

HYPERALLERGIC

REVIEWS • WEEKEND

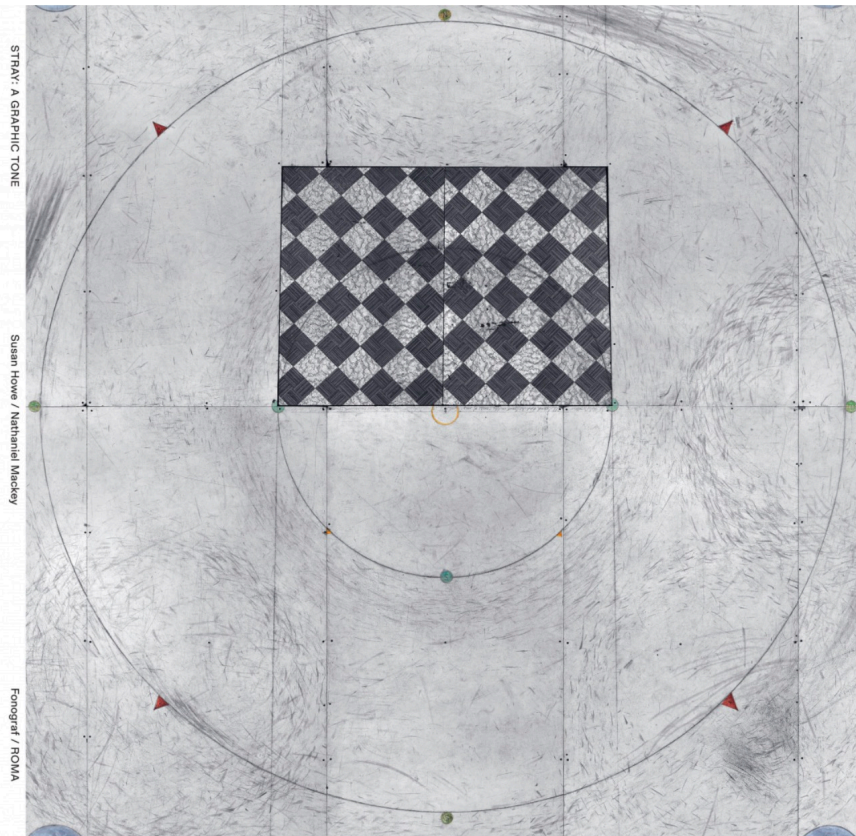
The Poetic Vinyl of Susan Howe and Nathaniel Mackey

Curated by Shannon Ebner, this LP combines recordings of poems as well as archival material from 1991 through 2018.



Ken Walker June 16, 2019

f t e 318 Shares



Stray: A Graphic Tone album cover: Shannon Ebner, "A Side" (2018), archival pigment prints mounted on aluminum, 78.5 x 57 x 0.3 inches. Original floor design by Elizabeth LeCompte from The Wooster Group's production *Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation* (photographed at The Performing Garage, New York, New York on July 5th, 2018)

A new, gate-fold LP from Fonograf Editions titled *Stray: A Graphic Tone* pairs two poets who are experts of sound, language, and archive — Nathaniel Mackey and Susan Howe.

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Curated by the visual artist Shannon Ebner, the gatefold pairing of Howe and Mackey for Fonograf Editions' latest release splits 13 tracks from 1991 to 2017. A recorded poetry reading presented on vinyl, it opens to new experiences of the poets' work, in relation to Ebner's aesthetic and curation.

One of Ebner's screenprints from 2015, entitled "A SELF," breaks apart phrases beginning with "A" and ending with the er / or / ion sounds. It is almost a combinatory mimesis of Howe's and Mackey's poetry.



Shannon Ebner, screenprint, 86 x 22 inches, courtesy of artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, Kaufmann Repetto, New York/Milan, and Sadie Coles, London

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Ebner's screenprint shows such phrases as "a starter," "a radiator," "a generator," and "a altern/ator." While the "a" implies singularity and type, the "er" and "or" endings relieve definition of its push toward distinction. This dynamic contrasts with the title, denoting an essentially undefinable entity. The phrases as presented in Ebner's screenprint could almost be confused, visually, with much of the work of Howe and Mackey. In the record's liner notes, Ebner writes that she was "drawn to their works for their experiments with poetic form — for their politics of poetic form, to be exact — for their poems' stray figures and stray errant marks." In printed poetry, figures and marks are invisible — the bodies of characters, the struggles of protagonists, the references, the narrative, and the sound, at least when read are quiet. Listening to a poet read her work brings these figures and marks into more out into the open, rupturing space around the more tangible sound.

This record showcases a poet (Howe), who has been referred to as a "pilgrim of the uncharted," and another (Mackey), who has charted an epic narrative that draws on the multiple points of histories where the music developed before and after the genocidal transatlantic slave trade left its marks. Both Howe and Mackey cross genres. And while genres imply categorization, poetry's departure from structured form allows a phrase like "the dead" to double as "the dead" and the (uninflected) dead. These bodies-in-passage are channeled by combining sound and language with fragmented narrative.

The poets' voices summon the invisible, bringing their respective narratives out of the artifice of time and into intaglios all their own. In "Song of the Andoumboulou: 1" Mackey reads: "The song says the / dead will not / ascend without song. That because if / we lure them their names get / our throats, the / word sticks.

Howe writes / reads in “Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk”:

Became the vision
but what is envy
but what is envy
is envy the bonfire inkling
shackles, shackles
a vengeance must be a story
No track by night
no coming out in the other day

Both Howe and Mackey write with economy. While their poetry shares this quality, it diverges in rhythm or upon the question of whether research requires utter accuracy rather than imagination. The record offers additional insight with excerpts from poems and interviews in the liner notes.

When I was a graduate student at Brooklyn College, Susan Howe read from her book *That This*. It seemed impossible for Howe’s poems to be spoken, but after her reading they made more sense. She told the audience that the great epistemological secret of poetry is hidden in the keeping of time. I also saw Nathaniel Mackey read from a paper he wrote called “Blue in Green: Black Interiority.” Mackey said that poets have to “wring the word.”

Howe has won the Griffin and the Bollingen and many other awards. Mackey has won the National Book Award and a Whiting Award. Fonograf and Ebner have done us all a favor by presenting an archive within an archive like shadows emerging into actual form. You can hear laughs, whistles, and the poets talk about their work in their own terms with their own voices. Hearing a good reading by accident is inspiring. Hearing a recorded reading because you simply want to expresses satisfaction and respect.

Stray: A Graphic Tone features Susan Howe and Nathaniel Mackey and is available from Fonograph Editions.