

## The Barrett Watten / Nathaniel Mackey Encounter

The first part of this extended *Dispatches* feature is an excerpt from a long exchange that took place on Barrett Watten's Facebook page, May 8-11, 2018. It was initiated when Watten posted a link to his [blog](#) where he had published a critique of [Grant Jenkins' review of Watten's recent book, \*Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences\*](#). Watten then posted further comments on Facebook, engaging with several interlocutors. Some of his comments came under challenge, and he later deleted the entire Facebook thread. What remains and is reproduced here was captured in screen shots by a witness before the thread was erased. The comments have been edited by us to remove tangential discussions. The Facebook conversation then moved to an email exchange between Nathaniel Mackey and Watten, which is reproduced here in its entirety. *Dispatches* suggests special attention to the bracing clarity of Mackey's ripostes.

*Dispatches* is reproducing this exchange because we feel it engages questions that are crucial to the current state of poetry in North America. The animus to Robert Duncan and his work evident on the part of Watten is in one sense personal and related to the apparent trauma Watten claims to have suffered at Duncan's hand in 1978. (The suppressed audio tape of this now legendary event was rescued by *Dispatches* and released to the public last year. It can be heard [here](#)):

### [Special Dispatch: Recovering a Suppressed and Vital Document of Post-War American Poetry](#)

The real issue, however is *poetics* and the ongoing, last-ditch attempts by Watten and members of his cohort to dismiss the work and current relevance of the New American Poetry (dismissively characterized by the old LangPo-garde as "mythic"), in favor of a shallow—and quasi-sectarian—materialism.

—*Dispatches*

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### Andrew Mossin

Yes, but it's the binary you articulate here that I find troubling: myth(Duncan)=ahistorica/Lanagpo=historical. And then the further connection that the former is also equated with regressive tendencies in contemporary poetry and poetics. Myth and its ambient vocabularies are also material realms, produced in language informed by more than the vatic or "sacred" registers. Raising the mythological as both a historically located resource and resonant site of poetically engaged and re-emergent narratives, not vacating them but recognizing their material realities, would seem to me the more useful reading of the connection between myth in its current iterations and the poetics that may emerge from it. In that sense the regression you cite I would cast as a progression, one meaningfully attached to texts that pose the mythic as inseparable from the revisionism poets working this ground seek to enact.

**Barrett Watten:**

OK if I append this and my response to the blog post itself?

**Barrett Watten:**

Andrew Mossin The substance of \*Questions of Poetics\* is working out material, historical, particular accounts of Language writing, not simply resting in a binary. For a polemical response to Jenkins's misuse of the debate as a reading of my work, I am saying "myth" in his mythifying account of the Zukofsky event contains "history," i.e., the emergence and development of Language writing. So that \*is\* a binary. Second, I do see myth and violence joined at the hip in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of modern reason. That doesn't mean one doesn't develop a critical account of myth, no. Or see instances of its being detoured--late surrealism a good example. The framing of this discussion was in fact reductive, and it would be nice to have opportunities to stretch it out.

**Norman Finkelstein**

I've been debating whether to intervene here or to email you, Barrett, but as the organizer of the Duncan panel at the last Louisville Conference, and hence at the center "of the largely homosocial community that supports and reproduces Duncan's work" (!), I think I'll add my two cents. Kudos to Andrew Mossin; he sums up my sense of contemporary mythopoetics beautifully. Mythopoesis can and does do important and progressive cultural work (**Nathaniel Mackey** would be an obvious example); Barrett, pace Adorno and Horkheimer, even a concept such as "sacrificial violence" can play a historically "progressive role," as Rene Girard argues with greater nuance, even if materialists would dismiss him as a conservative religious thinker. When you assert that "Myth is the violent conservation of hierarchy that founds 'community' in this sense, and the nonexistent Thing of the sacrificial act perpetuates it," I would argue that even the work that you yourself are doing, in your blog post, in Questions of Poetics, and even in the Grand Piano, is, however unconsciously, a myth-making project that seeks to perpetuate a sense of community based on Language writing, both as a historical event and as a set of theories about language and cultural. Ironically, what is getting sacrificed is mythopoesis itself! This became clear to me when reading Questions of Poetics, given its sustained argument against the notion of artistic or literary supersession, which leads in turn to your insistence on Language poetry's continued relevance. In that book, you see Duncan as caught in the trammels of the "eternal return," but in your continued argument for the relevance of Language poetry, it seems sometimes that you're caught in them as well. As I see it, the dialectic of materialist and mythic thinking is inescapable. I should also point out that, whatever the flaws in Grant Matthew Jenkins' review (I think it's an evenhanded piece that raises some important issues), all of us have to face the simple fact that we don't always get to control our own narratives. Indeed, who would want to? I'd rather be writing mythic poetry.

**Barrett Watten**

Norman, I simply can't see how writing literary history or arguing for the continued work and influence of Language writing accedes to myth-making, or all history is myth. Rather, it is you as mythic reader that thinks that--a substantial qualification. Yes, the Duncan reception is homosocial and conservative of the literary at the very least as Emersonian idealism and at the worst myth. I am happy to argue this

to eternity, or in real time historically. But the circularity is obvious--you read a critique of Language writing historically as mythic because you, yourself, are a mythic reader.

### **Luke Anthony**

But Barrett, if it isn't myth-making, how do you explain the consensus/dissensus in *The Grand Piano*? The argument about the use of the phrase Language School, for instance? I'm not saying this to denigrate your work - *Questions of Poetics* is a fascinating, thought-provoking book that adds much to the debate, in my view. But I don't think *The Grand Piano* can be described merely as "ideology critique"; even a few of the Pianists themselves write about a certain pressure towards coalescence at work there, and retreat from the situation, sometimes with sadness.

### **Barrett Watten**

What's the difference between writing autobiography and memoir and myth making? Or thinking about the politics of community and myth? Consensus or dissensus are not mythic ideas--they have to do with shared aesthetic assumptions. What is going on here? I think the bottom line is a ferocious resistance to the kind of work I am doing at the level of who is authorized to speak. The New Americans grounded themselves in a specific and historical authority--and that is it turns out a product of their time, the Cold War in fact. I am positing, exploring alternatives. And not just to them. I am questioning on the ground of poetics.

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### **Barrett Watten**

Critical discussion is the point; I read Duncan far more carefully, in *QoP* and also in the article I just posted, than this discussion. That is, I wish this discussion were as careful with my work as I was with getting precisely what I thought was going on with RD. I am not just pasting him with "myth"--but I am saying the mythifying reading the SF event was and is an effort to contain my work. Which I hope ppl will read and respond as not just about god-damned Robert Duncan.

### **Andrew Mossin**

I'm writing in response and through the seams of this conversation to, first, thank both **Barrett Watten** and **Norman Finkelstein** for their furthering of this dialogue. I think that for me, working as I am these days on artifacts of Greek and Egyptian religious texts, the issue remains less one of mythos than of the processes that sustain our working-through of the culturally specific and intricately layered belief systems that get channeled through our work as poets. I've never been convinced that language in and of itself is the singular conduit of thought nor am I in the camp that would argue for transcendence and spiritual economies as predominant modes of understanding. So, yes, it's a dialectical relation, as Norman points out, that is sustaining, and when we describe the dialectical we're of course pointing to the processive nature of such movement. It's also worth pointing out that suppression is part of the modus operandi of one discourse or another that seeks to shut down thinking in favor of positionality, something that **Nathaniel Mackey** in *Discrepant Engagement* enjoins us against and that it is worth recalling now--in this moment when the liturgies of this or that post-New American dialogue seem ascendant in ways that are not so much clarifying as reductive and reactionary. Duncan, among other

things, opened the doorway for a range of poetic stances and engagements, which is to say that whatever may have been suppressed by the enforcements and enchantments of lyric address in his own work also at the same time opened up to possibilities for many other poets both at the time and long after (I would count myself among the latter group), many of which have brought forward genuinely new and markedly polyvocal work in poetry over the last 10-15 years across poetic generations and positions.

### **Barrett Watten**

Duncan did not, emphatically, open the door to any kind of pluralism. He rode competing poets out the door on a rail--Robin Blaser, most notably--and tried to do the same with those upstart Language poets, the "mosquitoes on someone else's swamp." Wherever you got your benign and pluralist Duncan, you are dead wrong.

### **Barrett Watten**

Of course it is true that readers of work X do not reproduce it precisely, which what I do with my reading of Sherman Paul reading the Lost America of Love.

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### **Norman Finkelstein**

Barrett, yes, it's crucial to note "that readers of work X do not reproduce it precisely"--that pretty much defines how artistic influence works. So regardless of your view of Duncan, we can say that a range of poetries emerge from him. And yes, our argument can be seen as circular. But I don't see myself as a mythic thinker, and that's why I Andrew's responses here. As far back as *The Utopian Moment*, I sought to get the most out of both ideology critique and myth criticism (Adorno + Frye = Bloch). My poetry tends toward the mythic but I won't apologize for that. And I've learned a great deal from studying Language writing, as you know.

### **Barrett Watten**

Duncan as friend Ahab to crew: "I do not order ye, ye will it!" Now that is pretty severe, I admit.

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### **Norman Finkelstein**

Barrett,

just a couple of things in re your last remarks. Why "merely" a myth-making moment? We're dancing around an important question that needs a better platform than Facebook: what is the relation of myth to ideology? (For some, they're practically synonyms). Also, I think that sometimes it \*is\* best to go home and let someone else decide, which does not entail "giving up." As I said, we can't always control our own narratives--otherwise we succumb to a dangerous will to power. Of course you're entitled to say, in the face of critics or literary historians, "no, I meant X and not Y." And if there are ideas you feel need combating, be my guest. But my feeling about literary movements, including langpo, is that the

folks inside it can't know it veridically as it's happening, and your version of history, as it recedes in time, is increasingly only your version. This is why analysts put faith in reconstructions and also regard them with skepticism. And what did the man say about the owl of Minerva?

**Barrett Watten**

If I write a book on poetics, I am not "controlling the narrative." Was Creeley controlling the narrative with \*Contexts of Poetry\* or a \*Quick Graph\*? Of course not, because he is in Bro-Valhalla. Look out folks, I'm about to get nasty.

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**Barrett Watten**

BTW I just posted Entry 34, which should be a lot more grist for the mill. Where Norman sees mythic thinking, I see ideology critique.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

"If you don't know you're a myth, shame on you." — Dizzy G'sun Ra

**Barrett Watten**

Works for some ppl, in some contexts. Then there's the Triumph of the Will.

**Barrett Watten**

And actually, not getting the political conservatism of RD counts as a negative, for myth.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

So you're against white folks' use of myth?

**Barrett Watten**

Is racialization enabled by myth? That would indeed be a question. And so a counter-use might be all to the point among black folks.

**Barrett Watten**

Is Anglo-Saxonism a myth? Yes, indeed it is. Did RD have elements of Anglo-Saxonism in his work? Yes he did.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

Sounds personal to me, a bruising encounter with a poetic elder. I had one with Baraka as an undergrad, but I tried not to draw too much from it and we were later friends.

**Barrett Watten**

The whole "Golden Light of Seance" aspect of RD is Anglo-Saxonism looking toward the "West" as racial destiny. It's all over the West Coast in the modern period--Jeffers notably, but let's look at Rexroth too.

**Barrett Watten**

No Nate, and I don't want to get personal here either. I'm an intellectual, a poet and critic, let's talk at that level.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

I'm all those things as well, I dare say. I don't see how invoking one poet's treatment of another (e.g., Duncan and Blaser above) is not getting personal.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

Why not rail against racism rather than "myth"?

**Barrett Watten**

Those are not mutually exclusive. RD was not good on race. I never heard him speak of a black person or artist, but I did hear strongly anti-Semitic statements that evoked the discourse of racial destiny I mentioned.

**Barrett Watten**

I went to Jonathan Jackson's funeral. That was a historicist moment in direct opposition to the discourse of poetics about that period. Let's see, 1970. I was in SF after my first semester at Iowa. I want to write about that-- the Burial at Ornans or something.

**Barrett Watten**

OK Nate, let's find a time to do this right, at length you know and make something out of it rather than a FB post. Nice to see you.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

I didn't say they were. How often do you call out racism in A QUESTION OF POETICS? As often as you call out "myth"?

**Nathaniel Mackey**

If it's right enough to start it here, why not?

**Barrett Watten**

I wish I had had the eight chapters I wanted, in which case there would be a chapter on Braxton and improvisation and one on Hejinian and improvised musics. But the historical chapter on Berkeley in the 60s is that. Baraka did not read at Berkeley, and I discuss that. There are four poets cited, Duncan among them (and please do read what I wrote), with Baraka's nonappearance signifying. That was the Ron Karenga period, remember.

**Barrett Watten**

Well OK--I've got to do a couple of things, so I will stay here for 30 mins. Talk to me about Duncan and the decline of the West. You were in Orange County--that is the painful locus of the discourse I am talking about. Duncan was from Bakersfield. He d the Winchester Mystery House. So many details go together in what I'm saying here.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

I don't. But if you're going to yoke racism and "myth" maybe a more explicit critique of racism is in order. It's not exactly that racism hasn't been carried out in the name of "science" and "history" as well. Anyway, I too have to go. But we can continue some time.

**Barrett Watten**

The thread was on using Duncan/Watten on Zukofsky to not read my critical book. "Myth" was invoked re mythicizing, particularly in poetry. I was not promulgating "Against Myth as Such" at least to begin with, but as it turned out a larger question was addressed. The Mythic Method of T.S. Eliot. Northrup Frye. And finally the ways that the revival of myth goes along with the homosocial reception of RD I've noted. I'm not an essentialist, so I hope those points stand on their own. I just wrote on Kara Walker here, after introducing her at an event, and so there is a lot about racism in that piece. I hope you fill find it acceptable. See next.

**Norman Finkelstein**

**Barrett Watten** RD, at least in print, was philo-Semitic, which some historians and critics see as nothing more than a peculiar form of anti-Semitism. I was talking about that in Louisville. And the test case is his response to Zukofsky.

**Barrett Watten**

**Norman Finkelstein** He had a very charged sense of racial specificity and spoke of "the Jews" in a way that seemed highly projective, the chosen people as the "they." I remember his comparing Jews and Nazis as having comparable senses of racial destiny. So I think we agree.

**Norman Finkelstein**

**Barrett Watten** Yes, it's a problem. I'll send you my chapter, which includes a reading of Duncan's "After Reading Barely and Widely."

**Norman Finkelstein**

Because, you know, I can still do ideology critique when I'm not up in Cloud Cuckooland!

**Ben Friedlander**

**Norman Finkelstein** His poem for Celan in Groundwork and his use of the Holocaust in one of the lectures for Jungians indicate for me that he viewed Jewish history as so much illustrated matter for his grand collage. I'm not offended by it and I wouldn't call him an antisemite but it certainly keeps me at arm's length from his work.

**Norman Finkelstein**

Ben, yes indeed. I think he's very muddled in his thought and feelings about Jews and Judaism. The poem I mention above, "After Barely and Widely," really comes close to certain anti-Semitic images. Yet his is a Kabbalistic world-view in many respects; he appropriates and wrestles with Jewish culture throughout his career--right up to the end, in the essay on Jabes.

**Barrett Watten**

When u start bringing in Jung and Kabbalah I am even more confirmed in my stance against myth--particularly Jung. Racial destiny of the collective ucs.

**Ben Friedlander**

**Barrett Watten** I'm with you in preferring "history" to "myth" but I also think the two are only unitary and distinct when viewed from a great distance.

**Ben Friedlander**

I've contemplated writing a book on Spicer, Duncan, and Blaser as students of Kantorowitz, whose books encompass the poets' distinct relationships to history and myth: Spicer close to the K of Laudes Regiae, on the Byzantine sociality of royal courts; Duncan to the biography of Frederick II, K's mythohistoric defense of authoritarian rule; Blaser to The King's Two Bodies, an exhumation of dead ideas that yet haunt living action.

**Nathaniel Mackey**

Intellectually speaking, I don't find the "history vs. myth" business particularly trenchant. Never have, going back to Phillip Rahv's "Myth and the Powerhouse" back in the day. I'm surprised to see it being given so much weight here. I'm wary of it. It's always struck me as flatfooted at best, to put it kindly, especially given the interanimation of the two, especially in Western thought, especially in Western historicizing, especially in the Western weaponization of "history" against non-Europeans deemed "historyless" (Hegel on Africa, etc). That said, there's a strong line of personal appraisal and ad hominem critique aimed at RD running thru this thread. Barrett, do you really want to set that as a precedent and a standard for current and future evaluations of Language writers? Withering scrutiny of their personal conduct and their attitudes and actions when it comes to race, gender and class? There are, on that front, many people with stories to tell.

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**Grant Matthew Jenkins**

Barrett, as I say in my review, I bring up the Duncan 'debacle' to highlight your attempts to challenge the notion of 'generation', a primary myth-making device in US poetry criticism. I considered the anecdote fair game because you bring it up in QoP yourself. I think it may also be of interest to



nonspecialists and other Americanists who read ALH. I was not trying to contain your work but find a way in and to show what the incident 'contains' as emblematic of your concerns in the book.

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### **Barrett Watten**

As well, my challenge is to the concept of "period style"--the attempt to reify "generation," in fact. Your use of the event does the exact opposite, and hence I cannot imagine you read my text very carefully--which is an impression I get throughout the review, particularly in the opening. You strained to get the footnote to the discussion in the Grand Piano where I bring it up, and make it your lead. / This isn't going to be a happy place for me to respond to you, so I'm going to stop. Let another review be published, I say, one that actually deals with the various arguments I make.

### **Nathaniel Mackey**

Barrett, I finally got a chance to read your Kara Walker piece and, since you put it forth, I'll comment. I wouldn't exactly call it antiracist work, if that's what you offered it as an example of. What strikes me is the amount of self-positioning in what's ostensibly a piece about another person's work, an introduction for a black woman artist's appearance. More specifically, the degree of white (male) racial anxiety, a kind of white (male) protectionism, a certain unprovoked defensiveness, is overwhelming, e.g., "Now the question is, not that Joel Chandler Harris reduces to Kara Walker, but what is so different between the two? This provides a context in which her work is discussed. If it is simply that Harris is white and Kara Walker is black, then my teaching racial images at Wayne State is as problematic as Harris's work, and it isn't." Why set up such a strawman? As for your having attended Jonathan Jackson's funeral, "a historicist moment in direct opposition to the discourse of poetics about that period," as you put it, I don't know why, after all the uproar over Kenneth Goldsmith's conscription of Michael Brown's autopsy report, a black male corpse appears again as an authenticating or enabling point of reference, but what's more on my mind are these questions: What's this got to do with poetry or poetics? Wouldn't a more relevant thing be your practice as editor of THIS during that period? You say that "RD was not good on race. I never heard him speak of a black person or artist." I did, by the way, but that's only partly my point. How many writers of color did you publish in THIS? Who were they? How often? These seem to me to be questions more relevant to the kinds of stuff you're bringing up than what funeral you went to, especially given the advent of multiculturalism during that period.

### **Barrett Watten**

You want my references in relation to race and black people? I decline to give them. / As for This, the group I came up with was white, with good gender balance. I can't interpret it for you further. My roommate in the period was Erica Hunt. She hadn't started publishing yet. Ask her about the period. End of discussion.

### **Nathaniel Mackey**

Barrett, I wasn't asking for references or letters of recommendation or who you roomed with or about gender, I just asked you how many writers of color you published in THIS. Was DeLeon Harris, for example, who was living in the Bay Area, doing a program on KPFA and writing poems in which the foregrounding and materiality of the sign was very much the matter (Aldon Nielsen writes about him in BLACK CHANT) ever in THIS's pages? Anyway, I didn't mean for that to end the discussion and perhaps I should say I'm sorry I asked, but there is that old saying about staying out of the kitchen if you can't take the heat.

### **Barrett Watten**

Nate, you are calling me out in a quite revolting way, given what you know and have experienced of me as an editor on many occasions. I didn't know DeLeon Harris but am happy that Aldon has brought his work forward. The issues in the period were the move to "writing" and the material text, and the oral tradition was dominant among black writers. There is much more nuance to this and I try to deal with the split between expressive subjectivity and the turn to language in chapter 1. Please don't continue to rag me or belittle my friendship and support of Erica Hunt--or others in the 80s such as Lorenzo Thomas and Harryette Mullen. I will be happy to continue the convo once you have looked with some generosity of spirit on the work I've done over the past 20 years. Good for you?

### **Nathaniel Mackey**

Barrett, the two instances I take it you refer to, your seeking out a paper of mine that you'd heard about for REPRESENTATIONS and my work appearing, via Carrie Noland, in DIASPORIC AVANT-GARDES, which you and she co-edited, do not constitute "many occasions." It's disingenuous of you to characterize them that way in order to say that my asking simple questions about your editorship of THIS is "quite revolting." You're the one who took the discussion down this road. I'll ask again what I asked in an earlier post: Do you really want to set the sort of discussion Duncan, his work and his readers have been subjected to by you in this thread as a precedent and a standard for current and future evaluations of Language writers? Withering scrutiny of their personal conduct and their attitudes and actions when it comes to race, gender and class? Evidently, judging from your reaction to my questions, the answer is no. May I suggest something? When the audio of the Zukofsky evening was made available a while back, I listened to it a couple of times and came away wondering what all the fuss was about. What I heard was a far cry from the rude interruptions and eventual commandeering of your microphone by RD that filled the accounts of the evening I had heard over the years. Could we get together some time and listen to it together and you, with some generosity of spirit toward RD I hope, explain to me what went on and what about it was so extraordinary that we're still talking about it today?

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**The Facebook screen shots end here. The discussion continued with Watten responding to Mackey with a post that began, "One last word, Nate," and proceeded to list the instances he considers the "many occasions" of his support for Mackey's work. Mackey replied, "One last word, Barrett: Pathetic." Watten responded, "Same to you, Nate. We've seen something here," to**

which Mackey replied by posting Herbie Hancock's tune "[Blind Man, Blind Man.](#)" At that point, Watten took the entire discussion down and emailed Mackey.

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### Begin email exchange

On May 8, 2018, at 9:04 AM, Barrett Watten <[barrett.watten@gmail.com](mailto:barrett.watten@gmail.com)> wrote:

Nate-- I took that down. You must be aware of the possibility that various yahoos out there will cut and paste fragments of discussions like that and spread them all over the internet. I am happy to keep talking with you on what we have on the table, but this got out of control. Out of the kitchen indeed!

I note that you listened to the tape of the Duncan/Watten event twice. That tape was purloined from the SF State archives, probably by David Levi Strauss, and circulated without my permission. And that is a serious thing. I've corresponded with Steve Dickison and he tells me no release is on file. A copy probably went to Robert Bertholf, and was circulated as a scandal in itself. I think my post on the uses of that event by the New College crowd was accurate--that's what kept it alive. It was the stealing of the tape and a series of articles in Poetry Flash in the mid 80s that became a major moment in the Poetry Wars--populist poets vs. Language poets. Fortunately for you, you have only your personal view of those events.

But I understand something from this--namely, the defense of Duncan sets up a--what?--scary, objectifying, denying entity called Language writing but which could also be "theory" or "Marxism" about the same time. Or you can tell me what counts as the force of your defensiveness around Duncan.

Two more things--I would be happy, when we calm down, if you were to read chapter 1 of \*Questions of Poetics\*--which is my attempt to show how liberationist and language-centered poetics come from a similar moment in the 60s. This was the paper given at Orono that Baraka objected to from the back row, and my interest at the time was to have a further conversation. Amiri took that to the bank, but that's another story.

And I would still be happy too to pursue a conversation with you, but not in the form it took. One of the main points I am trying to make is returning to the 70s and what I was able to say at age 30 is an easy way to handle the much more nuanced discussions I advance decades later.

And as a footnote--anyone can racially characterize the poetry communities in the 70s; it's a cheap shot. The New College crowd, the New Narrativists, were "white." Was that a racialized whiteness? You would have to show there was denial in some form of black and minority culture, and there wasn't. Our crowd was deeply involved in improvised musics. In poetry, there were differences of aesthetics and particularly form. Things changed in the 80s and have continued to this day.

Which, btw, makes me sorry you didn't find the various ways I supported your work to be meaningful. At least in that context, so we try again.

Barrett

**On 5/8/18 11:48 PM, Nathaniel Mackey wrote:**

Dear Barrett,

I'm sorry you felt you needed to take down the FB discussion generated by your "The Duncan Thing" post. I'd have been fine with it not being deleted. I found it an interesting exchange on its various fronts and I don't feel misrepresented by anything I said. I'm not exactly sure what you mean by "this got out of control." A thought-provoking, even provocative or combative post summoned vigorous, engaged response. Surely it couldn't have been unknown to you that it would. I myself entered on a note of levity, with no ill intent, so I'm especially sorry my questions struck you as revolting. They seem to me to have been fair and pertinent to the topic of Language writing's origins in the 1970s and the political claims and analyses you put forth. I'm disappointed you decided to take offense rather than answer them.

Yes, I listened to the audio of the Zukofsky evening. I appreciate your sense that your permission rights were violated. I do, however, wonder why you would not have wanted it released, if for no other reason than to prevent the impression that it contained something you wanted to hide or to prevent further mystification. I did not hear about the event from Duncan or people at New College but from others, including one or two Language writers. The picture I got was that Duncan had charged the podium, commandeered your microphone and taken over, following a series of rude interruptions. I heard nothing that sounded like that when I listened and it does seem to me that something that disruptive, violent even, would be audible. So, to be honest, the discrepancy between what I was told and what I heard does make me wonder why you'd want the tape suppressed, just as I wonder why you deleted the FB discussion.

Duncan is a major poet. One should not have to explain why one finds value and instruction in his work. If you've read my work at all, much less supported it to the extent that you have, you know the various ways in which it has been important to me. I've written critically on it and its influence is present in my work. I'm not defensive about him but one does rise to the defense of people and elements (e.g., myth) in one's genealogy that one sees treated in ways that are not especially meticulous or discerning. As for your opposition between Duncan and a "scary, objectifying, denying entity called Language writing . . . [which] could also be 'theory' or 'Marxism,'" I didn't engage it back then and I don't engage it now and I believe, more generally, that you exaggerate people's fears of that last three. (What might once have been cutting edges have since become butter knives.) I haven't been a member of a movement or a clique, I haven't hung out in bunkers. My then partner Gloria and I took Fred Jameson to SF to meet Duncan in the early eighties and they subsequently stayed in touch. I went to hear Fred speak at 80 Langton Street. Fred invited Duncan, Bruce Boone, Bob Glück, Norman O. Brown and me to dinner in SC. Bob Callahan invited us to a party at his house in Berkeley to meet Cecil Taylor. We were invited to Leslie Scalapino's with you and Duncan McNaughton. On and on. Things aren't as rigid as you make them out to be.

Cheap shot? I wasn't calling you a racist in offering those comments on your Kara Walker piece or in asking about contributors to *This*, if that's what you think. Again, I'm disappointed. Why is your saying Duncan wasn't good on race okay but my following up on the topic of race a cheap shot, revolting?

I appreciate and I have thanked you for the ways you've shown support for my work. I did not dismiss them or in any way suggest them to be meaningless. My quarrel was with the imprecision of your saying I'd experienced you as an editor on "many occasions" and the purpose to which that imprecision was being put. I also didn't see, though I didn't mention it, what this had to do with the 70s, which we were discussing, a period before you and I met. And I certainly, given the way you put it, had no way of knowing you had the Wayne State visit and such in mind. But still, taking all these things you've brought up into account, I hope you're not suggesting that such support, presumably earned by the work, comes with an invisible price-tag requiring me not to disagree with you or to ask questions that you're not comfortable with. You're not suggesting that, right?

Yours,

Nate

**On May 9, 2018, at 10:33 AM, Barrett Watten <[barrett.watten@gmail.com](mailto:barrett.watten@gmail.com)> wrote:**

Nate-- Thank you for the letter. I will respond to some of this and we can continue as we wish.

First, on taking down the posts. Regrettably, that is informed by past experiences of similar threads that get screen shot and spread around the internet, like wildfire. Mongrel Coalition and co. My thread is "private" not public. Think of it as a convo in a kitchen at a party. It's getting late. Someone crosses a line. The line is crossed again. We start to say things that are regrettable in a different light. I'm not going to monumentalize a misfire, no.

For your amusement, here is Ben Friedlander's bc account, when I asked how he saw it:

It was very much in the mode of a schoolyard standoff between two toughs with pride. He wanted you to back down and gave a hint of threat, but with a smile. You wouldn't back down, and even got a little further into his space, though also with smile. Then suddenly there were no more smiles. That's how it struck me anyway--speaking as someone who often got beat up in schoolyards.

So that is how he saw it. My experience is when people who are watching such a conversation start to feel like that--are reminded of when they got beat up--they retreat and suffer an alienation from the entire discussion. They feel fear and become paralyzed. This is exactly what happened with the Duncan/Watten event and also with the Baraka/Watten event--the occasion of my chapter 1. In that one I wanted an "open" discussion of the politics of the 60s and got royally burned. No one remembers the fine points of the discussion, that is for sure. It was Amiri telling off a white man, one of his specialty acts.

That reminds me that you were present at my Santa Cruz presentation of chapter 1--I don't remember a riot happening on that occasion. And Luke tells me that he and you went over chapter 1 and discussed specifics when the book came out.

Our conversation on line, in any case, was not that. What would be preserved was an antagonism and that is not something I wanted to host, in that form. In a longer form where people are being careful, I'm fine with disagreement. Facebook is not conducive to fine points, and misunderstandings proliferate.

Then there is the question of race. Referencing Ben above, the point where you wanted me to back down and "gave a hint of threat" was the line, "So you're against white folks' use of myth?" Actually, I had just responded to your quip about Gillespie/Sun Ra with "Works for some ppl, in some contexts. Then there's the Triumph of the Will." So I mentioned Nazis and you mentioned race. But we were both still smiling. Me getting into your space further would be "Did RD have elements of Anglo-Saxonism in his work? Yes he did." To me this is all to the point and interesting, but it may be seen as inadmissibly linking "Western man" fantasies with Nazism and Anglo-Saxonism, and hence a major component of racism. The place where the gloves came off is when you said, "How often do you call out racism in QUESTIONS OF POETICS"? and I said "God-damned Robert Duncan." As I now know you read chapter 1, that is pretty reductive and hence a poke, as the whole chapter is about expressive vs. constructivist poetics.

And you got pokey, schoolyard: "If it's right enough to start it here, why not?" and "there's the old saying about staying out of the kitchen if you can't stand the heat." And finally, ending it with "pathetic" and a recording of "Blind Man" is a pretty specific call-out. I need not go on.

Your first paragraph below thus strikes me as disingenuous. You were calling out, racially baiting. We can find the specific points.

On the Zukofsky tape--the reason is that this was stolen from the archive by David Levi Strauss and used to return to that moment in a characterizing way in the mid 80s--i.e., some years later. The tape was "pelf" whose unauthorized use was galvanizing. No one would have questioned Duncan's right not to release material, but they ignored mine. So I needed to insist on my rights as author. That is not unexceptional. I remember hearing Creeley talk about a lawsuit he was in about the unauthorized use of "I Know a Man." He saw himself as up there with Bob Dylan or something. The larger point--where this all began--is that returning to that scene is a way that my work, say over the past forty years, is not being read. It is a defense, specifically. As for your doubt about Duncan's actions--they were physical. Everyone who was there would agree, and the air got literally sucked out of the room. You can't hear that on tape, no. You want to defend Duncan as not having abused his power and the public forum in that instance? No one would agree with that. Not even Palmer.

On Duncan as a "major poet"--certainly he would have said so, and did: "I know how big I am," he remarked. The authors are in eternity and he is among them. But at the same time he is a "derivative" major poet--his "major" is his "minor" so to speak, so in awe of the big table in eternity he is. This moment of self-canonizing, certainly possible among poets particularly the romantics, may be responsible for the illusion even among many of my friends that you can make your own place in canonical history. It actually does not work like that. My ranking of Duncan is similar to H.D.--important, flawed, and a failure on their own account. There are many who feel that more strongly--see Loewinsohn's review of *\*After the War\**, which was totally bitter on this kind of claim. Duncan vastly overstated his importance to the point of delusion. That makes his fantasy less in my view, and gets him kicked out of Valhalla. Critique of myth right then--permanent self-mythifying. Use at your own risk.

So no, I would not say either RD or H.D. are "major" poets and I am not concerned with that designation generally. I am concerned with "what is living and what is dead." For me, RD's voice is a dead echo chamber of self-importance; I can hardly listen to it. I really do not like his work--I hope that comes through.

Finally, you \*were\* calling me out in terms of race--as racialized in a negative, unpleasant, antagonistic way--in responding to many specifics at the end of the thread. Erica Hunt, Jonathan Jackson, Kara Walker, Lorenzo Thomas, Anthony Braxton, Harryette Mullen--all sites of real engagement. I shouldn't write on Jonathan Jackson bc I would be displaying a black corpse like Kenny Goldsmith--wow! tell me to stop now before I call down big trouble! You racially characterized my editing of \*This\* and claimed that I should have been able to locate the writer Aldon found some decades later. You were asking for my credentials--you were being a cop.

Another thing I mentioned was my editing of \*Diasporic Avant-Gardes\* which, way before the current debates on POC, was a substantial and totally ignored contribution. I do think that deserves credit. Of course I am not asking for pay-back. But in at least four important ways over the years, I've engaged your work: article in Repts; visit to WSU; Diasporic Avant-Gardes; discussion in current book. That is a real, but measured, response.

OK, that's enough for tonight, as they say. Good morning. Barrett

**On 5/9/18 9:41 PM, Nathaniel Mackey wrote:**

Dear Barrett,

Thank you for your response to my email. I'll respond to a few things and if you think there's more to say let me know.

I'm sorry you felt, based on Ben's response to your query, that readers of your FB page were in harm's way. I don't agree, but I regret that you've had past experiences that led you to take the discussion down.

May I clear up something? I haven't read *Questions of Poetics*. I haven't read Chapter 1 of *Questions of Poetics*. The conversation Luke refers to was a brief one in which he showed me a passage that he had marked and raised questions about. As I recall—this was in October 2016—the passage was advancing a bifurcation, the very one between Language writing and myth, I think, that he critiqued for not accounting for my work. This was done in passing and he did not sit me down to read an entire chapter. As I mentioned to you in an earlier email not connected to this matter, I bought the book only recently, remembering Luke's praise for it, the above critique notwithstanding, but I haven't yet had a chance to read it. I'll get to it during the summer, as I've already said. Nothing so sinister as me lying about not having read it is going on here.

Yes, I remember your presentation in Santa Cruz. I didn't offer any comments at the time, as you seemed already pretty defensive during the Q&A. As I think back on it, I didn't find it persuasive, so it left me with not much to say. The contextualizing struck me as strained at best, merely self-credentialing or self-serving at worst. I don't doubt that any of those public events had an impact on

you, as they did on all of us, but I'd have appreciated some demonstration of how they show up in the actual poems and the poetic practice of the Language writers. Perhaps there's more of that in *Questions of Poetics*. I look forward to finding out.

As for race, I had reason to take your "some ppl" to mean black people. I posted a Sun Ra track on a FB post of yours some time back, a post in which you were discussing myth. I don't remember the exact wording, but you basically replied "Works for some ppl, in some contexts" at greater length, specifying black people, black contexts. So you're the one who brought race in. Might there have been something a bit ghettoizing there? I was, after all, alluding to a globally recognized, globally influential cultural assertion—and I'm not just talking about the music—that has impacted, in many definitive ways, modernity and postmodernity. Might its contributions have been brought into your meditations to complicate and enrich the easy "history/myth" binary? In not allowing that to happen, isn't one relegating "some ppl" to the devalued realm of "myth," which is clearly, in your estimation, not on a par with "history," "theory," "Marxism" and "Language writing"?

"Racially baiting"? Really? You're resorting to Republican Party talking points now? I won't even dignify that with a response.

As for the tape, I wish there'd been video.

Duncan a major poet? We simply disagree on that and I'm tempted to just move on, but I find this striking: "For me, RD's voice is a dead echo chamber of self-importance; I can hardly listen to it. I really do not like his work—I hope that comes through." Yes, it does, as it did in your "God-damned Robert Duncan." The force of this is stunning. If RD did in fact attack you physically, I can understand you feeling this way. Such an attack would, understandably, color your evaluation of his work. Given that, perhaps you should have long ago recused yourself from commenting on him or his work and perhaps you shouldn't have reserved so prominent a place for him in your account of Language writing. Such a physical assault could easily be seen as compromising you intellectually when it comes to addressing his work.

I was "being a cop"? Racism in reverse? I pulled you over like they did Sandra Bland? See above.

As for your enumerating the four occasions on which you showed support for my work, it's unseemly to have ever brought this up and especially so in this context. Bringing it up, let alone reiterating it, as ammo in an intellectual exchange is unbecoming of you and it undermines the very support, generosity or acuity you're congratulating yourself on. It makes you look small and it tokenizes me, cheapening the thing you want credit for.

I'll add, since you've gone on so much about race, as though that's all I wanted to talk about, that I stated early on in my comments that your take on Duncan seems personal, arising from a bruising encounter with a poetic elder. I said this empathetically, comparing it to my early encounter with Baraka. Yes, I did go on to say, in essence, that I got over it and you may have been offended by the implication that you should too. I do think you should too. Why are we still talking about this forty years later? Why mention it in *Questions of Poetics* if you're sick of hearing about it? Why react online and on FB to a review that mentions it? I do think you should get over it.



Finally, in keeping with full disclosure, I should let you know that this morning I forwarded our exchange from yesterday to the people cc'd on this one, folks I could recall being in on the FB discussion and a few who got in touch with me about it. None of them are Yahoos, so I see no danger of the sort of thing you feared might happen on FB.

Yours,

Nate

**On May 10, 2018, at 11:18 AM, Barrett Watten <[barrett.watten@gmail.com](mailto:barrett.watten@gmail.com)> wrote:**

Dear Nate:

That was a foul, and you know it. I wrote you one on one; I might have suggested publishing some part of our correspondence, but it was not a public document. Given that this is email, I am going to ask you not to forward the conversation further. But what can I do?

So we may be in the Stuck Place. I liked my last letter; found it was clarifying. You can put scare quotes around things you found to be instrumental; I was being suggestive, not reactive.

Going down the list, which now feels like a chore:

The remark from Ben was I think good on the kind of challenge behavior that happened on my thread, and now seems to be happening here. I should remember that challenge behavior, no matter how much in a "community of discourse" as I assume poetry to be, never works if race is a part of it. It is not possible. Not now, if ever.

So let me say right now that I would like to take that off the table. What Ben said, however, I thought would help bring to light an aspect of the dynamic that was happening. Let's call it the "racial unconscious." I wrote about that in my discussion of Kara Walker; you saw only instrumental assertions, I do this or that, which were part of the mix and meant to work within a larger context, including my giving the introduction to Kara Walker, exhibition history, movies, my teaching, etc.

I wish you would read chapter 1; your memory of the Santa Cruz occasion is patronizing, defensive. The talk went well, and was an intervention to work being done at SC on the 60s and the Cultural Revolution--my take on the diverse and unsettled voices of the 60s would not go well with a Maoist, for instance. I didn't say, btw, that you were lying and was simply clarifying what I understood from Luke. That in itself is a sorry part of this.

This is my point on the 60s, btw--many voices, highly unresolved, conflictual, productive. No one "logic of liberation," hence the turn to identity politics in the 70s would always be denying part of the unsettledness that preceded it. This is a critical point that leads toward the material poetics and against the holism that were at stake in the Duncan/Watten event. So do return to that unsettled time, and its consequences, in the article to get a better sense of what I was saying there.

As for the account of events at Berkeley--I was a participant in many of them, from the Oakland Induction Center to People's Park. So there's that. My text was the film \*Berkeley in the 60s\*, which is what I worked with at the Orono talk. It is interesting, actually limiting, that you think only poetry

would authorize an account of that period--I do read Duncan, Levertov, Creeley, and Merwin, and I think well. But I also follow cultural studies in bringing nonliterary texts into dialogue with literary ones.

On "some ppl" I was being light, you took it heavy. But you were already being challenging, yes? What I meant, in thumbnail, was that yes there is a lot of myth and futurism and science fiction in jazz and black arts, a rather large area, all the way to Octavia Butler and Skip Delany. So myth is not one thing. Some people are into it; works for them. But that is not the kind of myth I am primarily thinking about. I am thinking myth in terms of the mythopoeia that was advanced by Duncan and Olson, backed by the critical canon they refer to. Jane Harrison and the fourfold unities. I want to bring myth forward into ideology, which is what \*I\* am interested in.

When you take my saying that to be "ghettoizing," I will say you are racially characterizing, and I believe I am right in seeing this tenor in your part of the discussion. So--could you please not perspectivize in this bifurcated way? But as soon as there is challenge, I guess it will happen.

On myth/history, that is a large topic that I don't think is usefully reduced to Eurocentricism. You can bring up Hegel, and indeed the work of critical theory and cultural studies over the past fifty years has been to rethink that. Let's go back to Herodotus/Thucydides, why not? That is a critical discussion, not an either/or.

As for the tape, really I don't want to hear more about it. I heard lots about it in the 80s, when Levi Strauss purloined the tape from the archive and brought it to Poetry Flash, and the fact that Grant framed his review of my book is what I needed to address. The tape was a fetish, a sacrificial object, for the Duncan community. It's a cult object. For me, it is Bad History.

What I said about Duncan is my view. I think it is important to ground it in a physical response. Duncan was well known to be an intellectual bully. There is also the question of sexual predation, substantiated in the Jarnot biography. There is much to unpack in the psyche of Robert Duncan that is not sweetness and light, put it that way. As someone on the receiving end, I think I am quite authorized to think what I do about it. But it is the reproduction of the event itself--by you and others, who were at a distance or were not there--that concerns me most, and was the basis for my post on "The Duncan Thing." Recently, the purloined tape was put up on line, so it is a fairly new revival, by those unfriendly to my work. You listened to it twice, looking for the smoking gun. Apparently, the Thing does not want to go away.

I should recuse myself, eh?

You did not bring up the force of my objection to your comments on my relation to or writing about other black artists or people. You were telling me not to write about Jonathan Jackson or I would be displaying a corpse like Kenny Goldsmith. Horrors of horrors to mention Goldsmith--I write against his work, and its reception, in my book. You were, in fact, telling me not to write about that topic, or about Kara Walker. What am I to do? You want to install a voice in my head saying, "don't do that." Well, I will now need to take that into account. This is what I meant by policing--an internalized logic. I have never been pulled over for Driving While Black, however--but am well aware of that form of policing, and of course there is a difference. I live in Detroit.

Are you suggesting I should not teach \*Fruitvale Station\* or \*Get Out\* at Wayne State, to multi-ethnic classrooms? But I do. And if I write about Jonathan Jackson, it will be informed by that experience. Should I not teach Kara Walker's work in my seminar next semester? Should I avoid Baraka, particularly if I have criticisms of his work?

There is a damned if you do, damned if you don't logic here concerning representing race. I'm damned for my editing \*This\*, but you don't mention helping publish your work in \*Representations\* or editing \*Diasporic Avant-Gardes\*. Or my friendships with Erica Hunt or Lorenzo Thomas. What indeed am I to do?

On the several times I have engaged your work in public contexts, that is something indeed to clarify. It came up in the context of editorial responsibility. And a larger responsibility in terms of engaging writers of color. Since I am talking to you, that's why I mentioned it. When I argued for publishing your "Other: From Noun to Verb" article at \*Representations\*, I was in a subaltern position. One of the arguments \*against\* publishing it was that academics hostile to \*Reps\* would think they they were advocating the "aesthetic" over the political by publishing your piece. I made the case for publishing it; this was an intellectual act and political accomplishment.

Yet another voice in the head is to "avoid tokenism." And yes, by all means. Tokenism was a word coined by then-LeRoi Jones concerning his inclusion in the Allen anthology; it's in an essay in \*Home\*. At an MLA session in the late 80s, Marjorie Perloff put it out there that you were the writer of color that met her standards, or some such. Leaving the session, I remarked to a young poet I had just met, and turned out to be Joshua Clover, that to say that was racist. Clover turned around and published a poem in \*Zyzyva\* that contained the line, "Barry says Marjorie is a racist"; I wrote him a strongly worded letter to say that on his own behalf. Interesting!

I am sorry, however, that you found that offensive, and I certainly would only speak like that in a one on one conversation, not publicly. So it is regrettable that you circulated it to the crowd. However, whatever. Things will remain as they are, and people will think what they think.

In conversation about this with Carla and Canadian writer Gail Scott, who was visiting, I recalled Baraka's line, "I am inside someone who hates me." I think that is brilliant, revealing, tragic. With you and Duncan--and mythic community overall--I would say there is something like "I am inside someone who loves me." But Duncan's love, which is the focus of my argument in the "The Lost America of Love," is the site of abjection and denial. So there's that--being inside a love that is also abjection. You mentioned a corpse, etc. And then there is the homosociality of the mythic community, the killing of totem father and the pact. All of your cc's were--check the list.

I'll close with my interest in the film \*Get Out\* and the racial unconscious. Such a thing exists, but is not one thing. The film shows that there is not one position to view it from (unlike \*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner\*). There is no liberal subject that can coexist with race. I think that is as it is and should be--the real question is what do we do now?

The same may be true of this conversation--there is no one subject of "myth" if writers of color find it a resource and a counter to dominant ideology. I am interested in ideology critique, and if myth is critical, good. If it is constitutive of another form of oppression, as I think it is with Duncan and in many other

political examples, no. You see this differently. And, unfortunately, you are highly offended that I do not agree, about Duncan or myth.

Going forward, if you can suggest a public forum where we can continue a dialogue--say pick a couple of texts and write back and forth--I would do that. But I would like you to have read my work in question before doing so. You could give me a text or texts you would like me to read, and I would do that. This conversation, however, is between us and I would like to keep it that way.

Best, Barrett

**On 5/10/18 7:06 PM, Nathaniel Mackey wrote:**

Dear Barrett,

This is hopeless. The strictures you'd like put in place are absurd. I see nothing wrong with letting others see how our FB conversation has continued and I'll do so again with today's exchange and any others that follow. The let's-take-race-off-the-table bit is laughable. Why just race? Why not take Duncan off the table, the tape off the table, your book off the table, "myth" off the table, everything off the table? Isn't there a saying about arguing procedure when you can't make your case?

There's a good deal I could rebut in your latest email, but much of it is mere repetition and I'm getting the sense that I'm wasting my time. Your return to the subject of your support of my work is particularly bothersome, so I'll say a word or two about that. I could go on about the spottiness and the thinness of it or about the fact that many others have done a great deal more without patting themselves on the back, but I won't. I can't ignore a protesteth-too-much aspect to it. I had good reason, long before this exchange, to question the solidity of that support. This exchange has done nothing to relieve me of my doubts. That's what bothers me most.

I have no interest in the public conversation you suggest.

Yours,

Nate

**On May 11, 2018, at 9:59 AM, Barrett Watten <[barrett.watten@gmail.com](mailto:barrett.watten@gmail.com)> wrote:**

Dear Nate--

You misread me, there and in many places, unfortunately. Sorry for any ambiguity. If you will look again, the antecedent for "taking off the table" is this: "The remark from Ben was I think good on **the kind of challenge behavior that happened on my thread**, and now seems to be happening here. I should remember that **challenge behavior**, no matter how much in a "community of discourse" as I assume poetry to be, never works if race is a part of it. It is not possible. Not now, if ever." I think that was an opening to the kind of discussion that might occur. The challenge behavior I am referring to is precisely how this started, and continued, and as far as you are concerned, will end.

To return: it is unethical of you to send my private correspondence to 11 other people--of your choosing--without my permission. I object. But it is also interesting and revealing, even symptomatic of

something wrong with this discourse, that these are 11 white males, "brothers" in the homosocial compact of your imagining. And it is the homosociality of the Duncan tradition that I find most problematic. Freud, "Totem and Taboo," is the locus classicus for that. The exclusion of women--the sharing of women among the rivalrous males after they have killed the totem father--is what makes homosociality politically obnoxious.

The New American Poetry was homosocial in its origins; Duncan was a major influence on that. When Norman put up a picture of the cover the *New American Poetry*, I had to reflect that, however historically important that anthology was, it is still very flawed--particularly in its "canon-making argument." As well, it is in fact the site for the coining of the word "tokenism" in relation to Jones/Baraka's inclusion, a positionality that it might be well to reconsider. There is a dated "period style" there too.

You are arguing from the "authority" of the New American poetry as literary tradition in your defense of Duncan and myth. I have no problem with your arguing for the aesthetics or poetics or even politics of same. But authority is what this is about, and my book is in fact an unlinking of that authority in historically specific ways. It's over, and has been since the early 90s. I am happy to have participated in that result.

In your intervention, you brought a gamey aggressivity to my thread. I responded in kind, but it turned into a flame. I did not want to preserve that. You were "going off" in my kitchen, so to speak, and so I suggested we step outside. This was not the forum you wanted, so you asked in your Bros.

To return to the main point: Grant Jenkins's review misreads, refuses to read, my book in numerous ways, and does so by employing the "covering myth" of the Duncan/Watten event. The only thing he reads in chapter 1, which is crucial for this discussion, is the section on Duncan, which he finds "fair" as if some kind of unfairness were at stake.

I invite you, and others you are in contact with, to read what I have to say about Duncan in chapter 1, and also in the section on "The Lost America of Love," which I linked in "Entry 34." On the Poetry Center event, please consult Jarnot's biography (you seem not to like that) and the various references to the occasion in *The Grand Piano*. Also, it is well to remember that the topic of the event was Zukofsky, not Duncan--some rivalry there, in fact--and I address Zukofsky in my first section of *The Grand Piano*.

On your work, I discuss your prose in relation to your essay "Other: From Noun to Verb," as I knew and liked that essay. The context is to think about how the poet/critic dyad unpacks in terms of race, class, and gender. For gender, I discuss Lyn's use of Scheherezade, and for class my writing on "the Bride of the Assembly Line." I hope you will check out the argument of chapter 6, then, on the "poet/critic."

Since you cc'd 11 brothers of your authorial compact, I will send this thread privately to people I am talking to, but only a few--so no gang there. I'll be interested in what Tyrone Williams, Carla Harryman, and Alan Golding think about all this--but not as part of some giant listserv in the sky.

All good, see you around. Barrett

**On 5/11/18 7:54 PM, Nathaniel Mackey wrote:**

Dear Barrett,

I understand that you want me to read your book. I'm telling you, for the third time, I will.

I see no need to take this to a public forum. I'd have been happy to let things end where they stood on FB had you not taken the discussion down.

I didn't cherry-pick the copy list. Most of it is people I could remember commenting on the FB post, two of whom, Ted and Luke, are mutual friends of ours who I don't think can be called Duncanites. Ted, if I recall correctly, commented, "Excellent," in response to your post. There was a woman in the discussion whom I don't know and whose name I couldn't remember or I'd have cc'd her too. The others were people who contacted me about the post after it'd been taken down.

I'm not interested in theorizing this. I didn't think attending Jonathan Jackson's funeral constituted *literary* activism, so I asked you about your editorship of *This*. That's when you blew up and told me how much you've done for me. I found that offensive, not to mention inaccurate, and, yes, I went after you strong. Sometimes that happens. But folks had been weighing in strong before that, beginning with the way you went after Grant in what you posted. I don't think we need to keep going over this.

I'll read your book at some point this summer and if I have any thoughts to share I'll let you know.

Yours,

Nate

From: **Barrett Watten** <[barrett.watten@gmail.com](mailto:barrett.watten@gmail.com)>

**Subject: Re: our convo**

**Date:** May 11, 2018 at 8:35:40 PM EDT

**To:** **Nathaniel Mackey** <[nathaniel.mackey@duke.edu](mailto:nathaniel.mackey@duke.edu)>

Dear Nate-- You have no business copying to your chosen group; no business telling me not to write about Jonathan Jackson--interior censorship!; and no business questioning my editing of \*This\*. You are not the designated arbiter of the racial composition of 70s groups, and if so please use equal opportunity skepticism for the New College crowd, the New Narrativists, the NY Language crowd, St. Marks Church, Bolinas, Something Else Press, Black Sparrow Press, North Point Press, clients of Marjorie Perloff, and so on.

I don't think you have properly recognized the value of the several things I've done for you over the years, no. So if you want to blow up again, go right ahead. I don't recall your having done \*anything\* for me except act diffident over the years, and if there is something I've forgotten please let me know.

No to last wordism. I liked my last as ending, but you keep cc'ing. Nasty habit.

BW

