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## Splay Anthem

Matt Sandler

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or if it was just you, the sheer miracle of all  
 that darkness swaying close enough to *touch*,  
 palm tree and Sambo and glistening tiger  
 running circles into golden oil. Ah,  
 Master B, little great man, tell me:  
 How does a shadow shine?

("The End, with MapQuest" 209)

George Augustus Bridgetower's resurgence through the genius of Dove's *Sonata Mulattica* ensures that he is no longer a footnote to history, but that he and his world have become the *imagined realized*, what Wallace Stevens called in the title of one of his last poems, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." Stevens's poem, in a musical conception serendipitously prefiguring Dove's mode of inspiration, expresses how a small detail, a "scrawny cry from outside," a "chorister whose c preceded the choir," might be caught by the imagination and swell, chorally, into a whole that is "like / A new knowledge of reality" (534). The "like" is meticulous in its claim. There is some irony, of course, in likening an African American woman poet of the twenty-first century to the grand master of the imagination whose taste for the exotic, heated by vacations in Florida, constructed binaries of hot negresses and pious virgins (Stevens, "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" 71). But Dove's imaginative reach is such that she is not dismissive of the blatant lure of the exotic other. Rather than condemn, she takes over. She inhabits the sensory fascination with "that darkness swaying close enough to *touch*"; she puts "palm tree and Sambo" out there for consumption. Spice and spectacle are part of her staging. Histrionics and history are the theatrical mix through which the story has "held."

—Pat Righelato

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Poetry prizes are notoriously unreliable indicators of literary endurance. Committees tend not to reward the sort of innovative work that appeals to later generations. Exceptions to this rule tend to take readers of adventurous poetry by surprise, even when they are confident of their most accomplished poets' deserving talent. Such has been the case with Nathaniel Mackey's most recent collection, which encountered the unusual fate of being given the National Book Award in 2006. His work fits Ron Silliman's category of "post-avant"—the disparate array of experimental poetics broken off from the Romantic

idea of artistic progress at the turn of the twentieth century. Such poetry rarely receives the kind of recognition Mackey's has over the last few years. The vibrantly skewed relation to time in his writing should be the stuff of some debate, if they have poetic justice in the future.

This watershed volume brings together two long poetic cycles begun in his earliest publications in the 1970s: *Song of Andoumboulou* and "Mu." Each of the ongoing serial poems is numbered (though Mackey skips a few numbers along the way). In *Splay Anthem*, "Mu" goes from its fifteenth to the thirty-eighth parts, while *Song* goes from number 40 to number 60. They are interwoven, or braided together, rather than placed in sections, to emphasize their shared ambience.

Mackey explains the overlap of the two projects in a preface—itsself a virtuosic work of self-criticism. The Andoumboulou are, in the Dogon cosmology, "not simply a failed, or flawed, earlier form of human being, but a rough draft of human being, the work-in-progress we continue to be" (xi). Likewise, "Mu" refers to, among other things, the lost continent. So the meeting of these two works constitutes what Robert Duncan has called in grand seriousness, a "world-poem," but a specifically utopic and prehistoric world. *Splay Anthem* is a "blue gnostic / loop," a choral return to creative origins that echoes back to the future (40). Its sources have an improvised philological quality. Mackey's exuberant cultural appetite runs from experimental American poetry to history, linguistics, anthropology, and ethnomusicology. Never with the blowhard attitudinizing of Poe, Pound, or Olson, all of whom have nevertheless left their mark here, Mackey's learning slants with the impossibility of his subject.

The poems ring with the kind of extra-historical consumption of history that characterizes Flaubert's North African epic *Salammbô*, with its crucified lions and perfumed earrings. Mackey offers a latter day cornucopia of literary pleasures—"fig liquor" (64) and an "armadillo-back / mandolin" (32). The distance of his imaginary world frames a critique of "the flailing imperial republic of Nub the United States has become" (xv). For the bombast of this statement, the social critique in the poetry itself remains largely implicit. The historical estrangement staged by the premise allows for moments of echoing reportage:

Bullets flew, bombs fell  
outside, century's end as  
andoumboulouous as  
ever. (17)

Here one of the poem's keywords is redeployed as an adjective at "century's end," suggesting that, despite or perhaps because of the temporal obliquities of the poetry, we might think of our own moment within its terms.

Likewise in the poem's geography, the displacement of "Mu" opens up the possibility for strange new views of the contemporary. For instance, many of Mackey's impossible juxtapositions reconstruct a ghostly solidarity between African American and Arabic cultures. Where else but "Mu" could it be said that "Abbey Lincoln sang a Sufi lament," or "jooked oud everywhere" (119, 88)? The post-avant politics of what he calls, following Duke Ellington, his "blutopia," are fundamentally wandering, as much projection as

protest. The ethnic determinants of his writing are much less explicit than will be familiar to readers accustomed to thinking around Langston Hughes's "racial mountain." Mackey heads toward theorizing a sort of post-racial aesthetic, and his work *travels*: "It was Egypt or Tennessee / we / were in" (55). *Splay Anthem* is never facile though, always in touch with violence and poverty for all its achieved avant-gardism and other-worldliness. Jack Spicer's anachronistic wish that he could write a poem in which a fugitive might hide from a posse is here brought to full and pointed expression.

Readers of *Callaloo* know well that Mackey's work echoes with music. In these poems that take place on a lost continent among characters whose humanity is always approximate, partial, or incomplete, the generic categories of conversation, poetry, and music are blurred under the mysterious weight of alternative cultural heredities. The writing withholds the possibility of knowing how literally to take a line like: "a Moroccan / reed-flute's desert wheeze took / our breath" (55). These expressions are fundamentally hypothetical—and in so being, capture the ambitions which define humanity. Mackey writes in the typically first-person plural voice of the poem:

Had there been a song we sang it was  
 extremity we sang, all but strangling song,  
a  
 straining  
 song (84)

The lines oscillate physically, spilling and swinging quickly down the middle of the page. The layout recalls Melvin Tolson's absolutely center-justified lines, and Mackey's work shares with that poet a commitment to knowledge expansive enough to include what the pretentious might dismiss as esoteric. Lost continents and West African cosmology, however academic they may seem, are after all rather "abject auspices" themselves in more conventional hierarchies of knowledge (88). His language is much more everyday, for all the strangeness of the work's impetus and its occasional neologism. In this, there are any number of poets in the American tradition with whom a comparison could be drawn, from Harryette Mullen back to Whitman. William Carlos Williams, with his stepped line keyed to breath like Mackey's, and his own epic ambitions, perhaps deserves special mention.

The "we" that speaks so often in *Splay Anthem* represents a "protoghost entourage," a kind of band or coterie, that travels this invented prehistoric world in quest of some as yet inarticulate transcendence (86). In his preface, Mackey borrows a description of Albert Ayler's music as "a Salvation Army band on LSD," calling it "as relevant a gloss on splay anthem as any" (xii). His "stiff-backed / ecstasies" undertake a missionary search for pleasure, half decadent and half community-building, but ever attuned to the suffering and struggle that surrounds them (74). In imagining a whole people through their group song of devotion, praise, and loyalty and offering it to contemporary America, Mackey attempts to change the pitch of our own chattering violence and un-self-conscious speed.

—Matt Sandler