extent that I can push the medium to do it, my sensibility at large, so to speak. And there are ways in which that sensibility reaches beyond or at least wants to reach beyond the confinements of the everyday, of the empirically verifiable, the sorts of things that we assume to define the realm in

which relevant events occur. That realm has been extended by a number of things that we maybe take for granted in the 20th century. The world in which we live is widened and deepened by what we read—books, but also, you know, periodical literature—and obviously by the electronic media that put us in touch with, if not distant parts of the world, images of distant parts of the world. The flow of information and such really has, in a way, shrunk the world. I think that the sensibility of a poem that allows that kind of information in is saying something very valid. It's testifying to—and is itself evidence of—the fact that the world is a more snug place these days and that individual consciousness is often being impressed or imprinted upon, impinged upon in some instances, by what's going on in various places at various times and at various levels at various times. That would be, off the top of my head, what I would begin to say to the reader you're speaking about. That's how I would begin to explain some of those differences that you speak about, some of the unexpected challenges the poetry might pose to that reader.

ROWELL: I want to try to explore another issue. Tradition and your readings. We know that you have read much, that you have read in a most critical way, and that you have read deeper than the usual reader, deeper than the traditional scholar; we know that you have read and absorbed and synthesized many, many texts and many, many traditions. But the point is that your readers—if they read as I usually do—feel something new when they face your poems as aesthetic and ideational constructs. In the use of disparate materials you have gone far beyond the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, for example. Your poetry reminds me more of that of Jay Wright. Is Jay Wright an influence on your work? Is the voice in these lines from your poem entitled "Capricorn Rising" that of a prophet, the same kind of voice I hear in some of Jay Wright's poems?

I wake up mumbling, "I'm
not at the music's
mercy," think damned
if I'm not, but
keep the thought
to myself.

Sweet mystic beast on the
outskirts of earth,
unruly airs, an awkward
birth

bruises the bell of its
horn...

Just listen to what I read. That takes us far beyond the world we read in most contemporary poetry. It's your synthesis that I'd like you to talk about.

MACKEY: Yes. Well, if I could just spring off from that particular poem: that's a poem dedicated to Pharoah Sanders, a tenor saxophone player who quite famously came onto the scene playing in John Coltrane's group in the mid-1960s. If we got into talking about what a passage such as that is synthesizing, I'd say it's certainly synthesizing a sense of danger and alarm that Pharoah Sanders's music conveys, as does Coltrane's music and that of a great number of other musicians that I've been listening to and influenced by. It plays with that fact. It plays with the fact that the attainment of a certain level of chops or imaginative virtuosity among these musicians is often marked by referring to the musician in question as a "monster": "He's a monster of a pianist." That term was one of the things that I had in mind in speaking of a "sweet mystic beast"—this monstrous eruption onto the world that music of that order seems to announce and to impose. That would be one of the senses in which the music is something one would have a mixed feeling about being at the mercy of. There is something very numinous about that experience of being in the control of a music that is so powerful. But it's also part of the ecstatic tradition of music and it's also a part of those privileged moments that musicians aspire to and live for and that we as listeners get a bit of a taste of. So something of that is in that passage, but I think you're right to detect in it a sense of poetic vocation, a sense of the writerly vocation, maybe with music as an analogue, that does perhaps take the poetry to a different conception of what writing is for and what writing does than do the predominant and most prevalent conceptions. It's a sense of the writing as—"ceremonial" is perhaps the word, "sacramental" is perhaps the word.

You mentioned Jay Wright. I know that one of the things that Jay has been very insistent about over the years is that the space for poetry in our society and in our culture has lost touch with those ritual and sacramental roles and spaces that it has traditionally occupied throughout the course of world history and throughout the various sites of world culture that you find poetry in, which is essentially everywhere. He has been quite adamant about insisting that poetry needs to reclaim that role and that space, with almost a priestly or a prophetic task being taken on by the poet. I'm informed by a lot of that, and there are impulses in me that tend very strongly in that direction. Those impulses are complicated by other influences, among them the fact that we do live in a secular age and in a secular culture, an age of skepticism and doubt. I'm also in touch with that. Some of the manner in which the poetry moves—because movement conveys and is a vehicle for meaning and implication as much as overt statement—some of the way in which it moves, I think, is a carrier of that anxious or not altogether settled relationship to the desire or the need for a poetry that would carry a hieratic voice or at least a desire for reaching after a hieratic voice. Maybe that's, if not new, at least different from what is encountered in a lot of poetries—and there are so many poetries—these days. That might be a place to begin to open up onto what it is that is, if not being synthesized, at least being reached toward or sought after in an admittedly unpropitious climate.

ROWELL: "Capricorn Rising" is a favorite of mine, but I like "Passing Thru" more. I think if one were to place these two poems together with one of the "Angel of Dust" poems one would get a sense of the variety in your poetry, and one would also get, as I said earlier, a sense of the poem as a new form in your hands.

MACKEY: Well, I think it goes back to being open and improvisatory as to what can come into the poem, trying to make the poem a place where not just the usual content of poetry appears but where all kinds of other things can appear: new information, new discoveries of a scholarly sort, an intellectual sort, intellectual excitements, intellectual disappointments, things like that. As you've noticed, I'm something of a bookish poet and I try to leaven that bookishness with musicality. I mean, music is very important in my work in a lot of different ways, including rhythm and explorations of a variety of rhetorical tonalities, and maybe that's what's opening it into novel or innovative areas. The poem "Passing Thru" simply came out of my reading Ivan Van Sertima's work. Actually, it began before I'd really read his work in any depth. I happened to hear him give a talk and in the course of that talk he mentioned and showed photographs of an inscription in an ancient Libyan alphabet that he had found in the Virgin Islands. He showed some photographs that later appeared in his *Journal of African Civilizations*. I was very taken by the look of this script and also by the facts surrounding it: that this was an alphabet that was used in North and West Africa and that here we find it inscribed above a rock pool on one of the Virgin Islands. Obviously, this was part of his thesis, which he has written about at length in his book *They Came Before Columbus*, that there were African expeditions to the Americas prior to Columbus's voyage to the Americas. I was struck by that because it's an unrepresented or underrepresented or hidden aspect of history, a history that doesn't make it to mainstream venues for the most part, mainstream historical texts, mainstream historical curricula. I was drawn to it as a kind of hidden or secret history. Of course, poetry has throughout the ages been a vehicle for imparting and keeping alive secret knowledge, secret information, secret wisdom. Not only did there seem to be something very ancient about that text, that old North and West African script that Van Sertima was talking about, but it also seemed to spark in me this old and ancient sense of the role of the poet. I had a great desire, when I saw that script while listening to his lecture, to write a poem, write something that would somehow come out of and honor—recognize, acknowledge—the fact of that inscription that he was showing the photographs of. That's a poem that I eventually did write some time afterwards, after reading *They Came Before Columbus*.

It's kind of faint now, it's been a long time, but I think it was in 1978 or 1979 that I heard this lecture. It was at the University of Southern California, where I was teaching at the time. I think I actually wrote the poem in the summer of 1979 after reading *They Came Before Columbus*. Anyway, there's a chapter in the book about a prince of Mali, Abubakari, who, like Columbus but before Columbus, had this sense that the world was round or, as the imagery that's used in the book says, like a bottlegourd. It seems that he set out to the west and was never heard from again. What triggered the poem was the fact that Mali was one of the places where this Libyan alphabet that Van Sertima had found in the Virgin Islands was used, this alphabet called Tifinagh. He doesn't make anything of it in *They Came Before Columbus*. I don't think he makes the connection and maybe there is no connection, but I made a connection between this Malian prince/navigator, Abubakari, setting out and not having been heard from again and the fact that this alphabet that was used in Mali, among other places, was found in the Americas—evidence, perhaps, that Abubakari

did make it here. The poem was sparked by the possible connection between those two things and it plays with that. And it *is* play. I mean, I wasn't trying to write an historical treatise proving this hypothesis, but it was an intriguing and appealing hypothesis and I ran with it a little bit, allowing speculation of that order to become the catalyst for a poem and feeling that the excitement that that speculation sparked was justification enough for a poem.

ROWELL: Risking unnecessary repetition, I want to return to the issues I raised at the opening of this interview. Will you for a moment imagine me as a general reader and help me to enter *Eroding Witness*, then guide me through the text by commenting on its architecture? First, perhaps, talk to me about the untitled opening poem. Is it an African Diasporic piece searching for a name and a voice? Look at the last line, "an undertow / of whirl im- / mersed in / words." Now look at the end of the volume, section four, entitled "Septet for the End of Time," with its series of eight poems, each beginning with "I wake up . . ." Will you talk about the form of this book and about the meaning of its title?

MACKEY: I try to make books work as books and try to get beyond the book of poetry as just a miscellaneous collection of poems that happen to have been written over a certain period of time and happen to have arrived at a certain number of pages that qualify it to be a book. I wanted to order the book in a way that made some kind of sense. One of the things that makes that not only appealing but imperative is the fact that one of the things that my reading of poets associated with open form—the William Carlos Williams of *Paterson*, Amiri Baraka, Charles Olson and his theories of open field composition, Robert Duncan and his idea of the "world-poem" and what he calls the "grand symphony"—one of the things that's happening in these ideas of open form is a discontent with and a critique of the individual poem as a bounded, discrete, self-sufficient achievement, the well-made poem that stands by itself as if everything that needs to be in it is in it. The tradition that I hooked up with was questioning that and instigating another kind of practice which sees the individual poem as always incomplete, always partial, always part of a larger work that is ongoing and that continues to feed upon previous work. I remember early on reading Robert Creeley quoting Louis Zukofsky, who said that we write one poem all our lives. The sense that each poem is just an installment in the development and inscription of this longer poem which is one's body of work I found to be a very freeing idea, in that it allows you to work in the poem with a certain intensity that does not have to be resolved in that particular poem. It allows you to get into areas that are alive and resonant in ways that you can't shut down and wouldn't want to shut down in a resolute way within the boundaries of a single poem. So my poems echo and anticipate one another. They lean on one another. They read back on one another. There's a kind of intertextuality going on among the various poems that I write within a book and even from book to book. There's also a conversation going on between the different books. I would say to that reader you've postulated that one way to get onto the turf that *Eroding Witness* is on is to keep that in mind: that the poems do share space with one another, that their borders are not hard borders and that there are flows among the various poems.

The book is divided into four parts and two of the parts, parts two and four, are in fact serial poems. Part two is the first seven installments of "Song of the Andoumboulou," which is a poem that I've continued to write. There were eight more installments of it in *School of Udhra* and the book that I've just completed is made up entirely of installments of "Song of the Andoumboulou," numbers sixteen through thirty-five. It's made up of twenty of them and it's divided into two sections of ten each. But, anyway, getting back to *Eroding Witness*, section two is "Song of the Andoumboulou" and section four is "Septet for the End of Time," which is, again, a set of poems, a set of eight poems that are tied together. One of the things that ties them together is that each begins with the three words "I wake up." Those three words are important to the whole book, because the book, from the first poem on, signals a task which the poetry has set for itself or which I have set for it or which poetry has set for me, which is the task of trying to enter a realm which it images as a submerged realm. That could be the realm of sleep or the realm of dream, as it comes to be in section four, or it can be the realm of the underwater, the subaquatic, an oceanic realm, as it's imaged in that first poem—"Waters / wet the / mouth"—which is both an invocation of the muse and a prefatory poem, significantly untitled, as you point out, that is meant to signal to the reader something of what's to come. I mean, it's a poem about speaking: "At the tongue's / tip the sting / of saltish / metal, rocks / the wound." It's a poem about the material of the book, words: "An undertow / of whirl im- / mersed in / words." Those last four lines give an image of something that the poetry is in other ways enacting, which is a determination to serve that dimension of linguistic activity and possibility which is imagined here as whirl. Whirl is what you might call a more unruly semantics than that which we normally use language for, than that of the instrumental and functional uses that we employ language for. The first poem, then, is announcing that the poems are going to pull us into another disposition with regard to language, a disposition that it images almost as a drowning: "An undertow / of whirl." It's announcing an ability to dwell in or a willingness to dwell in an area of resonance and implication that are not entirely domesticated by the instrumental, utilitarian senses of language which, because language is such a practical part of our everyday lives, we come to regard as perhaps the only valid deployment of language.

That poem is trying to say something about the poetics which inform the book. It's something of an *ars poetica* and it reinforces the suggestion in the book's title that writing or language as witnessing is here being brought into a kind of complication that can appear erosive, that can appear to be pulling the ground or the foundation out from under what we normally expect in the speech acts and the writing acts that we encounter. The book, overall, is informed by that trope, this title, *Eroding Witness*. If somebody were to say to you that poetry is an act of witnessing, that would conjure some pretty definite images, pretty reassuring and familiar images of what the function of poetry is. But for someone to say that the function of poetry is to simultaneously witness and erode its witness, to witness and erode its witnessing, as this title suggests, announces a different vocation for poetry, a trajectory for the poem that differs from that more common understanding. That first poem, as I said, really begins to flesh out what is already there and implied by the title. The first and third sections of the book are really more like miscellaneous sets of poems, although there

are connections among them as well. I tried to organize them in such a way that some connections flow through them. As you move through the book, you find, for example, the epigraph from the liner notes to a record album of Dogon music which talks about the song of the Andoumboulou, saying that the song of the Andoumboulou is addressed to the spirits. That's another statement in the book or another way of asserting in the book that there is a different sense of the rhetorical situation of the poem being practiced and advanced in the book, a sense which, as you noted earlier, doesn't take the constraints of the dominant model as its constraints. We're speaking to an audience of secular modern readers who won't buy into certain kinds of talk or evocations of certain kinds of realities—spiritual, ecstatic, etc.—but to take the Dogon song of the Andoumboulou as the namesake for a serial poem is to say that there is a wider sense of audience that's being sought by that work, that's being sought not only by that work but by the body of work that it's included in.

The last section, "Septet for the End of Time," has a number of epigraphs as well, and they go some further distance in showing the importance to my work of ancient texts and ancient cosmological traditions. There's a citation from Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, which is about Dogon cosmology, there's a citation from the Koran and there's a citation from one of the Egyptian pyramid texts. These epigraphs all play on numbers, seven and eight, and that kind of play, a play of resonance and implication as against an arrival at resolution and conclusion, is also saying something about the way I work, which is that I like to inhabit that play rather than try to close it down—not only inhabit that play but try to heighten and expand it. "Septet for the End of Time" is a set of poems that grew out of the first poem you brought up, "Capricorn Rising," which I did not embark upon as a poem that would be a part of a set. I just found, after I had written it, that there was a lot of imagery and implication in it that the subsequent poems revisited and began to further explore. This again says that the poem is a partial articulation that has within it the seeds of new articulations, that the poem continues to live beyond its own boundaries. "Capricorn Rising" continues to live in the subsequent poems that are a part of that set, both in the fact that those subsequent poems echo the first three words, "I wake up," and in, for example, a concern with music, ideas of danger within music and music within dangerous situations. The fourth poem in the set, "Winged Abyss," is dedicated to the French composer Olivier Messiaen and has largely to do with music, particularly music composed in dangerous and dire circumstances. Messiaen composed *Quartet for the End of Time* while he was a prisoner of war during World War II. One of the things of concern in those poems is war. They were written in the early 1980s. There's an apocalyptic tone to them. The Reagan administration had just come into office and was talking about a winnable nuclear war, things of that sort. The words "end of time" seemed apropos.

ROWELL: You mentioned your next book, *Whatsaid Serif*, your third volume of poetry. You told me some time ago that it has traces from *Eroding Witness* and from *School of Udhra*. Will you talk about its relationship, for example, to *School of Udhra*? Will you also discuss the genealogy of *Whatsaid Serif*?

MACKEY: Well, it continues, as I've already pointed out, the serial poem "Song of the Andoumboulou," which runs through the first two books. There are sections of the first two books that are devoted to installments of "Song of the Andoumboulou." The twenty installments in *Whatsaid Serif* pick up on a number of threads that run through *School of Udhra*. For example, in *School of Udhra* there's a poem called "Tonu Soy," a poem that I dedicated to Jay Wright. It came out of rereading Jay's work one summer, vaguely with the idea of writing an essay on his work, an essay that never got written. That rereading immersed me in the way in which Jay's work weaves together a variety of places—Latin America, the U.S., Spain, Portugal, Africa—a number of cultural traditions, mythological traditions, historical episodes and what have you from those places. A lot of those places are places I share his attraction to. The Dogon of Mali are very important in his work, and in fact the title, "Tonu Soy," is Dogon for "word seven." One of the things that happened in writing that poem is that I was weaving together references to the Arabic world and the Iberian world, to the diasporic extensions of those worlds. So references to and incorporations of flamenco are in there, as are references to some aspects of Cuban culture, reference to a Brazilian musician, Martinho da Vila, things like that. That kind of mix, especially the inclusion of the Arab world, came more and more into the later poems in *School of Udhra*, came up again, for example, in "Aspic Surmise" and "Slipped Quadrant." One of the things that *Whatsaid Serif* does is continue that.

The first poem in *Whatsaid Serif* is prefaced by an epigraph, a statement made by a flamenco singer, Manuel Torre, to García Lorca in the 1920s. He was talking to Lorca about the quality called *duende* that flamenco singers strive for. He said, "What you must search for, and find, is the black torso of the Pharaoh." I'm sure you can hear all the resonances in that. So I got going with "Song of the Andoumboulou: 16," which carries evocations of flamenco and evocations of Arab music. I wrote an essay at about the same time, which began as a talk at the Naropa Institute, called "Cante Moro," which means "Moorish Song." I got the title from an old Manitas de Plata album on which one of the singers says, "Eso es cante moro"—"That's Moorish singing." I thought it was pretty astounding to hear these Gypsies singing in southern Spain and calling it Moorish singing. In fact, Stephen Jonas, who was a poet in the Boston area associated with Jack Spicer and Charles Olson, among others, wrote a poem in the 1960s that takes off from that recording. Anyway, this talk that I gave at Naropa was about the connections between Lorca's theories of *duende* and the work of a number of recent American poets: Robert Duncan, Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman and Jack Spicer. It also took off into talking about how the idea of *duende* not only applies to flamenco music but, as I hear it, to certain qualities of African-American music, blues and other forms of African-American music. I was very much immersed in these sorts of things at the time, so one of the things that flows through *Whatsaid Serif* is a kind of musicological emphasis, which, like I said, picks up on some of the musical and cultural motifs that are in *School of Udhra*. But it brings in some other things as well. There is the city of Zar that comes out of African-American folklore. You find reference to it in Larry Neal's poem, "The City of Zar," and you find reference to it in Zora Neale Hurston's fieldwork. The third section of *School of Udhra* is called "Zar." In *Whatsaid Serif* there are references to Zar and there are anagrammatic rearrange-

ments of the word's letters: "Zra," "Arz," "Raz." That continues an interest in and a use of anagrammatic play that arises in *School of Udhra* with the poem "Alphabet of Ahtt," dedicated to Cecil Taylor. So it's very much a book that takes up the idea that the work you do always leaves unfinished business and proceeds to try to, if not finish some of that business, at least extend the doing of it. There are a lot of connections, a lot of ways in which it continues things that were initiated in *School of Udhra* and, before that, in *Eroding Witness*.

ROWELL: I feel absurd referring to your books in traditional terms—i.e., as volumes of poems or poetry. They do not differ extremely from your volumes of epistolary prose fiction, *Bedouin Hornbook* and *Djbot Baghostus's Run*. In each of your texts, you've broken down the artificial boundaries or conventions we have set to divide literary texts into genres. As a result, we as readers are always aware, when we read your work, that we are not only in the presence of a superior imagination but also a superior intellect.

MACKEY: Worrying the line between poetry and prose arose out of necessity. The thing about the epistolary series that bears emphasizing is that the first of those letters occurred in the "Song of the Andoumboulou" sequence. Numbers six and seven of that sequence, which appear in *Eroding Witness*, are the first appearance in my work of these letters to the Angel of Dust. So there's quite a literal connection between the poetry and the prose. The prose arose out of a need to include things that I didn't feel I could include in the poems but that were a part of the poems' trajectory in a very immediate and intimate way. It began with me trying to unpack some of the material that informs the poetry, availing myself of the kind of discursive and expository possibilities and capabilities that prose gives you. So, as readers have noted on several occasions, there's a good deal of overlap between the poems and the prose. A lot of the material—historical, cultural, mythological, cosmological—that you find in the poems you also find in the prose. I didn't continue to include the letters in books of poetry because they became so numerous that it would have been too bulky and unwieldy to do that. They also took on a life of their own after those first two, with the idea of the letter writer forming and becoming a part of a band. That opened up certain kinds of narrative possibility that were not there in the first two letters. One thing that I wanted to make use of was the possibility of more straightforward or conventional narrative. Although those books are hardly that, it's one of the things that they do make some use of. I wanted to also have a kind of undefined or not yet defined generic state in which to make use of the different amenities afforded by various genres of writing, one where I could be essayistic, where I could be cryptic and poetic, where I could tell a story in a short space, where I could sound like liner notes on a record, where I could be more recognizably autobiographical than, for the most part, I am in poems, where I could avail myself of multiple registers, mixing them as impulse and occasion saw fit. I see the poetry and the prose as related very closely to one another. The image that I've carried around is that they're two different instruments. But they have the same player and, in fact, they're probably instruments in the same family and probably that family is the saxophone family, since that's the instrument I seem to be

most attracted to. Poetry is a soprano saxophone and prose is a tenor saxophone. They have different registers and different timbres and each gets into octaves that the other doesn't, but they're often using the same melodies, the same rhythms, the same notes.

ROWELL: What I find interesting, too, about your volumes of poetry is that you have successfully embedded in them performance qualities as well as musical traditions. But the performance attributes of your poetry are not one-dimensional, as they are in that of so many contemporary "performance poets." You have succeeded in putting performance on the page. Your poems are for the eye and the voice, the page as well as "the stage." Is that a self-conscious effort on your part?

MACKEY: Yes. I've never bought into the dichotomy that's often postulated between poems for the page and poems for the ear. The page and the ear coexist. Not only do they coexist, they can contribute to one another. A fact of life for most poets is that we write for both those occasions. I mean, we write poems that are published and appear on a page and we also give poetry readings, where the poem is addressed to the ear rather than to the eye reading the page. Knowing that fact, I think it's important to honor both those sites of reception for the poem. So I try to write poems that are on the page in a fruitful and fertile way, poems that repay rereading, poems that can be gone back to and read again and again, poems that have enough action in them and enough life in them that those rereadings can find something fresh or can find something that hadn't been seen before or simply emphasize something that's been seen before but not seen with that emphasis before. At the same time, I want to write poems that, when heard, appeal to the ear's desire for rhythm, for music, for the quickness of movement and the shifting of reference and register that is meaningful to a listening audience—that is not only meaningful in the thematic sense but meaningful in the sense that that's one of the things that exercises the ear, exercises the listening faculties in a way that as listeners we enjoy and find instructive, find pleasurable, find challenging, any number of things. I try to get the poems to do both. In the way I put the poem on the page—with variable spacing and variable margins and such—I try to give some sense of a visual dance, a kind of choreographic—though it's frozen choreography—a sort of choreographic relationship among the words, which I think it's easier to pick up on when you hear a poem read. The uniform spatial arrangements that most poems are put on the page with—uniform except for the ragged right margin where you have the line breaks—impart or imply a uniformity or a homogeneity to the space the words occupy that is not really there in the way that we speak words and not there in a poem when we hear a poem read or hear a poem spoken, so one of the things going on with the way I put the poem on the page is an attempt to give the sense of a visual dance, a visual rhythm or rhythmicity on the page, and a sense of the poem as it appears on the page as a sculpted inscription. I'm just trying to use the medium in as many ways as I can, be that medium the spoken word, the poem in the air traveling from speaker to listener, or the printed word, the page being looked at by the reader.

ROWELL: Will you talk about the relationship of your texts to musical traditions?

MACKEY: Well, one of the relationships is that I've been an avid listener to music for most of my life. Though I'm not a musician and though the extent of my musical training is, to put it charitably, rudimentary, music has always been a very important and nourishing part of my life. That's reflected in my writing. It's reflected in the fact that some of the poems are dedicated to musicians, that some of the tropes are musical tropes, that some of the reference material comes from the world of music. Of course, in the prose it's even more obvious because I write these letters that are penned by a musician/composer who signs his letters "N." 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. Different grammatical arrangements, for example, elicit different responses. Music has been and continues to be a teacher and a case in point for me of such non-denotative possibilities. For example, I listen to a lot of vocal music from other countries, in languages that I don't understand. I don't get the lyrics at the denotative level, but I respond nonetheless, learning to listen to language without the amenities of its denotative content. Doing that has probably had a significant influence on some of the ways in which I go about writing, an influence that I'm not able to talk about in an extended or explanatory way but that I know to be there nonetheless.

ROWELL: I have already asked you whether Jay Wright influenced you as a writer. Are there other writers who have been important to you? I also wonder whether Wilson Harris has influenced you. The ritual and spirituality in Wright and Harris, for example, must have had an impact on you.

MACKEY: Both of them have been very important as kindred spirits, elder kin. Both of them I've corresponded with over a number of years now. I first wrote Wilson Harris in the late 1970s—I think it was 1978—and we've been corresponding regularly ever since. Jay I think I first wrote not too long after that, in the early 1980s, 1980 or 1981, and we've been corresponding since then. I wrote both of them out of admiration for their work and a sense of affinity with what they were doing. They were very important guiding spirits for me in their engagement with the African diaspora and beyond, the human diaspora which another poet important to me, Robert Duncan, spoke of as being articulated, inscribed and advanced within what he calls the "world-poem," a heterogeneous poem in which elements from various spaces on the map come into the weave. You're quite right. Those two poets in particular, those two writers in particular—I say "poets" because I consider Wilson a poet even though he

writes novels. To call his novels novels is to use a term of convenience. They have the compression and the imagistic muscle of poetry and they have the compacted thought of philosophic, theoretical discourse, with a whole lot more going on than what we normally think of when we think of the novel. The confounding of genre that we were talking about earlier is very active in his work. He's an acknowledged influence in my prose, but he's also been an inspiration in my poetry. One of the poems in "Septet for the End of Time" is dedicated to him. As for other influences, there are a number of figures who come to mind, more than we have time to go into. I'm rereading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* this week for a course I'm teaching, so I'll mention him. Again, rereading the novel, I see things that have influenced me, though I've never talked about Ellison very much as an influence. The open manhole that N. dreams about in *Bedouin Hornbook's* opening letter may well have been a subliminal homage, but Ellison's isn't one of the names I'm first to name when I start talking about influences. Perhaps it's because he's influenced so many people, his influence is so pervasive, I take it it goes without saying. But the idea he floats early on in the novel that writing is an impulse to make music of invisibility has teased me for years with its inversion of music's literal invisibility—usefully teased me, I think. I try to align writing with that invisible ability to make a mark.



Photo by Pascale Gaitet

Nathaniel Mackey and Wilson Harris
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