Nathaniel Mackey’s Serial Poetics*

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I. Introduction

In 2006, Nathaniel Mackey received the National Book Award for Poetry. Mackey’s honor came as a surprise for those familiar with the middlebrow proclivities of the Award. It had rarely gone to a black man; Mackey was the third in the entire history of the Award. But Mackey’s prospects seemed slim for another reason. In the preceding years, the judging panels had repeatedly bypassed writers of experimental poetry. The 2006 decision signaled a possible reversal of that trend.

For devoted readers of Mackey’s works, however, the “national” recognition was long overdue. Scholars, critics, and fellow poets noticed Mackey’s writing from the very start of his career. Mackey’s first book of poems, *Eroding Witness*, was selected by Michael Palmer for the National Poetry Series in 1984. *Talismans* devoted a special issue to Mackey as early as 1992. Critical engagement with Mackey’s work surged in 2000 with the arrival of the massive collection of essays published as a special issue of *Callaloo*.

An overview of Mackey criticism reveals that it is almost impossible to ignore the issue of form and language when analyzing Mackey’s works. Most critics allot some portion of their essays to the discussion of how Mackey’s writing sounds and looks. However, less than a handful of writers have addressed the issue of Mackey’s formal innovation in the context of postmodern American poetry. Brent Hayes Edwards’s influential study of Mackey’s “poetics of reprise” comes to mind (“Notes” 586). The only other example is Robert L. Zamsky’s formulation of Mackey’s “poetics of radical musicality” (114). To this short list one could add Mackey himself. Like a number of his contemporaries, such as Susan Howe and Leslie Scalapino, Mackey works in both aesthetic and critical modalities. Prior to 2000, he was in some sense his own best commentator. The fact that Mackey has been writing less criticism and more litera-

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ture in the new century can be attributed to two factors. On the one hand, his key concepts such as “discrepant engagement” and “the creaking of the word” have been enthusiastically embraced by scholars across several disciplines. (It is no accident that his collection of critical essays *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* has been reprinted by the prestigious Cambridge University Press in 1999.) On the other hand, Mackey appears to be making space for the critics who are participating in the interpretive community developing around of his oeuvre.

In this essay, I respond to this void created by Mackey’s withdrawal from Mackey criticism. I will be focusing on Mackey’s work in the context of contemporary American poetry. This focus is necessary partly because his poetic innovation tends to be eclipsed by his other achievements. More importantly, scholars of postmodern poetry have yet to engage fully with Mackey’s contribution to postmodern poetics. In the first section of this essay, therefore, I situate Mackey within the landscape of postmodern poetry, discussing how his poem *Song of the Andoumboulou* exemplifies and extends the serial technique. This contextualization is followed by a discussion of seriality as a compositional principle in *Song of the Andoumboulou*. In the final section, I analyze the thematic concerns that prod the poet toward radical experimentalism.

II. Serialism in Postmodern Poetry

In his 1991 monograph on postmodern poetry, Joseph M. Conte focuses on poetic form rather than poetic content. The question that drives his study, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*, is whether postmodern poetry has invented new forms to meet the demands of its historical nexus. Conte’s study stands out in that he attempts “a systematic typology of postmodern poetic forms” (1). Such an approach to contemporary poetry was rare at the time of the book’s publication. More typical was the way Fredric Jameson used poetry in his study of postmodernism. Poems are presented alongside photos of various postmodern artworks and architecture, quickly scanned for content, and left behind. In the important first chapter of *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson quotes Bob Perelman’s poem “China” in full. After presenting the poem, he makes a brief note of the “discontinuities” in the poem without conducting a formal analysis of how those