Leslie Scalapino Memorial Lecture in Innovative Poetics, with Divya Victor

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When I received the invitation to join you in celebrating Leslie’s work, I “noticed” myself asking “why me”? (Noticed is a useful word that Joan Retallack taught me.) “Why me?” may first appear to be a response that deflects the impulse to congratulate oneself on being invited, but in my case it isn’t motivated primarily by humility. It’s a response worth noticing because it comes out of increasingly thorny engagement with the problematic relations between poetic togetherness, isolation (togetherness’ ostensible opposite) and the baseline set of qualities that make writing that is hard to do and hard to read, capable of being read in togetherness or solitude. The thorniness of these questions has to do with my own feelings of blankness and bewilderment in the face of reading or hearing or thinking about narratives of poetic formation that involve “coming up” as part of, for example, a community of writers in San Francisco, or New York, or for that matter, a planned community of writers such as what is found at Cave Canem or Kundiman. My sense for affiliation is extremely faulty; having never belonged anywhere, I cannot imagine why real, human allegiances and loyalties could be mistaken for belief in imaginal belonging.

I’m saying that “Why me?” doesn’t mostly mean “isn’t there someone else?” (although it also means this); mostly it means, why should I come among you on this particular occasion to share thoughts about writing and thinking that are malformed and contradictory and nonetheless unshakeable and dear? What project of affiliation am I being asked to participate
in? Do I have an adequate understanding of that project’s relation to what I am trying to achieve as a human being? As a black human being? What I am getting at is the question, how will it be possible for you to understand me? How is that possible when questions at the poetic center of my writing and thinking deal with problems of misunderstanding, failure to receive, exclusion and suspicion of center-logics, suspicion of orthodoxy of all kinds? How can such a person reach others or be invited through writing? How can you be inviting such a person, how can such a person be inviting? I’m speaking to a kind of generative paranoia that I think of as an indispensable and deep well of despair, out of which the work constructs mechanisms for egress, not to say escape.

I want to get at all of this or break all of it down in two parts. I want to talk about how Leslie’s work affects me or how I feel myself to be associated and lined-up with her work despite (because of) the superficially contrasting intensity of my interest in what blackness means and how it is cut with practices of critical writing and reading. And I want to share some recent thinking about Nathaniel Mackey’s continuing prose masterwork, From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate, a work that concerns itself with all the issues I’ve mentioned at a level of complexity so demanding that I’ve come to think of it as probably unreadable. Now, many of you have read this work. I have read it. So I’m not trying to weigh Mackey’s novel down with any of the hostile dismissiveness that greets so much black brilliance – I’m totally against dealing in any kind of anti-intellectual conservatism or efforts to repress epistemological change where black people are concerned. I’m trying to press on the qualities of the readable and enjoyable in terms of how those qualities work as racialized effects tumbling out of or falling before a poetics of difficulty, taking Mackey’s work as a high example of a black poetics of difficulty. All of this is motivated by a desire to contribute
to formulating a counter-theory to the notion, articulated virally by Kenneth Warren, that
the notion of African-American literature is ahistorical; that what we have now is writing by
people who, as they say, “happen to be black” as opposed to black writing.

If I know anything, it is that I am working in a tradition of searching for ways of writing and
an accompanying critical practice (where the art and the criticism partake of one another,
asymptotically, and also, jump the rails of the asymptote in occasional instances of random
glory), a practice that never leaves questions of audience alone; that is, the tradition I’m
interested in is always engaged with questions of the “politics” of audience, although
“politics” cannot begin to describe the implications for personhood that I’m thinking about
and hoping for. I’m hoping for conditions under which the pressure of producing a readable
writing, the pressure to produce such a writing are responsive to principles of equality—-or, no,
where the techniques by which freedom is approached and practiced in order to produce a
writing that’s readable as defiant of anybody who wants to regulate readability or capture it
by way of knowledge that holds words, by way of which we understand the world, to be
dead things, things without the characteristics of every other thing in the universe. Words
don’t belong to me and they don’t belong to you, even if you learned them from me or I
learned them from you. I’m hoping to find ways to be the kind of person for whom it’s
impossible to imagine any technique through which freedom is approached as a technique
that creates more rather than less suffering in the lives of other people who aspire to be free.
I’m hoping for these conditions because we’re not there yet. Because we still live in a world
where it’s perfectly normal to accept that there is some deep, uncrossable divide between the
poetics of Leslie Scalapino and Nathaniel Mackey, and another divide that blocks my access
to what these writers have done, although I am working less than a generation behind them and so we are part of the same time and times.

Eleven or twelve years ago, I was in an MFA workshop taught by Mark Bibbins, where Mark asked me whether I knew Leslie Scalapino’s work – pedagogically, I think this was to help me to talk about some feature of the poem I had written or to help others to contextualize it, but I experienced it as a shameful reproach. I didn’t know Leslie’s work; I didn’t know who she was. I didn’t know enough about my own thinking in the early moments of emerging from a kind of green sleep, the middle-class chrysalis within which I had been trained to practice law with very little sensory awareness of the effects the practice produced within me and also trained to say nothing about those effects. When, after that workshop, I made a dutiful visit to the Norton Postmodern American in pursuit of the progenitor and guide I was desperate to discover, I didn’t recognize what I read (from Crowd and not evening or light). Poor Mark Bibbins -- he didn’t know what he was talking about.

Fred Moten writes of improvisational breakthrough, “If something is to happen you have to come unprepared, unarmed; but you don’t come with nothing.” It turns out that this is also a pretty good description of my experience of coming to writing “late,” which is a kind of lack of preparedness—I don’t know when or how it become possible for me to read and recognize Leslie’s work as vital, literally breathing life into my beginner’s efforts to read poetry and write it, and maybe in a more profound way, to get into a literary or cultural critical that was not essentially mimicry. I don’t know when it came to pass that I started to turn to Objects in the Terrifying Tense Longing from Taking Place to meditate on the possibility of critique, to pray on being visited by the ability to think beyond the categories that come to
me appearing to be tired and harmful descriptions of the world. Before I begin to work, I read *Objects in the Terrifying Tense* to remind myself of how it is possible to allow the mind to become encircled by the critical object, present to it, and yet to hold in one’s mind the circumstances that cause you to arrive in precisely that place with that object, with that critical intention. There is no such thing as an accident; there is no such thing as “pure” intellectual or academic “interest.” It costs me something to have Leslie’s work as a touchstone, to find myself thinking of her work, or of Lyn Hejinian’s or Joan Retallack’s when I am lost or unsure what I am as a thinker and writer. This is undoubtedly why I could not see her at first, or the fundamental similarity of our projects. I did not want to try a pagan friend. I didn’t want to see how it was possible to transform my self into a seal or a dog or a dead woman or an owl or how the power of these poetic transformations speaks to a willingness to lose the floor of subjectivity; how these practices are crucial to solving the Emersonian riddle of how to “come out of that” which causes us to suffer. Coming to this understanding in reading Leslie’s work and the work of other women poets associated with LANGUAGE conditions my ability to shape my mouth to form a single word of critique about black literary and intellectual history and its future. The tensions between the desire to work inside a poetics that explores infinitessimal possibility with respect to the subject’s relation to its outside and a materially and theoretically separate tradition, a black one, that holds close iconicity, a tradition that implicitly treasures and elevates heroic acts by specific subjects of the past, aren’t tensions that can be alleviated, problems that can be solved.

It is, of course, Leslie Scalapino who writes, “I am concerned in my own work with the sense that phenomena appear to unfold. (What is it or) how is it that the viewer sees the impression of history created, created by oneself though it’s occurring outside?” This is a
shockingly fitting description of the goal of the larger project I’m working from today, a
project that tries to put some theoretical stress on what I take to be a central assumption of
what Fred Moten calls “the aesthetics of the black radical tradition”: that is, the assumption
that the achievements we’ve seen in black music, *the Music* with a capital M, and by the
musicians who make it, historically defined and will continue to stand for or figure, if not
define, the universe of oppositional techniques and the possibility of entering into the realm
of the free. I’m interested in the phenomenon of taking certain avant garde practices in black
music as having left us with the only understanding we have or that we are ever likely to get
about how black people (or, really anybody willing to adopt blackness as an ally) can get out
of the subjectivity bind we find ourselves in, a bind that is to do with having been bound,
strapped down literally, and also tethered to the symbolic work of representing every kind of
abjection and unfreedom that could be nightmared-up by the architects of ideal democracy.
Saidiya Hartmann is the best source on what there is to fear about this. I’m taking this
assumption to include the corollary that we must continue, indefinitely into the future, to
think about black music’s bedrock practice of improvisation *ensemble*, as it were, to use
improvisation to arrive at epistemologically radical art inventions that enact in something like
the real time in which culture is actually made what Baraka called in one period *black attitudes
or emotions*, where these inventions are affirmations of the experience of black persons in
radical opposition to the worldview that black personhood by definition does not or ought
not meaningfully “experience” human life. The Music as freedom’s last best chance, then
and now. The Music as always already radical. The Music as foundational to any
understanding about how to define a tradition of black writing that coheres around projects
of freedom and collective memories of being unfree. Reversing the typical sense of the
domination of the visual, The Music, given as “the only, real experience or true interpretation
of the experience,” an erasure of “the division between fact and experience” (“Division Between Fact and Experience,” 183).

To take this claim closer to becoming a complaint, toward a critique, I’d say that it’s a generally accepted true-ism that the technical, cultural, historical, social, aesthetic and philosophical achievement that is the Music remains untouched by any other achievement by black persons; the Music is therefore, a sacred figure and example to which the practice of other art forms must aspire. Music is the figure for unscalable heights of consciousness and manifestations of creative genius---this is why, in poetry and not just black poetry, we talk about aspiring to music in the sense of writing what cannot be written, saying what cannot be said. I have always seen this as an impossibly strong claim but I know it to be uncontroversial.

Because it is taken as true that writing could never do or mean what black music does and means – this is, like, a pure inversion of enlightenment racism whereby Miles Davis, Bob Marley, or, fuck it, Prince, eclipse the significance of the (black) Shakespeare -- you are never going to see in the work of any serious thinker about what black music can mean for black writing in America any type of claim about the equivalent significance of improvisational work in music and improvisational poetics. – even though in the postmodern situation, as Aldon Nielsen writes in Black Chant, “the motions between black and white, between script and speech, between page and performance” have been accounted for (Nielsen 36-37) at a very high level of complexity. Du Bois, Hughes, Ellison, Murray, Baraka, not to mention Baker, Mackey, Lott, Griffin, O’Meally, Moten, Brooks, Edwards. What you are going to see, as matters of cultural studies and literary criticism, are exponentially complex renderings of
fundamentally orthodox claims about black music that sometimes break new ground by incorporating thinking about cross-cultural, inter-genre formations, performance, questions of border, questions of space and time, etc. Every African Americanist believes she is in the music business; everybody believes they are doing or have to be doing or ought to be doing something to advance thinking about the significance of black music; everybody is into this.

I'm starting to think that as a framework for thinking about what blackness is and what it might be, belief in black music is misplaced: that we might be starting to be wrong about the music’s *contemporary centrality*; that, in fact, the complexity and importance of the poetic project of theorizing the practices and meanings of black music far surpasses the expressive capacities of contemporary black music, -- a strange corporatized thing that gets by by way of the fetishization of black depth and fast access to critique by way of the black body. That we are, in fact, clinging to an ideology of black music that denies the coming, already done come, of the black Shakespeare; an ideology of black music that blinds us to the finest and wildest qualities of such a person’s work; that we are living is a strange attitude of denial about how long this figure has been with us; that that denial reinvigorates the isolation of the black artists, the black arts that we practice. That we are eating our tail, so to speak, in continuing to circle back to the Music.

It is not easy to talk about what happens to a person immersed in black culture and life, as I am, to whom the reality of black difference is undeniable, when explanations about what blackness is appear to come apart at the seam along which everyone agrees the logic of blackness shall cohere. For me, it has come apart along the seam of the Music. It has come apart because I cannot hold the idea of innovation and the idea of tradition in my mind at
the same time without thinking. But, how does black writing take place if it is subject to the
rigors of never resting? What would a recording of ideas, so punctilious, so exact, a writing
without precedent or following, become? Is it possible to read a writing that never rests?
How is it possible to get and stay between words? What other substance is there, that makes
things things, that would make being between words experience, however it is possible to
understand the limits of possible experience, however it is possible to be things at their
limits? Does the unapproachable demand to discover what is between the elemental fall on
me because of the ways in which blackness, for the sake of its own survival, has been unable
to allow the very notion of innovation to take an air necessary to it, if it is to remain useful
and coherent, an air that is, while necessary, also taboo, what it cannot claim for itself, as
black? Not to celebrate, but to see the changes.

Poetically, I’m asking, What does it mean to enter a league of discussion where black Music
has the power to control every statement about innovation? Where the idea of the necessity
of beginning again persists, is impossible to dislodge, like a pit in the throat of statements
regarding the nature of tradition; where the notion that invention is radical in itself is held so close
that gatherings of momentum that come off the one could be considered indecent. Once I
get it in my head to get up out of a place, then what happens, if the kind of straight
movement that typifies the line is aesthetically forbidden me? What do I get out of
author/ship?

“Dear Angel of Dust: Nathaniel Mackey’s audience of (no)one”

From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate is important to me because it enacts a
thoroughly gripping examination of possible convergence and divergence between the
possibilities proposed for black personhood by way of performing and listening to music (that is, of music-based theories of radical black personhood) and possibilities proposed by way of writing. All the evidence suggests that I might be reading him wrong, but I can’t shake the intuition that with these four books Nathaniel Mackey does the impossible by insisting on the correctness of the music-based theory while accessing a poetics that permanently destabilizes all its premises. In *From a Broken Bottle*, Nathaniel Mackey ruins the intention to run-on indefinitely with a poetics that is simultaneously music-based, black and radical --- ruins it forever.

As you know, In *From a Broken Bottle*, N. and the band play an expansive and highly experimental music in the jazz tradition (and that’s complicated), and inspired by each member’s meditations on how to advance in the music and how to make spiritual advances in freedom. Mackey allows for and then maximizes (or maxes out) the use of what I call the trope of the “up and out,” part of a familiar poetic discourse of ascent/descent – the discourse that gives us “Way Out West,” “Out to Lunch,” “Air” “Ascension” “Interstellar Space” Sun-Ra and George Clinton. Balloons given off (Mackey’s word is “emanated”) by the music of N. and the band arguably put words in the mouth of the player, as he thinks about and makes music that communicates his reflections upon what to do/how to live, and because they are balloons, the words float away, float off and out. When one of the band’s members puts it this way: “It’s not about being here anymore. I’ve gotta tighten up my concept, give it a few turns I’ve gotta go elsewhere to get.” Reading this novel, readers assent to an absolute weave between playing to live a new life and living to play a new music, playing live and playing life: we assent to the invention of a “realm” (Mackey’s word from *Bass Cathedral*) in which the thought/action divide is taken to be a bunch of baloney.
Subjectivity problem #1 for black aesthetics solved: Mackey’s fictional black people don’t have to argue for the political significance of acts of art because the order of politics recedes behind the cosmic order that controls events, such as the manifestation of thought balloons. For the first time, I see the novel as a work of genius that affirms the independent power of poetic thinking to change the course of one life at a time by forcing language off, taking possession of the forces that make it move off, get off you.

I want to say that again: this novel is a work of genius and a masterpiece. So what’s the problem? The problem is that, for me, language that goes off doesn’t aspire to the condition of music; it aspires to itself. What’s fascinating in From a Broken Bottle is that the massive scale and complexity of the changes-in-self Mackey envisions for his fictional black persons might (and I can’t imagine that he doesn’t know this) require them to give up a sacredly held view of their central spiritual and intellectual ritual – playing music. This is why the balloons are such a HUGE PROBLEM. This is why they take over the narrative; this is why, after their first appearance, the novel becomes more and more meditation on the unexpected (improvised and also otherworldly) outcome that is the convergence of what is seen and what is heard by way of the aesthetic rupture or break that coincides with the appearance of the balloons. PLUS, and this bothers me a LOT, if the novel is actually playing out, as I think it is, a scene whereby music is decentered by an alternative thought tradition -- the gnostic poetic tradition (I wish I could get into the transformation of the prevailing view of the history and meaning of blackness this might involve) – the writer of the novel and its readers are left in the awkward position of having narrowed the possibilities for relating to those who are not actually, currently participating in the poetic practices of reading/writing/listening that the novel simultaneously invents and operates prophetically.
on behalf of. Again, re-newing the central problem of the avant-garde, and also
undermining the orthodox principles of a given avant-garde. And who wants to be the John
the Baptist of black people?

I’m going to close by READING N.’s initial take on “what the balloons are” from the third
book of the novel, *Atet, A.D.*

The balloons are words taken out of our mouths, an eruptive critique of predications rickety spin rewound as endowment. They subsist, if not on excision, on exhaust, abstract-extrapolative strenuousness, tenuity, technical-ecstatic duress. They advance the exponential potency of dubbed excision—plexed, parallactic articulacy, vexed elevation, vatic vacuity, giddy stilt. They speak of overblown hope, loss’s learned aspiration, the eventuality of see-said formula, filled-in equation, vocative imprint, prophylactic bluff. They raise hopes while striking an otherwise cautionary note, warnings having to do with empty authority, habitable indent, housed as well as unhoused vacuity, fecund recess.

The balloons are love’s exponential debris, “high-would” atmospheric dispatch. Hyperbolic aubade (love’s post-expectant farewell), they arise from the depth we invest in ordeal, chivalric trauma—depth charge and buoy rolled into one. They advance an exchange adumbrating the advent of optic utterance, seen-said exogamous mix of which the coupling of tryst and trial would bear the inaugural brunt. Like Djeannine’s logarithmic flute, they obey, in the most graphic imaginable fashion, ocular deficit’s oracular ricochet, seen-said remit.

The balloons are thrown-away baggage, oddly sonic survival, sound and sight rolled into one. They map even as they mourn post-appropriative precincts, chthonic or subaquatic residua come to the surface caroling world collapse. They dredge vestiges of premature post-expectancy (overblown arrival, overblown goodbye), seen-said belief’s wooed risk of inflation, synaesthetic excess, erotic-elegiac behest. The balloons augur—or, put more modestly, acknowledge—the ascendancy of videotic premises (autoerotic tube, autoerotic test pattern), automatic stigmata bruited as though of the air itself. (BB, 481-482)

The balloons are one sign in a whole Mackey-an symbolic world, one small piece of one deep logico-symbolic structure of sound/sight meditation in a novel that is unbearably dense with deep logico-symbolic structures—
no “meta” reading suggests itself because each symbolic structure vies with, informs, contradicts, another. If you know the novel, think about the operatic, the post-expectant, the phoneme Dj-

The balloons are impossible to understand, philosophically. From a Broken Bottle warns against the folly of approaching this language that is exhaust with “formula,” one character wisely concluding that “it’s hard to say” what they are—philosophy can’t say. But that doesn’t mean that “words don’t go there,” necessarily, even if you can’t read words that refuse to become singularly referential; that become, instead, writing made of air, writing that becomes matter. The balloons speak, to me, anyway, of the stakes involved in moving into the space of “Considering how exaggerated music is,” what that might mean, and precisely because I’ve been warned: THAT WAY MADNESS LIES.

The balloons emerge out of, are synaesthetically coterminous with the energetic and psychological demands (including crippling (mind-fucking) episodes of lost time, unbearable cranial pain, automatic writing, prophetic shared dreams) of composing and performing ACTING toward “the most ontic music ever heard.”

The balloons put a comic quietus on the dead serious performance of the music. The balloons’ “rough poetry” wins out over the demand to hear, as sacred sound, the most ontic music ever made. People want to pay see the magic balloons. Language that goes off doesn’t aspire to the condition of music, is unspectacular; it surpasses music’s exaggeration by way of new specificity, specificity that highlights discovery and enjoyment of poetic hyper-referentiality achieved via dismemberment/disaggregation of ONE heroic consciousness. In the poem, I become one in conversation with myself and others.

The balloons propose a potent anti-essentialism for which we are not even ready, displacing the black genius improviser as the vector of discovery however much he goes out. This way, this freedom to transform and go out
of the body as such, as of the troubles of the past body, is made possible by heroism but does not re-enter it by way of the new thing it makes possible to understand as proper.

The balloons come to pass when we write with knowledge of the possibility of becoming multiple as dreamers of the same dream, when we write a proper writing in-keeping with the multi-layered experience of “deep listening.”

The balloons are proper writing. They are a proper cosmic response to an alignment achieved through N.’s libretto of a non-acoustic opera, the unacknowledged scrawl that outs. N.’s/Mackey’s powers of composition will out the alignment of performance/listening : playing/memory : speech/playing : conversation/argument taking place in the present by way of an archive that is heavily musical.

N. writes (he says he is “quoting a book on Stravinsky”) “In the Kingdom of the Father there is no drama, but only dialogue, which is disguised monologue.” The balloons come to pass at the junction of the namesake epigraph. They pass by anaphora to re-describe how epigraph works. How ancestry works. The balloons change the direction of the address of proper black writing, away from the possibility of its being received by the many, and toward the possibility of its being understood by a few.

The balloons are an emanation of rage we do not yet know we feel upon encountering conditions of writing that would take us away from sound and into the age of the epigraph.

What epistemological satisfactions arise when physical/spatial (which might be the absence of or the condition for primarily “material” ideologies of black personhood), as opposed to the sonic/linguistic (not that this is an
exposé of the “seeing-said” as just another used-to-be useful dialectic), aspects of thinking the difference between black art traditions and any other kinds of tradition come forward?

The balloons “invoke” music and come into being in a manner that alludes to the ways in which black history is inflected by music, but leaves music in an ambivalent and altered — ambivalent because altered — relation with the worldview that takes music to be at the center of black history. Like, the notion of the cross-cultural as truly cosmic threatens the special spiritual and professional intellectual significance of black music. The great fear would therefore be that “blues” as shorthand for black aesthetic difference—its condition and reason-for-being—would become dislodged from its backhanded pedestal, if words were to really go off.