

splay anthem
nathaniel mackey



PREFACE

Splay Anthem takes up and takes farther two ongoing serial poems, *Song of the Andoumboulou* and "Mu," the two now understood as two and the same, each the other's understudy. Each is the other, each is both, announcedly so in this book by way of number, in earlier books not so announcedly so. By turns visibly and invisibly present, each is the other's twin or contagion, each entwines the other's crabbed advance. They have done so, unannouncedly, from the beginning, shadowed each other from the outset, having a number of things in common, most obviously music. Each was given its impetus by a piece of recorded music from which it takes its title, the Dogon "Song of the Andoumboulou" in one case, Don Cherry's "Mu" *First Part* and "Mu" *Second Part* in the other.

François Di Dio, in the liner notes to *Les Dogon*, his 1956 recording of Dogon music for Disques Ocora, says the song of the Andoumboulou is addressed to the spirits. Part of the Dogon funeral rites, it begins with sticks marking time on a drum's head, joined in short order by a lone, laconic voice – gravelly, raspy, reluctant – recounting the creation of the world and the advent of human life. Other voices, likewise reticent, dry, join in, eventually build into song, a scratchy, low-key chorus. From time to time a yodeling shriek breaks out in the background. Song subsided, another lone voice eulogizes the deceased, reciting his genealogy, bestowing praise, listing all the places where he set foot while alive, a spiral around the surrounding countryside. Antelope-horn trumpets blast and bleat when the listing ends, marking the entry of the deceased into the other life, evoking, Di Dio writes, "the wail of a new-born child, born into a terrifying world."

Multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry, best known as a trumpeter, includes voice among the instruments used on the "Mu" albums and resorts to a sort of dove-coo baby talk on one piece, "Teo-Teo-Can," emitting sounds that might accompany the tickling of a baby's chin if not be made by the baby itself. It recalls Amiri Baraka's comment on hearing a John Coltrane solo that consisted of playing the head of "Confirmation" again and again, twenty times or so: "like watching a grown man learning to speak." In both cases, as with the Dogon trumpet burst and as it's put in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 58," one is "back / at / some beginning," some extremity taking one back to animating constraint. The antelope-horn trumpet's blast and bleat, Cherry's ludic warble and Trane's recursive quandary are variations on music as gnostic announcement, ancient rhyme, that

of end and beginning, gnostic accent or note that cuts both ways. But not only music. "Mu" (in quotes to underscore its whatsaidness) is also lingual and imaginal effect and affect, myth and mouth in the Greek form *muthos* that Jane Harrison, as Charles Olson was fond of noting, calls "a re-utterance or pre-utterance, ... a focus of emotion," surmising the first *muthos* to have been "simply the interjectional utterance *mu*." "Mu" is also lingual and erotic allure, mouth and muse, mouth not only noun but verb and muse likewise, lingual and imaginal process, prod and process. It promises verbal and romantic enhancement, graduation to an altered state, momentary thrall translated into myth. Proffered from time immemorial, poetry's perennial boon, it thrives on quixotic persistence, the increment or enablement language affords, promise and impossibility rolled into one (Anuncia/Nunca). "Mu" carries a theme of utopic reverie, a theme of lost ground and elegiac allure recalling the Atlantis-like continent Mu, thought by some during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to have existed long ago in the Pacific. The places named in the song of the Andoumboulou, set foot on by the deceased while alive but lost or taken away by death, could be called "Mu." Any longingly imagined, mourned or remembered place, time, state, or condition can be called "Mu."

Wandering and run come into both series, shaded or shadowed by rut, the condition they seek to undo or to come to new terms with, as though roust, rout, rouse and the like were rut itself differently understood, an itineracy endemic to the medium echoing the flight and fugitivity the poems point to and report. The poems' we, a lost tribe of sorts, a band of nervous travelers, know nothing if not locality's discontent, ground gone under. Sonic semblance's age-old promise, rhyme's reason, the consolation they seek in song, accents and further aggravates movement. The songs are increasingly songs of transit. Sameness and similitude, dispersed, worry location, fret constituting historical shorthand. Glamorizations by the tourist industry notwithstanding, travel and migration for the vast majority of people have been and continue to be unhappy if not catastrophic occurrences brought about by unhappy if not catastrophic events: the Middle Passage, the Spanish Expulsion, the Irish Potato Famine, conscripted military service, indentured labor systems, pursuit of asylum....

I wasn't aware of the Andoumboulou's relevance to ground gone under until I read Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen's *The Pale Fox* in the late 1980s, though the whispered, sotto voce recitation and singing heard on the "Song of the Andoumboulou" track on *Les Do-*

gon planted an intuitive theme of underness when I first heard it in the early 1970s. From Griaule and Dieterlen I learned that the Andoumboulou are a failed, earlier form of human being in Dogon cosmogony, one of the results of the pale fox Ogo's cosmic revolt and incestuous penetration of the earth in pursuit of his lost female twin. The Andoumboulou, along with the Yeban who were born of that union and in turn gave birth to them, live underground, inhabiting holes in the earth.

Given the centrality of various forms of graphic inscription in Dogon cosmology, the cosmogonic potency and role of sign, figure, drawing, trace, diagram, outline, image, mark, design and so on (for all of which the Dogon use a careful, hairsplitting terminology), along with the strikingly tactile, abraded vocality, the grating, "graphic" tone and timbre of the song of the Andoumboulou itself, I couldn't help thinking of the Andoumboulou as not simply a failed, or flawed, earlier form of human being but a rough draft of human being, the work-in-progress we continue to be. The commonplace expression "man's inhumanity to man" has long acknowledged our andoumboulouousness. The song of the Andoumboulou is one of striving, strain, abrasion, an all but asthmatic song of aspiration. Lost ground, lost twinness, lost union and other losses variably inflect that aspiration, a wish, among others, to be we, that of the recurring two, the archetypal lovers who visit and revisit the poems, that of some larger collectivity an anthem would celebrate.

The song of the Andoumboulou is Dogon deep song, Dogon *cante jondo*. As in *cante jondo*, inauspicious prospects attenuate the voice. Rasp and aridity hold sway, affliction and response to affliction – "rasp our lone / resort," as I put it in *Whatsaid Serif*. As in *cante jondo*, attenuation extends the voice; it stretches it, strings it out. A subjection to qualm and qualification is the semantic equivalent of such attenuation, "rub's accretion" as it's called in "Sound and Ceremony," strain and abrasion played out as predication. Rub a kind of erasure, statement backtracks or breaks off, ellipses abound, assertion and retraction volley, assertion and supplementation: addition, subtraction, revision, conundrum, nuance, amendment, tweak. This too is a kind of movement, a kind of mobility, an aspect of ground gone under, loss or lack of assurance.

- Serial form lends itself to andoumboulouous liminality, the draft unassured extension knows itself to be. Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly "back / at / some beginning," repeatedly circling or cycling back, doing so with such adamance as to call forward and back into question and

suggest an eccentric step to the side – as though, driven to distraction by shortcircuiting options, it can only be itself beside itself. So it is that “Mu” is also *Song of the Andoumboulou*, *Song of the Andoumboulou* also “Mu.” H.D.’s crazed geese, circling above the spot that was once Atlantis or the Hesperides or the Islands of the Blest, come to mind, as do John Coltrane’s wheeling, spiraling runs as if around or in pursuit of some lost or last note, lost or last amenity: a tangential, verging movement out (outlantish). The ring shout comes to mind, as do the rings of Saturn, the planet adopted by Sun Ra, one of whose albums, *Atlantis*, opens with a piece called “Mu.”

Emblematic of an outside seriality wishes to reach, ringing is sonic resurfacing, a step up as well as out. It invites echo, reverberation, overtone, undertone, resonance and repetition. In seriality, rasp is recursive form, a net of echoes; it catches. One hears this in the music of Glenn Spearman, a San Francisco Bay Area tenor saxophonist to whom four of the poems herein, published in 2002 as a chapbook entitled *Four for Glenn*, are dedicated, poems in which *rung* is both noun and verb, in which *climb*, we’re reminded, rhymes with *chime*. The chapbook title deliberately echoes that of my first chapbook, *Four for Trane*, itself taken from and echoing that of Archie Shepp’s 1965 album dedicated to John Coltrane. Appropriately so, as Spearman, who died in 1998 at age 51, was a saxophonist in the Coltrane tradition, a tradition worked and ramified by such musicians as Shepp, Albert Ayler (whose music was likened to a Salvation Army band on LSD, as relevant a gloss on splay anthem as any), Pharoah Sanders and, of particular importance to Spearman, Frank Wright, with whom he studied and worked in Paris in the 1970s. Appropriately so in other ways as well, as Glenn’s music could be pointedly echoic. Toward the end of his 1993 composition “Thinking of Frank,” he quotes from the piece Wright wrote in memory of Trane, “One for John.” Here echo is homage, lineage, “a school of ancestors” as Wilson Harris would say. Echo is also the specter of dispersed identity and community, staggered adjunction or address recalling Robert Duncan’s “commune of poetry.”

One echoes oneself as well, a consequence of time not to be avoided that seriality makes conscious work of, “Song of the Andoumboulou: 48” harking back to “Song of the Andoumboulou: 10,” three titles in the “Mu” series recalling my essay “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol” and so on. One finds oneself circling, the susceptibility of previous moments in the work to revisitation and variation conducing to a theme of articulation’s non-ultimacy, a theme too of mortality and new life. Earlier moments can be said to

die and live on as echo and rearticulation, riff and recontextualization, alteration and reconception. The song of the Andoumboulou is one of burial and rebirth, *mu* momentary utterance extended into ongoing myth, an impulse toward signature, self-elaboration, finding and losing itself. The word for this is *ythm* (clipped rhythm, anagrammatic myth). Revisitation suggests that what was and, by extension, what is might be otherwise. "By myth," Olson quotes Harrison quoting Aristotle, "I mean the arrangement of the incidents" – this in advancing a sense of alternative, "a special view of history."

Against presumptions of an objective ordering of history Olson elsewhere poses "what we know went on, the dream." This applies to present as well as past history, which is why we know or think we know it. Dream, the tendency of events to overwhelm rendition, is also rendition's wish to compete, often in the form of telic assurances, positing eventual if not immanent transparency and redemption. Even the gnostic indictment of history as nightmare and delusion carries a prescribed awakening which, if gnosis is to be gnostic enough, would have to allow it might itself be only a dream. When rendition knows or thinks it knows this, dream and awakening relativize each other. As Ed Roberson puts it, "to dream is not to dream / if waking up is never finished." When rendition knows or thinks it knows this, awakening to rather than from the dream is as close as one gets and, even in subscribing to a salvific history, any march events can be said to comprise can only be crablike, splay.

As much the condition the poem aspires to as music, dream can be so much and mean so much one wonders what waking up offers. The inhabitants of Atlantis are said to have been dreamless, which presumably means they were happy, without discontent, but the Aranda of Australia, the subject of Géza Róheim's *The Eternal Ones of the Dream*, a book important to Duncan's *H.D. Book*, actively seek to remain in the dream, to be in more than one place at a time. Dreamtime, *altjeringa*, is a way of enduring reality, the fact that dream itself borders on dread notwithstanding, the fact that as nightmare, more than bordering, it crosses over notwithstanding. It is also a way of challenging reality, a sense in which to dream is not to dream but to replace waking with realization, an ongoing process of testing or contesting reality, subjecting it to change or a demand for change.

Dream too is a school of ancestors, one of the altered states in which the dead reappear, one of such states the we in these pages pursue. (The Aranda word for dream also means ancestor.) Among the Dogon, elders get drunk on millet beer, into which the souls of

the disgruntled dead have crept. These are the dead who have not yet been properly laid to rest by their surviving kin, those for whom the required rites have not yet been performed, the required altars not yet built, the attendant libations not yet poured. They get into the beer, under whose influence the elders accost the community with insults and accusations, openly muttering abuse along the streets, in the marketplace and elsewhere. "The dead are dying of thirst," they say, a reminder intended to make its way to the kin in question. This pronouncement has echoed and been revisited and varied in poems going back to "Song of the Andoumboulou: 1," an echo that continues in *Splay Anthem*, suggesting not only debts to history or the dead or the past, a neglect of history or the dead or the past, but other non-observances only an alteration of mind might set right. Could "The dead are dying of thirst" apply to the living dead wanting to awake, wanting more life, wanting more from life? An appetite for acknowledgment and the change it can bring drives andoumboulouous we.

This thirst or demand or desire sounds a sometimes dark note, a note whose not yet fulfilled promise bends it, turns it blue. A desperate accent or inflection runs through seriality's recourse to repetition, an apprehension of limits we find ourselves up against again and again, limits we'd get beyond if we could. This qualifies the promise of advance and possibility the form otherwise proffers, the feeling for search it's conducive to complicated by senses of constraint. Circularity, a figure for wholeness, also connotes boundedness. Recursiveness can mark a sense of deprivation fostered by failed advance, a sense of alarm and insufficiency pacing a dark, even desperate measure, but this dark accent or inflection issues from a large appetite or even a utopic appetite or, better – invoking Duke Ellington's neologism – a blutopic appetite. Seriality's mix of utopic ongoingness and recursive constraint is blutopic, an idealism shaped or shaded by blue, in-between foreboding, blue, dystopic apprehension of the way the world is.

↙ Recursiveness, incantatory insistence, is liturgy and libation, repeated ritual sip, a form of sonic observance aiming to undo the obstruction it reports. It plies memory, compensatory possession, reminiscent regard and regret. "The dead are dying of thirst" I first read around the time I read a line of Edward Dahlberg's that I tend to hear it in conversation with: "Memory is our day of water tutored by want." I hear it in conversation with Robert Creeley's reading of Dahlberg's aperçu as well. "It means," Creeley writes, "that we remember what we have, because we do not have it." Recursion is

conjunctive deprivation and possession, phantom limb, as if certain aroused and retained relations among consonants and vowels and progressions of accent were compensatory arms we reach with, compensatory legs we cross over on.

Thus the chronically resided in, repeatedly arrived at Nub (nubbed version Nuh), place name and diagnosis fraught with senses of diminishment: failed extension or falling short but not only that, the proverbial nub drawn back from overreaching but not only that, phantom limb's compensated occasion but not only that, remnant wish but not only that. I don't know everything Nub is or implies or might mean (nubbed version of Numb as well as Nubia but not only that), only that it offered itself, the predicament it appeared intent on naming having to do with the dreariness of recent events as well as ontology, the imperial, flailing republic of Nub the United States has become, the shrunken place the earth has become, planet Nub. In a match that seems to have been made in hell, hijacked airliners echo and further entrench a hijacked election, cycles of recriminatory assault further confirming a regime of echo the poem's recourse to echo would cure homeopathically if it could. The long odds against that are enough to induce an exasperated scat or an incipient stutter or a lapse into baby talk (Nuh), an impulse "to caricature history" and "to become Idiot Nameless" as Harris puts it, the advent of "unsay's / day" as it is in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 58."

Such odds are enough to induce bird talk and to condition bird talk, talk by birds and for the birds, the prototype for music and poetic language among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, as well as for Olson, who, addressing poets, says that "the Airs which belong to Birds have / led our lives to be these things instead of Kings." Steven Feld writes about the Kaluli in *Sound and Sentiment*, a book which, along with Victor Zuckerkandl's *Sound and Symbol*, gives the essay "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" its title and is recalled by three titles in the "Mu" series: "Sound and Semblance," "Sound and Sentience," "Sound and Cerement." Feld relates a story the Kaluli tell regarding the origin of poetry and music, the myth of the boy who became a *muni* bird, a kind of fruitdove with a bright purple red beak. The boy turns into a *muni* bird and resorts to its cry when his older sister denies him food, a semi-sung, semi-wept complaint the Kaluli identify as the origin and essence of music and poetic language. To poetize or sing is to talk like a bird, a way with words and sound given rise to by a break in social relations, a denial of kinship and social sustenance, as if the break were a whistling fissure, an opening blown on like a flute. "Mu," then, also as in *muni*.

A sign of estrangement, to poetize or sing is to risk irrelevance, to be haunted by poetry's or music's possible irrelevance ("Tell it to the birds"), but nothing could be more relevant than estrangement, involved as we are in what Harris calls "the funeral of an age," an age of global intimacy and predation. *Gisalo*, the most Kaluli of Kaluli song forms and the one that most closely approximates the sound of the *muni* bird, has the melodic contour of the *muni* bird's cry and is a form of singing that crosses over into weeping. Like the song of the Andoumboulou, it is addressed to the spirits. The Kaluli sing it at funerals and they sing it during spirit-medium seances as well. Kaluli poetics posits poetry and music as quintessentially elegiac but also restorative, not only lamenting violated connection but aiming to reestablish connection, as if the entropy that gives rise to them is never to be given the last word. As with the Dogon trumpet blast or the post-burial parade in New Orleans music, something undaunted wants to move no matter how inauspicious the prospects, advance no matter how pained or ungainly.

... a place of encounter and connivance ...
—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

and all motion
is a crab
—Charles Olson, "The Moon Is the Number 18"