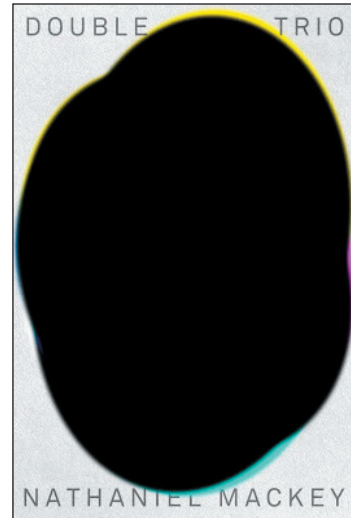


**Double Trio by Nathaniel Mackey**

*Review by Donald Wellman*

I have been reading Nathaniel Mackey's *Double Trio* (New Directions, 2020), three volumes, each containing multiple sections in which strands from his long serial poems, *Song of the Andomboulou* and *Mu* are interwoven as was the case in *Splay Anthem* (New Directions, 2006). The development of these serial poems is a lifework stemming from 2002, a lifework of challenging dimensions that the reader may find daunting, as I do, especially with the recent release of *Double Trio*. Achieving a remarkable degree of stylistic consistency, each poem and each strophe expands through line and syllable using a prosody first found in *School of Udhra* where the rhythm of line and strophe is extended by means of monosyllabic hinge points that force enjambment or torquing, "sleepless, eyes like rocks, / night / like so many such nights I've known." The poems of *Double Trio* adhere to a "bedouin impulse," pursuing a *mélange* of threads that incorporate jazz, politics, anthropology and spiritual studies.



*Double Trio* is structured by the meetings and wanderings of a disparate group of individuals as they experience emotions that are often identified with a gnostic presence, the waft of a perfume, ineffable but vital, "melodic pout, Bedouin updraft" (Trio I, *Tej Bet*, 73). These comings and goings describe layers of ritual in superposition with the rational realms of quotidian reality, although that reality too appears to be a virtual construct. One of Mackey's models is found in Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. In conversation with Paul Naylor, as early as 2002, Mackey recalls Baudelaire's poem "Correspondences," which he first read in his late teens. Turner uses the poem as an epigraph. Mackey explains, "The book is about

how the Ndembu intuit and enact correspondences between themselves and their environment and among themselves, about a sort of lived poetry, a sense of underlying rapport, about how they sustain or, when it's ruptured, restore such a sense." In the opening pages of *Tej Bet*, Mackey again cites Turner, "Ritual, scholars are coming to see, is precisely a mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable." In other words, the obligatory can be said to be punctuated by desire. In the gatherings of spiritual scholars or adepts, including the migrating peoples that populate *Double Trio*, identity resolves itself and filters through an immanent "might have been." Ritual enables a "we" and a "way."

*There was a we we were on our way towards regardless, no utopic elsewhere too utopic, a we we would eventually be. "Let the parts congregate and grow," we got up insisting a shout so loud it lifted us, our feet left the floor, no matter it might've been mental at most . . . It was an abstract inaudible ring shout," (239).*

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The “ritual” in hand here is modelled on celebrations held by African American congregations. States of “might’ve been” opposed to states of actuality form identity. Virtual, eventual, obscured, abstract or immanent states “lift” the congregation, as an “a we” or an all of us, coinage found in the work of Kamau Brathwaite. Immanence and community are the pivots of Double Trio.

It’s a spell to’ve inhabited a space that splays or spread out. Didn’t Heidegger speak of how poetry dwells? Immanent to the body and released during sex is a perfume associated by Mackey with gnostic spirituality. The bodies of the Andoumboulou, primal Dogon creatures, imperfect or not quite human, as they cross virtual worlds, spread in multiple directions, a scattered flight, in which they seek union among themselves. Different bodies in different conversations create a multilayered discourse, social reality, as it were, ever on the edge of happening. The burr or buzz of song or choric soughing, mixed with pleading and clapping are “the one truth” known by participants.

*“Well, well, well.” Said to have been said of Sough  
Choir, said of what was, whatever it was, at two  
removes, two the very least we knew, Said to’ve been  
said to’ve been caught up in burr, buzz the one  
truth we knew . . . So spoke the we I awaited, a  
collective wish made by a wished for collective,  
his or that mystic bent, splay immanence, this or that  
ythmic event,  
“Sough Choir,” -- mu one hundred and thirty-eight part — Double Trio 1: Tej  
Bet, 326*

In the Nationaal Book Award winning Splay Anthem (2002, 2006) dogon figures work to similar effect. There is a remarkable and deliberate sonance of signs that suggests “dotted bodies,” cattle among the thundering horses of Lascaux and a stick figure that might indicate a body, perhaps that of shaman or ghost among the cattle and bison figured on the walls, the animals too in ghostly guise. I remember Mackey in the years of the composition of Double Trio, bracing himself upon his walking stick, as if he too were a virtual part of the world figured in his poetry, a shaman himself. “Signs / all around, how to read them one of us / knew. It wasn’t we were lost, we lost / track absorbed as we were . . . dotted / bodies bespoke ‘immanent elsewhere’” (97). Twisted and dance-like lines bespeak immanences layered in time and on the page. Perception of this sort consists of layers in both Charles Olson, dear to Mackey, and Giles Deleuze, whose many plateaus are central to my Expressivity and to Mackey’s thought. In Expressivity I undertook an analysis of the forms of immanence so central to the disorienting swirl of Mackey’s poetry. I wrote:

In “Anuncio’s Last Love Song,” Mackey refers to “paper” as “wood’s pressed immanence.” A plane of immanence is always virtual, Deleuze writes, and then he continues, “Absolute immanence is in itself; it is not in something, or to something: it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject.” Immanence has a life, and its life is found not in moments that happen to collide or build upon one another. It exists between moments and “offers the immensity of an empty space where one sees the event yet

to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness." "Paper," in Mackey's poem, is subsequent to virtual rings that circle like halos and are likened to pearls, a gnostic image for the soul. His lines require context: Soul and Self's lyric digest. Circling round our heads went rings of paper, wood's pressed immanence, pearls we cut our teeth on, strung, string broken, let's go . . . Comments on the unwinding of Mackey's baroque syntax, notes sustained for many bars on a singular horn, further implicate immanence as transcendent to the page, an extended modality of reading's suggestibilities. "Occasions" or "meanwhiles" exist between "moments" of perception. Here are glimpses of virtualities that are not bound in time. An "occasion" is a plane of consistency populated by multiple moments of perception. (Expressivity 182)

In this poetry from its earliest conception, rings of smoke, haloes, and wells of gnostic light take the form of perfume or melodic pout, as in the case of the minister who in his spiritual transport, with its distinctive postures of crouching and leaping, is driven by or responds to the loud and rhapsodic noise of celebration. In this paper I have been tracking various instances of the immanence that offers glimpses of the wholeness underlying Double Trio.

Mackey's method of composition seems to be best addressed in the section entitled "I-Insofar's Last Love Song," So's Notice (Trio II). The title of this passage is reminiscent of several of the passages with a title that read "Anuncio's Last Love Song." "I-Insofar's Last Love Song" recounts a lying back, a repose or restraint, "what / lay close not to be let in , , , Ooze of honey I'd / have said but held back, tongue tugged on by / tej." (272). Tej is the Ethiopian honey-wine or mead often invoked for its intoxicating and trance-inducing qualities. The sexual imagery like the perfume cited earlier occupies a between space, as it were between two layers of virtuality. "In-betweenness" is the essence of liminality, "inter / polated, nonce, anomalous kiss." The imagery of closeness but not quite closeness rhymes with the imagery of composition, an imagery of language use. This section begins with the lines "I listened and I wrote away / from what came at once. To write was to / be at odds or at an angle, bent ventricle I'd / have / said / had it had to do with heart." The language loop of listening and writings exists at an angle with the heart, "bent" as in the bent notes of the blues. The image is also quantum-mechanical, a science that posits worlds at right angle to related worlds. The reference here is both to recovery from heart surgery and reminiscences of love. The art is to resist any easy fusion of emotions or conditions and "to write away from" these towards a moment that is itself in itself. Mackey's grammar contains so many sweet contortions "had it had to do." Here I hear those "bent notes" clearly. The loveliness of this section of Mu is completely present in the strophe entitled. "I looked and I wrote and I wrote away from / what I saw. I called her crow's feet filigree" (274), lines recognized as denial in virtuality. Double Trio evokes spaces of love on every page.

Double Trio, a consummate love poem is also a poem about war and dying. In So's Notice (Double Trio II), the subject of death via decapitation, resonates with a horrify aspect of the world we inhabit, "Decapitism stuck to the end of my tongue" ("Song of the Andoumboulou 1661/2," 49). Again: "We sought refuge, decapitism at us where- / ever er looked. They were starting the next / war, they were stealing the sky's ozone," The scene

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could well be Iraq with memories of decapitations executed by Isis. (Trio 3, Nerve Church, "Song of the Andouboulou: 216," 34). "Decapitism is an aspect of capitalism, it's cause.<sup>i</sup> Consider the history of oil in the Middle East. Under capitalism, life fades into invisibility, "Citizen vs denizen an inequation we came to / as well, the TV on lest we missed the latest out- / rage. . . . Toward / the end we were only so much breath" (Trio III, Nerve Church, 131). Dying embodies immanence, "a / deep singing sounding like shadows of a voice, gruff / murmur, immanence caught between limbs of a / tree outside" (226). Synesthesia of sound and image one of the destination in Double Trio that disappears as approached, and yet such states are the object of Mackey's poetry. Nerve Church presents us with a constant disappearing, a felt disappearing.

*Whatever it was, I was feeling it. It was all so inordinate I thought, whatever it was the horns we couldn't hear, the water we couldn't see, a secret world, whose effects we moved at large in, an immanence unvalved, unstopped . . . (156).<sup>i</sup> "In this installment of the ongoing 'Song of the Andoumboulou,' the poem's transient 'we' stop at the Stick City Ashram. They rename capitalism 'decapitism,' rename prophecy 'profitry,' rename business 'bitness' and revisit poetic dicta, all in the service of 'thought's due ad- / vent.'" — Nathaniel M*

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