

The Creaking of the World:
Ontological Substitution in Nathaniel Mackey's Fiction

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A Thesis
In The Department of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Arts (English Literature)

At Concordia University
Montréal, Quebec, Canada

December 2022

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Master of Arts (English Department)

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ABSTRACT

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Nathaniel Mackey's serial fiction presents readers with characters who experience reality on several, interpenetrating levels: quotidian, dream, mythic, music-induced trance, and as subjects in an ongoing libretto. If one of these ontological shifts into a different consciousness is energized enough, two-dimensional balloons appear, inscribed with text, confronting the characters' sense of identity, and challenging their presuppositions regarding knowledge, morality, and aesthetics. This thesis examines this phenomenon from a mythic-materialistic perspective which is borrowed specifically from Mackey's critical writing. It seeks to show that Mackey's work provides myth criticism with valuable new contexts.

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I. Introduction

While there has been a great deal of critical writing on the poetry of Nathaniel Mackey, less attention has been paid by critics to his ongoing, five-volume serial fiction project known collectively as *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. This is strange, because Mackey's two most important theoretical concepts (and the titles of his two books of criticism)—discrepant engagement and paracritical hinge—originate in his fiction. As he explains in an essay titled “Paracritical Hinge”:

What I decided was to highlight the practice of mine out of which, more than any single other, the critical formulation I call discrepant engagement emerged. That practice is the writing of fiction, specifically that of a work called *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, running through which are installments of a scribal-performative undertaking known as “The Creaking of the Word,” a name borrowed from the Dogon of Mali that I see as related to—a parent to or an ancestor to—discrepant engagement.¹

The “creaking of the word” refers to the weaving block used by the Dogon, where the rough noise of the warp and woof of the loom figures as the cosmogonic origin of language through weaving. Words are thus “made things,” “fabric echoes fabrication,” and the creaking denotes the “rickety” quality with which we construct our relationship to the world.² Paracritical hinge refers to a similar sense of uncertainty and porousness with regard to categories of writing, where Mackey's stated preference is for a mix of idioms, genres, registers, discourses.³ A third key concept underpinning Mackey's work—one that also foregrounds contingency and volatility—is in the figure of the Kalapalo “what-sayer”, the one who invites and investigates detours and

¹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 207-8.

² Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 181.

³ Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 211.

asides, questions authoritative claims, “whose purpose is to interfere with a storyteller’s tale with interruptions, augmentations, and differences of opinion.”⁴ In *From a Broken Bottle*, these disruptive principles combine at an ontological level, where multiple states of being or consciousness intrude upon, distort, and transform the quotidian. In other words, the what-sayer’s actions have a structural parallel in the way that dreaming, writing, improvising music, and spirit possession function as discrepant participants in the construction of reality. They hijack the narrative in order to comment and critique, as opposed to simply augment, the characters’ lives. Much the way a jazz musician will use substitute chords over top of a well-known sequence such as “rhythm changes”, Mackey alters the registers of the actual, playing historical, mythic, and often surreal “changes” that question, in often darkly humorous ways, the surface materiality of life. Part of this essay will examine the process that makes myth the surprising ancestor of these modes of critical address.

Set in Los Angeles between the years 1979-84, *From a Broken Bottle* concerns the doings of a composer / multi-instrumentalist, “N.” and his avant-jazz ensemble Molimo m’Atet. The narrative presents a one-way epistolary exchange between N. and a being known as the “Angel of Dust,” where the group’s rehearsals, gigs, and personal lives are described. The core of my argument speaks to what might be called “the question of the balloons”, which poet-critic Simone White calls a “HUGE PROBLEM.”⁵ These balloons emanate first from musical instruments and then take further and differing opportunities to impinge upon the life of the novels’ characters. Most often, the balloons appear as two-dimensional comic-strip speech/thought bubbles containing miniature and obscure texts. Eerie, recondite, comedic, taunting, sexually graphic, psychologically revealing, or even “mute/blank,” the balloons slowly

⁴ Peter O’Leary, “Myth’s Ythmic Whatsay and Nathaniel Mackey,” *Nathaniel Mackey, Destination Out: Essays on His Work*, ed. Jeanne Heuving (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 36.

⁵ Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death* (New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2018), 100.

dominate the narrative from the first appearance during N.'s initiation ceremony in *Bedouin Hornbook* until the final image of B'Loon floating away in *Late Arcade*. In my reading, the balloons become concrete occasions that mark the collision of the differing ontological states, offering paracritical and discrepant "takes" upon the lives of the musicians and their audiences. Simultaneously articulate and ambiguous, both sonic and textual in nature, the balloons effectively dramatize the operation of what-saying.

X-rated balloon texts account for over half of the sightings, but the first few unfold in a more poetic, dreamlike manner. Originally, N. witnesses a single balloon during an "initiation ceremony"/ after-hours gig (N. experiences a ritual-psychic mutilation, the musicians smoke a joint soaked in embalming fluid) that contains the words "Only One." He thinks of it as a cabalistic ball of light that he notices after his solo over the jazz standard "Body and Soul." A base level Gnosticism is hinted at, "a vocation for longing," as N.'s thoughts during this solo were of a distant week-long love affair that cannot be erased nor yet pursued (Mackey, *From a Broken*, 89). Letter "28.IV.81" describes the next sighting occurs a few months later, when, during the song "Bottoming Out," bubbles keep emerging from several musician's horns and burst as the audience touches them. They are wordless, but connotatively rich; N. sees them as "the blink of a weeping eye," "cavewall and canvas," "aborted exit, caesarian 'out'," each image associating spherical quality to historical incident (166). This type of imaginal dual consciousness, this splitting of self is echoed in the Gnostic idea of the "troubled birth": the divine spark (N. calls the sputtering notes he plays "staccato sparks") within each soul connects it to heaven, while the body's flesh consigns it to the hostile environment of earth. These ideas, and others—a criticism of the middlebrow aesthetics which Molimo m'Atet oppose, a mouth

washed out with soap, the bubbles from Lawrence Welk's machine—prepare us for the balloon experience proper to take shape. The sense Mackey provides is one of calculated foreboding.

II. Discrepant Engagement

The Latinate roots of the term “discrepant” call difference, disagreement, dissonance, and crackle into chordal resonance with each other, while the French origins of “engagement” conjure up a martial resonance. This boisterous phrase lends itself to open-ended possibilities for signification, the calling forth of rub, abrade, clash, fray, snag, rasp—verbs-as-nouns that serve as the requisite conduct between opposing/dialectical categories such as seen/hidden, seen/spoken, and il/legible. Discrepant engagement is thus a practice of heterogeneous conjoining-by-contiguity, an attention towards roughness and the mixing of disparate elements, the result of which Mackey names “noise,” also understood as “the discrepant foundation of all coherence and articulation, of the purchase upon the world fabrication affords” (Mackey, *Discrepant*, 19). We might note even at the level of definition, Mackey places the words “discrepant” and “foundation” side by side, indicating his preference for collision and complication. For Mackey, noise is not only the product of this fruitful engagement but also a revelation of the suppressed aspects of any signifying system, be it literary, musical, or otherwise. Noise becomes an escapee from totalizing and perfectionist works of art or theory, a corrective to simplistic and closure-oriented narratives. Part of *From a Broken Bottle's* project is the transcription of both recorded (actual tracks from specific jazz artists) and imagined (the songs written, rehearsed and performed by Molimo m'Atet) sound into written language, and thus noise - whether heard in the fury of an Albert Ayler solo, or in the skips on a cd or vinyl record - makes itself seen in Mackey's writing. Improvisational music's “divergence from the

given” (here I refer to the melody of a jazz standard), its simultaneous wordlessness and attempted emulation of speech, are echoed in Mackey’s creaking of the word, which “complicates and critiques” standard grammatical practices (Mackey, *Paracritical*, 211). Mackey writes:

It (discrepant engagement) worries identity and demarcation, resolute boundary lines, resolute definition, obeying a vibrational rather than a corpuscular sense of being. . . . To see being as a verb rather than noun is to be at odds with hypostasis, the reification of fixed identities that has been the bane of socially marginalized groups. It is to be at odds with taxonomies and categorizations that obscure the fact of heterogeneity and mix (*Discrepant*, 20).

At the level of language, Mackey has several techniques by which he performs such boundary breaking, attempting to make the unseen sound upon the page. Most prominently, he uses a unique type of lexical-kinesthetic synaesthesia.

Dimitri Anastopoulos describes this specific process which moves beyond the sensory-perceptual exchange already suffused throughout the work. In a literary derangement not unlike a solo passage from one of avant-jazz’s masters, Mackey’s prose “assumes the difficulty of abstract, conceptual thinking, even though it is formed by more concrete, tactile description. . . . Here, synaesthesia would constitute a melding or synthesis of interpretation, the conflation of abstract concepts and concrete descriptions.”⁶ In the following example, we find “noise” or abrasion issuing from the merging of adjective phrase and proper noun (“dizzy”, “axe”), and from the multiple connotative directions of the word “spin.” N., who is subject to precipitous, consciousness-losing, “cowrie shell / bottlecap attacks” that emanate from his forehead, has just

⁶ Dimitri Anastopoulos, “Resisting the Law: Nathaniel Mackey’s *Djbot Baghostus’s Run*” (The Johns Hopkins University Press, *Callaloo*, Vol. 23, No. 2., Spring 2000): 784-795.

recovered from one such incident and is speaking to his mother, who distrusts her son's choice of career. "No, seriously", she went on, "all those records doing all that spinning have made you dizzy" (*From a Broken Bottle*, 207). Spinning is literally "going in circles," which makes one dizzy. Yet N. isn't in motion; since the word for "put a record on" is "spin," he spins records. For N.'s mother, listening to too much jazz will negatively alter your consciousness and behaviour, and so this message is framed as her old "axe to grind," one she's been grinding since he was a child. Yet this rhetorical figure solidifies in the hands of the musicians N. studies; The instrument of a musician is known as their "axe." For N., the music contained in the record's grooves, released through the cyclical, circular motion of the turntable puts him into a trance state, a dizziness recapitulated in the cowrie attacks. Further, the very name of "Dizzy" (underscored by N.'s recent adoption of the trumpet), recalls Dizzy Gillespie, one of bebop's inventors. One becomes what one hears. In this sense, N. does "go in circles." While listening, he metaphorically spins in ecstasy as in Sufi dervish practices, themselves designed to allow the adept to abandon selfhood and connect with God through music and cyclical motion. "These gods were there," Mackey tells Hua Hsu in an interview while discussing why he chose to attend university so close to New York City's burgeoning avant-garde jazz scene.⁷ Recorded music becomes a kind of in-between category, neither physical nor ethereal. N. self-questions, thinks perhaps his mother could be right: "Are the (cowrie) attacks a self-sentencing conviction the music fosters and feeds. . . . Are self-sentencing conviction and self-commuting sentence merely symbiotic halves of a *self-cycling ordeal*?" (*From a Broken Bottle*, 208, italics mine). Finally, the axe becomes the edge onto which the nicks and scratches of a record played repeatedly are carved. Appropriately, Miles Davis' *Seven Steps to Heaven* is the album under discussion.

⁷ See Hua Hsu, "The Long Song", *The New Yorker*, April 12, 2021, 25. Mackey's quotation is in reference to the "new thing" jazz musicians assembled in New York when he was a student at Princeton.

III. Paracritical Hinge

In his essay “Poseidon (Dub Version),” Mackey conflates creaking of the word with “an array of intellectual trends that tend to be grouped under the rubric ‘theory’” (*Discrepant*, 182). He outlines several of the canonical features of critical theory (hermeneutics of suspicion, loss of faith in dominant paradigms, the sense of a representational and foundational crisis) and points to their efficacy in the work of complicating and re-organizing the humanist West’s view of itself. Defined as a questioning of ground or origin, or an investigation into conditions of possibility, critique encompasses a key aspect of the work done by Molimo m’Atet through their pursuit of a more experimental music, and by Mackey himself within the lineage of radical writing and his attempts to transcribe said music. Both parties are unsatisfied by the limits of the “given.” Mackey modifies his method of critique with the prefix *para*, meaning both “beside, near, issuing from” and “against, contrary to, protection against.” Thus, the neologism itself inscribes a discrepancy: a combination of proximity and suspicion, a critical approach that examines itself even as it outwardly examines. The paracritical observer can simultaneously critique their objects of attention and hold space for “near but divergent identities within given disciplines and dispositions” (Mackey, *Paracritical*, 212). The next word, hinge, like critique, functions as verb and noun. As noun, hinge is the support of the door’s opening and closing, that which demarcates passage-between, and for Mackey this must include relations considered discrepant. Speaking specifically of the first trilogy of the series, he writes:

It’s a type of fiction that wants to be a door or to open a door permitting flow between disparate orders of articulation. It wants to be what I call a paracritical hinge, permitting flow between statement and nonstatement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and

performance, music and literature, and so forth. It traffics in a mix—a discrepant, collaborative mix—of idioms, genres, registers, dispositions. (211)

But Mackey also points to hinge as verb, expressly its quality of “swing,” thereby embedding the cornerstone of jazz music within the actions of migration, interface, combination. The operation of the paracritical hinge expresses a further dimension of the creaking of the word, one where movement-between afforded by hinge extends the mere rubbing-against, so that noise might undergo a transformational process as it flows between different cultural and formal aesthetic styles (witness Pharoah Sanders’s use of middle eastern scales on the album *Tauhid*). For the band and its members “boundary crossing and its implied if not explicit critique of categorization” is a matter of course, as evidenced in their genre-blending compositions, their abstract theorizing on subjects from graffiti to Griaule, or their ongoing improvisations (209). A hinge is a link that allows movement from one location to another and facilitates the engagements Mackey seeks to create between discrepant musics, myths, social orders, and schools of thought. The “noise” generated from these activities reflects upon any attempts to narrow or clarify meaning, despite the general public’s fondness for entrenched monoculture. After all, “American society’s appetite for simplicities is not to be underestimated” (242).

Hinge is also a pivot point, a meeting place, familiar to Mackey’s readers in such figures as the limp-afflicted Yoruba trickster Legba or the Pale Fox of the Dogon who bestows the gift of divination; The Comeback Inn, the Scarab, The Blue Light Lounge, names of the venues the band plays; and The Crossroads Choir, The Chosen Few, the Mystic Horn Society, names of jazz ensembles. Each of these figures signifies a nexus of heaven and earth, or a way this nexus is announced. Here hinge becomes mythic, the site of what Mircea Eliade called a “hierophany.”⁸ The contingent contents are no longer concrete cultural artifacts, such as texts, but metaphysical

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 11.

energies, manifesting variously as improvisations, visions, or indeed, balloons. The balloons are an emanation of contact sustained at the hinge; they are the mediators of the hinge. Balloons almost always appear in conjunction with the band's music, yet not all performances or listenings produce balloons. Certain conditions must be met; there must be a certain level of intensity of "critique" that calls forth the balloons. In the case of Molimo m'Atet, their music advances an interrogation into each character's current psychological state, uncovering and questioning the grounds upon which each musician self-identifies. The instinctual passions of Penguin, the anchored stoicism of Aunt Nancy, the Gnostic yearning emblematic of the group as a whole, are fully investigated and invested in in order to generate the required energy which allows the hinge to function—to creak in such a way that the "noise-cum-balloon" takes form. The combination of factors at play during such improvisatory ventures—each individual's emotionality swerving in and out of group chorusing, the extemporaneous calling-on of artistic ancestors via melodic quotation, and the harnessing of squelch, shred, flurry, and unpitched sound in order to purify the auditory ground, the action of noise or pure sound—are what the balloons require to reveal themselves.

Extending paracritical hinge's function as mediator, the hinge also *transforms*, so that each party is altered by the occasion. For Molimo m'Atet, solo improvising within a chordal or tonal or rhythmic structure necessitates a mental version of the saxophone technique known as circular breathing: as melodic and harmonic information is given by the musician, it affects and changes the responses of the group, who then send new structures and instant ideas back to the soloist and so on. It matches the well-known African-American musical pattern of call and response. Transposing the aspect of hierophany that Mackey's mythic allusiveness points toward onto this pattern, we have a musical offering being made by the musician, and a response from

the unknown - the rising up of a balloon. It is a reciprocal relationship, active and participatory on both sides, and by no means limited to the music in Mackey's writing. One might find it "hiding in plain sight" on a compilation of gospel songs. The Pilgrim Travelers, an American gospel quartet active in the late 1940s-50s, perform such a critique in their devastating track, "I Want My Crown," explicitly questioning God's ability to recognize the efforts of the faithful. Here, critique works to denaturalize that which seems natural and simply given, in other words, that all-knowing God could never make a mistake. The vocalist has complied with the good book, has carried out God's mission, has held his "sword and shield," has suffered, and in attempting to "carry out Your mission" is now "grown old and feeble." Yet with an almost unmatched fury in a *cappella* gospel singing of the period, tenor Keith Barbour demands that he receive "his crown." He is not on bended knee, he is not meek or polite before God. Instead, he "wrecks the house" with the passion of his divine gift—music, voice—and it is this style of meeting, a two-way movement of interchange, a rejection of subservience (that Mackey also applies to his mythography), where critique attends to the social, political, and metaphysical. It is impossible not to hear African American rage beneath "I Want My Crown," despite the song's four-part harmonic sweetness, theological intent, and insistent restraint.

IV. Ontological Substitutions

The combined explicit critique of containment announced by discrepant engagement and implicit urgency of movement afforded by paracritical hinge produce an often-literal questioning of the ground of reality within the narrative. In *From a Broken Bottle*, a variety of parallel realities

consistently intersect and impinge upon the empirical world, bringing with them artistic, cultural, and philosophical demands that threaten, in each instance, the “seen-said.” As mentioned in the introduction, these include: individual and collective dreaming, “X-Ray moments” either in rehearsal or on a gig (experienced by the musicians as a visionary state wherein the space-time continuum unravels and provides access to “other knowledge”), various states of spirit possession (the character of N.’s alter-ego Dredj, Penguin’s take-over while chopping onions, Djamilaa’s sleepwalking), the parallel universes of the “scribal performative undertaking” that are the librettos, and the balloons. The discrepant play that results when one of these zones usurps reality is necessarily illogical, if judged by the demarcations of common sense. Questions immediately confront the reader: What does it mean if you allow dream visions to influence key decisions in waking life? (I refer to the revelation of the new drummer as indicated in separate and conflicting dreams within the band). How do musically induced trance states contribute to a materialist conception of African American slave history? At what point does sexual desire become expressed as spiritual loss? What is extraordinary about the members of Molimo m’Atet is that they themselves never doubt the validity of the epistemological solutions provided by the rogue zones, even when the critique is focused upon themselves personally—as it often is. One must be able to remain fluid—to improvise—when confronted with a sudden, unpredictable, *present*. To think metaphorically, to immediately assess and instantly react, to have access to an entire repository of historical knowledge, to be accustomed to cultural fluidity, all these are attributes of the avant-jazz musician’s abilities as well as, Mackey implies, key components of the African diasporic skill set.

Each differing structure carries its own set of conditions. Spirit possession, for example, often involves actual danger as gigging does not, dreams typically offer tantalising yet enigmatic

vignettes, while the balloons taunt and undercut attempts at interpretation. Each style of interruption is discrete, yet connected through memory, image, speech, text, music, and myth. Unsurprisingly, it is the librettos, which, as separate scripts for such a “total art”, that take shape as the most developed and complex what-saying function against that of the characters’ quotidian world. They operate somewhat like dream (as day residue), somewhat like opera (the bold dramatic outlines of their plots, the “high-would” affectivity or emotionality), and somewhat like critical theory (the dense discursivity on a wide range of subjects from the police state to musician Joe Henderson’s “flubbed note”). Recombining events from the each of the other planes, they create surreal versions in which reality may be posited differently, exposing cracks, gaps, and openings through which sex, memory, and the psychopathology of everyday life may enter and exit. Thus, paracritical hinge is a key feature, not only in terms of music, writing, and register but also consciousness itself.

This ontological substitution deprivileges any specific one of these modes of consciousness; in a sense, it flattens the entire repertoire of reality to allow for maximum exchange. Indeed, part of what makes Mackey’s work so heterogeneous is his refusal to compromise the validity of “the intuitive, the uncanny, the oneiric, the sympathetic, the coincidental, the ecstatic, the intangible, the paradoxical, the oceanic, the quirky, the psychosomatic, the quixotic, the religioerotic and so on” (*Paracritical*, 326). O’Leary develops the idea of an increased open field of reality in Mackey’s work, connecting his unique language usage to spiritual and esoteric syncretism: “Mackey’s attraction to the Andoumboulou mythos attests to his interest in brokenness, netherness, waywardness, ghostliness, and the unfixable. *Just so, his reading of reality is not fixed*; rather, it’s a revision” (*Thick*, 243, italics mine). For O’Leary, and Mackey himself, one possible lens through which to view this penchant for

multiplicity is Gnostic, which supports an emanatory reality where various levels overlap and coexist, “multiple frames veiling and unveiling, albeit neither all at once” (*Paracritical*, 340). Several related Gnostic ideas haunt *From a Broken Bottle*, from the idea of “estrangement/the Stranger/cosmic dislocation” (the Angel of Dust itself, the never-seen, never-heard receiver of N.’s letters personifies this idea) to its qualification as a syncretic religion (thus connecting it to the cultural and aesthetic hybridity Mackey valorizes), to its linkage with the Dogon personages known as the Andoumboulou, human beings that are still in a state of “rough draft” (*Discrepant*, 204, 259; *Paracritical*, 341). Perhaps the strongest Gnostic theme pursued by Mackey is that of “lost ground, lost twinness, lost union and other losses” which come to inflect the messages each ontological zone carries into the text and is publicly announced by the scripts the balloons contain.⁹ For the remainder of this essay, I will concentrate on the repertoire of the balloons, the locus of the most intense speculation for the characters in the work, if not critics. Emissaries of the spirit, thin-skinned punchlines, human/bird harbingers, or mute “tell-alls,” the balloons play mimetic games with each member of the band, inscribing their texts compellingly toward either dissent or ascent.

V. The Balloon Problem

I’ll borrow from Peter Gizzi’s afterword to *The House that Jack Built*, his edition of the lectures of Jack Spicer, specifically the section of the essay titled “Enter the Diamond.” Spicer, like Mackey, is a poet who threads his oeuvre with poetic models: systems of theme and theory which form a variegated substrate for the entirety. For Spicer, this includes Martians, radios, and

⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2006), xi.

baseball. Gizzi states that baseball both “represents a complex system that reflects and materially embodies its humanity, geometry and sociality” and is “part of Spicer’s larger attempt to degrade the high tone of critical discourse”.¹⁰ Mackey, who has spoken of Spicer’s influence on his fiction writing, uses the balloon theme similarly, in that it materializes a complex network of relations between individuals and groups, metaphysics and entertainment, birth and death.¹¹ It is also unabashedly humorous; and while it is not Mackey’s goal to undermine critical rhetoric (far from it), he provides, like Spicer, an absurdist counterpoint to more traditional literary representations of existential and epistemological questioning.

The balloon’s satiric edge constitutes a third version of the work of paracritical hinge in which *para* is understood as “going beyond,” or “through”: where critique turns on itself, disrupting its own process in order to question, “what-say,” and overturn the ground it stands on. A radical reversal of subject/object relations occurs when, rather than viewing one of the musicians (or Mackey himself) as the initiator of theoretical analysis, we find that the balloons themselves occupy that “subjective” position. Rather than questioning the conditions of possibility—for example, pursuing the farther extremes of experimental art both the band and Mackey participate in—one finds *oneself* being questioned by a condition of *impossibility*. These conditions are the balloons and the contingent planes they demarcate. The very presence of multiple and competing zones, so that narrative is constantly re-ordered and intentionality disrupted, insists upon a base assumption that what has been previously “impossible” is now in fact unavoidable. Outsider artists are to be challenged no less than mainstream ones simply due to their more marginal societal roles.

The word “impossible” offers an opportunity to further the connection with Spicer.

¹⁰ Jack Spicer, *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 192.

¹¹ For example, the first letter addressed to the Angel of Dust in Mackey’s first book, *Eroding Witness*, is CC-ed to Spicer and Federico García Lorca. See *Eroding Witness* (Pittsboro: Selva Oscura Press, 1985/2018), 52.

“Imp-” is cognate with the spirit of the duende, a figure originating in Federico García Lorca’s well-known 1933 lecture “Play and Theory of the Duende,” which concerns the “black spirit” Lorca sees as the animating force of flamenco music.¹² Mischief, dissociation, irrationality, awareness of death, “the speaking of more than one knew what”: these are the conditions the impossible advances and for which the balloons act as messengers (Mackey, *Paracritical*, 186). Throughout *From a Broken Bottle*, N. and company are taunted by texts that describe impossibly graceful Egyptian gods creating music, painful childhood memories of abandonment, moral quandaries instigated by devil-or-angel substitutes, or possible-prophetic images that tear the narrative to shreds. Ellen B. Basso’s epigraph that opens Mackey’s second book, *Whatsaid Serif*, relates a further quality of the what-sayer that has relevance here. She notes that “the person serving as the what-sayer can change during the course of a telling,” thus accounting for the often-contradictory messaging the balloons proffer.¹³ In keeping with Lorca’s proposal that the duende arrives on its own time, regardless of the musicians’ technical ability, so it is with the balloons’ unpredictability. When an improvisation reaches a certain fever pitch, when the noise generated through the mix of discrepant modes achieves a certain intensity, the imp/duende/what-sayer/balloon arises and performs paracritique on the total situation at hand, be it a public gig, a recording session, or simply a rehearsal. In this way, “Reflexivity, metafictionality, advances a warning the text issues to itself, a reminder that it not presume to have escaped the discourses it ostensibly critiques” (Mackey, *Discrepant*, 188). This third mode of paracritique harnesses the undeniable comedic/mimetic potential of balloon-as-interlocuter to create an uncanny tension. The “demands” made by the balloons read dead-serious, but how can

¹² Mackey’s writing on this subject is extensive. See, for example, *Discrepant*, 162-164; *Paracritical*, 181-198.

¹³ Nathaniel Mackey, *Whatsaid Serif* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), n.p.

they be, when they come issued from such a cartoonlike source and when they critique themselves through such a presentation?

I would like to look at three balloon qualities that function as modifiers to each individual balloon circumstance, shading its surface, sometimes to the point of eclipse. These are containment, flight, and festivity. As figures of containers-of-air they refer simultaneously to lungs (“The balloons are dispossessed lungs”), to inflation as both condition and adjective (Mackey writes of inflationary aplomb, reaction, claims, premises) and to musical instruments.¹⁴ Air is the necessary animating breath of the brass and reed-based instruments. It is also the atomic and oscillational conductor of the sound of drum kit, and the upright bass, whose strings’ vibrating causes pitch to be heard. It is that which is contained within the hollow of the upright bass’s body and which creates an acoustic environment (the fourth book of the series is titled *Bass Cathedral*). Likewise, the docile air molecules inside Drennette’s kick drum, snare, and toms, are what is activated to produce percussion, and her frequent drum solos are often described in terms of their air-power: “Drennette brewed a spinning wind with each roll she resorted to,”; “...she made the drums a wind instrument, ventilated his grist with beguiling gusts” (Mackey, *From a Broken*, 513). Mimetically, balloons become skulls or heads and refer to what is contained therein: memory, thought, image, and emotion. On one level, this explains the balloons’ scriptorial imperatives, the lines of text/speech replacing or perhaps reiterating the melodic rhythmic utterances from each instrument. The “head” of a jazz tune is the repeated arrangement found at the beginning and ends of the song, the container of melody, which for most musicians was in fact memorized. The head-balloon motif is established early in *Bedouin Hornbook*, during N.’s initiation. As he looks around at the audience, he feels “a bit disconcerted

¹⁴ Nathaniel Mackey, *Late Arcade* (New York: New Directions, 2017), 134.

by the blank, laconic stare I met on every rounded, ‘metaphysical’ head. It was as if I’d stepped into a de Chirico canvas” (91).

The hot air balloon’s connection with ascent and flight directs our attention in further ways. Analogical height, which can refer to a myriad of concepts that thread the volumes—popularity, aplomb, elitism, vantage, king/queenship, flight, escape, hybridity—becomes a measurement by which a notion of “attainment” is mediated, triggering questions that are keyed to levels of satisfaction. For the artist-musician, how “high” is high enough when it comes to material security or creative capability? In what ways does achievement harm or hinder artistic and personal freedom—itself imaged by flight? The heights of popularity can easily trap (contain) a performer, pushing them towards formulaic or merely successful interpretations of their work. N. reflects on the ballooning cheeks of Dizzy Gillespie—do they end up becoming a gimmick that he must reproduce each time he performs? Do Louis Armstrong’s bulging eyes represent affective authenticity, or are they just full of “hot air”? Hence the balloons, and their tendency to pop, occupy a consistently anxious position in the minds of a jazz group committed to higher purposes than the merely commercial. Mackey isn’t the only African American artist to use this trope; De La Soul’s *Buhloone Mindstate* (1993) has a repeated chant in several songs: “It might blow up, but it won’t go pop.” In both cases, credibility in the ears of the audience is what is valued over any type of “crossover” into mainstream commercial success. This anxiety produces several crisis points where several of the band members attempt a way to “beat the balloons at their own game,” each time with unpredictable results.

Mackey avoids the fact that balloons usually signify celebration until the last volume of the series, when the band is hired to play the birthday gathering for the Comeback Inn’s owner’s wife. The stages of pregnancy, birth, and first breath proper to such an occasion are not lost on

the theoretically inclined band members, who, in an instance of discrepant engagement, conflate the club's prevailing upbeat mood by recalling a past gig where, during a particularly searching saxophone solo, an audience member had yelled out "Uterine hoofbeat!," a church holler intended to encourage the difficult work of reclaiming self-hood. They decide that this phrase (originating from the second appearance of the comic-strip balloons) strikes the correct note of "dark festivity" they need to summon and improvise over, signifying as it does that "the run of apocalyptic beat, repercussion and possession thereby implied (the Four Horsemen allied with Haitian vodoun) was ours to introduce, a complicating note we would insist accrues to each natal occasion, the owner's wife's notwithstanding" (Mackey, *Late*, 97). This challenge to the more typical request of levity sets in motion "a sometimes fluid, sometimes tense standoff with the music's more austere demands," animating further meditations on the object that has metamorphosized from inconsequential decoration to almost world-defining, world-constructing symbol (112).

It is doubtful whether Mackey knew in advance the importance that the balloons would have for this serial project. In the first installment, *Bedouin Hornbook*, there are only two incidents that qualify as "balloon-worthy", and they seem to be "rehearsals" for what comes. In the next volume, *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, there are none. The next three works, *Atet A.D.*, *Bass Cathedral*, and *Late Arcade*, ramp up the balloons' role until it virtually takes over, stealing attention and interest away from the music and towards the spectacle of their appearances, gradually unnerving the group. The balloons weave in and out of each otherwise discrete ontological zone, obeying no boundaries, offering no conclusive synthesis of meaning in and of themselves. Within the frame of the ontological permeability, and of "what-saying" so much at play in the work, the balloons become a twinned instance of this impulse, an indeterminate

goaded disturbance, one that forces the members of Molimo m'Atet to question the synaesthetic essence of their music, their relationships to each other, and their influence within the wider social sphere. They produce and enact the operations of discrepant engagement and paracritical hinge on a basic level through the often-comedic opposition between the oracular cipher which speaks of death, sex, and loss (the content of their texts) and the incongruous performativity of their cartoonish manifestations (the form(s) of their appearing).

Seen from a racialized framework, their emergence, or “escape,” from the instruments allies them not only with slave fugitivity but also with the release of spiritual energies, emanations of Black diasporic speech/knowledge that have remained “undercover” and therefore preserved from white curiosity and control. Mackey steadfastly aligns his writing with this imperative, refusing to spell out the aesthetic and therapeutic connections toward which the balloon-angel texts hint. His early reading of Michael Sells’s *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* provides a more cosmic perspective for this same impulse, one that stresses the paradoxical and apophatic registers of his esotericism (Mackey, *Paracritical*, 327). As the band puts it in their second Post-Expectant Press Release: “No one knows them better than us—no one, that is, knows better than us that they’re not to be known—and our experience has been that no peace is to be made with them” (Mackey, *Late*, 133). The balloons, then, gradually come to occupy a place in the narrative that is shadow-like, “endarkened,” to use Duncan’s phrase.¹⁵ This surreptitious aspect appears most vividly when they speak in their “eroto-elegiac” stance, one that has roots in both Gnostic myth and Black stand-up comedy. In the readings that follow I will focus on this mode, clarifying the workings of paracritique in all three of its aspects: as what allows for flow between ontological zones and cultural styles, as the hinge where migrating

¹⁵ See Robert Duncan, *a little endarkenment and in my poetry you find me* (Buffalo: Poetry/Rare Books Collection, 1997), 29.

entities are transformed, and as the what-saying, creaking, self-insinuating impulse that emanates from the experience at the hinge.

Section VI details a “ground shifting” that occurs in the final song of a gig, the musicians literally and metaphorically employing the call and response technique to gradually transform “lust” into “lost”. Section VII pivots from eros to romance, showing the balloons’ predilection to simultaneously apply abstraction (memory) and actuality (syntax) to uncover and question the origins of the characters’ lovelorn affects. Finally, section VIII examines the results of the band’s attempt to short circuit the balloons’ ability to dominate the (ritual) experience of live music. Their refusal to be controlled or silenced ignores both eros and romance and ushers in a cosmogonic agape that mirrors the ceremonial possession-by-a-god of Haitian voodoo.

VI. Letter “13.II.83”

Letter “13.II.83” is a report of the encore of the band’s very successful record release party. This balloon instance swerves from the usual in two ways: in the brevity of the balloon’s messages and in their origination not from the band’s instruments but from the audience, which becomes the basis for a ritualistic experience of spirit, albeit one based in flesh. In the balloon corpus, Gnostic loss and funk’s lust combine to produce fusions that traverse the entirety of their poles: from Sufi poetry to soap opera, tin pan alley lyric to sacred sex text. Whether lustful, familial, or spiritual, these phenomenological states of “love” contain within them commensurate felt absences. Yearning, therefore, is expressed as love’s correlate. The balloons often paracritique either side of this inflationary experience, re-inscribing overblown claims made by dominant love themes by putting a pin into them. They reveal, somewhat ironically, the more down-to-earth aspects of love which the characters often choose to ignore, preferring the security of their

own thought bubbles. For example, the “wouldly” heights of uninhibited sex is no match for the one-to-one connection of spirit during those moments; the entire façade of opera is merely a dressed-up cat house; gazing into the eyes of the beloved means turning away from the needs of the community; the love of a lost parent becomes a lag-leg limp one can never heal.¹⁶ Yearning for what is not immediate, or is lacking, is thus a precondition, a discrepancy required to initiate the balloons, and when occurring within a song, this is usually expressed by the music’s character and the song’s title.

The piece, “Djam Suasion,” is an improvisation that does not appear on the album itself. Thus, it relies on a more responsive set of skills and a slightly higher level of attention because the “head” and form of the new tune are completely unknown to the musicians. The title is curious. What more might they have to prove or persuade when they have already been so well received by the audience? The tune begins with a series of individual solos which tend to emphasize the jagged, pointillistic and intellectual strains of improvisation. After Penguin’s solo, one where he “reached a point of utmost aubade and high flight” (befitting the character assigned to the spurned lover role), they drop down into something that “implied a low cauldron, shot through with omen, semiotic stress, a bubbling vat given the reach of torn chthonic tissue.”¹⁷ This murk “implied regret” and yet also spoke of “reminiscent flesh’s first awakening.” The rhythm section decides to anchor the piece in a 4/4 shuffle meter, which tilts the song toward an “irresistible, infectious” boogaloo beat which gets the audience on their feet. Their dance involves each hand pounding each thigh with a fist, a gentle hammer-like motion; as each fist hits thigh, a balloon emerges, each one bearing the same message. They are divided by gender. The female dancers’ balloons read: *I lie on my back. He straddles me, down on all fours, his*

¹⁶ “Wouldly” is one of N.’s neologisms, here approximating a conditional, or possible, or pointing-toward outcome. For one definition, see Mackey, *Late Arcade*, 134.

¹⁷ Nathaniel Mackey, *Bass Cathedral* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 67.

head between my legs, my head between his. I press my nose to the crack of his ass, put my mouth around the sack his balls hang in (Mackey, Bass, 69). The male balloons are the mirror version, replacing “*matted hair of her cunt*” for ball-sack. N. is delighted by the dancing, yet dismayed as the message seems to return “jazz” to “jass,” a reference to an earlier version of the word and its bawdy house connotations. The balloons’ critique harnesses the simmering erotic. It “lowers” the high-tone of “heady” avant jazz, challenging the band to respond to the claim that they are unable to loosen up, that they are “prudes”. Ironically, the extreme mimetic one dimensionality of the balloon messages unlocks possibilities where one might seek new ground for signification: sexually illustrative text veils flesh as prison, the sixty-nine position graphically recalls an ouroboros or eternal recurrence. The band telepathically senses the need to look beyond this x-rated instantiation, to respond to the dancer’s clamour for an “ascetic deployment of workmanlike rhythmicity and vocal exertion,” to complicate what at first seems purely erotic (69). To do this, they change the music, diminishing the corporeal groove and cutting out the harmonic content until the song’s austerity reflects nothing so much as an encounter with emptiness.

Fist to thigh becomes hammer to anvil, which conjures the starkest modality of flamenco, the martinete, an unaccompanied song sung to the beat of a hammer striking iron. The band drops down to the voice of the North African born Djamilaa, with Drennette on ride cymbal, which explicitly sets the scene for an irruption of duende. But the imps have made their point – what effect will calling on duende have upon the already-ensconced balloons? Despite the intimacy of the new soundscape, the dancers do not stop, instead their movements become almost robotic. But the balloons respond in kind, they now appear wordless, empty, blank, mimicking Djamilaa’s harsh, wordless, song, which “speaks” “via texture, inflection, intensity

and tone,” bordering on “cosmic harangue, gnostic rant” (70). This is an example of the band’s symbiotic critique from/of/with the balloons, where premises and narratives are offered, undercut, and modified in a musical call and response dialectic: funk to flamenco. A flood of mythological extrapolations of the smith-god pour in, from Greek Hephaistos (lame, like Legba) to Yoruba Ogun, to the Indian Tvashtri, dramatizing this hieropanhy as a nexus of heaven and earth. There is a definite catharsis in this shift, from the sound-image of sexual pounding to “would-be sacred labour or divine endeavour,” but importantly Mackey refuses to allow transcendence. Djamilaa’s martinete contains all manner of creaks, it calls upon the historical specificities of flamenco’s historical and geographical genealogy, it exposes the roughness of the threadbare and the impoverished, it elaborates on the imperfect, and it suggests that the making at the forge, the god’s work which is intended to be all powerful, is in fact flawed (71). The repetitive actions that the sixty-nine explicitly celebrates transform into a sombre and “mixed-emotional” hammering, a marking out of time, a monotonous, abject echoing of machine-like labour. The martinete freed them from the body’s containment but notated a longing for which no answer—empty balloon—would come. The band face a difficult problem, trapped between all-too-human might and meekness, corporeal earth and absent heaven.

This neither/nor is a kind of impasse, a prison the dancers inhabit as they, trance-like, continue their fist-to-thigh gesture, empty balloons still appearing at each hit. The band solves this by invoking the ancestors through musical citation, also known as covering. (Such opening up of time-space Simone White names anaphoric/epigraphic, a way of expressing Black history through music, to which I will return). The band chooses to quote Cannonball Adderley’s “Work Song,” transforming the hammer into an axe, the players’ instrument. The horn section of N., Lambert, and Penguin are recalled to duty playing the antiphonal “head” of “Work Song” in a

loop, again shifting the improvisation into another direction. The band now becomes “possessed or obsessed agents of iterativity . . . sacred and profane conduits caroling chiliastic sweat,” both “inmates and “wardens” of rhythm (73). Meanwhile, the dancers add to the continuing journey by picking up on the incoming strains of jazz-soul music, the “work” of the song hinting at both sharecropper’s field holler and Saturday night abandon, and matching the bands increasing intensity, their bodies vehicles for “lingual exertion and proto-apotheosis” (74). By the time the tune ends, the “something we were there to work out” has disappeared; and as each fist rebounds off thigh, the hand opens out as if in bloom, and no balloons emerge at all. N. understands this progression as subtle “victory” over the balloons in that the arrival of “no named aggregate,” or captionless moment signals a state of being that remains beyond words (75).

VII. Letter “5.VI.82”

In letter “5.VI.82,” N. describes the first arrival of multiple, narrative balloon texts which draw together several strata—collective dream, X-ray moment, myth—and subject them to mixed metaphorical and metathetic language in order to what-say the player’s surface aplomb. Here the balloons pick up on the multiple strains of sentimentality (as opposed to eros) that Mackey has threaded through the narrative: courtly etiquette, doowop wooings, balconic presentiments.

Penguin, having recently suffered a “romantic setback” in his pursuit of the new band member, drummer Drennette, has returned after a self-imposed retreat to “Wouldly Ridge.” The band are playing at the Soulstice club in Seattle, and during his solo on the composition “Prometheus,”

Penguin harnesses the persona of the twin, Epimetheus, messaging a “love-slave thematics” toward his personal Pandora, Drennette. As Drennette anchors the rhythm, she encourages his increasing speed and confidence, so much that “His oboe spoke. It not only spoke but did so with outrageous articulacy” (426). Summoned by Penguin’s “blistering pace,” the balloons appear: *Drennette dreamt I lived on Djeannine Street. I walked from one end to the other everyday, back and forth all day. Having heard flamenco singers early on, I wanted in on duende* (427). As more balloons come, a pattern emerges: when Penguin draws a breath, the balloon disappears, when he exhales to play a run, another balloon arises, the out breath produces a balloon and on the in breath it vanishes, a reverse lung of sorts. Mackey skillfully literalizes the third model of paracritque, whereby it comes forth from *within*, and works against its host. *A long-toed woman, no respecter of lines, Drennette obliged me by dreaming I walked up and down Djeannine Street, stepping, just as she or Djeannine would, into literality, notwithstanding the littered sidewalk and the unkempt yards* (427). The texts are in effect “written” by the animating breath and its multiple etymological tangents: spirit, vital principle, volatile substance, supernatural immaterial creature, and essential principle. Thus, one can see in the balloons a key hinge point, a fulcrum between zones, where the breath both translates and becomes (a) spirit, an expression that is caught in both ear and eye. This “essence” is “alienated rather than immediate,” which ties Gnosticism’s precept of estrangement to a core proposition of esotericism, “the idea that meaning or essence is veiled rather than openly available” (Mackey, *Paracritical*, 339). As I shall point out in the next section, this estrangement, or ontology of loss, and its corresponding illegible or incomplete messaging, has a definite parallel in African and diasporic aesthetic practices as well.¹⁸

¹⁸ On the concept of estrangement and aesthetics, see Harryette Mullen, *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 155.

In *Bass Cathedral*, Dredj, (N.'s possessed-ego), gives an interview to a press conference eager to get more "inside information" on the balloons. This is an excerpt:

Q: Isn't saying you're tempted to say X a way of saying X? Why do you have your say by withholding your say?

A: Say says nothing unless pressed by spirit. Nothing I say, no matter what I say, will even come close.

Q: What do you mean by spirit?

A: I mean what people, generation after generation, have meant by it down thru the ages.

Q: Could you give an example?

A: The balloons are full of it. (Mackey, *Bass*, 148)

Given that Mackey has mentioned his fiction is strongly influenced by his poetry, it makes sense to read the balloon texts, cryptic as they are, as prose poems.¹⁹ In these first two iterations one immediately notes how form and content coincide. There is an intimacy between the speech-like phrases ("I wanted in on") and the close-spoken telling of dream, replete with the repetition and accretion usual to such telling. The proliferation of the phoneme "e" stands out in the words Drennette, dreamt, end, every, flamenco, duende, respecter, stepping, and unkempt. These short, gruff tones make for a more cut, broken up syntax, complementing the image of the littered sidewalk and unkempt yards. The Gnostic/diasporic notes of ruin and abandonment are accentuated in these same phonemes, reinforced by the mention of duende. Possession by duende leaves the voice left shredded and torn from life itself, singing of a longing that has no remedy, a thirst that cannot be quenched. The second balloon "creaks" when it uses three phrases that unexpectedly jar the reader. Mackey syntactically upsets, hinges connotative possibilities to keep the poetic ground active, allowing language to what-say communicative meaning. Drennette is a

¹⁹ On the influence of Mackey's verse practice on his fiction, see *Paracritical*, 338.

“long-toed woman,” a colloquialism meaning that she has possible Greek ancestry, that she will dominate her marriage, and that she is hot-tempered. What are the “lines” that she does not respect? And what does it mean for Penguin to “step into literality” just as (real drummer) Drennette or (dream drummer) Djeannine would? Perhaps “stepping into literality” for Drennette involves the fulfillment of her long-toed epithet. Seen this way, her Greek origin refers to her Pandora aspect (the song they are playing is “Prometheus”), and the domination of marriage reflects the central controlling power of the drummer in African musics and her position within Molimo m’Atet that “makes them whole” (Lambert composed “Prometheus” as a way of alerting the band to their need of a “real,” trapkit drummer, as opposed to the hand percussion that had been using [Mackey, *From a Broken*, 123]).

Drennette’s “hot” temper points to her role as the beloved or the desired one, the object of Penguin’s pursuit and the favourite, i.e. most visited, of the balloons. She crosses lines as Gnostic Sophia, the source of instability between the material and immaterial realms, Mackey’s word choice of “respector” sounding out the ghost in both balloon and belief. The balloon claims that Drennette dreams of Penguin also stepping “into literality” as she does; he also, it seems, crosses lines. This ability to relay across borders is part of Mackey’s overall theoretical project as we have seen; antiliteralism “appeals to me,” he writes, and “implies an acute sense of unarrested play between letter and spirit, the very play that poetry seeks to ride rather than resolve” (*Paracritical*, 340). Perhaps to step into literality is to become trapped in a single zone universe. The fourth and fifth balloons shift the predominate vowel sound to an open “a” which seems to correspond to the introduction of the concept of “audiotactile aroma,” the “synaesthetic perfume” that leads the dreamer on and, by combining memory, music, and sweat, blurs both abstract and concrete objects. The “Long-toed” descriptor of Drennette shifts from adjective duty to that of

adverb and now modifies her “advance,” which “animated the street with an astringent allure.” This advance also cracks the street’s concrete in order to release “an atomistic attar,” dilating the nostrils of the balloon’s “I” (Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle*, 427). The poetics of the balloons, which are both *of* and *not-of* their musician-“mother,” and contain material from personal history, collective dream, and participatory ritual, serve as empirical proofs of the collision between them. More than just what-saying the individual player, they subvert and scrutinize any easy façades or convenient veils their subjects / witnesses choose to ignore. Below—and in addition to—their comedic guise lies an apparent underworld of rejected truths. In the case of the song “Prometheus,” Penguin’s external surface simplicity when it comes to matters of the heart cracks apart when his troubling and cyclical psychic situation is publicly exposed.

VIII. Letter “27.II.84”

Drennette is the ostensible object of the balloons’ most sustained communication. A twenty-two-page letter from “27.V.84” details the event that one might call “peak balloon,” which occurs during her solo on the song “Some Sunday,” a solo she shares with a balloon-equipped audience. Peak balloon’s heightened context is due to several factors, not the least of which is the increased expectation of the balloon phenomena from both band and public. At this point, it has been three years since the proto-balloon-bubbles of Seattle, and Molimo m’Atet have done extensive interviews, sent out press releases and been forced to reckon, privately and publicly, with the attention and mystery the balloons bring, activities they have grown to resent. In addition, this gig is a closed affair, a birthday party for the owner of the Comeback Inn’s wife. I noted above

the palpable tension that the band experiences between the demand for a party and the call of the “Uterine Hoofbeat!,” the “dread, gnostic note” that insists birth is a “dubious arrival into a miscreant world,” a “dubious or at best ambiguous cause for celebration” (Mackey, *Late*, 97). This gig is also where the band decide to engage with the balloons more directly by bringing a box of literal balloons and handing them out to the audience members to use as instruments during certain cued moments of the song. Although Aunt Nancy calls this strategy a “prophylaxis” and potential participatory revelation, N. wonders, “Is irony lever enough to fend off what could look like endorsement?” (77). In this gesture Mackey maximizes the utility of his central image, hilariously offering a rubber balloon/condom as paltry protection against cosmic pregnancy and having N. express an avant-garde anxiety over gimmick, authenticity, and approval, “festivity” not being “their thing.” In other words, Aunt Nancy’s move is one of Frazerian sympathetic magic, using like to fend off like, a move that N. doubts not only the efficacy of (too slight a gesture, too silly a solution), but worries that it too might become a further identification, or worse, trademark, of the band’s performances. Letter “27.V.84” appears in the final (i.e., most recent) volume of *From a Broken Bottle*, and it is worth noting the deepening paracritical effect balloon what-saying has on the band as it forces them towards an existential crisis concerning the very act of making music itself.

Before the encore, Lambert passes balloons out to the audience and instructs them to “play” during each solo, following each musician’s cues as to when to begin and end, which produces a cacophonous swell that meshes in and out of the band’s vamping. Handing out balloons, encouraging involvement, will break the distinction (the second function of the hinge) between the two entities, band and audience, “listener and performer, participant and observer” (77). As each soloist takes turn, N. notes an increasing level of confidence and playfulness from

the “balloon choir.” When, during Drennette’s solo, the balloon emissaries emerge, they do so from the audience’s own real balloons, creating what N. calls “balloon-on-balloon valence”—a completely unexpected outcome, reversing Aunt Nancy’s reductionist expectations (114). N.’s phrase plays discrepantly, instantly bringing the hackneyed media-speak “Black on Black violence” meme into the semiotic field, and re-inscribing it, paradigmatically exchanging balloons for weapons, valence for violence.

I take the balloons as a manifestation of contact sustained at the hinge, both products and agents of the creaking of the worlds. They are escapees, and as such, the channels through which they move are not sanctioned pathways, but rather gaps, fissures, faults, and tears. For Mackey, imperfection is aesthetically pleasing, ethically inevitable, and divinely sanctioned. Forgone presuppositions which are somehow beyond question are accordingly subjected to what-saying and critique, whether they are the fantasies of the musicians (who are at first inflated by the appearance of the balloons) or are mytho-historical events as described by N. (that his father was a member of the Ink Spots). I want to connect this sense of breakage and absence to African aesthetics found in both musical and graphic systems, showing their influence on the composing practises of Molimo m’Atet, and on Mackey’s self-aware positioning in a diasporic (and perhaps Duncan-influenced) “derivative” poetics.

In *Bedouin Hornbook* (the first installment of *From a Broken Bottle*), Aunt Nancy has the band read John Miller Chernoff’s *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (1981), from which comes the following quotation: “The music is perhaps best considered as an arrangement of gaps . . . it is the space between the notes from which the dynamic tension comes, and it is the silence which constitutes the musical form as much as does the sound.”²⁰ Chernoff specifically addresses

²⁰ John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 113-14.

the highly polyrhythmic organization of drum ensembles and the differences in reception between an African and Western listener, where for one there is clarity and for the other, cluster. Behind the shifting patterns that anchor the music, there is an “unsounded beat” or “hidden rhythm” that N. recognizes as theological, an absent Drum God whose arrival is announced but continually deferred. Indeed, during Drennette’s solo, N. describes the balloon’s oncoming as “deferred buildup”, and the “hothouse atmosphere” is “deferred buildup’s bequest” (Mackey, *Late*, 112, 114). By using the word “deferred,” Mackey creates yet another gap, another absent-yet-present (Word) God in the figure of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. Hughes’s poem “Harlem,” with its famous first line, “What happens to a dream deferred?”, connects African American politics to the rhythm of dreaming, and for N. in this case, to a sense of upcoming, sonic, inevitability. Non-, or mis-speaking (i.e. silence, tension) can be equated with further instances of the recondite in African drumming; for example, junior drummers may play a specific rhythm without knowing its societal significance, that is, they do not know what they are saying. In some cases, the sequence may contain a false meaning that disguises the intended one. Lyrics, too, participate in this game of il/legibility, so that their semantic value is unconnected to the power inherent in the living experience of them. They are often made from very obscure, spiritual, and symbolic sources and as such cannot be grasped through conventional, Western means. Chernoff mentions a singer named The Entertainer, of whom he asks what his songs were about. “He said he did not really understand some of them, that he would have to go and ask the old men who had given him the proverbs which he had set to music” (Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, 124). Like Djamilá’s non-verbal martinet, like the texts carried by the balloons, “lyrical” communicative dynamism comes from poetic, and ultimately unknowable, spiritual sources. N. echoes this Dagomban negative capability in his own explicitly

apophatic writing. In “Post-Expectant Press Release #2,” written in response to a review of the Comeback Inn gig, the balloons are “not to be known”; in fact, “the review’s easy presumption of knowledge nudged us into knowing by not knowing, a position that would acknowledge not knowing” (*Late*, 132). African music’s intricate (to non-African ears) layering insists on keeping a cool head, and “being steady within a context of multiple rhythms . . . because only through combined rhythms does the music emerge” (Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, 51). Molimo m’Atet’s fluid navigation through the differing zones encourages one to take special note of the parallels between the construction of the music and of reality itself, and the coolness of the head/calmness of the musician within the improvising moment that is required for such exploration.

In both African diasporic experimental writing and traditional African graphic systems, many of these same techniques—syntactic disruption, secret communications, phonological ambiguity—are applied to the page. The first chapter of Aldon Nielsen’s *Black Chant* forcefully argues against the profiling of Black aesthetics that assumes that “experimental approaches to expression and theorized reading are somehow white things” (Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 13).²¹ Nielsen’s work gathers ample evidence from such literary enclaves as the Dasein poets, the Umbra group, and the Black Arts Movement, and individual writers such as Russell Atkins, Jayne Cortez, and Norman Pritchard in order to (re-)historicize the work made by African-American artists investing in modern and postmodern avant-garde traditions. In other words, Nielsen’s research on the relations between Black speech, script, performance, and reception demarcates a genealogy of radical discourse assumed by a majority of (white) critics to have never existed. Compare the musical examples above to the following quotes: Clarence Major, in *The Dark and the Feeling* (1974), states his intention “to invest the work with a *secret nature* so

²¹ Mackey himself has spoken against this specific type of racist assumption. See, for example, *Discrepant*, 260-264; *Paracritical*, 240-244.

powerful that, while it should fascinate, it should always elude the reader—just as the nature of life does” (8); Pritchard’s epigraph to *The Matrix* (1970) is “Words are ancillary to content” (12); and finally, Harryette Mullen’s 1993 revaluations concerning the transformation of the Western view of writing: “. . .one might ask how writing and text functioned in a folk milieu that valued script for its cryptographic incomprehensibility and uniqueness rather than its legibility or reproducibility . . . and for whom graphic systems are associated not with instrumental human communication but with techniques of spiritual power and spirit possession” (36). The often surreal and challenging balloon texts take part in this genealogy of radical poetics. Turning to the third and fourth set of balloons (see below), Mackey is no less likely to draw upon his literary antecedents than he is his musical ones. His phrase, “Tell my house it’s hot in here,” alludes to Zora Neale Hurston’s 1938 study of voodoo, *Tell My Horse*. Earlier in this section, Mackey nods to his former mentor Robert Duncan by using the word “field” to indicate the complex in which musical and poetic ideas circulate. The balloons “extended a multiplex field freighted with a feel for polyrhythmicity,” the audience’s participant pops and squeals accrete a “sonic field” (*Late*, 110). As Drennette builds her solo, she imitates the balloon sounds by rubbing and scraping her conga’s head, a “divinatory field” is ridden into existence, and as the balloons increase on top of each other, the room itself becomes a “thicketed field” (113, 114).

The opening balloon words of Drennette’s drum solo are “*By whatever birth was, back at some beginning, I lay on my back, unable to see past my belly.*” (113). In the imagery that follows this origin story set-up, syncretic myth meets romantic matter in an inevitable result of divine/human intercourse, a further example of the hinge-action enacted and narrated by the balloons. The third and fourth balloon sets contain these words:

Sweet rotundity. Fecund recess. Ride had been all there'd been, ride was all I wanted. Thrown off as to where I was, what I'd been on, my long legs straddling my horse, my long legs pedalling, I lay on my back riding myself hard, I lay on my back giving birth to myself. My ballooning belly took the place of the hill I'd begun to climb, the hill at whose base my bicycles pedal broke, at whose base my foot slipped from the stirrup, causing my horse to buck and rear up.

A flood ran down the far side of the hill, blood gushed at its base. I lay on my back bleeding between my legs, legs bent, legs up, legs open, the lips between them bleeding, blood I knew could only be a kiss, a kiss boats bearing a message were afloat on. They floated leaving the hill behind, each of their sails having the same thing written on them: "Tell my house its hot in here." So spoke my sailor boy, hot to be with me, my sailor boy who was all but back, due back on Sunday, a Sunday that couldn't come soon enough.

(114).

Pregnancy, a major balloon theme since N.'s initiation, dominates this visitation, as does its alphabetical equivalent, the letter "b." Time-space collapses, allowing the balloons to superimpose an unknowable past ("*back at some beginning*") and an imminent future ("*My ballooning belly*"), and setting what Simone White calls "anaphoric history" in motion, which is "predicated on the artist's ability to develop a deranged and *hyper-cognitive* understanding of hers location on a grid of recordings-textual, somatic, spiritual or what have you" (*Dear*, 118). So we have a palimpsestic overlay (temporal fusions, ontological substitutions) in concert with repeated, or perhaps chanted, events that produces the condition—derangement—necessary for hyper-cognitive proprioception. A key feature of the balloons' textual style is what N. refers to as "ringing the changes," a type of repetition-with-difference of certain passages, here best seen

in Mackey's anaphoric deployment of the phrase "*I lay*" ("*on my back*", "*on the ground*", "*bleeding*", "*thrown off*", "*percussing*", "*getting ready*", "*repossessing myself*"). Peter O'Leary's term for this is "ongoingness in consciousness" ("Ythmic," 38). The balloons channel the pivotal moment in Drennette's backstory—a bloody bicycle spill with her ex-lover that triggers an awakening to her "antique sentiment" and her true "percussive spirit"—while equating said bicycle with a Haitian vodoun horse (Mackey, *Late*, 114). Her self-conceived birth ("*I lay on my back giving birth to myself*") as a "real" drummer is thus due to a loss ("*my bicycle pedal broke*", or "*my foot slipped from the stirrup*"), which causes a momentary loss of consciousness in her spill from the bike. She revives amid fresh blood that she at first mistakes for kisses. Such consciousness loss, or "gapping out," parallels possession by a loa in a voodoo ceremony, where the initiate is known to be "ridden" by the god, who is summoned through ceremonial drum songs and the blood sacrifice of animals specific to them. Yet, in paracritical mode, the balloons reverse the situation and Drennette is "thrown off" by her horse, suggesting she herself is the rider, and not the ridden. How can one be both at once? This situation "throws off" the reader, who is thwarted when trying to neatly complete the metaphor. Being thrown off the scent is also implied here: "*Thrown off as to where I was*". Loss is a not-following of meaning, a derangement, as well as a Gnostic loss, understood by the band's view of incarnation as separation from the divine, a fall. Derangement and fall thus precipitate birth, paralleling the specified funereal order of burial to rebirth found in the Dogon songs to the Andoumboulou.

The fourth balloon set begins with the words "*flood*," "*blood*," and "*gush*," and the Drennette/"I" senses the bleeding as "*blood I knew could only be a kiss*." The next fragment radically upsets conventional sentence structure, "*a kiss boats bearing a message were afloat on*"

(115). The words “a kiss boats bearing” effect a jarring syntax—a momentary confusion of their grammatical functions—which is sonically mirrored by the highly irregular percussive stresses. What sort of meaning does this phrase express, to float upon blood that is kiss? What are the boats that bear messages? What else bears messages? The balloons are self-implicating (“*Sweet rotundity*,” the first two words of balloon three), tying the image of curvature, and a wind-filled sail, to their own physical characteristics and inscribing a message-within-a-message, almost a message in a bottle, on the boats’ sails. Birth’s blood is figured as a vast ocean, upon which “*I*”s “*sailor boy*” is a cyclical, circular, presence, not there for the birth, but “*all but back*.” The message written on “*each of their sails*” (paralleling the audiences’ balloons that all carry the same text), “*Tell my house it’s hot in here*,” at first glance serves a “resistant-function,” a purposely elusive secret hiding in plain sight. The house is perhaps the womb, or refers to the increasingly sweat-humid, “hothouse atmosphere” of the Comeback Inn itself, highlighting the balloons’ role as what-saying commentators on the immediate situation as well as being psychic emissaries. Mackey’s metathetic practices allow us to substitute “horse” for “house,” which equalizes the subject position of the voudun initiate, as alluded to by the Hurston title mentioned above: one becomes a container for the god in the same way one is a vehicle for the god. As increasing sets of balloons emerge, the balloon sounds “hit like aspirated static” and “unremitting rush,” terms that might easily be used in the description of one of Molimo m’Atet’s horn players’ noise-solos. The texts are now word-improvisations, ringing changes on “*legs*,” “*lips*,” “*labor*,” “*sweat*,” “*heat*,” “*horse*,” “*blood*,” “*belly*,” “*thrown*,” “*lotus*” and the like (116). This is the “seen-said” aspect of the creaking of the word operating at full capacity: textual abstraction rubs against temporal melody, visual poesis emerges from pure sound, cosmic transformation connects to everyday object, or as Drennette puts it “Prepared ensemble meets visual pun” (77).

N. describes the pre-parturitive chaos as a “balloon arraignment,” another reversal which places interrogative power in the balloon’s corner, their what-saying function raised to a judicial level.

Their slow coup of the narrative (over the five volumes) poses uncomfortable and perhaps unanswerable questions: What sort of double consciousness do they dramatize? Psychological, historical, racial? Do they symbolize showmanship or shamanism on behalf of the band? Are they undermining or underwriting? Whose voice is it that speaks without a mouth? Who is “it” addressing, exactly, the individual or the collective? What is the value contained within such willful obscurity? When is happy ever happy enough? Like Ishmael Reed’s *Jes Grew*, the balloons are an “influence which sought its Text . . . if it could not find its Text then it would be mistaken for entertainment” (Mackey, *Discrepant*, 262). White’s argument that the “the novel is actually playing out. . . a scene whereby music is decentred by an alternative thought tradition – a newfangled black gnostic poetics. . .” finds support in such phenomena as peak balloon (*Dear*, 112).

IX. Ythmic What-saying

On 5/8/18 11:48 PM, after being name-checked the previous day by Norman Finkelstein, Nathaniel Mackey appeared, without warning, balloon-like, in the middle of a heated Facebook exchange: “‘If you don’t know you’re a myth, shame on you.’ – Dizzy G’sun Ra.”²² Summoned by the friction of lively debate, with this phrase he effectively what-said Barret Watten, on whose page this comment arrived. Watten, a theorist and Language writer, was in an extended

²² See Nathaniel Mackey and Barret Watten, “An Encounter Between Nathaniel Mackey and Barrett Watten.”, *Dispatches from the Poetry Wars*, wayback.archive-it.org, May 23, 2018, dispatchespoetrywars.com/commentary/an-encounter-between-nathaniel-mackey-and-barrett-watten/

and entrenched online fracas with other poet-critics, arguing, among other things, that Robert Duncan's use of myth—and then mythopoetics in general—amounted to little more than ahistorical, politically conservative, and aesthetically anemic work. Amongst Watten's posts, there are several articulations of these views. "I want to bring myth forward into ideology, which is what *I* am interested in." "Second, I do see myth and violence as joined at the hip as in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of modern reason" (Watten, *Encounter*, np). A final response to Mackey includes "---there is no one subject of myth If writers of colour find it a resource and a counter to dominant ideology. I am interested in ideology critique, and if myth is critical, good. If it is constitutive of another form of oppression, as I think it is with Duncan and in many other political examples, no. You see this differently" (*Encounter*, np). Watten's contradictory comments point not only towards a typical idea of myth from the theoretical framework within which he is situated, but also, to the use of myth as a paradoxical, fugitive, problematizing set of narratives that Mackey and the despised Duncan deploy—in Watten's words—as a "counter to dominant ideology." Hence Watten has what-said himself by willfully ignoring those examples of mythopoetics (i.e., those of Mackey, and Watten's interlocutors on Facebook) that enact the political and social reevaluating he claims to champion. What he has failed to perceive as an astute reader of Mackey's work (a claim he makes during the private email exchange) is simply that much of Mackey's critical acumen and major theoretical statements have their inception in mythic narrative. Discrepant engagement, what-saying, epistemologies of loss, and the various workings of the paracritical hinge all contain traces of mythic imagery and events.

Yet Mackey does not practice universalist mythopoetics, nor does his work advocate the uncovering of an eternal order that transcends the disorder of the times. Instead, seen as mythic agents, the balloons behave not unlike the Muses' at the beginning of Hesoid's *Theogony*:

deliberately ambiguous towards the “truth claims” of their account of cosmology. The balloons embody a mockery of idealized narrative closures, which extends to ideas of knowledge of subjectivity, and the gravity that determination can imply. Their messages of lust and loss, inscribed in scenarios of small-time intrigues and incomplete personal memories, serve to confuse rather than convert any readers. The musicians of Molimo m’Atet often experience grandiose mythic hallucinations during extended improvisations; the poetry of the balloons punctures any imagined bestowal of individual greatness.

In typical Mackey fashion, he has created a neologism for this process of myth what-saying itself: ythm. Ythm, “clipped rhythm, anagrammatic myth”, uses myth by recontextualizing the imagery, refabricating the narratives, relocating the temporal frame, and revisioning its relation to history (Mackey, *Splay*, xiii). Ythm acts palimpsestically and paracritically by allowing radical cross-cultural exchange (for example, the “mu” of the Greek “muthos” is found to be metaphorically cognate with the “mu” from the Kapalo “muni” bird) and extending this border crossing activity to alternate states of consciousness (“to dream is not to dream but to replace waking with realization, an ongoing process of testing or contesting reality, subjecting it to change or a demand for change.” [xii]). In O’Leary’s words, “ythm is a poetics of myth,” (“Ythmic,” 40). By what-saying myth, Mackey avoids many of the conventional and dogmatic ways that myth is understood. He rejects a type of modernist literary approach whereby the regeneration or rediscovery of a distant symbolic figure restores a timeless, yet inaccessible universal harmony—T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Nor are contemporary attempts at allegorization, or recuperations of an idealized “ancient/primitive” knowledge base for Mackey

acceptable or critical modes of interpretation.²³ Monolithic and rigid interpretive approaches make myth understandable, legible, even as it cloaks itself in cultural or psychological guises. Freud attempted such a codification with the Oedipus complex. His desire to reify the theory of sexuality, making it “a dogma” of his work, found anxious expression when he exhorted his then heir apparent Carl Jung to use the theory—itsself a rewriting of myth—as a “bulwark” against “the black tide of mud of occultism”.²⁴ This “occultism” refers to Jung’s turn toward a non-exclusively sexual motivational basis for psychoanalysis, an approach that included the hypothesis of the collective unconscious. (Note Freud’s own associative parapraxis with the word “black”). To this Mackey replies “Myth advancing mud. Mouth proving mud” (*From a Broken Bottle*, 485). His materialist mythography is best revealed in a series of two adjacent letters, “26.VII.82” and “4.VIII.82”, the origin story of B’Loon.

In the first of many theorizing responses to the “huge question” of the balloons, N. attempts to isolate possible preconditions for their occurrences. He notes that the band often experiences an “anti-foundational sense and/or apprehension,” an intuitive feeling of groundlessness beneath their feet. In Seattle, this was a “pointillist plank-walk,” in San Francisco, “tar pit premises,” both provoke a collective stumble, doubt, or dizziness that marks a potential zonal convergence (484). (Recall that at the Comeback Inn, Drenette’s balloons tell of her “ungroundedness” before her fall, riding her bicycle/horse until she is thrown off). Crumbling streets and collapsed hotels (through the cracks of which the balloons escape), glass bottomed barges, prison bunks several storeys high, and other such images regularly appear. This is a key metaphor for Mackey, with roots in the creaking of the word’s call to attention of the tenuousness and uninsured activity of making; its “anti-foundational noise” akin to larger

²³ For example, Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020); Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Gods in Everyman* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1993).

²⁴ See C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Parthenon Editions, 1963), 150.

cultural questions on the crisis of representation to which both political and aesthetic practises adhere. N.'s insight involves the recovery of lost ground in the imagery of earth-diver myths, where an animal plunges into primeval waters and brings up a mouthful of mud from which the world is then made. N. asks, "Are the balloons mud we resurface with, mud we situate ourselves upon, heuristic precipitate, axiomatic muck, unprepossessing mire?" (484). Noting that one of these animals is a loon, he convincingly offers the prefix "ba"—the Egyptian word for soul—and dubs "the spirit or embodied soul of namesake play" B'Loon, which comes to denote both the "one" and the "many" of its kind. This is a basic example of Mackey's myth methodology, compressing ancient sources, archetypal theme (de/ascent), and immediate phenomena into the physicality of syllables, etymological experiment, word work. ("Loon" also recalls Simone White's assertion that anaphoric time rests upon an artists' ability to "develop a *deranged* and hyper-cognitive understanding" [*italics mine*]). B'Loon penetrates anaphoric history, moving backward as the twin of the lone, textless balloon present at N.'s initiation and then forward into each of the librettos, and gains iconographic status through the fan-club-police-sketch Dredj makes of it. B'Loon thus takes many forms, and in "26.VII.82," it is figured as "our murky, mired cry, a call for world reparation" (485). This call or cry implies voice, speech, but of course the balloons' mode of speaking is silent and textual. Thus, they are not only what-sayers, but un-sayers, speakers of unresolvable, aporetic, paradoxical mystical discourse.²⁵ As such, the balloons on a profound level critique the idea of clear speech and prefer to issue their messages, as previously mentioned, as poetry. In fact, Mackey's entire project of attempting to transcribe the "missing" music of the band—the readers will never actually hear it—adds up to a type of audio unveiling of the invisible, a listening to the unheard, which proves to be a task that requires the participation of multiple allusions, references, histories, zones.

²⁵ Mackey mentions the influence of Michael Sells's *Mystical Languages of Unsayings in Paracritical*, 327.

Consequently, B'Loon is said to “expand” rather than “explain”—the same technique Mackey effects in his mythography:

B'Loon indicts presumptions of command as it bestows command. . . . By no means an easy muse or master, B'Loon requires that grasp and relinquishment meet, that they wrestle the angel each takes the other to be, the devil each takes the other to be—a harlequin fray in which debt mires endowment, advancing an ethic of letting go while suggesting letting go might be an ulterior tack aimed at taking hold, talking hold a Pyrrhic seizure not unmixed with letting go, each the others taint and contagion, ad infinitum. B'Loon ushers the soul of blown seizure, fractured access, reach and retreat. (490-91).

Yet as with many a false prophet, B'Loon's actions tilt toward the authoritarian: they indict, bestow, yield, augur, acknowledge, require, usher, and marry. And like any set of orthodoxies, the balloons eventually inspire skepticism on behalf of the band, which maintain, “We don't trust them. Never have, never will” (Mackey, *Late*, 134). (Recall the “arraignment” the balloons subject the audience to at the Comeback Inn). The recurrent qualities of unpredictability, excess, inflation, provocation, and flightiness, all recommend them to the category of mere “problematic romance.” Yet wasn't B'Loon calling for “world reparation”? This massive rebuild would require the work of the collective, not simply an individual's wouldly wish. If the balloons seem largely concerned with introspective eroto-elegiac laments and personal “hyperbolic aubades,” these circumstances and stories, and their genesis in a “loss of larger bonding” are certainly anchored in the “larger social, political moment we find ourselves in” (Mackey, *From a Broken*, 484). In a rare temporal signpost, N. assigns “Reaganomic roots” to much of the suffering he sees around him, the field from which Molimo m'Atet arises.

If we are to have a poetry that enacts myth it cannot resemble any grand synthesizing that aims at complete explanation or uses “universal” symbology to fix unseen political agendas as timeless credos. Instead, myth must now be read paracritically, emerging from “axiomatic muck, unprepossessing mire.” I want to suggest that Mackey’s myth, discrepantly engaged with the local and material conditions that surround it, opens up an anti-hegemonic discourse by virtue of its “newfangled black gnostic poetics” which calls for the pursuit of knowledge rejected by the greater part of the secular West, and the ability to live coterminous with catastrophe yet remain unsusceptible to paradigms of perfection. Radical theoretical and artistic practices such as the life work of Molimo m’Atet instantiate this ongoing mythic and metaphorical perspective, one that neither grieves for nor harmonizes with this given, fallen, world.

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