An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey

The following interview was conducted by Paul E. Nelson for the website www.paulenelson.com. It took place via telephone between Seattle, Washington, and Durham, North Carolina, on August 24, 2012. Excerpts from the interview can be heard at http://paulenelson.com/nate-mackey/.

Paul E. Nelson: The blurb calls the poetry "an astonishing confluence of music and meaning unprecedented in American poetry." And while the music is evident just picking up the book and reading a line or two or, best, hearing it in the author's voice, the poetry's meaning is rich with allusions to the end of the American empire, the notion of past lives lived on lost mythical continents, in a play-by-play account of what it might be like in the effort to become fully human, all done in the serial manner in which the narrative of the spirit is unveiled in the act of writing. The blurb is on the back of *Nod House*, the latest book by poet Nate Mackey, published by New Directions. A professor for many years at the University of California, Santa Cruz, he now teaches at Duke, and is also the author of books of fiction, criticism, and four other books of poetry, including the 2006 National Book Award-winning *Splay Anthem*. We talk to him today via Skype from North Carolina. Nate, welcome.

Nathaniel Mackey: Hello.

PEN: In our last interview, we discussed your serial poem, perhaps a world poem, in two threads that intertwine. *Song of the Andoumboulou* is a Dogon funeral song, directed to the spirit world, about what you've called rough draft human beings. And the other part is *"Mu,"* which refers to several things. We pointed out last time Jane Harrison and Charles Olson's *muthos*, which can be defined as irrational speech story with an affinity to the notion of *mythos*, as well as the mythical lost continent some have called Lemuria, and the avant-garde jazz trumpeter Don Cherry's LP from the late '60s. What I want to know about is the notion of the serial poem itself. When did you first get a sense that you were doing a serial poem? Or did you start this process with the notion that that was where you were headed?

NM: I think I got the notion back in the 1970s. I was writing poems that were individual and more or less self-contained, but I was also reading a

number of poets whose work was very resonant for me and they were working in longer serial forms. I was also listening to music that was getting into longer forms. The initial sense I had of things was that those two different things could go on within the same body of work, that you could have the individual bounded poems, as more or less self-contained, and you could have a series. If you look at the first book I published, the chapbook *Four for Trane*, it's four poems that are not presented as though they are part of a serial work, but they are related to one another. If you go on to *Septet for the End of Time*, which was a chapbook in 1983, there are eight poems but they are related to one another. They all begin with the phrase "I wake up." That had begun with there just being one of those poems, the first one, which is called "Capricorn Rising," and I wrote it not thinking I was writing a set of poems but that I was writing a single poem. What I found is that that phrase came back to me, and I wrote another poem beginning "I wake up," and yet another. It turned out to be a set of eight poems. So even in *Eroding Witness*, which is the first full-length book collection in which those poems appear, there's a mix, the *Song of the Andoumboulou*, the first seven installments, and then it ends with *Septet for the End of Time*. So at that point, I was missing it, but the possibility of serial work was still beginning to germinate. It hadn't gotten to the point that it has gotten to lately, where it's pretty much the defining feature of what I do, but even that early the appeal of the serial form was making itself felt.

PEN: What is the appeal of the serial form? What attracts you to it?

NM: The fact that things remain open. It's an open form. The well-wrought urn aesthetic, where the poem is this discrete, self-contained accomplishment in which everything fits together and works together in this well-oiled, machine-like way, imposes a certain sense of closure on each poem that I find constricting and found constricting. I wanted there to be the possibility of things coming into the poem that were not necessarily resolved in that poem, that were not necessarily pursued to their fullest or most exhaustive sense in the poem. I wanted things to come into the poem that would have a life beyond that particular poem and that would become part of an exploration that I'd be involved in in my writing. The appeal of the serial poem is that it allows that. It's not so much a matter of it's there and it's done, but that again and again, again and again, again and again, you come back to certain concerns, certain motifs, certain figures. In a sense, there's the freedom of not feeling that one has been definitive, that one has closed things up, that one has shut the door on further exploration. That's

been a real driving force in a lot of the work that's been important to me and it's become, I think, a feature of my work as well.

PEN: It sounds like the notion of negative capability, rich with that.

NM: Yes. To be in areas that you're feeling out, you're groping your way, you're feeling your way. You have a bit of light, you go into the poem with some sense of what you're doing and what you wish to say, but you also leave yourself open to the information you get from the poem itself in the act of writing and the act of exploring and thinking about writing. You find out what the work might want to say that you hadn't necessarily intended to say. So it's kind of a dialogue with the work, more of a dialogue with the work than a certain other model of writing might propose, which is that you are in command, you are in control and you simply have to find the technical means of executing your will.

PEN: Which means, on a couple of different levels, you are marginalizing yourself out of mainstream U.S. poetry, which likes that contained poem, something very neat that it can put on one page of an anthology and that has a nice little compact meaning that we can use an objective correlative sense to figure out what it means and then kind of consume it and move on.

NM: Yes, it's a little different from that. It's on the margins of that. It's doing something else. It wants to make the work a kind of ongoing companion to one's life. There's a back and forth between the life and the work, the writing and where you find yourself at any particular time. It's very much about process. It's very much about revisitation, bringing some material forward, altering it in ways. Some material drops off by the wayside, but there is more of a sense of openness and of dynamics and kinetics, as opposed to some closure and sense of stasis having been arrived at.

PEN: It's really interesting and it leads onto my next question, which is: The process of writing and being open to what the poem might propose is as much about building a soul as it is about anything. And this book *Nod House,* if you count the number of times you mention the word "soul"—in a sense, it's really being hammered at us. "We wanted to find out what soul was." I can just look at my notes and find so many different references to the notion of soul. Your own writing you describe as a search for soul, so there's a confluence there. Can you elaborate on the notion of what it means to have

a soul? Keats suggested that this planet was a vale of soul-making, the notion that maybe we're not given a soul but given the opportunity to build one. How does that notion inform what you're trying to do in *Nod House*?

NM: You've mentioned Keats twice now, negative capability and the idea of soul-making, and those two things are related. The idea is that you are born into a vale in which the soul is not given but has to be made or has to be found. There are various ways in which Homo sapiens have gone about that. One of them is poetry. At the root of poetry, the poet means to make. The poet is a maker. The notion that one has a hand in creating one's life is essential to that, and that creational impetus is what has variously been called soul, the inner life, sometimes spirit. There are other words for it as well. One of the things that comes up in *Nod House* is a kind of quizzical, sometimes inverse or even negative relationship to that project, or that prospect, because often it's kind of a question. It's usually proposed in the phrase "what soul was." I'm not sure how many instances but there aren't many instances where it's just put out there as "soul." So it's "No one wanted to / know / what soul was." Soul is there in that book as the object of a quest or question that some are attending to and some are not. But certainly the suggestion is and certainly the momentum that you get from the work is that it is attending to that. It's psyche. In the deepest sense, it's meaning. It's what we mean by trying to find meaning in our lives. Language, of course, is an essential instrument of that and poetry is nothing if not the use of that instrument, the carrying of that instrument to certain lengths and hopefully heights in which the work of soul-making is advanced. It's something that's not easy to talk about. That's probably one of the reasons I resort to poetry to talk about it. It's a vocabulary that's out of fashion in a lot of quarters, even in poetry quarters in which that vocabulary has traditionally been at home. To find a way to continue to pursue that, but at a time where that term has almost been bracketed, is one of the things that I've been trying to do and that *Nod House* is one of the latest installments of doing.

PEN: That's very interesting because we live at a time in history here in the United States in which a reductionist mentality is being taken to its obvious —well, perhaps not its obvious extremes but to its extremes certainly. And, in this mentality, nothing exists unless you can see it or touch it or taste it or smell it or hold it in your hands. So soul doesn't exist in this mentality, taken to the most logical extreme. So this book is, in a way, a reference to that. You have notions of quag, the quagmires that we're stuck in in Afghanistan

and Iraq and elsewhere around the world, the notion of necropolitan police, the notion that this empire is ending, or maybe even this way of viewing soul is ending. So the two kind of go hand and hand. There are many kinds of references to, for example, [Hurricane] Katrina and other kinds of things that were happening while the book was being written. And I wonder what effect do these wars and our current state of politics in this country, what effect do they have on one's soul or one's ability to make a soul? Can you speak to that?

NM: In some ways they challenge the very notion of soul, because they seem to be so much the actions of human beings reduced to some kind of state of being automata or, to use another vocabulary, zombies. It just suggests an inability to make the lives we say we want to live. I mean, if this is a vale of soul-making, then what does it say that we're making these various catastrophes? There's certainly a way in which soul knows low places and soul has to deal with low places. That's something that has come up in my work and come up in a lot of stuff that I've read and that I sometimes make reference to. So one way to understand these various catastrophes that we're faced with is that they are purgatorial, that they are part of a process of growing up, a process of maturation. One of the reasons that the figure of the Andoumboulou speaks to me is that it provides that figure of something that is provisional, that is a rough draft, that is on its way to being something that's more fulfilled and more fulfilling. So the fact is that soul is posed again and again in the book as a what, as a question, as a something being reached for, in a context in which it seems that it's not being reached for by large numbers of people and by large numbers of institutions. The testing time that the soul goes through is essential to understanding how you can have both of those things, how you can have quagmire and some hope of getting beyond quagmire.

PEN: It seems to me that we live in a time when, in many ways, the odds are stacked against those who would use this time to attempt to build a soul. But, on the other hand, the opportunity now is greater. Even the smallest bit of work dedicated to that effort is rewarded. There is a quote from Max Müller in the book. *Introduction to the Science of Religion* is the name of the book that the quote is from. And the quote suggests, "Mythology is inevitable, it is natural, it is an inherent necessity of language. It is in fact the dark shadow that language throws on thought and which can never disappear until language becomes altogether commensurate with thought,

which it never will." You include this quote in *Nod House*. Can you elaborate on why that quote is so important to you?

NM: Because I think that the lag between thought and language is one of the things that drive the serial poem. The poem can never catch up. It's a condition that creates what that quote refers to as a shadow. The work tries to find what light it can in that shadow, but, even having found that light, there is that lag, which can't quite present that light or that illumination with the immediacy that it might otherwise have. One of the things that appeal to me about that quote is that it's a quote that's been on my mind for a long time. There was a little book by Ernst Cassirer called *Language and Myth* that I read it in years ago. It was the early '70s, something like that. And about the same time I was thinking about myth-making. There were poets, especially poets involved with projects like ethnopoetics, but also precursors to that, Robert Duncan writing about "The Truth and Life of Myth," who saw poetry and who saw writing as a kind of myth-making process. I think Diane Wakoski talked about creating a personal mythology, that kind of thing. So one of the reasons that that quote comes in is the resonance of myth and mythology and the mythic in the writing I've been doing. One of the things that the title "*Mu*" goes back to is the Greek word *muthos*, which has to do with myth and which Charles Olson was very into and excited to explicate via Jane Harrison. There's a recursive quality in the work I've been doing and that would be an instance of it, this passage from Max Müller's book, read back in the '70s, coming up forty years later in a book published in 2011. I find myself doing that, going back to stuff. Recursion and revisitation, with variation, are staples of the writing I do.

PEN: Hopefully, when you do revisit it your effort to build a soul has been somewhat successful, so you have a deeper understanding or you see it from a different light. That's been my experience. And I think that's the experience I have with the work of someone like you, because I can go back and read stuff that I've already read before and take a year or five or ten years and get more out of it because I'm in a different place. I think the best art is like that. The other notion about that lag between thought and language, or perception and language, lends itself to a serial approach, because you can't quite get there, you're striving to do that, so each new part of the serial poem is like a stab to try and get closer to that. Perhaps that's why the serial poem is something that you find as the best way to try and close that gap or narrow it.

NM: Or to make your peace with being in that gap, of being in that lag. "Lag" is a word that comes up a number of times in the poems. The phrase "lag anthem" occurs in *Splay Anthem*. And at various points in *Song of the Andoumboulou* and in "*Mu*," "lag" is spelled with a capital "L," as though it were a place. To accept a certain residence or abidance in lag is one of the things that the poems are trying to do, trying to find some solace in. The Müller quote says that language will never catch up with the instantaneity of thought or perception, there's always going to be that lag. That's part of the condition that we have to find soul in. And maybe that is what soul is, that lag. So to propose a lag anthem is to propose something that glories in that condition, marches to it, has a music that is somewhat triumphant in its embrace of that condition.

PEN: When I look at page sixty-two and page sixty-four in the book, there is a similarity. Page sixty-four almost seems like a second take. I know you're influenced by jazz and there are many references to jazz and other kinds of world music in the book. I love the notion that it would be a second take. It's like, "I didn't quite get it. Alright, let's try it again." You don't want to lose the spontaneity, but—can you speak to that? Do you know what I'm talking about?

NM: Yes, yes. That's not the first time that that occurs. It happened in *Splay Anthem* towards the end, where a passage that appeared on one page appeared a couple of pages later with some variation. And certainly the idea of first, second, third, fourth takes applies, but again it's back to what I said earlier, which is that it gives a sense or it accepts a sense of provisionality, that what you see on page sixty-two was not final, nor is what you see on page sixty-four final. These are two versions that are of something. There is so much that is the same in them that you can see that they are versions of some same thing. The idea that they could be varied, maybe endlessly I think, is there, but it also should shed a certain light or a certain way of looking on the rest of the work, the surrounding work that isn't repeated in as obvious a form as that. That work too is not definitive in some kind of final way. It too is subject to further takes. In some ways, that's what serial work is, take after take after take. I had a certain resistance to actually making that quality that obvious, but I did it. I had done it in *Splay Anthem* and I did it again. I guess what one would typically do would be to take the second version as a revision of the first and give it a certain authority and a certain finality, so that you could get rid of the first, as if to say, "This is it." But I didn't necessarily feel that way about the second version. I mean, it

was a version. It wasn't the "it" that was being striven for in some kind of ultimate way that would exclude all other possible versions. At the same time, I did find that I had a bit of resistance within myself to doing that, but I did do it. It's kind of scary, because one could probably do that with every page. [Laughter]

PEN: You know, I'm thinking we get a look at how your mind works when we see something like that. It's like, "Hmmm, how did he go and what was similar and what changed and how did the music carry him here and how did it not hit there?" That's one notion that comes up. Another notion, of course, is jazz. I'll give you one example of the perhaps thousands of examples. Now when these jazz guys die and they go through the vault and they find alternate versions, we want to know more about them, so we'll take any material that comes out. Bill Evans and Jim Hall did a record called *Undercurrents* and they did a couple of different versions of "My Funny Valentine." I like one so much better than the other. I don't know if it's the first take or the alternate take, but that's one example. And the last notion that comes up for me when you use the word "provisional" or "provision"—you know, I'm back on the golf course and you hit a drive and it's way the fuck out somewhere and it's like, "Well, I better hit a provisional ball, just in case I don't find that one, you know." It's like, "Oh man, that one might be way out there. Let me try reeling that one in and see if I don't slice or whatever." These are just some notions that come up as you talk about that.

NM: Talking about music again, I remember back when I was in college. I guess I started listening to music back in junior high school, high school, and I remember having these conversations in college with a good friend of mine, who was really into the music as well, and we would talk about Coltrane. Something he said that stayed with me I think applies to this, which is that although Trane sounds like he's looking for some right note, that he's testing these various notes, my friend says, no, that's not it. All of those notes are the right notes, he wants you to hear all of those notes. It's not that he's, to mix metaphors, like a batter fouling off pitches until he gets the right one. All of them are the right one. And he wants you to hear all of them. So there's a kind of post-scarcity aesthetic, that kind of versioning…

PEN: Post-what?

NM: Post-scarcity, which is that there is a plenitude. There are a lot of right versions. There are a lot of right ways to go. And, again, the piece on page

sixty-four is just more recent than the piece on page sixty-two. It's not just necessarily more right. It's equally right, let's say. So for both of them to co-exist, not that one has gone through this lesser version to get to a better version but that both of them are, in their own right, right—trying to think in that way too, and feel in that way, and write and experience writing and life in that way, it's not easy. I mean, I don't think the way we're brought up, the way our predilections are taught and educated into us, I don't think that we're inclined that way, but that's one of the things that has been with me and been a big part of what I've been trying to do.

PEN: You also skip some of the songs, such as 63 and 65 and 69. Are these outtakes that weren't up to snuff? What's the reason for that?

NM: No, actually they're there, but they're there in the form of the "*Mu*" poems. Starting with *Splay Anthem*, the two series are two and the same. So if you actually look at the numbering that runs through them, if you look at the numbering of "*Mu*" and you look at the numbering of *Andoumboulou*, what you'll see is that there are skips in the numbering in each of them. That has to do with the fact that each *Song of the Andoumboulou* poem is also a "*Mu*" poem. It's just not indicated as such. So the implication is that either the "*Mu*" poem is also a *Song of Andoumboulou* poem or it's covering up a *Song of the Andoumboulou* poem that's under it, kind of like the dark side of the moon.

PEN: So how do we get a 66½ out of the deal?

NM: [Laughter] It's just a bent note, a half step, you know. I was playing with something. In *Whatsaid Serif*, I got to "Song of the Andoumboulou: 33" and then I wrote "Song of the Andoumboulou: 33½," which is playing with something that's very much a part of the work, which is references to music, especially to recorded music. Throughout these travels and these movements, there are recurring references to something being "on the box," as in a jukebox or a boom box, a piece of music. So this kind of phonographic thread that runs through the work was being played with with this 33½, which is *just* off from being 33 1/3, which back in that old technology of vinyl LPs was the speed at which you played it. But that itself was bent. I remember giving a reading and reading the poem, announcing it as "33½," and somebody in the audience said, "You mean thirty-three and a third."

PEN: [Laughter] That's what I was going to say.

NM: But if you could actually take one of those LPs and play it at 33½, the sound would be different.

PEN: You know they did that with Miles. I understand with *Kind of Blue*, the original recording was just a little bit too slow, so when you played it, it came back just a little too fast. So they remastered it at the right speed. Did you know about that?

NM: I didn't hear it about *Kind of Blue*. Or maybe I did. I remember them talking, there was a radio project, the Miles Davis Radio Project, a while back, and I remember something of that coming up. But apparently it happened not just on *Kind of Blue* but on one of his later recordings as well. Apparently Teo Macero was kind of a genius at doing that, manipulating tape speed and doing the splicing and stuff like that. But anyway, it was this idea that—it was an allusion to 33 1/3, an allusion to that whole phonographic motif that runs throughout the work, but bending it in the way that the sound would be bent by playing it at 33½ rather than at 33 1/3. And then that opens up the whole business of bent notes and blue notes that's part of the whole African diasporic musical tradition. Anyway, one of the things I decided to do was revisit that every thirty-three songs. So "66" has a "66½." And, in fact, the book that will follow *Nod House* has a "99½." It just became a kind of form or convention within the larger work that I instituted. I made an executive decision that that would be the case.

PEN: I understand. The book tracks the effort to become more fully human and it feels very phenomenological. And so there are a couple of things I wonder about this, so this I guess is a two-part question, and I'm not sure exactly how to ask it. I'm wondering how the process of writing the poetry aligns with your own way of writing the fiction? Is there a sketch or an outline from which you write individual poems? And how do you make it so visceral when, you know, could you have been there? I'm not sure. There in the process of purgatory, there in the process of what Buddhism might look at as the place where you are before you drink that bowl of soup and forget all about your past lives and reincarnate again. So a couple of different angles to that question. Do you use a sketch?

NM: I'm not sure I know what you mean by sketch. If you mean outline…

PEN: Yes.

NM: Then, no.

PEN: That's what I mean, an outline. You know, this chapter is going to do this and this chapter is going to do that, and what have you.

NM: I don't start with an outline in most cases. I find something—shape, outline, sketch—in the course of the writing, possibilities of form and structure as I write. The way I write poetry and the way I write fiction are pretty much the same. The one grew out of the other. The "Dear Angel of Dust" series, the first few letters in what became that series, actually occurred in *Song of the Andoumboulou*. But again, back to what I said earlier about coming into writing a piece, writing pieces, with some sense of what's on one's mind, some sense of what one wants to get down on paper, some sense of what one wants to say, there's that, but there's also leaving oneself open to what is in that that one wouldn't necessarily know at the beginning is in there. I mean, writing is an activity and certain things happen in the course of writing that you don't plan, certain directions. You have to *do* it, you have to put yourself in the act of writing for those things to happen. You can't plan it all out in advance. I try to have some kind of grip on things that are of moment for my writing, but not too tight a grip, and to let the writing, in a sense, talk back to me. A lot of what I do is just jotting things down that are fragments or pieces. I don't' know how they're going to fit with other pieces. Again, negative capability. I don't require that I understand that yet. I work towards understanding it. I work towards seeing, asking what is this the tip of, what is this a piece of. Not that I necessarily get to some kind of symmetrical, coherent piece of writing that offers all of the classical, rational amenities. But I do get to something that seems to have—to me, the test is: Is there life in it?

PEN: And does it swing?

NM: Does it swing; that's what people are talking about when they talk about swing. Is it animate? Years ago I read a book called *A Musical View of the Universe*. I make reference to it in a number of places, in my critical work and elsewhere. It's about the Kalapalo people in South America and their notions of the world and of life. Music plays a large part in how they see the universe. They look at things in the world as occupying different orders of animacy and, as it turns out, for them music has the highest order of animacy. For me, swing is another way of talking about an order of

animacy. And we can see that not just in music but does a painting—what order of animacy does this painting have? What order of animacy does this story or this poem have? What order of animacy does this piece of sculpture arrive at? So I feel my way and that's what I'm feeling and groping and looking for, something that is animate and swings.

PEN: So the process is very organic, as you describe it. Denise Levertov had a sort of friendly amendment to what Robert Creeley had told Charles Olson, and that is "form is never more than a *revelation* of content." It seems that that's exactly what you're talking about, the process of discovery. And it seems to me that, when reading poetry that has that process of discovery, it's more satisfying to me than that poetry which doesn't. We alluded to that earlier. But getting back to the other part of the question, how phenomenological this work reads, in something that I guess we've experienced. We would have to, if this is the process of what happens to us before we incarnate as human beings. I guess I'm a little dumbstruck by how this work, that in a sense is fiction, has such a feeling of being there. Maybe that's just the quality of the work, Nate. I don't know.

NM: Well, that's what I would want. When I feel my way towards the composition that the pieces comprise, that sense of aliveness, that sense of animacy that in some sense predates or survives the particular form of life and of organizing life that we find ourselves in right now, I'm not trying to be a documentarian of the present moment, although what I'm attuned to or want to be attuned to has to have resonances with the present moment. I have a sense that there's something apart from that or beyond that or that extends that. I mean, that statement of Creeley's that you alluded to, "form is never more than an extension of content." Of course, Levertov says "revelation of content," but I'm interested in that word "extension." It does take the form of a verb, to extend something, and I'm interested in how writing, how form, can extend content. Content can come from any number of places. The most obvious place that people look for content is the author's biography and the author's context, but my emphasis on extension as an act, as an activity involved with the verb "to extend," puts a premium on going beyond or outside or farther than or maybe just deeper into the most obvious forms of content. So maybe in doing that it touches on something or draws on something that is elsewhere or comes from elsewhere or comes from inside. Again, the sense of an inner life: soul, soul-making, spirit, the spirit within the letter. I know there's a strong drive in me to be a

carrier of that sense in the work that I do. To whatever extent I do that, you know, mission accomplished, I guess.

PEN: I think so. *Nod House* is the title of the book and, at one moment in the book, the narrator "looked out the nod / house, looked into each face." And then in italics, "*We'd see / what face was only front for.*" And then later on on that page, soul is described as "a certain bareness." I get this notion and perhaps one interpretation is that Nod House is that place in purgatory where you're waiting for that nod to incarnate again. Once you get the nod, you're a human again. You forget about all that happened, in one sense, and, in another sense, you have some kind of access to it that is maybe not that articulate. There are just two more notions I want to get to, this time. I think about the notion of Mu, that lost continent. You read the Wikipedia definition and of course it never existed, it's just mythic. With Wikipedia and the materialist mindset that we're still dealing with, you have to take those kinds of things with a grain of salt. In the wake of the information age, you have to be a real conscious person, you really have to be media literate. I myself believe that we've had these previous worlds. Maybe it was pre-pole shift. Maybe the pole shift was the planet's effort to get rid of us humans for a while so that it could heal and maybe we're getting close to that point again. Human history is filled with examples of endless violent occupations, the rich squeezing out every last penny from the poor, but environmental degradation that affects planetary climate systems, genetically modified food foisted on an unknowing public, nuclear radiation deadening large swaths of the sea and other man-made catastrophes are really getting quite intense here, as we lunge for the Mayan finish line in December. Can you talk about how Mu and Lemuria and the previous civilizations inspire you or inform this work?

NM: Well, yes, all of the stuff that you're talking about—you know, we live in apocalyptic times. Maybe all times are apocalyptic. Certainly we have testimony down through the ages from people who felt that they were in apocalyptic times and pointed to the various forms of evidence that they had in the ages they lived in. Mu and its cousins, Atlantis and Lemuria, are omens, they're warnings. As are the Andoumboulou, who are a failed form of human being that did not survive, but now survive in a stunted form underground, in Dogon cosmology. Over the years it's kind of struck me and kind of been a haunting fact for me that these two serial poems that have taken over my work have to do with this rather ominous material. *Song of the Andoumboulou*, a funeral song, and "*Mu*," resonant with lost continents,

sunken continents that could be a picture of the future, certainly a believable picture of the future. Maybe it is cyclical and maybe these things are the baths of rebirth that have to be undergone before new continents, new formations, can arise. There's a strong apocalyptic strain running through the writing I've been doing. I remember sending *Septet for the End of Time*, that set of poems that I wrote in the early eighties, to Wilson Harris, the Guyanese critic and novelist whose work I've written about and published in *Hambone*, etc, etc, etc. He used a phrase in talking about the set of poems that struck me and stayed with me. He talked about them intoning "the funeral of an age," that sense of an age coming to an end, that sense of trial and tribulation, necessary trial and tribulation, on various fronts. You talk about the ongoing, endless war that is plural in its hazards, stationed both geographically and temporally, and the degradation of the planet and the atmosphere, the wiping out of species, the momentum towards wiping out ourselves. All these things inflect the work. There was something that seemed appropriate about those two titles, about those two works. There was something I heard in that Dogon song, there was something I heard in that music, and there was something in the whole proposition of continents being lost and perhaps rearising in other forms that still stays with me. *Nod House* is a further articulation of that.

PEN: Maybe the next cataclysmic flood will take out all of the red states. [Laughter] That's just kind of a joke.

NM: Remember that Nod is the desert that Cain wanders in after killing Abel. That was an overtone that I heard in that title as well.

PEN: Many would suggest that what the Mayans were after was not the end of time but an end to one way of seeing time, a yet-to-be world available to us. Do you have a sense that we are at a historical time where that kind of world is possible, that this is the dark before the dawn, an age that has more justice, real freedom and sustainability to it? I read lines like, on page forty, in the poem "Blue Anuncia's Bird Lute," where the line goes "yet-to-be world / on the tips of their tongues."

NM: The purgatorial or provisional quality of the work is aimed at some sense that something new can come of crisis, something new and necessary, that the crisis itself is a revelation of the limitations of a particular mindset, a particular way of seeing and doing things. Crisis is an occasion for critical reevaluation and the finding of new ways. And the sense that you put forth,

I think, is very much the sense that informs the possibility of hope. I don't think that I would be writing if I didn't think there was that possibility. I don't quite know what I'd be doing…

PEN: You'd be living in a bunker. You'd be getting cans of baked beans in your bunker.

NM: [Laughter] And there are people doing that.

PEN: And they live in Idaho. [Laughter] You know, as a matter of fact, I heard a thing on NPR about a real-estate guy who *specializes* in survivalists.

NM: Yes, that's sort of like, "It's all going to blow and I want to be one of the people who survive it." I'm more interested in a more collective survival or revival than that. I'm not so interested in increasing my chances of individual survival. I think that's what the crisis has to bring us to, some way in which we can all—or at least most of us, or future generations—come through, and not just sit up on some hill and wait to shoot down people who are coming to enlist your help when things hit the fan. There is that glimmer of hope in that one even writes at all, however dark the passages that the writing leads you through may be. I think that there is some hope that by looking at the dark, looking into the dark and not evading it, we can work our way through it.

PEN: From your lips to God's ear, Nate Mackey.

NM: [Laughter] Well, that's very kind of you. There's a piece in the forthcoming issue of *Hambone* by Nathaniel Tarn that touches on this whole subject of poetry and hope, especially in dark, apocalyptic, terminalist times, that I was excited to see. It's a lecture that he gave at the University of Chicago I guess a couple of months ago now. Anyway, it will be in *Hambone* #20, which is coming out in a few weeks.

PEN: That sounds like an edition that one should buy five copies of and give away as gifts.

NM: [Laughter] I think so.

PEN: Well, just a delight to get into this depth with your work. It's really an honor and a privilege, I'm delighted to have it, so thanks very much, Nate.

NM: Well, thank you for inviting me to have this conversation. I always like talking with you. What, it must have been a year ago now?

PEN: A little over a year, yes, it was March of 2011.

NM: Yes. Yes. Well, it's good to talk to you again. I remember our various conversations out in Seattle very well, fondly.