

Waters
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which the tongue
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At the tongue's
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the wound. A
darkness there
like tar,
like bits of
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edge. A slow

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back upon
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An undertow
of whir im-
mersed in
words.

Broken Liquidity in Nathaniel Mackey's "Waters"

Waters — we're already in them. Waters that end in words, we're already caught in their currents. We're drifting from the start, even as we're just getting started, as waters wet the mouth aspiring to speak, as one wets a reed preparing to play.

Nathaniel Mackey's "Waters" is a song about a beginning, about an oral apparatus ("mouth", "lips" and "tongue") being compelled to open. The opening stanza describes a sequence of events disorientingly shuffled in a chicken-or-egg game of causal attribution. Initially, "Waters / wet the / mouth." But then, "currents come / to where the / lips / ... / part." Have the waters beckoned the mouth to sing, or are the parted lips signal for the currents to come?

In these waters, delineations between cause and effect, past and present, are blurred by overlapping tides. At the song's center is an origin, the "ocean" route of the Middle Passage, the trauma-birth of Black life, a new form of life erupting from mass death. From this oxymoronic condition of life-in-death, Mackey's mouth might open for several reasons at once: to breathe; to scream in horror, anger; to cry in pain, grief; to shout, "I'm here!" both before drowning and after. The mouth attests, outwardly and inwardly, to its own existence.

In the first images, the oral apparatus is beset by the ocean around it: waters wet the mouth, currents come to the lips. Overwhelmed by obfuscation, the mouth is lost in the "drift" of a shifting ocean as dark as "tar" and fragmented into "bits." The mouth does respond to the maelstrom, but not with a coordinated clarity: an utterance escapes when the "tongue / slips." The mouth speaks, but not in a sovereign declaration — it's a slip of the tongue, an accidental, unintended, pressurized break in the language.

And what gets said? As Mackey paints this oral apparatus, he refrains from putting words in its mouth, even as the speech act happens. This poem is not about what can be said. Mackey obscures the utterance by burying the phrase, reconfiguring it as image and action: the tongue slips *out* of the parted

lips in a fugitive flight. “Waters” is about the conditions under which something cannot be said, the history under which language has been transformed into a site of futility and the endless casting about for the right words.

This interminable search carries into the second stanza where, at “the tongue’s / tip,” we locate a reverberant pain: “the sting / of saltish / metal.” Another double take on a common figure of speech, the tip of one’s tongue is the desolate territory of all the words one can’t quite get at. There is a signified that desperately wants to take shape, yet it evades a precise signifier, eludes its place of rest in just the right word. Mackey turns the tongue’s tip into a holding pen, wherein the effects of violence (the sting of metal, the “darkness” of tar) collect and reside. They accumulate like bacteria, and in the resultant infection the parted lips decay into an open “wound.” The oral apparatus degrades into a sign of suffering, an injury to the living tissue.

Obviously, “Waters” is driven by metaphors of the liquid. The setting is the endless “ocean,” the central movements are the ocean’s “currents,” drifts and undertows. The words themselves liquify, taking one form only to resurface later in a modified shape: “lips” become “slips,” become the tongue’s “tip.” A noisy “whir” begets the final “words” and, indeed, those closing “words” are the alliterative terminus for the opening “Waters” — as if to suggest that life born in the water, born from the drowning, will have to find itself in its words, utterance, speech.

But, these waters aren’t exactly liquid. Liquids are characterized as substances that flow freely but are of constant volumes. Mackey’s waters are not free-flowing, not constant, and he tells us so in one of the work’s stranger images:

...A
darkness there
like tar,
like bits of
drift at ocean’s
edge.

In the wound is a “darkness,” a Blackness. But this darkness has a liquid flow that is queerly broken into pieces, “bits of / drift at ocean’s / edge.” The lines are abstract, slippery — how does one cut a fluid drift into separate bits? Can a drift exist at the ocean’s edge, on the land of the shore of a new, alien continent? “Waters” describes a complex state of pervasive fragmentation that characterizes Black existence, presenting contradictory states as a way to stress incompleteness, even as it suggests the consequences of Black life’s origins to be inescapable and oppressively defining.

The trauma of this origin is so inescapable, in fact, that Mackey makes the dramatic transposition of self and water, testifying to the intense relationship between Black life and the waters in which Black death was enacted. In the third stanza, we witness a “retreat of / waters beaten / back upon / themselves.” The drowning victims become the very waters they are drowned within. On the one hand, they are beaten by external forces: kidnapped, enslaved, raped, and murdered; on the other, they are tossed about by interior waves, churned by an immense existential crisis, cut off continuously from a sense of wholeness. This drama deepens in the poem’s last lines, in the hyphenated break of “im- / mersed,” where the contracted “I’m” or “I am” is simultaneously hidden and stressed within a fractured immersion.

“Waters” suggests that the living victims of the Middle Passage still find themselves at the center of a whirlpool that spirals without any sign of stopping. Mackey makes a claim to the specific conditions of Black existence — a shattering that pervades every aspect of Black life — as defining specific possibilities in which language can be used to pay witness to this tragedy. The words will come from below the surface; through “slow” undertows; in unexpected innovations (the slip of the tongue); through unsatisfiable searchings (at the tip of my tongue); in emanations of noise and whir; in the musics that recognize the pain: what rocks the wound.