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Introduction to *Twenty-First-Century Forms* and Hyperarchival Poetics

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Welcome everyone and thank you for joining us this morning for a roundtable on *Twenty-First-Century Forms*. We'll be hearing from six panelists, myself included, and I'll begin by introducing our panelists and then providing a few introductory remarks about the roundtable along with my own short contribution.

My name is Bradley J. Fest and I am associate professor of literature, media, and writing and Cora A. Babcock Chair in English at Hartwick College. I am currently working on a book about massively unreadable twenty-first-century megatexts and my work on contemporary literature and culture has appeared in *boundary 2*, *CounterText*, *Critique*, *Genre*, *Scale in Literature and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and elsewhere. I am also the author of two volumes of poetry, *The Rocking Chair* (Blue Sketch, 2015) and *The Shape of Things* (Salò, 2017).

Our first speaker following myself will be Dan Burns, who is assistant professor of English at Elon University, where he teaches courses in American literature and film studies. His research has appeared in edited collections and *American Book Review*, including a guest-edited special issue on "Big Novels."

Next will be Zoe Bursztajn-Illingworth [Bursh-stein], who is currently a postdoctoral fellow in digital humanities at the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation “Shooting Script: Poetry, Film, and Form,” argues that contemporary poetry and narrative film are overlooked sister arts, connected by their shared theoretical investments in voice, genre, and temporality. Her writing about cinema, poetry, and visual culture can be found in *Next Generation Adaptation: Spectatorship and Process*, edited by Allen Redmon (University Press of Mississippi, 2021) and *The E3W Review of Books*.

Next, we’ll hear from Kathryn Harlan-Gran (she/her/hers), who is a PhD candidate in Cornell University’s Department of Literatures in English. Her scholarship focuses on contemporary American literature and culture, applying queer, feminist, and critical race theories to popular culture, genre fiction, and new media. This talk draws from the second chapter of her dissertation project, “In the Wreck: Speculative Fiction and the Creative and Critical Ethics of Salvage,” which examines various perceived sites of “wreckage” in mainstream literary disciplines, considering the social and academic significance of creators, forms, and genres that have historically been excluded from the English literary canon.

Next will be Kevin Pyon, who is assistant professor of American literature, race, and ethnic studies at Penn State Harrisburg. His research considers the intersections between Black Studies, American and African American literary studies, and political theology.

And our last speaker will be Elizabeth Sotelo, who is a PhD candidate, researcher, teacher, and writer. She holds an MA in Hispanic Studies from the University of California Riverside and a BA in Spanish from California State Polytechnic University Pomona. Her research interests are Latin American literature and culture from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (with an emphasis on Peru and Mexico), the chronicle genre, postcolonial studies,

critical race studies, critical theory, feminist studies, and narratology. Currently, she is finishing her doctoral degree in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Oregon and working on her dissertation “The Urban Literary Chronicle in Peru and Mexico (1999–2022).”

Our panel this morning takes up the large and perhaps overambitious question of what new literary forms are emerging in the twenty-first century. Drawing upon Raymond Williams’s theory of cultural forms, critics such as Jonathan Arac have argued that previously dominant forms such as the novel and lyric poem have become residual.¹ If we grant this residuality, and consider film, television, and new media among today’s dominant forms, what particularly *literary* forms are emerging and what is their role in twenty-first-century imaginaries? As part of a project begun at MLA 2021, this roundtable explores emergent literary forms and their relationship with, instantiation in, or remediation by other media. With the material transformations wrought by networked digital media, smartphones, new distribution methods, algorithmic text generation, artificial intelligence, and readily available video capture, literary artifacts are manifesting in a variety of forms and media beyond traditional print ones. This panel will investigate what happens when literature intersects with film, theory, social media, publishing platforms, documentary, music, and other new, hybrid, or hyperarchival forms.

Though studies in new media and electronic literature have paved the way toward an

I delivered the following remarks introducing the roundtable, 197. *Twenty-First-Century Forms*, which I organized for the Modern Language Association Convention, San Francisco, CA, January 6, 2023. Other panelists included Dan Burns, Zoe Bursztajn-Illingworth, Kathryn Harlan-Gran, Kevin Pyon, and Elizabeth Sotelo. For abstracts of talks and other information, see Bradley J. Fest, “MLA 2023: Twenty-First-Century Forms,” *Hyperarchival Parallax*, September 15, 2022, <https://bradleyjfest.com/2022/09/15/mla-2023-twenty-first-century-forms/>. This is a work in progress. Please do not cite or circulate without permission.

¹ See Williams, Raymond, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1973), in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (1980; repr., New York: Verso, 2005), 31–49; and Jonathan Arac, “What Kind of History Does a Theory of the Novel Require?” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 190–95, and “Defining an ‘Age of the Novel’ in the United States,” in *New Directions in the History of the Novel*, ed. Patrick Parrinder, Andrew Nash, and Nicola Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 165–76.

understanding of emergent literary forms, too often such scholarship has been cordoned off (in both directions) from the study of more traditional forms—novels and poems. This panel seeks to broaden our understanding of the literary and of form in order to once again ask: What new forms has literature taken in the twenty-first century?

My own contribution to this roundtable and answer to this question is to briefly sketch a theory of what I would like to call *hyperarchival poetics*: that is, how we might understand contemporary *poiesis* as productively caught between the new modalities of textual hyperaccumulation and textual destruction that have emerged in the digital age. Part of my thinking on this topic has arisen at the intersection of my recent work on the United States long poem and my work in progress on what I call *megatexts*, the massive, unreadably large texts increasingly appearing across media in the twenty-first century—texts such as Mark Leach’s seventeen-million-word novel *Marienbad My Love* (2013), the 857-hour film *Logistics* (2012), or the colossal video game *No Man’s Sky* (2016)—causing me to ask: What happens to the long poem when it begins to be produced in a media ecology increasingly inhabited by other massive forms?

Dwelling on the problem of totality and encyclopedism inherent in the formal undertaking of a long poem, John Ashbery once famously began his 1972 book *Three Poems*: “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.”² Elsewhere, I have defined the term *hyperarchive* as “an archive whose goal, whether stated or not, can be seen in an attempt to gather together as many documents and texts as it can, regardless of content.”³ Ashbery’s

² John Ashbery, “The New Spirit,” in *Three Poems* (1972), in *John Ashbery: Collected Poems 1956–1987*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: Library of America, 2008), 247.

³ Bradley J. Fest, “Apocalypse Networks: Representing the Nuclear Archive,” in *The Silence of Fallout: Nuclear*

opening sentences show the long poem dwelling in an explicitly hyperarchival situation long before the digital age: it wants to include everything, and not for any particular reason, but just because that is “one way.” But a hyperarchival *poetics*, as opposed to the baldly hyperarchival impulse on display by, say, the National Security Agency, cannot be merely accumulatory. Barely has the ambition for total encyclopedic accumulation gotten onto the page before Ashbery posits an equally hyperarchival ambition: to somehow leave everything out.⁴

Other notable writers have picked up Ashbery’s torch. In her long poem *Midwinter Day* written six years after *Three Poems* and published in 1982, Bernadette Mayer echoes Ashbery:

How preoccupying

Is the wish to include all or to leave all out

Some say either wish is against a poem or art

I’m asking

Is it an insane wish?⁵

And in Anne Boyer’s recent memoir *The Undying* (2019), she similarly understands the task of writing in the aftermath of her treatment for breast cancer as hyperarchival: “Now that I am undying, the world is full of possibility. I could write a book in which nothing is left out, or write

Criticism in a Post-Cold War World, ed. Michael Blouin, Morgan Shipley, and Jack Taylor (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 102n41. For further discussion of *hyperarchivalism*, see Bradley J. Fest, “Reading Now and Again: Hyperarchivalism and Democracy in Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller’s *Thinking Literature across Continents*,” *CounterText* 4, no. 1 (April 2018): 9–29.

⁴ As Michael Clune puts it: “Ashbery wants the truth that is revealed by what is left out. In his mature poetry, he chooses the art of describing a thing’s partiality, its place as part of a world.” Michael Clune, “‘Whatever Charms Is Alien’: John Ashbery’s Everything,” *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 451. Helen Vendler has also written about how the critic of Ashbery’s is thrown into a similar hyperarchival situation: “But a scavenger hunt for manhandled quotations is not what Ashbery’s reader is in the game for. Rather, the reader receives a highly idiosyncratic introduction to the contents of what Stevens called the ‘trash can at the end of the world,’ where all culture comes eventually to rest as pieces of itself. . . . The whole is too big to be subordinated to criticism; no critical essay could hope to control, except in very general terms, the sheer volume of linguistic and psychological data presented by the poem.” Helen Vendler, “A Steely Glitter Chasing Shadows: John Ashbery’s *Flow Chart*,” in *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 137, 138.

⁵ Bernadette Mayer, *Midwinter Day* (1982; repr., New York: New Directions, 1999), 102.

a work of undying literature in which everything that is missing shows up as the shadow of its own shape, or one where nothing could be displayed except as its consequence.”⁶

Now fifty years since Ashbery’s statement of hyperarchival poetics, the means available for putting it all in or leaving it all out have multiplied, and literature making use of digital tools for generating and erasing text has flourished. The increased availability of texts, all kinds of texts, has also widely expanded the modes of transmedia and cross-cultural intertextuality available to contemporary writers. Though one could look almost anywhere for manifestations of the hyperarchival poetics of the twenty-first century, Nathaniel Mackey’s ongoing long poem, the twin, braided poems *Song of the Andoumboulou* and “*Mu*” (1974–), now in its ninth volume and sixth decade of composition, has expanded the scope of what it might mean to both put it all in and leave it all out. Both old—Mackey’s first poems were composed in 1971—and new—of the poem’s 1673 pages of collected cantos, over one thousand were published in 2021 as the three-volume box set *Double Trio*—Mackey’s long poem is famous for its voracious if discrepant inclusion of “Western, North African/Moorish, Middle Eastern, African, and New World (Caribbean/Atlantic) cultures.”⁷ Of particular note is Mackey’s dialogic, transmedia engagement with music, including jazz, blues, reggae, world music, and much else. As Fred Moten has said about Mackey’s long poem: ““There’s this formulation about Shakespeare, where everything is in Shakespeare. I would say, everything might be in Shakespeare, but *it’s all in Nate*.””⁸ But, of course, Mackey’s work also endeavors in many ways to leave it all out, or rather, as he writes in the preface to *Splay Anthem* (2006):

⁶ Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 201.

⁷ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ““The / Whole Was Not the Half of It’: Mackey’s Long Poem and Its Poetics,” in *Nathaniel Mackey, Destination Out: Essays on His Work*, ed. Jeanne Heuving (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 229n1, 86. For Mackey’s account of the early inspiration and composition of *Song of the Andoumboulou*, see Cathy Park Hong, “The Art of Poetry No. 107: Nathaniel Mackey,” *Paris Review*, no. 232 (Spring 2020): 143.

⁸ Qtd. in Hua Hsu, “Nathaniel Mackey’s Long Song,” *New Yorker*, April 5, 2021,

Rub a kind of erasure, statement backtracks or breaks off, ellipses abound, assertion and retraction volley, assertion and supplementation: addition, subtraction, revision, conundrum, nuance, amendment, tweak.

Serial form lends itself to andoumboulouous liminality, the draft unassured extension knows itself to be. Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both . . . repeatedly circling or cycling back.⁹

As I've been lightly suggesting in these brief notes, if what I'm calling hyperarchival poetics begin to emerge around the early 1970s, the material resources presented by contemporary technologies for practicing and producing hyperarchival poetics are multiplying the "all" of what might get put down while simultaneously providing productive new horizons for what it means to "leave it all out." If you might grant me that hyperarchival poetics has now fully emerged as a form in Mackey and others since its nascence in the 1970s, for critics of the hyperarchival long poem, it is clear that broadening the kinds of resources we bring to bear on

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/12/nathaniel-mackeys-long-song>. Mackey discusses the relationship between music and poetry at some length in "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" (1987), in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 231–59. For further discussion of the role of music in Mackey's poetry, see Brent Hayes Edwards, "Notes on Poetics regarding Mackey's 'Song,'" in "Nathaniel Mackey," special issue, *Callaloo* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 571–591; Paul Jaussen, "Emergent Sounds: Nathaniel Mackey's 'Post-Expectant Futurity,'" in *Writing in Real Time: Emergent Poetics from Whitman to the Digital* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 144–71, and "Mackey's Late Style," in *Nathaniel Mackey, Destination Out: Essays on His Work*, ed. Jeanne Heuving (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 105–21; and Peter O'Leary, "Deep Trouble/Deep Treble: Nathaniel Mackey's Gnostic Rasp," in "Nathaniel Mackey," special issue, *Callaloo* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 516–37.

⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2006), xi. The hyperarchivalism (of including it all and leaving it all out) of Mackey's poetry also occurs at the level of reference. Andrew Mossin writes: "Mackey's work proposes again the problematic relation of form and content. In the assiduous cross-cultural scholarship that works such as 'Song of the Andoumboulou' represent, one is granted at least partial entrance to a variety of cultural knowledges, including Islam, West Africa and the Caribbean. On the other hand, the poems' emotional intelligibility is continually blurred by the formal strategies that prevent any easy or immediate access to their meaning and referentiality." Andrew Mossin, "Unveiling Expectancy: Nathaniel Mackey, Robert Duncan, and the Formation of Discrepant Subjectivity," in "Nathaniel Mackey," special issue, *Callaloo* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 543. Fred Moten similarly emphasizes the poem's absences, deferrals, improvisations. See Fred Moten, "Soul Looks Back," in *Nathaniel Mackey, Destination Out: Essays on His Work*, ed. Jeanne Heuving (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 205–22. Mackey himself says in one interview that "poetry seems to me to be less about unity than about drift, the animate debris of some turning under, some catastrophe it commemorates and whose effects it keeps alive to outrun." Andrew R. Mossin, "'The Song Sung in a Strange Land': An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey," *Iowa Review* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2014–15), <https://iowareview.org/from-the-issue/volume-44-issue-3-%E2%80%94-winter-201415/song-sung-strange-land-interview-nathaniel-mackey>.

these diverse, encyclopedic, discrepant materials needs to be similarly hyperarchival;
hyperarchival poems should encourage a hyperarchival criticism.

This panel is an attempt to further expand and broaden such conversations, to multiply the intertextual, interformal, intercultural, and intergenre questions and discussions we might have about emerging literary forms.

So, our next speaker will be Dan Burns, and then we'll go by the order in the program (minus myself). Thank you very much.

Dan Burns (Elon U)

Zoe Bursztajn-Illingworth (U of Texas, Austin)

Bradley Fest (Hartwick C)

Kathryn Harlan-Gran (Cornell U)

Kevin Pyon (Penn State U)

Elizabeth Sotelo (U of Oregon)