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an interview with
NATHANIEL MACKEY

Conducted by Jeanne Heuving

Nathaniel Mackey won the National Book Award in 2006 for his poetry volume *Splay Anthem* (New Directions, 2006) and a Guggenheim Award in 2010. A polymath, Mackey has published five chapbooks and five books of poetry; two critical works, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge, 2003) and *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Wisconsin, 2005); and four volumes of epistolary fiction as installments in his ongoing project *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* (vols. 1–3, New Directions, 2010): *Bedouin Hornbook* (Callaloo, 1986; second edition, Sun & Moon, 1997); *Djbot Baghostus's Run* (Sun & Moon, 1993); *Atet A.D.* (City Lights, 2001); and *Bass Cathedral* (New Directions, 2008). Yet to categorize Mackey's work by genre is to belie the cross-fertilization among all of these endeavors as well as their cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, and cross-art experimentation.

Mackey's work is defined by his commitment to serial composition and improvisatory modes and draws inspiration from jazz and world music and from Black Mountain (or New American) and Caribbean writers. Turning to the projective and open field poetics of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan, Mackey wrote his 1975 Ph.D. dissertation at Stanford University on "open field poetics as muse." Finding early on in Amiri Baraka's poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* an example of a writing crossing between poetry and jazz, in a 1978 essay on Baraka, "The Changing Same," Mackey contested Baraka's own early

disavowal of his experimental methods, while noting how Baraka himself connected avant-garde jazz with open field poetics. Mackey subsequently located an important inspiration, especially for his epistolary fiction, in the writing of the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, whose metanarratives reflect upon their own figuration in relationship to “the legacies of conquest in the Caribbean” (*Discrepant Engagement* 5). Mackey writes of Harris’s attempt “to free the Caribbean of a reductionist historiography” through his “spectral or phantom remembering of a dismembered past” (165) that allows for “the possibility of fulfillment in the midst of presumed and even manifest deprivation” (169).

Mackey’s work is usefully approached through his concept of “discrepant engagement,” a coinage that served to spearhead a cross-arts colloquium, “Collaborative Dissonances: Jazz, Discrepancy, and Cultural Theory,” at the Guelph Jazz Festival in Ontario, and the book *Discrepant Abstraction* (MIT, 2006), a collection that addresses “abstraction” in so-called third-world art, produced by the British-based Institute of International Visual Arts. In his introduction to *Discrepant Engagement*, Mackey discusses what he means by the term “discrepant engagement,” drawing out its significance and implications:

It is an expression coined in reference to practices that, in the interest of opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world. Such practices highlight—indeed inhabit—discrepancy, engage rather than seek to ignore it. Recalling the derivation of the word *discrepant* from a root meaning “to rattle, creak,” I relate discrepant engagement to the name the Dogon of West Africa give their weaving block, . . . the “creaking of the word.” It is the noise upon which the word is based, the discrepant foundation of all coherence and articulation, of the purchase upon the world fabrication affords. Discrepant engagement, rather than suppressing or seeking to silence that noise, acknowledges it. In its anti-foundational acknowledgment of founding noise, discrepant engagement . . . voice[s] reminders of the axiomatic exclusions upon which positings of identity and meaning depend.

(19)

As a writing of dissonance, Mackey’s poetry embraces a discordant set of sources and references and constructs “unlikely”

spaces and musics. In an early poem, “Winged Abyss,” dedicated to Olivier Messiaen and published in *Eroding Witness* (Illinois, 1986), Mackey writes:

A war camp quartet for the end of time
 heard with ears whose time has yet to
 begin . . .

An unlikely music I hear makes a world
 break
 beyond its reach . . .

(91)

More recently, in “Anouman Sandrofia,” from *Nod House* (New Directions, 2011), he composes

Night’s own embou-
 chure. Night’s nextet, we came out
 of nowhere, announcing and annulling the
 end of all things. . . All tack, all tone, all
 inti-
 mation. Hummed as if words fell short.

(140)

Mackey has described *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* as constituting, in part, an “*ars poetica*,” and as made up of “conventional as well as experimental narrative, essayistic analysis and reflection, diaristic and anecdotal elements, literary-critical techniques and a variety of influences ranging from mythology to anthropology to album liner notes” (*Paracritical Hinge* 210). And he has commented on how this work’s breaking with genres and disciplines, its improvisatory modes, allows us “to hear noise, the creaking of categorization, the noise categorization suppresses, and the noise, not admitting doing so, it makes” (209). Yet the four separate volumes of this work, and an in-progress fifth, written over the last three decades, if an example of discrepant engagement, are also a sustained engagement. Written as a series of letters to “Angel of Dust,” almost all of the entries are dated from the early 1980s and are about a group of characters who make up an aspiring jazz band, including “N.,” a composer-musician. Similarly, Mackey’s several volumes of poetry, beginning with his first full-length volume, *Eroding Wit-*

ness, a National Poetry Series award winner, and concluding with his just published *Nod House*, are written through recurring elements: “Song of the Andoumboulou” and “Mu.” While these two series “braid” and “fray,” “Andoumboulou,” taken from a Dogon myth of “a flawed, earlier form of human being,” interjects an awareness of human failure and a “theme of underness,” while “Mu,” in its reference to *muthos* and mouth, poses the possibility of “lingual and erotic allure” (*Splay* xi).

If there is one overriding exploration in Mackey’s work, it is music as writing and writing as music, an extension of jazz players’ repeated claim that their “horns speak.” Growing up in Northern and Southern California, Mackey encountered a mix of music, including rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and jazz. He has commented on the gospel and spirituals in the Baptist church he attended as a child:

Seeing people respond to music in ways that were quite different from music being listened to in a concert situation, I mean, people actually going into states of trance and possession in church, had a tremendous and continuing impact on me. It’s no doubt one of the reasons I so often refer to and incorporate aspects of, say, Haitian *vodoun*, Cuban *santería*, and other trance rituals that involve music—dance as a form of worship.

(*Paracritical Hinge* 252)

While an undergraduate at Princeton, Mackey attended a concert where John Coltrane played an avant-garde jazz, an initially alien sound that he grew to appreciate through repeated listening and transposed into his poetry as a kind of scat of abstracted letters and syllables, as in “Ttha, the most abstract / ‘at’ / we’d ever inhabit” (*Whatsaid Serif* [City Lights, 2001] 105).

Creating a career as a professor for over thirty years at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and most recently as the Reynolds Price Professor at Duke University, Mackey has sought interaction with intellectuals, artists, poets, and musicians, often in venues outside the academy. This interview got its start when I was asked by the Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas in Seattle to serve as the interlocutor for “An Evening with Nathaniel Mackey” at the Northwest African-American Museum, at which Mackey read from the first three volumes of *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. I later asked him if he would

consent to do an interview with me, and we agreed to an email exchange that transpired between August 2011 and March 2012.

Q. Robert Duncan once used the phrase “my life in poetry” to describe the relationship between his life and his intensive commitments to poetry and poetics. He also wrote, “not to find what art is but through the art to find what life might be.” Your writing strikes me as having a breadth, commitment, and concentration similar to Duncan’s, although your work includes a greater variety of endeavors. Do you find the phrasing “my life in poetry” or “my life in writing” descriptive of or resonant for your work? How do you understand the diverse aspects of your work in relationship to what seems to me to be its rather singular concentration?

A. Yes, those are resonant ways of putting it, resonant for pretty much all writers, I would think. We write because we sense there’s life there, not simply the life or the lived experience words can report but the life of the art or the medium itself. That’s true of all arts, all media. All of them are ways in which we go beyond the given. They have a life we tap into in furtherance of our life experience and life sense, a deepening and widening of our life experience and life sense. Duncan, in that quotation, might seem to disparage “find[ing] what art is” in favor of “find[ing] what life might be,” but throughout his writing he strongly equates the two. That’s one of the senses I get from the title of one of his later poems, “An Alternate Life,” as I also do from the title of Derek Walcott’s book-length autobiographical poem, *Another Life*. Poetry is one of the ways in which life others itself. And, yes, that’s been my experience of it.

I was influenced, during my late teens and early twenties, by an insistence on poetry as making that I found among a number of writers, an insistence built on the word *poet* deriving from the Greek word for “maker.” William Carlos Williams’s assertion “Make it and it is a poem,” Duncan’s “meadow” that is “a made place,” and Robert Creeley’s saying somewhere in an early essay, “We are made by what we make” would be examples, reinforced, around that same time, by my reading Mircea Eliade on alchemy and *homo faber*. I tend to see all of my writings as forms of mak-

ing, and if not poetry by virtue of that, related to poetry, and certainly related, in that sense and others, to my writing poetry and to the poetry I write.

I first encountered the Dogon "Song of the Andoumboulou," for example, in the early 1970s while hosting a musical mix program on a noncommercial radio station in Los Gatos, California, KTAO. The album *Les Dogon* was in the station library and I played it. There was even a stretch of programs in which I read a chapter from Marcel Griaule's book on the Dogon, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, over the air during each show. Similarly, I've written critical essays on the work of Guyanese author Wilson Harris, who also gets mentioned on the first page of *Bedouin Hornbook* and to whom I've dedicated poems, and I recall reading an essay of his over the air on a musical mix program called *Mu* that I hosted in the mid-seventies on WORT, a noncommercial station in Madison, Wisconsin. I've also published his work in my journal *Hambone*. And so on. The various endeavors I've undertaken are parts of the same endeavor, and there's a good deal of intersection, overlap, and shared material among them, somewhat inevitably, but also by design.

Q. I like very much your statement, "Poetry is one of the ways in which life others itself." Could you say more about what you mean by this?

A. I mean that life creates an accompaniment to itself, a second take or a double take, something like a sound track to a movie. There's a particular resonance and dimension it gets from and gives itself through poetry. I'm not the first person to try to talk about this. It's the *sur-* in surrealism. It's what Mallarmé meant by everything ending up in a book, Marianne Moore by real toads in imaginary gardens, Viktor Shklovsky by defamiliarization. Charles Olson was fond of Keats's statement that life is an allegory. The *allos* in allegory is one example of the othering I'm referring to.

Q. In your essay "Other: From Noun to Verb," you contrast social othering with artistic othering: "Social othering has to do with power, exclusion, and privilege, the centralizing of a norm

against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized." And "artistic othering has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive." In your essays, you comment on two rather different processes of artistic othering, versioning and *duende*. In "Cante Moro," you link *duende* with "daimonic possession" and comment: "Language itself takes over. Something beyond the will, the conscious design or desire of the poet, is active, something that goes beyond univocal, unequivocal control." There seems potentially to be a good deal more conscious control available in "versioning" and much less conscious control in *duende*. Is that how you see it?

A. In saying that life others itself, I'm saying we're subject to a dynamic of change and variation we both unconsciously and consciously advance. Life subsumes us, but we're an instance of it, both worked on by it and a point at which it works itself through. The sorting out of conscious and unconscious consequences is thus a difficult, maybe impossible task, consciousness itself being something of a trickster. I think there's a certain frustration with being so subsumed, sovereign as we take ourselves to be or aspire to be, so crucial we think or want to think we are, yet, we know, so expendable as well. That frustration can drive both versioning and *duende*, so I'm no more certain exasperation doesn't inform the former at some level distinct from conscious control than I am that the latter can't be consciously pursued.

I haven't particularly thought about versioning and *duende* together, but now that I do, I think they both have to do with the nonultimacy of technical achievement, the necessity and insufficiency of technical achievement, be such achievement a form, a melody, a rendition, or what have you. Both are up against the given, bent on breaking through or extending the given. The apprehension of that nonultimacy takes place at both conscious and unconscious levels in both. I think I understand why versioning might appear to lend itself more to conscious control, to be the more Apollonian of the two. That's probably due to the two musical contexts that most readily come to mind when we think of those two terms, reggae singing tending to be comparatively cool and contained, even sweet, and flamenco

singing, *cante jondo*, more fraught, Dionysian, strung out. But Dick Hebdige, whom I cite in "Other: From Noun to Verb," acknowledges that versioning is at the core not only of reggae but of such other African American and Caribbean musics as jazz, blues, calypso, and salsa. So I go on to relate John Coltrane to versioning in that essay. I also, in "Cante Moro," relate his music to *duende*. His renditions of "My Favorite Things," especially such later ones as that on the *Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard Again!* album, are clear examples of *duende* and versioning both, as are Albert Ayler playing "Summertime" and a great number of other examples one could cite.

So, no, I haven't tended to contrast versioning and *duende* or to look all that closely, in a comparative way, at the question of conscious control as it pertains to them, but the two concepts do inform my aesthetics and my writing, as does a respect for both conscious control and unconscious dictate. I try to be as conscious as I can be in writing, whether poetry or fiction, knowing I can't be completely conscious and knowing that's not a bad thing. I try, in part, that is, to become aware of unconscious, unintended, and auxiliary meanings, implications and resonances that happen into the writing, that turn out to be alive in the writing, both in the process of writing and in the text in which the process results. Writing is a mix of saying what I mean to say and finding out what else the writing might say.

Q. Did you at any time write a more traditional poetry in which the first-person poetic speaker was dominant? At times, you use multiple poetic speakers, "I," "we," "he," "she." Are these pronouns equally important for you?

A. I did write a more "I"-dominant poetry early on. I think we all start out writing with a strong sense of an autobiographical "I" and a heavy use of the first-person singular pronoun. We think it's about that at first. I'm no exception. But we find out the "I" isn't that straightforward or that easily given. Creeley was an early influence and *For Love* the first book of his I read, but for all the obvious first-person insistence one finds in Creeley, the "I" is neither unified nor self-evident. "As soon as / I speak, I / speaks," he writes in *Words*. Amiri Baraka, when he was

LeRoi Jones, was also an early influence, earlier than Creeley, actually, and there too the “I” is splintering, split. You read things like “I am inside someone / who hates me” in *The Dead Lecturer*. And there had been Williams earlier still, in “The Desert Music”: “I am that he whose brains / are scattered / aimlessly.” So the “I,” one found, was hardly the sovereign, self-contained, consistent entity one took it to be. It had been questioned and put under pressure for some time. Rimbaud famously wrote, “I is an other.” As is language generally, writing is an act of transposition, a transposition of person, place, occasion, and such. So the “I” was there at the start, but it was more multiple than autobiographical pretty soon, more multiple and dispersed.

For some time now, “we” has been my pronoun of choice, which is something readers and commentators have remarked on and something I’ve gotten questions about. In any case, the impulse or desire to have recourse to “we” has been with me a long time, going back even to the period when the “I” was dominant. It’s an impulse I wasn’t always comfortable with or always felt I understood, but it was a strong one nonetheless, visceral or instinctual it seemed. The poetic norms that presume the “I” to be *de rigueur* are probably what gave rise to my early discomfort and perplexity over where the impulse was coming from and whether it was okay to follow it. They’re also probably the reason I so often get asked about it.

I think it’s the openness and the elasticity of “we” that speaks and appeals to me, and perhaps that’s been the case all along. I recall a visit to read at Wesleyan University a few years ago, not long after *Splay Anthem* came out, particularly a visit to a class in which the book was being read. The topic of my use of “we” came up, questions regarding the bounds or identity of that “we,” the possible presumption or risk of imposition involved in using it, and so forth. One student said something that particularly stayed with me, which is that he read the “we” as an invitation, that he felt invited as a reader to join that “we,” identify with it. I realized not only that that was what I wanted, but that that was what the “we” impulse, going all the way back, had been for me as well, as first reader of my own work—an invitation. This in fact pertains to my practice and poetics more

generally. In the matter of “we” and in other matters as well, I’ve been invited into areas whose lineaments I could only partially identify and thus had to further explore.

Q. While you explore the subjects of love and sex in many of your poems, I don’t see you using female figures as foils or objects. In your early chapbook *Four for Trane* [Goleemics, 1978], you begin with the poem “Dearly Beloved.” You chose not to include this poem in *Eroding Witness*, although it republishes all of the other poems from your first two chapbooks, including your second, *Septet for the End of Time* [Boneset, 1983]. Was there any special reason that you dropped this poem? *Eroding Witness* and *School of Udhra* [City Lights, 1993] also begin with poems that along with “Dearly Beloved” might be considered invocations of the muse or the beloved, albeit they are all rather different. Do you consider these poems primarily as love or muse poems?

A. The poems are exploring love, sex, thinking, speaking, dreaming, especially as these bear on idealization and expectation and the fulfillment or the falling short of expectation. “Dearly Beloved” had some of that in it, vested in the facts that a horn player takes the horn into his or her mouth, and that the mouth itself is an instrument, the instrument of speech, as well as that mouths initiate or announce the initiation of romance with a kiss or with an “I love you,” often both: “Took / between my lips / Her cusp of / tongue’s / foretaste of / Heaven.” It anticipated the conjunction of terms, images, and ideas operative under the “mu” rubric in the series of that name: mouth, myth, muse, music. I wrote “Dearly Beloved” specifically for the *Four for Trane* chapbook. It was the last of the four poems to be written, intended as something of an invocation. It takes its title from a Coltrane composition on the *Sun Ship* album, a track that’s preceded by a snippet of Trane speaking to the other musicians, ending with the question, “Ready?” So it was resonant, for me, with ideas of readiness and anticipation, not to mention speech, language, the primacy of the word. In any event, the poem was written for the chapbook, and it didn’t seem to fit when I was putting *Eroding Witness* together. The poem that opens that book,

“Waters . . .,” gets at some of the same inferences and implications—mouth, word, whetting, readiness—while bearing on *Eroding Witness’s* wider scope. It shares an imagery of tongue between parted lips that’s both erotic and elocutionary and an imagery of vertical transport with “Dearly Beloved,” oceanic rather than celestial and more announcedly linguistic: “An undertow / of whir im- / mersed in / words.” “Song of the Andoumboulou: 8,” which opens *School of Udhra*, invokes Erzulie, the *loa* of love and beauty in Haitian *vodoun*, sometimes referred to as the Haitian Aphrodite. I’ve called her the muse of Haitian *vodoun*. So, yes, I’m very much a poet of the muse and the beloved.

Q. Why do you think beloved and muse figures have been so inspiring, or efficacious, for poetry writing?

A. I’m tempted to say I’d sooner explain the wetness of water, so axiomatic do figures of the muse and the beloved seem to be, from Sappho to the latest pop song. The importance and the power of sex obviously have to do with it, but the will to language and the shaping of language both siphon that importance and power and are siphoned by it. I remember Gaston Bachelard saying, in *The Poetics of Reverie*, “Love completes itself at the writing desk.” Romance and the discourse of love have as much to do with the insufficiency of sex as with the allure and the necessity of sex. Language is a crucial component of love, speaking or writing love an essential aspect of romance, making and sustaining love. The poetry of the muse and the beloved is what Williams calls “a counter stress, / born of the sexual shock.” We not only want sex and want more sex, we want more than sex. Language is key to the positing and the pursuit of that “more.”

Q. I am not sure that I would use the concepts of “idealization” or “romance” in relationship to your poetry, or if I did, they would be concepts I would use way down the line with many caveats, in part because of what you said earlier about poetry as making, Duncan’s “a made place,” and “poetry [as] one of the ways life others itself.” Rather than focusing on the “I” or the “beloved,” you would seem, say in the “Maitresse Erzulie”

poem, to concentrate on the states of being that her imagined or conjured presence effects: "As though an angel sought / me out in sleep or I sat up / sleepless, eyes like rocks"; or "Who sits at her feet fills his head / with wings, oils his mouth." That concentration, a kind of doubling back, is also there, I think, in the way you make noun phrases of emotional states, for example, "Long Night Lounge" (*School of Udhra*, *Splay Anthem*), "Loquat Cove" (*Whatsaid Serif*), "Lone Coast" (*Splay Anthem*), and then return to them, as if they were an actual place. How do your noun phrases function for you in your writing process? As spur, or place to return to? There is also the concept of "twin" and "twinless" that wends its way through your books. Are you taking the concept of the twin primarily from Dogon mythology, or elsewhere?

A. I'd have to say I don't see a conflict between romance and making or between idealization and making. I see both as forms of making, and I count them among the ways in which life others itself, not to mention poetry's role in the articulation and the testing of them. I don't think Duncan saw a conflict either. He said a poem is "a mystery in making," but he was also fond of Pound's *The Spirit of Romance*. The "made place" in "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" is the haunt of "the First Beloved," "the Lady," the "Queen Under The Hill." Matters and features of artifactual making, such as spacing and typographical arrangements, aim to correspond with the invocatory, sense-experiential ideal that they arise from: "architectures . . . / I say are likenesses of the First Beloved." They mean to carry the sensed, maybe synesthetic sway that could be said to be what romance and the apprehension of ideality are.

As for place names like those you mention, I think they're part of a concern with naming that's in my fiction as well, and that I've also written about critically. I suppose I'm trying, among other things, to press or to push the act of naming until it creaks. I'm also allowing felt or imagined or made places, which are as much qualities or conditions as places, to exist alongside or to overlap with more empirically actual places. They do, as you suggest, become places to return to, points on an imaginal terrain

the poems traverse and to some degree map. Likewise, twinning could be related to the return, the repeat, the refrain, doubling back, but I more immediately think of the twin as a figure of semblance and rapport, similitude and rapport, with ideas of mating and match, even by way of complementarity or supplementarity, active as well. Twinning and twinlessness figure significantly in the poems, and, yes, the Dogon have a lot to do with that, especially via the role the Nommo twins play in their cosmology. One of them male and one of them female, they embody an idealized complementarity, the Dogon ideal of wholeness. The Nommo are also closely associated with language and its workings, which the Dogon, through equations with cloth and clothing, picture as an erotizing play of display and concealment. Dogon figuration entered my work in the 1970s when I read Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. In the 1980s I read the book he wrote with Germaine Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, and his daughter Geneviève Calame-Griaule's *Words and the Dogon World*. Dogon tropes and ideas, twinning among them, continue to be resources I revisit and work variations on.

Q. So much in your poetry and poetics seems to counter idealization that I am surprised by your embrace of it here. In *Discrepant Engagement* you describe a kind of direct action on language, "subjecting words to bends, breaks, deformation, reformation—othering." Or as you earlier remarked, "to press or to push the act of naming until it creaks."

A. To say that my poems have to do with love, sex, thinking, speaking, and dreaming as they bear upon—and, I should add, are borne upon by—idealization and expectation is not to say that the poems are idealizing, though I'm okay with whatever degree of idealizing they do. It doesn't indicate an embrace of idealization or a turn toward idealization. It simply recognizes the existence of idealization and the effects to which it can lead, expectation and the fulfillment or the frustration of expectation. The positing of meaning and value is fraught with idealization and thereby with a risk of overvaluation or overestimation, not to mention the risk of unattainability. Experience tends to fall short of or simply to be other than the expectations bred by ide-

alization. Nonetheless, idealization remains a fact of psychic life and a fact of cultural life. I'm not sure I'd say my poetry and poetics counter idealization. I no more feel I have to embrace or reject idealization, to be for or against it, than I feel I have to be for or against gravity. It's there and it has consequences, and the people in the poems are often dealing with the ideas, ideals, and expectations that they've been subject to or that they subject themselves to. In "Beginning with Lines by Anwar Naguib," for example: "Thought / we saw the heavenly city. / No sooner thought than / what we saw stood only / in / thought." I think my poems tend to test and to appraise idealization, to qualify idealization, to be wary of idealization while acknowledging its draw. How could we not be drawn to it? Aren't idealizations by definition attractive, desirable, ideal?

"We," for example, can sometimes be an idealization or be subject to idealization, whether that of the romantic couple, some larger collectivity such as family, tribe, or nation, or the Gnostic apprehension of unity referred to in the Jacques Lacarrière epigraph I use in *Whatsaid Serif*, but my recourse to "we" has not done away with the other pronouns. "I," "he," "she," and "they" still abound. "We" is often merely a matter of number, simply indicating more than one, but it also signifies a sought-after quality, state, or condition, romantic oneness, utopic sociality or millenarian arrival, if not all of these at once. It's an aim, an aspiration, an object of pursuit and a source of fulfillment, or if not, disappointment, "They the would-be we" in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 60," for, as I said in "Destination Out," "we" was never a swifter fiction.

Q. I would like to ask you more about what I take from your critical essays, at least, as an unease or distrust of idealization or overvaluation. This distrust, or perhaps more neutrally, critique, emerges in complex ways in your lengthy essay "Gassire's Lute: Robert Duncan's Vietnam War Poems," one of the great meditations on poetry. In it you discuss the "dangers of poetry" through attention to the Mali myth of Gassire's lute and to Robert Duncan's poetry. Most summarily, you note, "The risk of inspiration may well be inflation, but the risk of brooding is one of

inertia, not doing" (75). Am I correct in surmising that there is a distrust or ambivalence about art or poetry in your criticism?

A. "Distrust" might be putting it too strongly—though the tale of Gassire's lute could certainly lead one to that—but, yes, there's a wariness in my criticism that's not unrelated to the one I referred to in my previous response. It involves a willingness to sift through the claims and the implications of the claims made for this or that artistic or poetic disposition, this or that artistic or poetic practice. This has typically been a matter of simply taking seriously the terms a particular writer or work lays down, terms in the sense both of words and of boundaries, a matter of examining the ground and the complications upon the ground those terms enclose. It was Duncan himself, for example, who connected inflation with inspiration, a recasting or rewording of Hesiod, where the Muses announce that they speak both false things and true things. Wariness, a certain trepidation, would seem to come with the territory. I've written about the writers and works that I've engaged critically with a mix of attraction and wariness, endorsement and wariness.

There's a like wariness in my poetry and fiction. It's there in titles like *Eroding Witness* and *Splay Anthem*. It's also there in a tendency toward qualification and shaded assertion, in a taste for the conditional and for what N., in *From A Broken Bottle*, calls "subjunctive abeyance," and in a number of recurrent concerns and a regard for angles. A recourse to negation and various other technical and tonal characteristics evince and convey it as well.

Q. Is it connected to your experimental or avant-garde commitments?

A. Yes, experimental or avant-garde approaches factor in. Their appeal is that they bring a critical, questioning frame of mind to bear on artistic precepts, particularly conventional or accepted practices and ideas. Their inspiration, one could say, is the undoing or dismantling of the inflated status those practices and ideas may have come to have. Samuel Beckett, at a certain moment, for example, steps in and strips the theater of an overinvestment

in realist notions of dialogue and set design. These approaches nonetheless run their own risks of inflation.

Q. Wariness would seem to disrupt the connection between a writer and his or her words, whereas inspiration would seem to promote connection, or to be descriptive of a state of hyperconnectivity. One of the words that has been dropped from much talk about poetry and art in the last several decades is “inspiration.” There are other ways of indicating “inspiration,” of course. In “Gassire’s Lute,” you write about how Duncan draws on the “intensities” of “strife” and “love” in order to write. And in your interview with Wilson Harris in *Discrepant Abstraction*, you refer to his “oneiric poetic sources.” Your treatment of *cante moro* and *duende* would seem to be about inspiration, at least in part. Some avant-garde practices—practices of constraint, procedure, and/or aleatory disjunction—deliberately discourage anything too connective between the writer and his or her words in order to prevent hegemonic forms from replicating themselves. Have you deliberately taken on or imposed on yourself any formal restrictions in writing individual poems or entire volumes of poems, or does your practice reside in a more intuitively calibrated negativity or negation? Would you be willing to say more about your writing process with respect to your own states in writing, or of inspiration, if you will? Above you mention some pretty edgy source material: alchemy, *vodoun*, avant-garde jazz. How do you bridge the wariness and inspiration divide, if it is a divide for you, with such connective sources?

A. I’ve never used proceduralist methods, chance operations or the like. I guess I’ve been more inclined toward intuitive calibration, with a good deal of reflection, revision, trial and error, forcing the issue, and so forth factoring in as well. My writing process is a mix that runs the gamut from the very prosaic act of regularly sitting down to see what, if anything, I can write to the proverbial inspired moments where the writing seems to write itself. I haven’t been particularly troubled by a divide between wariness and inspiration, or between wariness and connection. It’s not simply that wariness can be one’s inspiration or deflect one’s inspiration, or that a wary connection is still a connection,

but that wariness is an epistemological toll exacted by the material with which a connection is being made. As the old blues line puts it, "If you ain't scared, you ain't right." Jack Spicer's commitment to dictation, to what Robin Blaser called his "practice of outside," with all its suggestion of a submission to a voice or voices other than that of the poet, a suggestion very much in line with traditional, age-old notions of inspiration, doesn't prevent his work from being rife with qualm and qualification. Yeats's *A Vision*, purportedly channeled in a manner that brings to mind the most mystical senses of inspiration, is characteristically laced with trepidation, cautionary parsing, and the language of caveat. Here we have two inspired poets attributing their words to other sources, so I'm not sure how far the equation of inspiration with connection goes. Maybe it's less a matter of how connected a writer is to his or her words than how the words behave, the work they do. But that's probably oversimplifying matters as well, for these questions of connection and inspiration (or, more broadly, intake or input) are intimate with qualities of linguistic behavior to which, as first reader of my work, as I write, I'm always attentive.

Q. That's very interesting about wariness as increasing connection. When I referred to a writer's hyperconnectivity to words, in the back of my mind was Giorgio Agamben's *The End of the Poem*. Agamben is preoccupied with the moment of speech or writing itself, of an inceptive act, in which event and utterance are inseparable, in which "what is lived and what is poeticized is absolute and life is truly only what is made in speech." With respect to such speech, Agamben emphasizes how "poetry and life are united . . . in a medium. This medium is language." And, he writes: "Poetry matters because the individual who experiences this unity in the medium of language undergoes an anthropological change that is in the context of the individual's history . . . decisive." However, he also questions his postulations: "What does it mean for a living being to speak? Do life and speech constitute an articulated unity, or is there a disjunction between the two that neither individual existence nor the historical development of humanity can overcome? It is on this

uneven ground that theology and, later, psychology and biology took up their residence. When literary criticism and aesthetics finally come to formulate the problem of the relations between lived experience and poeticized experience . . . the terrain on which the problem could have been correctly posed had already been covered over." Are Agamben's thoughts resonant with your thoughts about poetry or language, or do you think his ideas tend to valorize poetry and/or the poetic act—or the act of an inceptive speech?

A. The bit about "the terrain on which the problem could have been correctly posed" loses me, but perhaps that's because I haven't read the book and don't know the context and the larger argument of which it's a part. I've read a couple of Agamben's books, *The Coming Community* and *Infancy and History*, and I heard him give a talk at UC Santa Cruz a number of years ago, but I can't say that I feel a particular affinity or convergence between what I've been saying and the statements of his that you quote—beyond, that is, the widely shared recognition that language is or can be constitutive of experience, or that, pertaining more particularly to poetry, the coming into existence of the poem is itself an experience, not simply a reference to experience, and so on. I don't mind poetry being valorized, to put it mildly, but experience isn't constituted only by language, and it's often exactly poetry that's telling us that, though not always poetry that's telling us that. The emphasis in the passages you quote seems to fall on unity, whether originary or momentary, disjunction being posed as a problem. One source of the wariness I've been touching on is the recognition of a give and take between unity and disjunction, the provisionality and intermittency of acts of adequation between language and experience, poetry and life. Words like "inseparable" and "absolute" don't jibe with that, so, no, I don't find what you've outlined especially congruent with what I've been saying.

Q. One of the defining aspects of your work is the sense of movement, of travel, as both theme or subject and the motility of the work itself. I don't find this sense of motion, this kinetic or proprioception, to borrow from Olson, in *Eroding Witness*, but

by your next book of poetry, *School of Udhra*, it is there, as well as in all of your subsequent volumes of poetry. Did the writing of your epistolary fiction, in its engagement with a traveling group of jazz musicians, lead to what seems to be a kind of breakthrough in your poetry, of writing itself as travel, or motion?

A. There were anticipations in *Eroding Witness*, I think, with Trane's "Boat of Years," the "sea-weary drift of boatlifted / Haitians," "Marcus's / erratic ships, aborted Black Star Line, / prophetic / ark of unrest," and so on. In any event, I think it has to do with the poems becoming more decidedly serial. One of my senses of seriality is that it involves the same or similar material not staying put, the same or similar material going through changes, moving, migrating, a sense that began to assert itself in *School of Udhra*. I was drawn to that as a quality of experience that takes place on various levels and on various fronts, so that a traveling band of musicians could be seen as an instance of it, as could the music itself, both the traveling and the music being analogous to a migrant impulse in writing that I was acknowledging more and more. It also, that is, had to do with one of those levels or fronts being bodily location and bodily movement in space and time, a nonlinguistic constituent of experience that a great deal of language, of course, has been aimed at addressing.

The figure of the bedouin was important to these early suggestions of migrancy and the nomadic, *School of Udhra* and *Bedouin Hornbook* both invoking it. Victor Zuckerkandl's discussion of tonal motion in *Sound and Symbol* was a big factor in my thinking around that time. It reinforced my sense of music as quintessential migrancy, something suggested by many things, the etymological relationship between "fugitive" and "fugue," for example. Ellen Basso's book on Kalapalo myth and ritual, *A Musical View of the Universe*, was also a big factor, especially its analysis of the Kalapalo attention to "orders of animacy," music being the highest. Animacy, animation, the ability to move in orders that were concentric and eccentric by turns, would run through the poems as a quintessential mark of the living. The social and historical realities signified by movement and dislocation, the various anthropological and political facts of life symptomized by migration and displacement were on my mind

as well, as with many others around that time, in the turn of attention toward diaspora, migrancy, and exile. Kamau Brathwaite's trilogy *The Arrivants* was an important place where one saw this turn in poetry ("When release / from further journey?"), and it continued in his subsequent trilogy, language itself becoming increasingly dislocated.

Q. Did this sense of motion provide an answer to concerns you addressed in your doctoral dissertation in regard to a "Puritanical" or "antisexual" strain in much American poetry, even among those poets who are trying to get sexuality into their verse?

A. I hadn't thought about this in relation to the concern in my dissertation that you mention, but it probably is the case that bodily animation is an overarching theme or disposition that touches on mobility and attraction in ways that are related, movement and sexuality as resonant with or entwined with one another. When I think of animacy or animation, I can't help thinking of *anima*, soul, and when I think of *anima*, I can't help thinking of *eros*—body and soul. Certainly the least one can say about sexuality is that it moves us.

Q. Your writing would seem to be constituted by acts of momentary unity or "dictation" as a "writing which seems to write itself"; by acts of "adequation of life and experience"; and by acts of "disjunction"—and a crossover between all these acts. One of the sustained political and ethical commitments of your work would seem to be its refusal of compartmentalized knowledge, whether through category, polemic, discipline, field, genre, or medium. Wilson Harris, in his preface to *Bass Cathedral*, the fourth volume in your epistolary fiction, praises your work for your willingness to go between music and language, drawing attention to how your work courts an "incompletion" necessary to the reworking of a different, "potential wholeness," apart from "the one-sided triumphs of a hierarchy of history looming large still." In your interview with Harris in *Discrepant Abstraction*, addressing his engagement with painting, you question him

about the “rendering of one artistic medium in terms of another” and ask, “What bearing does intermedia translation or equation have upon cross-culturality?” How would you respond to that question with respect to your own work and your engagement with music through language? How do you understand the relationship between “dictation” and “adequation,” or between listening to music and writing about music?

A. I think intermedia translation is cross-cultural translation in microcosm or by analogy. It’s not unusual for an artistic medium to be used as a synecdoche for a culture, to exemplify a particular cultural disposition or identity. Even components of an artistic medium (genre, implement, etc.) can do this, as when Brathwaite refers to musical instruments and techniques to telescope the encounter between Africa and Europe: “You scratch my drum / I beat your violin.” An artistic medium isn’t only an aspect of culture but a culture in and of itself, or at least comparable to one. It filters and inflects thought, perception, and expression in particular ways, processes experience and its representations in particular ways, as does a culture. To render one artistic medium in terms of another is to suggest affinities between the two, but it also accents the fact that each is incomplete, subject to augmentation, significantly not the bound whole it might appear to be or presume itself to be.

The same can be said of cultures, of rendering one culture in terms of another. Hence Harris’s attention to incompleteness and the work of dislodgment done by the cross-cultural imagination, which for me calls to mind Zuckermandl’s analysis of tonal motion, his observation that a tone’s dynamic quality is “a statement of its incompleteness,” that in listening to music we’re always between tones, on the way from one to another, reaching through and beyond. To be possessed of a similar, nonresident dynamic, a similar play of suspension and transition with regard to cultural givens and inclinations, is one of the things I seek in writing, as my work’s explicit and recurrent references to music and its association of itself with music make very evident. I often present writing as music and music as writing, both to suggest that the two are closer than we normally think and to register,

inversely or by way of discrepant rattle, that the two are different and, in their difference, have something to say to each other, offer each other. There's also a great deal of cross-cultural insistence at the content level in my writing, referring to and drawing upon jazz as it does, a form of music that grew out of cross-cultural contact and is famously open to and often in dialogue with a global range of musical idioms. Hence the Crossroads Choir's "Indo-Haitian Sufi nocturne based on a line from the *Upanishads*" in *Bedouin Hornbook* and so on.

As for dictation and adequation in my work, I think they're both going on all the time and are at some level and in some sense basically the same. I'm speaking of dictation not in Spicer's sense of channeling "Martians," nor as exclusively writing that seems to write itself, but as listening, not only to music but to and for attunement on every available front, micro to macro, with the aim of writing. Adequation, in its various manifestations and its various accords with and resistances to writing, is what I listen for.

Q. One of the recurring events in your epistolary fiction is the rising up of balloons with words written on them from musical instruments and recordings, sometimes when the music is thought to be the most intense or to most realize itself, and at other times as "deepest caprice." And while the material manifestation of balloons as emanations of the music creates much excitement among the band members, they worry that the balloons may be "upstaging the music." In addition to publishing these letters in *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, you select letters about the balloons for publication in volumes predominantly made up of critical essays, in the title essay of *Paracritical Hinge*, and in *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, edited by Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten. In "Paracritical Hinge," you select a passage from *Atet A.D.* in which the balloons appear during a jazz piece that is motivated, in part, by an unrealized affair between two of the band members, with the balloons bearing such words as "Having heard flamenco singers early on, I wanted in on *duende*," and "Something I saw, thought I saw, some intangible something

led me on. . . ." In the selection for *Diasporic Avant-Gardes*, the word-bearing balloons are later followed by blank balloons and by a "vaguely anthropomorphic figure," B'Loon, "said by those who saw it to possess a balloonlike body." There is an actual sketch of B'Loon, a whimsical, askew, and spiritual fellow, credited to "a sketch artist." Why did you choose the particular letters you selected to be published in *Diasporic Avant-Gardes*? In your some eight hundred pages of epistolary fiction, B'Loon, I believe, is the only figure who is actually drawn, or who undergoes a visual "translation." Why does B'Loon get such special treatment?

A. I don't recall having any special reason for choosing that particular excerpt. In general, I like the idea of my fiction "sitting in" with critical discourse, as I said of "Paracritical Hinge" at the Guelph Jazz Festival Symposium. As for the sketch, I'm not sure it's so much that B'Loon is being given special treatment as that a certain motif gets further inflection. N. has a graphic proclivity that's pretty strong, an impulse toward posing or transposing matters in visual correlatives like the "Deaf Diagrammatic Perspective on the Toupouri Wind Ensemble's Harvest Song," and the "prostrate v" diagrams in *Bedouin Hornbook*, and the "Suspect-Symmetrical Structure of Misconceptual Seed's Paralactic Dispatch" diagram in *Djbot Baghostus's Run* [Sun & Moon, 1993]. The sketch of B'Loon in *Bass Cathedral* has to do with that impulse. N. draws it while undergoing a cowrie shell attack, writing as Dredj—a trancelike state in which his hand, he explains afterward, "picked up a pen and began moving." This impulse surfaces again in volume 5 of *From A Broken Bottle*, on which I'm currently working, where N. writes a piece called "Fossil Flow" that includes a drawing on which the band members are to base what they play at various points marked on the score. The possibility of visual translation and of intersensory translation more generally, the possibility of transposing different sensory modes, runs variously through *From A Broken Bottle*, from the "growling" bits of broken glass embedded in N.'s brow, to Djbouche's "Theory of Founding No(i)se," to the balloons themselves and beyond. The B'Loon sketch partakes of that.

Q. Critics have commented on your work from two rather different orientations, from cultural materialist and spiritual perspectives. Jed Rasula has commented on *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate's* "transgeneric fabric" and Charles Bernstein on its "reworkings of the essay form." Norman Finkelstein has written on the shamanism of your work and Peter O'Leary on its gnosticism, a concept which you also engage. How do you understand the cultural materialist and spiritual divide among critics or criticism of your work, or more generally?

A. I think of it less as a divide than as a difference of emphasis, different critics having different focuses of attention. I don't see the critics who've addressed my work as arguing against each other, though I'm well aware of a divide existing "more generally," as you note, within academia over the past two or three decades. I remember attending a talk in the 1980s in which the speaker celebrated Walter Benjamin's historical materialism by railing against the attention given to his mystical side (his friendship with Gershom Scholem, his interest in the Kabbalah, his angelological discourse, and so on). I think that typifies what you're alluding to. That divide has also had a lot to do with the diminished attention to poetry in recent critical and literary discourse and curricula. Perhaps critics and scholars who do pay attention to poetry are less prone to invest in that schism. In any case, it's fine with me that my work admits both approaches. In "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," I wrote about hearing not only the "enraged sociologies" Amiri Baraka attributes to black music but a mystic thrust as well. In other essays and elsewhere in my writing, there's a good deal that acknowledges both the material and the metaphysical.

Q. Do you think you will return to write, say, a more literary critical type of essay, for which you have been so rightfully praised? Does your turn away from what most would categorize, and therefore engage, as literary or cultural criticism have to do with a distrust of or lack of interest in polemics?

A. I'm not primarily interested in polemics, especially academic polemics. However, I've written less criticism in recent years not so much because of that as because at a certain point, having explored and sketched out, via critical essays, a poetics (the theorization of practice), I decided to focus more on the writing of poetry and fiction (the practice of practice). Having made that decision, I was fortunate to have a steady run of poetry and fiction ensue, usually working on both simultaneously, though sometimes one more than the other, always on one or the other if not both—so steady as to leave less time for criticism, though the fiction, which is where the dedication of time grew the most, encompasses critical moves of a sort. ("Run" may not be the right word. I write very slowly, hence my difficulty finding time to write criticism.) That doesn't mean I've written my last critical essay. William J. Harris, in an issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, refers to "Paracritical Hinge" and the episode from *Atet A.D.* that comprises most of it to explicate why I "must move beyond mere criticism," as he puts it. I haven't disavowed criticism as explicitly as that, though I understand I may have implicitly or apparently done so. I've wanted, at various points in recent years, to write something on Jay Wright's poetry, to write something on Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets*, to write something on Erna Brodber's novels, so I don't rule out writing more critical essays in the future.

Q. I admire your use of the concept of "adequation" for how it cuts across diverse theories of art-making, and the signifier-signified-referent triad—namely across theories of mimesis, expressivism, and constructivism. "Adequation" suggests an art practice that pursues all of these modes while drawing them together through its own difference, its discrepancy. What has struck me about your critical writing in *Discrepant Engagement* and *Paracritical Hinge* is how responsive it is to what seems to me to be the most pressing issues in our current academic, intellectual, and political situation. Your work addresses the demands that gave rise to cultural studies, by situating itself within larger fields of cultural inquiry rather than within disciplinary regimens or debates (including the growing orthodoxies

of cultural studies itself). In developing such concepts as “discrepant engagement” or “adequation,” how much of your invention is a conscious response to divisive academic, intellectual, and political formulations, and how much is a way through for your writing, a way of keeping, as you say elsewhere, “the atmosphere . . . alive”?

A. The two are so closely intertwined I’m not sure I can specify proportions—how much of one, how much of the other. The divisions you refer to are very much a part of what the atmosphere is alive with, and the writing, insofar as it, too, would be alive, can’t help but engage them. Writing registers and interacts with such formulations, wanting to work, as you suggest, its way through them, diverge from or maybe outflank them. That’s all a part of paying attention. I’ve been in academia for many years, and it’s only to be expected, I think, that my writing would in part respond to the issues you refer to, which include their iterations outside as well as inside academia. There certainly should be no surprise that my critical essays do so, but I also recall a friend reading the manuscript of *Bedouin Hornbook* and remarking on its having fun with academic rituals (N.’s response to the Angel of Dust’s essay on the falsetto, his participation in the “Locus and Locomotivity in Postcontemporary Music” symposium, and so on), which has to do with a sense that critical discourse, especially in its move toward cultural studies, however much I was excited by and attracted to and perhaps a part of it, needed to open up and loosen up, to at times lighten up, if it were to obey the spirit it was instigated by.

One could relate this to Charles Olson, whose interdisciplinarity and whose use of the term “postmodern” anticipated much that has gone on more recently in our academic and intellectual life, demanding that response, critical and otherwise, be participant, “equal, that is, to the real itself,” a demand that has resonated for me since I first read it in my early twenties. One could relate it more generally to the artistic, intellectual, and social movements of the 1960s, the time during which I attended high school and college, movements that set the stage for cultural studies via such programs as ethnic studies and women’s studies

but also included a strain that said—to paraphrase Norman O. Brown, with whom I'd eventually be colleagues at UC–Santa Cruz—the only response to poetry is poetry. There's much else one could relate it to, all of which would only go to say that my intellectual bearings and my poetic bearings have been closely bound up with one another, Lukàcs's "adequation" in touch with Duncan's "equilibrations" in touch with Ellington's "parallel to."

Q. You comment on how your multivolume *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* came out of a phrase that "occurred" to you—"dear angel of dust"—in the mid-1970s. The first two letters to "Dear Angel of Dust" are not dated in *Eroding Witness*, but they are dated by the first volume of your epistolary fiction, *Bedouin Hornbook*. At first the letters are dated so that they seem to be contemporaneous with your writing of them, beginning *Bedouin Hornbook* in 1978 and concluding it in 1981. By the end of your fourth volume, *Bass Cathedral*, published in 2008, you are still in 1983. Did it change your sense of the letters that they were veering increasingly away from the time in which you were actually writing them?

A. That aspect of the work is something that developed as I figured out what sort of work it was. I wasn't sure what the letters were at first, and I wasn't sure what they were part of. Early on it looked like they might be occasional pieces that would have a diaristic cast, interspersed among poems, perhaps, but possibly comprising a book of their own, hence the early dates corresponding with the time of their composition. But after a few letters in what eventually became *Bedouin Hornbook*, I had a greater sense that I was writing fiction, and the dates themselves became fictional, chronicling an accelerated pace of writing on N.'s part. The time of my writing and the time of N.'s writing no longer coincided, as they had at first. It was the change in my sense of the writing that brought this about, not the other way around. With N. writing more letters, often longer letters, writing more frequently, I was depicting an intense, concentrated period of creativity, a fictional concentration that was part of a larger fiction. It was fictional time—fictional to the point of fantastical even, almost mythic time. N. became doubly dis-

placed from me, writing away in the past and in the city I moved to Santa Cruz from in 1979.

Q. What in your experience or practice of the writing of these letters has led you to write most of them through the temporal window of the early 1980s?

A. There's no particular significance to *From A Broken Bottle's* time frame remaining in the early 1980s other than that it was a stimulating time for me, something of a breakthrough, watershed time. It was then that I began to come into a stronger sense of what I wanted to do in writing, in both poetry and prose, but especially in prose. I'd never been able to maintain a diary, and discarding a diaristic notion of the work, embracing its fictional or even phantom nature, was important. That's when it really took off, around 1980 or 1981, after I had moved from Los Angeles, though it continued to be set there. The pace I had in mind for N.'s writing resulted in it continuing to unfold in a time period I moved away from as well, which has made for challenges on occasion, like not being able to refer to things I might like to—a book, a record, an event—that are subsequent to that time frame, but I can live with that.

Q. You have recently moved to Durham, North Carolina, to take a position at Duke University. I associate your work with the West Coast and coastal areas more generally, in part because of where you have lived, but also because of your multiple references to coastal features, through such recurring formulations as "Lone Coast" and "Loquat Cove," as well as your engagement with Caribbean writers. What kind of effect has moving away from the West Coast had on your writing? *Nod House* feels very "inland" to me, and even southern, beginning with a "melon patch" and a "pond" and "frogs," or is this just my imagination?

A. None of the poems in *Nod House* were written after the move to Durham. I finished the book during the fall of 2008, nearly two years before leaving Santa Cruz. "Sound and Somnolence," the poem with the melon patch, pond, and frogs in it, the poem that opens the book, grew out of my visiting Athens, Georgia, in

2002. Jed Rasula, whom I've known since the late seventies, when we both lived in Los Angeles, invited me to read at the University of Georgia. While I was there, I stayed at his house, which was in a wooded area, with a pond nearby, and it got pretty loud at night with the sounds of crickets, frogs, tree frogs, and such. My first night there I had a very vivid dream in which I was in a pond, up to my nose in water, bobbing in the water. It wasn't clear whether my body was submerged or I had no body, simply a head bobbing in water. I think the sounds from the pond infiltrated my sleep, and I was dreaming I was a frog. The dream made a strong impression on me, and the poem grew out of it. But other than that poem and "Lone Coast Anacrusis," which alludes to New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina (though not without reference to redwoods and the central California coast's Ohlone Indians), I wasn't particularly thinking of southern venues in the book.

It remains to be seen what effects moving to and living in North Carolina will have on my writing. Locale does assert itself, and I have no doubt there'll be effects. Pine trees and a place called Low Forest have already popped up in poems. At the same time, I don't imagine the imprint of the West Coast ever leaving me.

Q. Some moments and lines in *Splay Anthem* might be described as joyously ecstatic, such as "To abide by hearing was / what love was" and "To / love was to hear without / looking." The last section of *Splay Anthem*, "Nub," is downbeat. In the preface, you define "Nub" as "failed extension" or "falling short" and associate it with "the imperial, flailing republic of Nub the United States has become." *Nod House* seems to continue in a negative vein, with the title itself suggesting a kind of falling asleep, or a too readily given assent. In the end there seems a kind of ecstatic repositioning, involving "initiate" "stick figures," which "Insofar as there was an / I it fell in." Then the "I," "insofar as there was" one, forms a crossed "I," an "X," which creates a kind of stop to the book's negative drift or riff. Is *Nod House* a pursuit of the ecstatic, if ecstasy is understood as standing beside

or outside of oneself? Or is *Nod House* an enactment of the ecstatic in its refusals of solace and retreat?

A. In the book's last passage, "nod" is said to be "Nub's / emic / retreat." "Emic" is a term in anthropology that applies to analyses of cultural phenomena from the vantage of a participant in the culture in question; it's contrasted with "etic," which applies to analyses from an outsider's perspective. "Nod" is Nub thrown back on itself, and the book's title wants to suggest Nub's introspection, Nub's inward retreat, a certain recoil or repercussion having to do with failed extension, "house" carrying its usual connotations of the domestic, the private, but, via recent parlance, the public as well ("in the house"), Nub all the same outside or beside itself. It's an inwardness or introspection that the expression "to nod off" lends a suggestion of sleep and the expression "to nod out" a suggestion of drug use, while, as you note, "nod" as a sign of assent and/or recognition and/or invitation and/or approval is somehow part of this condition or state that aims both to be aware of itself and to be rid of itself, to extinguish and awaken itself. "Ecstatic? Post-ecstatic?" is a good question, and the title seeks to carry that quandary, that qualm, as well as to imply sleepwalking. It wants readers to recall that Nod is the land east of Eden, the land Cain fled to and wandered in after killing Abel. It announces themes of exile and unrest and inner and outer extension running through the book.