FRONT PORCH: In an interview I read in *Paracritical Hinge*, somebody asked you whether you're a musician, and you said, "No, I don't play music." I was wondering, since music is so primary as a source for you, is *not* playing in some ways an advantage as a writer? I'm thinking in terms of that figure you use a lot of the phantom limb, reaching for something with words that's missing or that you're wanting.

NATHANIEL MACKEY: There's an energy of desire that especially drives *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanates*, a certain energy, a fascination, a fantasy: What is it like to be a musician? What is it like to make music? Not having a literal experience of that has put me in the position of imagining it, dreaming it. The first letter in *Bedouin Hornbook* comes out of a dream in which I'm playing music. So I do think there's something to the idea that the writing is a kind of phantom limb that does the work the nonmusician I am wants to do in music.

FP: As readers of your work—especially the prose letters—there's a couple of things we don't have. One thing is we never see the response from Angel of Dust. And we never get to hear the music. Which is all the more tantalizing because sometimes the letters will say, "I'm enclosing a tape." How real to you as a writer are those missing parts? How deeply into those do you imagine into them? And what as readers are we supposed to do with those absences?

NM: Well, the pieces are very real to me, because the imagination of those pieces comes out of quite literal and material engagements with actual pieces of music, actual experiences with music. So they're very real. What readers are supposed to do with them is imagine them. The reader is supposed to bring his or her own experiences with music to bear on the imagining of the music that's being evoked by the words, that's being referred to by the words. The absences are quite conscious on my part; they leave space. The fact that the reader doesn't have the Angel of Dust's letters puts the reader in the position of having to imagine or in some way create the Angel of Dust, imagine or in some way create the Angel of Dust's contribution to the correspondence. In some cases, N. gives readers of the books a few specifics as to what the Angel has written, but, still, it's through the filter of N.'s rendition. In *Bedouin Hornbook*, N. gets an essay from the Angel on the falsetto in New World African musics. In *Bass Cathedral*, the Angel writes the liner notes for the band's three-record debut recording, which is called *Orphic Bend*. There are exchanges where you can get a sense of what the Angel has written, but the focus is on N. and what he's thinking, writing, doing. And at the same time that the work is asking the reader to imagine the music and making references to tapes that accompany the letters, there's also a great deal of reference to very specific recordings that a reader who isn't particularly familiar with the musical traditions that fuel N.'s work could go to and listen to, recordings that would give some sense of what the band's music might sound like. You go listen to those recordings and say, "All right, it's music influenced by these pieces that N. has told us about, so what might it sound like?"

FP: That was certainly my sense of it, and it's interesting to me, but I just want to clarify: so when you describe a piece N. has composed like "Tosaut L'Ouverture" in *Atet A.D.*, you really hear that whole piece—you imagine it, you know what it sounds like.

NM: No, I wouldn't say that. I would say that in the passages where there's writing that evokes what the piece sounds like, that's as much of it as I've imagined. Maybe I've imagined a little more that I haven't been able to write, but the piece is in many ways in the writing about it, my imagination is in the writing about it. What gets said about it in the writing is what I hear in my mind's ear.

FP: N.'s group is a group. And so often the musical descriptions are about this wonderful musical one-upmanship, people communicating, collaborating, and it's also happening live in front of an audience. Is there a longing towards that kind of collaboration, as a solitary writer, or is there a sort of collaboration going on, on a different level as you're writing with other writers, texts, your text itself, with language?

NM: I think it's both. There's a longing to have the kind of immediate, collaborative, communal, participatory group creation that being in a band would give one. One of the things that's going on in the work is a certain play on solitude. Letters written to an Angel, letters written to another realm, suggest that

N., in one aspect of himself at least, is a very solitary guy. But that's part of the musical tradition too. You have to spend a lot of time practicing by yourself before you can go out and show up in a meaningful way in a group context. An oscillation between solitude and community is a very central part of the experience of being a musician. Now, writing is mostly solitary, more solitary than music. What did Dylan Thomas call it? The "sullen art"? So, as a writer writing as a musician, there's a certain desire for, attraction to and envy of the kind of collective, collaborative process that making music with other people affords. But at the same time, yes, there is a way in which, as a writer, one is collaborating with one's influences, one's predecessors, one's contemporaries, especially the ones that one is in touch with. It's not as immediate as a jam session, but there are senses of connection, senses of affinity and what have you, that do make writing itself something that is done at an individual, solitary level but that goes beyond that level. Robert Duncan talks about "the commune of poetry." And there have been experiments with collaborative writing. I haven't been involved with any of those myself, but writers do have a desire to break out of the solitary fact of writing, the fact that it unfolds in solitude for the most part. I've done other kinds of collaboration. I've collaborated with musicians, presenting my poetry with musical accompaniment, and that gives a taste of what that process would be like. There's the CD I did with Royal Hartigan and Hafez Modirzadeh, and recently I've been presenting my work with Hafez again. In fact, just last week we did a set at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. That gives me some sense of what N.'s experience is in getting together with other musicians.

FP: It's significant to me that the group [in *From a Broken Bottle*] includes women. So much of the music, this type of music, is fairly male dominated. How important and significant is that to you that there's this group that also includes women? And how does that inform the kind of music that they create and the kind of writing you do about it?

NM: It's an important concern that runs through the writing. It's a concern that reflects the times in which the work got started and into which it continued. The late 1970s is when I started *From a Broken Bottle*, and the impact of feminism is one of the features of that period of time, the '70s into the '80s, so I was thinking about that, thinking about gender, thinking about the role of women in society in general, but also bringing it to bear on a tradition which, as you rightly point out, is the product of a very male and masculinist subculture. It was important enough for me to make an explicit point of that. In the second volume, *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, it's very much an issue, because in searching for a drummer for the group, Aunt Nancy and Djamilaa stage a demand, a protest demand, that consideration be given to adding a woman drummer to the band. And that ends up being what happens. So the band is then balanced, three men and three women. There's a certain utopic suggestion being made by that gender equality. There's a tradition of regarding jazz bands as a kind of model society, a model of democracy, given the interplay between and among the musicians, the give-and-take, the way everybody has a voice and everybody contributes, even though there's a leader of the group, given the fact that with improvisation the role of leader and the role of accompanist or the role of soloist and the role of accompanist are often blurred, and so on. So this long tradition of thinking of the jazz combo as giving us an inkling of what a more democratic society would be like is there, and I just took it and brought concerns with gender equality to bear on it. Tensions and concerns regarding gender recur, in relation to the name of the band, renaming the band, in *Atet A.D.*, for example, so it's definitely important if it comes into the work in such a pronounced and repeated way.

FP: Well, it also introduces eros, because there are attractions, but it's certainly not a harlequin romance resolution to those things.

NM: Yes. One of the things that the work is treating, dealing with, is romance, the status of romance and the romance tradition, which runs through music of all sorts and certainly has a prominent place in the jazz tradition that these musicians come out of and the world music traditions that they're conversing with. You look at musical traditions all over the world and the preponderance of them, in songs, in lyrics and so forth, have to do with love, eros, in one form or another. That involves questions of difference in gender and what gets made of it, what kind of aura can attach to it, the muse dynamics that can attach to it. Those questions and dynamics come into the work.

FP: Talk about humor in your work. It seems to me it's more present or at least more apparent in the prose. For example the balloons coming out of the horns is really funny, at the same time that it captures to me that desire to come at, to bring music towards verbal expression and to bring verbal expression towards music. But is it present in a different way in the poetry?

NM: One of the things that led me to *From a Broken Bottle*, one of the attractions of prose for me, was that I felt there were things I couldn't do in poetry, things I wanted to do, certain kinds of content, certain approaches to content, certain registers of statement, certain angles of address, and so on. One of the things that I was seeking in prose was a place for humor. There wasn't a very large place in my poetry for it, if there

was a place for it at all. I wanted that dimension of my personality and experience to have an outlet, and it wasn't getting that outlet in poetry. I didn't see that it necessarily would and I wasn't sure that I wanted it to, so prose was a place where that could happen. There are moments in the poetry, but for the most part, no, not nearly to the extent that there's often an arch, ironizing temper in the prose. Prose has that capacity. I don't think about it much as something I want to get into the poetry, but it's something that does come into the poetry. I'm not deliberately aiming for that, but sometimes it comes up.

FP: To me it comes up in those moments, again with the wordplay. "'A Likkle Sonance' ... trickle," ["On Antiphon Island—'mu' twenty-eighth part," ***Splay Anthem*****] it's funny, it's very wry in a way. You could laugh but you could not.**

NM: It's a kind of playfulness. We do refer to the musicians as players, so play in its various senses is at issue in *From a Broken Bottle* and also in the poetry in a way. I feel that writing *From a Broken Bottle* has had an influence on my poetry and vice versa, and the "likkle" / "trickle" thing would be an example of a kind of playfulness that comes into the poems. One of the doors, one of the things that opened that door, was the prose.

FP: I wanted to talk about the use of person in your poetry. I noticed a slippage in terms of person. There's a "we" voice, and sometimes it shifts, sometimes there's an "I," at the start of "Song of Andoumboulou: 58" there's a "he" and "she," that becomes "us." And the effect is this complex shifting or slipping of perspective. And I wanted to ask you how that works because we're poets in the MFA program and in workshop, and we would tell each other, "Don't do that."

NM: Yes, it is a slippage, consciously so. Once you embark upon slippage, though, you have to surrender a certain amount of control, because what the references are, what the referents are for those pronouns, does indeed become slippery. Is "us" the same as "he" and "she"? Is "we" the same as "he" and "she," or are "he" and "she" just a part of a larger "we"? I'm not trying to specify the boundaries of the entities those pronouns name. I'm involved in something that's trying to give a sense of collectivity, trying to give a sense that those bounded identities within collectivity are not so bounded. There's a bleeding of identities, a blurring of identities. That has to do with the work asking what are the boundaries between persons, among persons, what are the ways in which those boundaries are breached. One of the things the poems are often reaching to are moments of breaching, where "I" and some other become "we," where "he" and "she" become "we." A necessary derangement, I guess you could call it, a derailment of the specifying function of pronouns. One confounds the boundaries they normally enforce. That's a conscious, aware choice on my part.

FP: So when I read "we," am I included in that "we," or is that a "we" that's a collective voice of the Andoumboulou?

NM: The "we" is an invitation. Any reader can accept or not accept the invitation. I don't see anything that excludes you from that "we," other than you, potentially. I get asked about my use of "we" a lot; it jumps out, I go to it a lot, and it's obviously a pronoun that I favor, the pronoun I use most often. I've long had an impulse to do that, from early on when I began writing. That didn't always sit well with others—or with me—because it didn't sit well with others. I wasn't quite sure why I wanted to write "we," rather than "I," which is what everyone expects one to write. Writing "we" hasn't been unaccompanied by anxieties, and one of the anxieties is the fear that one is imposing, that one is presuming. But you can impose or presume with every other pronoun as well; all of the pronouns are susceptible to that, the "I," the "she," the "you," all of them. It's one of the risks we run with pronouns. I've come to see it as an unavoidable risk. It comes with the territory of language and the pronouns language provides. But I like "we" because it's so inclusive, it can include you.

FP: I've noticed that there's this paradoxical tendency in both the poetry and prose to get more meaning out of a shortened, truncated word than the whole word itself–"pubic" / "public"; "ythmic" / "rhythmic"; "atless" / "hatless"; "nub" / "numb." That's fascinating to me, and I wonder how that happens–do you think of these shortened words first and then write, do they come up as you write, are they generated or generative or both? And how does that relate to music?

NM: They come up as I write; they're both generated and generative. I happen upon them. "Atless," for example, came up as I wrote, and it fit. It worked in ways that nothing else I could have put there would. One of the things going on in the writing is a certain discontent with the limits that words and the meanings that are attached to them impose and reinforce. There's a neologistic impulse to try to make new words, to get at the suggestion of new meanings through new words such as "atless," non-words, portmanteau words and

such. There's a lot of that going on. It has to do with loving language, for one thing, and in some ways wanting more words, wanting there to be more words to love. But it also has to do with a certain wariness about words perhaps getting dull from usage, with a sense of having to come up with new ones. There's also, as you note, a move toward shortening or truncation, which can also be an expression either way or both ways, wariness and/or love. Since I'm often drawn, both in poetry and prose, to polysyllabic words, long words, to go to very short words like "nub," or to shorten words, introduces a kind of counterpoint, a variation that enriches the work in directions that are interesting to me.

FP: You've talked about how, with *Splay Anthem*, these two strains of different serial poems came together into essentially one work, or different parts of one work. Since the prose and poetry also seem so closely related, can you envision a time when that will appear all in one book? N. writing letters that morph into poems that partake of a series you've also been working on?

NM: That's a theoretical possibility. Whether it'll actually happen at a practical level I don't know. I haven't thought along those lines. I think that's happening in a less literal way, in that often in the *Song of the Andoumboulou* and *"Mu"* poems I find myself writing almost as though I were a musician, as though I were N. writing, especially some of the poems that come in the book I'm writing now. In fact, I remember reading one of them at a reading and saying, "This is a poem that seems to have been written by N." As far as the literal packaging of them together, the poetry and the prose, I don't envision that happening. But already, as I've said, there's a way in which the poetry and the prose are porous to one another, permeate one another. I don't necessarily know what there is to gain by packing them into one book, so I'm not thinking along those lines. I would have to answer that question. There would have to be some gain that I saw. There would have to be something more intricate and more elaborate and elegant than just this rubbing off on one another. They would have to become structural, more structurally implicated, in a way that I don't have any inkling of right now, so I'm not really thinking of moving in that direction.

FP: Part of the reason I ask that is I see the balloon voice as poetry in a way, or as a statement on what poetry is or does, and so I could see that become—suddenly in the middle of the book there's this giant balloon that's going on and on.

NM: I think that's the other side of it. I think you're right, that the balloons are, in some way, poetry coming into the prose. So that would be the other side of it, the other side of the porousness I just mentioned. But we'll just have to see. Now you've got me thinking about this.

FP: So much of your work seems to be about making connections between (seemingly) disparate writers, artists, genres—for example, in the introduction to *Paracritical Hinge*, you write about H.D. and a number of jazz musicians, especially Sun Ra, being interested in the anagrammatic / cryptogrammic element of language, and say "The point isn't that such musicians have read H.D. but that I have—and that I relate the interest of these musicians... [to H.D.'s concerns]." How important is making those types of connections to you and your work, and is that why you've been so active as critic, editor, even radio host, in addition to writer? And do you think those roles are important for young writers as well?

NM: Well, yes, I think it's very important. It's obviously very important to me. It's been important to have a context for what I do. It's no doubt important for everyone to have a context for what they do, and it seems to me it's increasingly incumbent on individuals to have an active hand in creating that context. There's so much out there. There's so much that we could inherit, that we theoretically could inherit, but that, on a practical level, we probably can't. One thus has to have an active role in creating one's tradition. We've seen canons exploded, we've seen the whole canonizing impulse and project rightly critiqued and called into question, problematized. We've seen how exclusionary the establishment of canons is. One of the things this has left us with is a sense not of *the* tradition, but of *traditions*, plural. The situation this leaves us with is that one's context is not given, one's tradition is not given, one has to have a hand in establishing it, creating it, which can entail mixes that wouldn't have necessarily occurred to anyone else. That's one of the interesting things to me about the situation we find ourselves in. I think it can make for more interesting possibilities and more exciting kinds of writing. The comments of mine that you quoted have to do with recognizing that situation, recognizing that one has to take responsibility for finding and articulating the tradition and the context in which one sees one's work situated. I've seen other writers do that. I'm by no means the only writer who does that. It's been going on with writers and other artists for quite a long time in fact. The academic suspicion of canons and traditions is rather belated. Practicing artists and writers have had that suspicion, have known, for a while now, that there's a selection process that at a certain level is undeterminable, having to do with inclination and individual initiative and spark and quirk and creativity. It's been going on for quite a long time and will continue to go on, and it's an important thing. What's

important, I guess, is to recognize that it's been going on, that there's a venerable lineage to it. I think it gives younger writers and artists who come along some useful information for carrying out their work.

FP: There's this push-and-pull in your work, especially the poetry it seems to me, between the political and the purely artistic. It's a conundrum you explore at some length in *Paracritical Hinge*, the essay on Duncan and Gassire's Lute, the possibility that poetry is just the other side of the violence of war or may feed off it somehow, and how direct should the poet be in addressing politics. The new work you read yesterday seemed more overtly political than anything I'd read before—references to "Operation Kill, Operation Grab, Operation Spin." Is this a somewhat new direction?

NM: I don't know if it's a new direction, in the sense of being apart from or a departure from the ongoing push-and-pull you note. It's a point on a road I've been on or in a field of concern I've been in. The relationship of art and politics is something I've thought about and written about over the years; it's been on my mind for a while. I don't dismiss the relationship, but at the same time I don't lightly assume it. It's been a question for me for a long time—a vexed question, as they say. To the extent that the poem I read yesterday, "Song of the Andoumboulou: 62," is more overtly political, or that, as some people have said, *Splay Anthem* is more overtly political, I think it's for the reasons that I touched on in the preface to *Splay Anthem*. Things have gotten so bad that they get inside you and they come out in ways you hadn't necessarily planned or foreseen. I didn't set out to write a more explicitly political poem, but the situation in this country thanks to Bush and Cheney, the situation in the world thanks to Bush and Cheney, has gotten to be so inescapably and all-pervadingly dismal that it seems to come out everywhere. It's as if it's coming out of one's pores. That has to do with a certain context. Even if we're not over there, we're inside the war and the war's inside us. As a writer, you register or inscribe both what's inside and what's outside, and the conversation, often antiphonal, between the inside and the outside. What you heard in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 62" was the outside getting inside and the inside getting outside, those two engaging each other, talking to each other, morphing in various ways into each other. For me, this comes with writing over a long period of time, with the fact that writing is a long-distance run, that one struggles to be an antenna that brings in more and more signal. Finding a way to include more and more of what's at issue is one of the challenges a writer or an artist in any medium faces. So to be open to changes in the environment—social, natural, etc.—and to be some kind of instrument that can register those changes has been and continues to be an aspiration of mine, as it has been and continues to be an aspiration that's at the root of writing. I spoke earlier of beginning to write prose because there were aspects of my sensibility and experience that were otherwise not coming through. You struggle, as William Carlos Williams put it, to get said what must be said. That's a long road, a long haul. So, in answer to your question, yes, as you put it, "somewhat new"—which is to say, yes and no, old and new. Neither the political overtness, the ongoing push-and-pull nor the underlying aspiration is entirely new. The direction I'm moving in, hope to be moving in, is a direction that makes my writing a more capacious instrument.

—interview conducted by David Hadbawnik on September 14, 2007