

FRONT PORCH

Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews

Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*

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In the introduction to *Paracritical Hinge*, a recent collection of his critical works, Nathaniel Mackey makes a connection between modernist poet H.D. and various avant-garde jazz musicians of the late twentieth century. He cites the poet's fascination with anagrammatic "riffs" on words, especially in her long sequence *Trilogy*, and juxtaposes that with the musicians' tendency to use anagrams of names in song and album titles. While the special relationship the writer perceives between avant-garde jazz and poetry is developed in several of the essays, a larger, implicit aim of the book is to help establish a contextual lineage for Mackey and his creative work. Like Borges, he makes original and compelling connections throughout the essays, finding affinities between writers and musicians from disparate times and cultures. This pulling together invites readers to share the author's unique perspective on art, one that's exhilarating in its openness and inclusiveness.

The book is organized in five sections, of which the first and third will be examined here. The first sticks pretty close to the terrain of poetry, establishing an aesthetic framework for Mackey's art and thought. The second concerns the poet in a time of war, and the third and fourth elaborate on Mackey's unique approach to and use of music in his work, as well as his role as editor of a long-running literary journal. The last section is comprised of a series of interviews with Mackey at various points during the 1990s.

The first essay, "Phrenological Whitman," explores Whitman's obsession with the pseudo-science of reading bumps on the head. Whitman, Mackey writes, was attracted to phrenology in part because it proposed the body as a book to be read. He quotes from Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass*: "your very flesh shall be a great poem."

Mackey calls phrenology a "white way of knowing." "It valorized obtusion, surface, apparency, warding off the obscurities and indeterminacies of recess, crevice, fold," he writes—these latter being elements of what he calls "black ways of knowing," which value "indirection," "suggestion," "looking inwards at what is not apparent." Of course, phrenology was "white in another sense," with its bogus charts that placed the Caucasian skull shape at the highest end of the phrenological spectrum, the black skull barely above that of an animal. But the point of the essay is not to dismiss Whitman or his work. Whitman might have been taken in by phrenology's "white way of knowing," Mackey seems to be saying, but the poet in him was never entirely comfortable with it, and kept coming back to and exploring the "black way of knowing." Mackey concludes the essay by pointing out several examples of this, most notably Whitman's use of flag imagery in "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," an image that recurs in Mackey's own poetry.

In "Wringing the Word," an essay on Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite, Mackey continues to explore "black ways of knowing," especially as this relates to an indeterminacy of language. This indeterminacy itself is, paradoxically, the "ground" both poets share—a "Caribbean landscape" of "shoreline, sand, coral"—one that also relates to what Mackey calls, in the essay "Palimpsestic Stagger," H.D.'s "coastal poetics," her tendency to let words and meanings drift. It's H.D.'s and Brathwaite's splitting apart of words in a quasi-anagrammatic, quasi-etymological way that Mackey finds so rich, and makes such use of, in his own work—both the prose-letter series *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* and the serial poems that intertwine in *Splay Anthem*, winner of the 2006 National Book Award. Fragmenting language is not only a mode of poetry that connects the three poets, but also a way to make connections *in* language, to make language more than the sum of its parts. For example, as Mackey writes of Brathwaite, "His ability to sound

and see *cave* in *clavicle* to fashion *cavicle* recalls a nation-language term such as *likkle* [a Jamaican term for 'little' that Mackey himself plays on in *Splay Anthem*], which manages to sound a suggestion of *lick* and *trickle* one might otherwise not hear in the word *little*." The implications of this are profound. Mackey sees a "nation language" in Brathwaite, the fluid altering of English as it filters through the Caribbean islands. In his own works, Mackey builds a "world language" in which words are split apart to make cross-cultural connections. In the essays that comprise the first section of the book, he draws a line that extends from Whitman to Brathwaite and H.D., establishing a lineage for his poetics.

In Part III of the book, a series of essays deepen Mackey's contextualizing work, specifically in the area of black avant jazz and its relationship to poetry. He draws on Lorca's concept of "duende," the deep song, and points out how musicians like John Coltrane and Miles Davis applied this idea to their music in very conscious ways; they turned their backs (in Davis's case, literally) on audience expectations of the peppy, dance-hall jazz their predecessors had produced and instead made increasingly difficult music concerned with space and silence. Again, this is important, in that it poetically legitimizes a type of music that's often reduced to stereotypical tropes of black emotional expression—a back-handed compliment that implies a relative lack of intellectual rigor and depth. This, in turn, legitimizes Mackey's own filtering of that music through his readings of poets like H.D., Duncan, and Brathwaite, and finally through his own writing. The boundary- and genre-crossing that concerns Mackey is thus shown to be essential, and he defines the book's eponymous phrase by describing his view of his series *From a Broken Bottle*: "It's a type of fiction that wants to be a door or to support a door or to open a door permitting flow between disparate orders of articulation. It wants to be what I call a paracritical hinge, permitting flow between statement and metastatement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature, and so forth."

One question a volume like this raises is whether a writer ought to require a self-made context or tradition, almost in the way of a critical reader, to shed light on his creative work. All Mackey's poetic forebears—Pound, Olson, Duncan, even H.D.—wrote such critical texts, though none, perhaps, range so far or dig so deeply to make connections between disparate genres and forms. All these poets saw their critical undertakings as not only primers on their creative work but also extensions of it; indeed, their books tend to be read and appreciated in their own right. There is a similar impulse and energy here, one that makes *Paracritical Hinge* not only a valuable reference for Mackey's poems and fictions, but an illuminating foray into an adventurous and challenging mind.

—David Hadbawnik