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The Answer is Paracritical: Caribbean Literature and *The Limits of Critique*

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Abstract: I argue that both Rita Felski's postcritical model (as articulated in *The Limits of Critique*) and its academic reception are made possible only by ignoring or erasing African-American and Afro-Caribbean modes of engagement with art that predate and complicate the critical-postcritical binary. To counteract the vanguardism of this trend in literary studies, I pair Caribbean philosopher-poet Edouard Glissant's meditation on the origins of Creole speech as an indirect language of "detour" with Nathaniel Mackey's theorizing of black art as "paracritical"—a mode that assimilates performance and critique, language and metalanguage, and that sits adjacent to (and not against or behind) traditionally academic discourses of engaging with literature. If Glissant provides the cultural and philosophical frame for an Afro-Caribbean way of reading literature, Mackey supplies the artistic metaphor par excellence of the paracritical hinge, voiced in the idioms of jazz and blues. Finally, I examine how Glissant and Mackey's ideas find formal and aesthetic expression in Trinidadian-Canadian author Dionne Brand's 2005 novel *What We All Long For*, paying attention to the reader response engendered by the adjacencies of violence, empowerment, possibility, and desire in the novel. In order to analyze *What We All Long For*, we must promote the liveliness and vivacity of the reading experience *and* put the text under ethical scrutiny, evincing the paracritical faculty that Afro-Caribbean art demands: commingling the twin pleasures of reading and interpretation, establishing a counter-hegemonic model of literary engagement that implicates the reader without stripping away reading's pleasure.

Keywords: ethics; reading; postcritical; Afro-Caribbean literature; African-American literature; paracritical; Glissant

1. Introduction

In *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski argues for a return to the pleasurable moods of readerly engagement, contra the paranoid, tired, and joyless state of critique she describes as the prevailing mode of literary criticism. Opening with the polemic that critique is "limited, not limitless . . . that it does some things well and other things poorly or not at all", Felski offers a satirical yet recognizable image of the literary critic "holding a shield, scanning the horizon for possible assailants, fearful of being tricked or taken in", trapped "in a cycle of punitive scrutiny and self-scrutiny," in self-imposed exile from "a swathe of intellectual and experiential possibility" (Felski 2015, pp. 8, 12). The rise of the hermeneutics of suspicion, the obsession with critique at a clinical distance, detachment calcifying into ethical paralysis: in crystallizing these academic trends, Felski exhorts the reader to appreciate what literature makes possible, situating "ourselves in front of the text" instead of "looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives" (p. 12). Felski's argument is incredibly persuasive, partly because she is such an engaging prose writer, and partly because the insightfulness of her approach provokes at least two feelings in her readers: familiarity, on the one hand—aren't we all sick to death of critique?—and surprise, on the other, at how she able to offer such a "timely and diagnostically acute" (Beckwith 2017, p. 332) summary of both the problem and its

solution. Critique, Felski avers, is not always or even often the best tool we have to approach a work of literature.

Proponents of Felski's stance have positioned postcriticism as an ethical way to revitalize humanities scholarship in an age when deconstructionist methodology has been accused of allowing right-wing "alternative facts" and endless moral relativity to proliferate.¹ Felski herself frames the postcritical turn as a defense of the humanities, offering "a positive vision for humanistic thought in the face of growing skepticism about its value" (Felski 2015, p. 186). Conversely, her critics tend to perform their ideological opposition to her position through the vehicle of critique: pointing out weaknesses in her model (Best 2017, p. 338), or questioning the advisability of turning literary criticism into little more than "fandom", through the mechanics of "corporate restructuring" (Robbins 2017, p. 372).

Pause, though, and reflect on the cultural and spatial sensibilities of this arc: critical, then postcritical, with the underlying literary canvas left unrevealed. The vast majority of critical discourse on these debates revolves around Anglo-American fiction, broadly speaking, within a western, white intellectual tradition. The authors usually invoked fall squarely in the vanguard of that intellectual tradition: Woolf, Richardson, Nabokov, et al. It's a strange kind of tunnel vision, in which progress from critique to postcritique operates in the hermetically sealed environment of the Western academy. Robbins comes closest to articulating the larger ethical problem by observing that "socially engaged criticism" is already addressing the issue of critique more effectively than Felski's book, which he characterizes as too preoccupied (ironically enough) with "faultfinding" (p. 371). But this characterization is so abstract that it leaves room for nothing but a return to the same arena in which critique and postcritique are seemingly locked in mortal combat. The question remains: Why does the postcritical 'turn', which urges scholars to abandon the detachment and suspicion of critique in favor of affect, sympathy, and enjoyment, seem to be unable to acknowledge its own literary-cultural lineage?

In the article that follows, I argue that both Felski's postcritical model and its academic reception are made possible only by ignoring African-American and Afro-Caribbean modes of engagement with art that predate and complicate the critical-postcritical binary. To counteract the vanguardism of this trend in literary studies, I pair Caribbean philosopher-poet Edouard Glissant's meditation on the origins of Creole speech as an indirect language of 'detour' with Nathaniel Mackey's theorizing of black art as 'paracritical'—a mode that assimilates performance and critique, language, and metalanguage—and that sits adjacent to (and not against or behind) traditionally academic discourses of engaging with literature. If Glissant provides the cultural and philosophical frame for an Afro-Caribbean way of reading literature, Mackey supplies the artistic metaphor par excellence of the paracritical hinge, voiced in the idioms of jazz and blues. Finally, I examine how Glissant and Mackey's ideas find formal and aesthetic expression in Trinidadian-Canadian author Dionne Brand's 2005 novel *What We All Long For*, paying attention to the reader response engendered by the adjacencies of violence, empowerment, possibility, and desire in the novel. In order to analyze *What We All Long For*, we must promote the liveliness and vivacity of the reading experience and put the text under formal scrutiny, evincing the paracritical faculty that Afro-Caribbean art demands: commingling the twin pleasures of reading and interpretation, establishing a counter-hegemonic model of literary engagement that implicates the reader without stripping away reading's pleasure.

2. Detour and Caribbean Speech

Felski and her critics, of course, do not possess an ironclad monopoly on this tendency to universalism. Indeed, we can see in this debate a reflection of the old and familiar pattern of colonial violence, in which nonwhite and nonwestern modes of experience are erased, with the very act of erasure forgotten. In *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant offers a précis of this violence, by way of

¹ See "But What about Love?" (Fuss), "Reading for Our Lives" (Beckwith), and "Critique is Ordinary" (Love 2017) for cogent defenses of Felski's position.

a single crystalline trope: filiation, the projection outward that informs both history (“Myth”) and narrative (“Epic”), “setting out upon the fixed linearity of time, always toward a projection, a project” (Glissant 1997, p. 47). Glissant’s critical eye fixes upon filiation as an “imperative” that produces the very history, in the West, that ascends to the status of a given. The continuous “retelling (certifying)” of a creation story “guarantees that this same filiation” is reproduced in the world: one presumes that this Christian account of experience is the only possible account, treating the current time and place—the product of such a formation—as inevitable and universal (p. 47). Here, Glissant moves toward philosophical exegesis through an implied question: how does the Caribbean, the implied Other of this filiation or arrow-like trajectory, define itself in a tacitly white and Christian founding myth?

The Christianity of this founding myth is evident in the act of “universalizing linear time—before and after Christ”, and thereby inaugurating “a chronology of the human race into general use, initiating a History of Humanity” (p. 48). Time, in other words, surges outward and forward, producing a world in which objects exist to be known and mastered in sequence. Later, this Christian filiation finds its “objectivized vision” in the scientific principle, which defines “the human race within the network of evolution” (p. 48). The eventual outcome, for Glissant, amounts to an epistemological violence, in which the “opacity” of the Other must be subsumed to the “transparency” of the western subject (p. 48). The choice, for the Other, is either assimilation or eradication.

Myth, then, contains a violence that is below the register of conscious thought, grounded as it is in an unacknowledged circuit of epistemological projections. In this circuit, the fear is of contamination—of mixing, rather, with all the xenophobic underpinnings of fascism in 1939 Germany, the long history of white attempts to legislate against ‘miscegenation’ in the US, the recurring demonization of immigrants and immigration. All gesture back to this filiative connection, the “legitimacy” of which is “disrupted by the abduction of Helen (with its threat of mixing the blood of East and West)” (Glissant 1997, p. 50). To the fear of mixing Glissant opposes Creolization—the encounter with difference and continual transformation in the Caribbean that characterized the colonial period. The chain of islands constituting the Caribbean, each marked by successive waves of colonization over hundreds of years, forms the terrain for transformation, defining the region through three terms: *choq* (shock), *métissage* (mixing), and the linguistic synthesis of Creolization. In this process, Creole dialects of the Caribbean emerge through what Glissant describes as a continuous series of “forgettings”:

Forgetting, that is, integration of what it started from: the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other, the nostalgia finally for the Caribbean remains of these. The linguistic movement of creolization proceeded through very rapid, interrupted, successive settlings of these contributions; the synthesis resulting from this process never became fixed in its terms, despite having asserted from the beginning the durability of its structures. (Glissant 1997, p. 69)

Only impermanence is permanent, leading to synthesis without unity or transparency. In this way, Glissant attempts to position Caribbean ontology as a way of understanding the broader world, a challenge to the tyranny of Western filiation. The synthesis, he notes, is never fixed or settled, but rather ontologically open. Glissant, true to his background as both philosopher and poet, implicitly turns to artistic models to situate his ontology. The heuristic of forgetting comes to us, he observes, from the material and spatial logic of slavery: enslaved persons in the plantations of the Caribbean and the US South, having no other recourse, took on the “obligation to get around the rule of silence” that enslavement compelled. The threat of violence, of reprisal or punishment from an overseer, militated the language of the enslaved toward detour, indirection, introspection, a welling forth of “snatches and fragments” (p. 69). From the historical condition of enslavement, then, comes an ontology that refutes filiation, embraces mixing, indeed is constituted by the very mixing that was forbidden in colonial and plantation hegemonies.

If Creolization distributes experience and rejects transparency, it pushes us to think through artistic and literary experience over and against the western model of filiation. In Glissant’s account of how Creole dialects form from the violence of plantation slavery, three modes emerge: the “direct”

speech necessary to complete manual labor, the “stifled” speech of those who were historically denied literacy, and “deferred or disguised speech, in which women and men who are gagged keep their words close” (p. 73). Creole, then, turns the circumspection forced on the enslaved into a strength, which is the polyphony and indirection of Afro-Caribbean art, ranging from jazz, blues, and reggae to the poetry of Derek Walcott and the fiction of Toni Morrison. Glissant locates this tradition within what he refers to as the *échos-monde*, the collective sum of each individual act of artistic creation, which Relation, as an ontology or metaphysical theory of being, is charged with preserving. Such acts, born perform in the violence of enslavement, include “Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and growing cities; jazz, biguines, and calypsos, bursting into barrios and shantytowns; salsas and reggaes, assembled everything blunt and direct, painfully stifled, and patiently differed into this varied speech” (p. 73). Note the richness of possibility achieved by an ontology of detour and continual synthesis. For Glissant, penetrating the “surface” of outward appearances to access an inner truth merely replicates, on a symbolic level, the violence of enslavement. By contrast, indirection and detour, the hallmarks of his ontology, reject western ideas of depth and transparency as methods of understanding the experience of the Other, and look flawed or enfeebled only if we take the western model (that Glissant has critiqued so movingly) as the unreflective basis for experience. Yet this is precisely what is at issue in the contemporary postcritical debate, which is underpinned, I suggest, by a correspondingly unreflective model of linear progress within a western cultural tradition.

3. Paracritical “Blue”

This movement of Glissant’s, to be sure, is not without cost to the reader. If the object of analysis is the underlying epistemology that underwrites colonialism, which informs the idea of progress outward in violent arrow-shaped momentum, it follows that we too must move, circumnavigate the object, shift the lens, in short, undergo a critical displacement that leaves us proximate, via detour, to different ideas and fresh linkages. From this angle, we are closest, then, to the poet and intellectual Nathaniel Mackey’s *Paracritical Hinge*, a collection of essays and interviews that connects the study of poetics to musical critique, both aesthetically and politically engaged with African-American and Afro-Caribbean music and literature. I want to put Glissant and Mackey in an indirect sort of conversation, not necessarily reading one through the other, but establishing a critical–spatial relationship keyed to magnitude: quantal criticism, one might say, born of thematic and cultural proximity. If Glissant’s text is the philosophical basis for considering Relation as the basis for ethically informed reading, Mackey underwrites that connection, I suggest, by providing a direct artistic link from Afro-Caribbean history to contemporary forms of African-American art, such as jazz and blues. Reading Glissant and Mackey together, in other words, provides us with an alternative conceptual model for engaging literature, one that challenges the paired oppositions of critique/postcritical, distance/closeness, and suspicion/celebration so prevalent in the academic establishment.

At the outset, Mackey draws our attention to diaspora and topography, suggesting that the same broken origins of Creole speech that Glissant discusses are inextricable from correspondingly broken landmasses. In the poetry of Barbadian author Kamau Brathwaite, Mackey reads an “insistence” formed by echo and indirection, from *Mother Poem*, which finds the speaker lamenting that “the child/is born to splinters//broken islands/broken homes”, to *Islands*, with its emphasis on “not only ‘cracked note’, ‘cracked mother’, ‘cracked ground’, and ‘broken tongue’, but also ‘history ... / ... stripped and torn’ (A 162, 180, 187, 210, 216)” (Mackey 2005, p. 35). These recurring images coalesce into what Mackey describes as “the fragmentariness of insular topography, the islands’ lack of the relative coherence possessed by larger land masses”, forming a “fractured wordscape” in which “the very ground, geography itself” accentuates this sense of fragmentation (p. 35). The cracks in this landscape form the objective correlate to the movement of Creole that Glissant identifies. Language, born out of the surveillance and trauma of the plantation, acquires resistant and subversive meanings: it comes out of the cracks even as it becomes constitutive of the cracks as well, a kind of emergent or alchemical transformation. Mackey identifies this rawness in Brathwaite’s writing, experience that emerges split

and reticulated, shaping the child's relationship to history, land, and language. The certainty that subtends filiation, as a Western and Christian concept, is absent. At the level of topography, Mackey reminds us, the islands of the Caribbean—in this instance, Barbados—are lands without the “relative coherence possessed by larger land masses” (p. 35). Perspective is by definition both fragmented and fractal. Everything must be approached via detour and indirection; depth and transparency are chimeric. The arrow can never fly outward in a straight line.

If, for Mackey, the fragmentation of Caribbean topography clears a conceptual space to approach and absorb art, it also asks us to develop the capacity to apprehend “blue” moments in music, instances of artistic creation that include intellectual meditation, affect, intimacy, and sensuality:

James Hillman suggests that blue “deepens the idea of reflection beyond the single notion of mirroring, to the further notions of pondering, considering, meditating”. William Gass writes that blue is “the color consciousness becomes when caressed”. That's what we hear when we hear Miles, who said he saw colors when he played, and who would seem to have seen blue a lot: the sound of consciousness being caressed. Just as a certain withholding we hear in Billie Holiday's voice heightens, by way of contrast, the emotional extremity her lyrics announce, Miles's less-is-more approach appears to make deliberative thought audible, palpable—deliberative thought itself, not simply the decisions at which it has arrived. (Mackey 2005, p. 144)

Here, Mackey's thought follows a trajectory that is not only indirect—echoing or signing the earlier discussion of Glissant and Relation—but also blue, in both idiom and style. Mackey makes his claims through a discussion of the work of Billie Holiday and Miles Davis, whose most famous popular recording is titled *Kind of Blue*, and for whom the emotional and spiritual resonance of “blue” notes obtained, at a visceral level, in much of the music he made, and for his listening audience. By focusing his analysis on two African-American artists whose work has achieved a permanent imprint in the popular consciousness, Mackey makes it impossible to return to the taxonomy of moods and activities that Felski proposes (Friedman 2017, p. 345) without feeling stifled, as if one were re-entering a sensory deprivation tank but forced to pretend that it offered the full range of the senses.

Blue notes have multiple meanings, even within a musical context. They refer sometimes to a style of phrasing, as described above, sometimes to the black keys on a piano that sound sharp and flat notes, and sometimes to variations in tone that are subtler in degree than is typically found in European and western music—a piano, for example, allows one to play whole tones and semitones, but not quarter-tones. Phrasing, I would suggest, is what binds these three related definitions of blue notes together, what allows Mackey to talk about African-American and Afro-Caribbean idioms in a manner that draws out both their uniqueness and the lack of attention black art receives in the wider world. In the academic vanguard, black writing is “multiply marginalized”, in part by a tacitly racist distinction between “a formally innovative willingness to incur difficulty, on the white hand, and a simple disclosure of innovative content, on the black” (Mackey 2005, p. 172). This distinction, for Mackey, fuels “the relative invisibility of African American writing that seeks to advance content outside the prescribed or expected limits and/or to be formally innovative or experimental” (p. 172). The very mode of innovation is thus contaminated by an unspoken agreement that its art, philosophy, and practitioners are white, leaving black modes of viewing the world on the margin, or not even discussed at all.

Earlier, I asked how we might activate a sense of critical engagement with literature that does not treat progress as the purview of Anglo-American literary trends. One way to reconfigure the terms of the debate—moving beyond the critical-postcritical binary—is to continue to view it at this different angle, by considering the cultural implications of reading postures that we tend to take for granted. To achieve this goal, I invoke Mackey's call for fiction to “‘sit in’ with the kinds of critical and analytic discourse characteristic of colloquia, to pursue the possibility of fiction collaborating with those kinds of discourse” (Mackey 2005, p. 152). Sitting in, of course, is a musical term, endemic to the act of improvisation on which jazz, for example, is built: a musician sits in on a session and improvises, on

the spot, out of a repertoire of shared musical knowledge—pieces of music, common chords, keys, and scales, and so on—adjusting phrasing, pace, and note choice to suit the mood of the moment. In this model, our mode of engagement is already athwart and paratactic to the critical-postcritical binary: we traverse a set of possibilities that encompasses both positions, prepared to read fiction “that wants to be a door or to support a door or to open a door permitting flow between *disparate orders of articulation*” (ibid, p. 152, emphasis added). This mode of interpretation is not a decadent outpouring of art for its own sake, sealed away from real-world concerns, but rather marked by an indelible political and ethical urgency. Miles Davis recorded *Kind of Blue* in 1959; Ralph Ellison, in music criticism of the same period, characterized jazz as an art form resistant to white police surveillance through the way it bends notes “to hear and see around corners” and “outmaneuver the rigidities of a taxonomic grid” (ibid, p. 151). To be blunt, black artists and critics have been writing around, through, and against the artistic text—combining critique, appreciation, affect, aesthetic, and commentary—long before the topic of postcriticism become fashionable in the academy. The type of vanguardism characterized by both Felski and her critics is thus untenable; black idiom and historical context have robbed it of intellectual weight.

We come to Mackey’s signature term, the ‘paracritical hinge’, from which the collection of essays takes its name, and which, in its most expressive form, articulates a posture of reading literature that historicizes and acculturates the act of reading beyond the terms of the postcritical debate. The paracritical hinge, as a literary model, allows

flow between statement and metastatement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature, and so forth. It traffics in a mix—a discrepant, collaborative mix—of idioms, genres, registers, dispositions. (Paracritical is meant, of course, to echo and to be analogous to such terms as paramedical and paralegal, its prefix indicating an auxiliary, accessory relationship to criticism, a near equation with or a close resemblance to criticism. Merriam-Webster’s Eleventh Collegiate Dictionary defines a hinge as “a jointed or flexible device on which a door, lid, or other swinging part turns.” I’d like to suggest a translative project or prospect in a quality so often attributed to the music, the quality—the verb, not the noun—known as swing. Hinge’s work as verb highlights contingency, haunted by tenuousness and risk, an intransitive creaking well worth bearing in mind. The coinage wants to suggest that improvisation, the pursuit of new expressivity, whether musical or literary, is an operation best characterized by the prefix para -, an activity supplemental to more firmly established disciplines and dispositions, an activity that hinges on a near but divergent identity with given disciplines and dispositions . . . (Mackey 2005, p. 152)

Paracriticism functions as a type of traffic, a vibrant mix marked by tenuousness and risk, the outpouring of improvisation as literary creativity, an intellectual method of engagement that does not abandon affect, but one that remains “supplemental” to the literary establishment, to critique and postcritique and so on. One might add that proponents of literature on the cultural margins of the Anglo-American academy have been frequently compelled to adopt a paracritical stance simply in order to place that literature on the public radar.² Only rarely have writers on the margins been afforded the luxury of dissection so common to the hermeneutics of suspicion. One can only submit to the analytic microscope if one is already at the cultural center, if the text has become worthy of critique’s suspicious mood. Otherwise, literature outside the cultural vanguardism of critique tends to be viewed as a transparent “window” onto another world (Damrosch 2003). The reading posture constructs the text as native informant (Spivak 2013); aesthetic innovation is left at the door. Or as George Elliott Clarke trenchantly puts it: “The trap that too many critics fall into . . . is that, in seeking to broadcast their own sermons against racism, sexism, imperialism, classism, and homophobia, they

² See *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 2004), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Spivak 1999), and *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft et al. 2003) for what are, by now, canonical critiques of the colonial or neocolonial center.

either reduce the writers to the status of sociologists or they bleach their work of aesthetic value" (Clarke 2000, p. 164). Paracritical reading, by contrast, keeps the engagement with aesthetics alive without sacrificing pleasure, affect, or the posture of critique.

4. Reading for the Blue Notes

Thus far, I've characterized paracritical reading as a corrective to the postcritical debate, one that pulls apart hard distinctions between critique and postcritique by virtue of its placement within a correspondingly paracritical tradition of African-American and Afro-Caribbean thought. In the final section of this essay, I briefly turn to a work of literature that exemplifies the aesthetic, intellectual, and affective registers that paracritical reading permits: *What We All Long For*, a 2005 diaspora novel by Trinidadian-Canadian author Dionne Brand.

A pocket outline of Brand's novel: formally working in an Afro-Caribbean literary and artistic tradition, recalling the aesthetic choices of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, *What We All Long For* tracks the second-generation diasporic experience of its main characters in a narrative mode that positions relationships as physical, temporal, and literary adjacencies. Tuyen, the second-generation Vietnamese-Canadian artist, has returned to the urban neighborhood that her immigrant family left years ago, but struggles to distance herself from her parents' grief over losing her brother Quy when they fled Vietnam. Alongside her artistic pursuits, Tuyen also harbors an unresolved desire for her friend Carla, a half-Italian, half-black bike courier haunted by her mother's suicide and burdened by the impossible task of watching over her brother, Jamal, who is in and out of Toronto's Mimico correctional facility and whose identity has been negatively molded by constant police surveillance. Oku, the son of Jamaican immigrants, is forced to conceal his artistic and musical aspirations from his embittered and abusive father, even as he, in his turn, desires Jackie, who runs a clothing store and whose parents were forced to emigrate to Toronto from Nova Scotia following racialized displacement.

Much has been written on the spatial and diasporic possibilities of *What We All Long For*. Johanna X.K. Garvey, for example, reads Brand's novel through Glissant's concept of errantry: that is, a concept opposed to connections "based on origins, genealogies, hierarchies of power, and fixed identities," focused instead on lines of affiliation "formed in relation, shared space, and overlapping paths not yet mapped". Errantry, according to Garvey, provides an ethical framework for reading a novel in which "a first-person narrator observes the movements of four young Torontonians who reject or resist their immigrant parents' longings and whose own conflicting desires belie the idea of a singular 'we' or 'all' acting as a unified citizenry" (Garvey 2011, p. 767). As a method of "expressing loss—of her brother and family stability—and of connecting to her surroundings," Chris Ewart notes, "Tuyen chisels away at a cathartic *lubiao* (a larger than room-sized signpost-like sculpture)," foregrounding "her 'diasporic haunting' (Chariandy, 105) by recording the 'longings' of strangers in her neighborhood 'to make them public'" (Ewart 2010, p. 154). For Jenny M. James, the novel's treatment of diaspora "demonstrates that all bonds of attachment bring with them a necessary emotional vulnerability and physical risk, a fact intensified for communities in dislocation" (James 2016, p. 51), while Joanne Leow suggests that the novel sets "the locality of the city in opposition to its global, Cartesian plotted location", producing a literary rendering of Toronto that is "not mappable" but "rooted and powerful [through] the form of its physical space" (Leow 2012, p. 199). Building on these arguments, I want to interpret Brand's novel as a structural and aesthetic invitation to 'sit in' with a different kind of reading, one that places Felski's activity categorizations—curating, conveying, criticizing, and composing—to one side, in order to enter a paracritical mode.

The novel begins with snatches of impressions couched in musical registers, cool in the blue sense of the term—neither major nor minor, missing the third tone of the scale that would establish one mood's prevalence over the other. The city described, Toronto in the early 2000s, is evanescent, fragile, burdened with the expectations of its inhabitants but also subsumed to a kind of impossible longing, a wish, beneath the melting snow and ice that swells the river ways of the city, a desire for certainty undermined by the ruthless passage of spring. "Don't make too many plans or assumptions, don't get

ahead of yourself”, the third-person narrator warns, foreshadowing a later phrase: “What happened next happened” (Brand 2005, pp. 1, 10). Recall the description of “consciousness being caressed” in Mackey’s account of blue notes in music, of jazz’s most reflective moments, and observe how the intellectual and the physical are not binaries but companions, each sutured to the other in a linkage that gently grafts seemingly opposed critical postures. Three pages, comprising the briefest of chapters, are devoted to Toronto as both subject matter and setting for the novel that follows, in what amounts to a similar narrative “caress” across theme, locale, metaphor, and narrative expectation.

Such a caress undoubtedly has a readerly dimension. It invites a response, but one predicated on connection and transgression, not the hard edges of detachment. The basic question implicit in the postcritical debate—whether to read with and for the text, “for our lives” as Beckwith puts it, or in a posture of coolly critical detachment, searching every corner of Brand’s prose for clues to meanings the novel itself isn’t allowed to grasp—is undone by how the novel invites us to engage the text: by turns ominous, playful, serious, political, poignant, and reflective.

This type of engagement, I argue, forms the basis of an Afro-Caribbean register of reading, one that is neither critical nor postcritical, but paracritical, in all the dimensions of the term. Consider the dislocation of the environment. We obtain an image of Toronto not merely in springtime, but convulsed by the weight and memory of snowstorms past, located specifically on the train, the subway, which carries thousands of Torontonians to and from destinations at all points in a vast city. The train, in motion, already contains passengers, then admits three more, each one granted a brief but evocative description:

One of them has a camera, she’s Asian, she’s wearing an old oilskin coat, and you want to look at her, she’s beautiful in a strange way. Not the pouting corporate beauty on the ad for shampoo above her head, she has the beauty a falcon has: watchful, feathered, clawed, and probing. Another one’s a young black man; he’s carrying a drum in a duffel bag. He’s trying to find space for it on the floor, and he’s getting annoyed looks all around. There’s an enviable loose physical allure to him. He has a few days’ growth on his face, and when he smiles his eyebrows, his eyes—his whole face can’t help its seduction. The third is another woman, she might be Italian, southern. She’s bony like a mantis in her yellow slick plastic coat, except her mouth has a voluptuousness to it, and her eyes, the long eyelashes weigh them down . . . They’re talking now about some friend of theirs whom the young man loves. (Brand 2005, pp. 2–3)

Apprehension, convention, description, subversion: the narrator moves along the train, disgorging this description of four of the novel’s five main characters (Tuyen, Oku, Carla, and, in absentia, Jackie, the object of Oku’s desire). Highly sensual, possessing a knowing kind of gaze, the narrator speaks with a colloquial intimacy, as if discussing these young Torontonians with an unnamed friend whose reactions are left off the page. Aesthetic bliss sits adjacent to possible traumas written on Tuyen’s “watchful” face, but the narrative motion is as ephemeral as the impressions on the moving subway train. The fifth character, Quy—the grifter-manipulator whose self-titled chapters gradually infiltrate the ‘main’ text—is partially present, in the unnamed description of another passenger on the train:

And jammed in a seat down the car there’s a man who hardly understands English at all, but he hears the tinkle of laughter, and it surprises him out of his own declensions on fate—how he ended up here and what’s to be his next move, and how the small panic that he feels disgusts him. He rouses himself from going over the details of his life, repeating them in his head as if to the woman reading a newspaper next to him. The laughter pierces him, and he thinks that he’s never heard laughter sound so pure, and it is his first week in this city. Only when he was very, very little—a boy—then he heard it, he remembers. (Brand 2005, p. 4)

A mystery has been proffered. Who are these young train passengers, and why are they important? What is the relationship of this unnamed man to the young people whom the train’s “taut silence”

(Brand 2005, p. 3) is trying its best to subdue? Desire here fits in some way within the container of queer diaspora, resisting the static idea of an “imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history” and instead telescoping queer experience through “a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles” (Gopinath qtd. in Garvey 2011, p. 767). Redolent with “mutual longings and the bonds that they have formed with each other in Toronto, as well as the ways that they often miss each other” (Garvey 2011, p. 767), the quartet evince a kind of spontaneity to being in the world, an acquiescence to motion and to unpredictability. But the as-yet-unnamed fifth character, the passenger with only a rudimentary understanding of English, reminds us of the need to look “around corners”, recalling Mackey’s invocation of Ellison and jazz music as an illustration of African-American responses to white hegemony. Quy, then, forecloses any sense of Toronto as the site of utopian experience.

Substantively, the four young Torontonians—Tuyen, Carla, Oku, and Jackie—occupy the lion’s share of the novel. There is a kind of narrative givenness that destabilizes the singularity of perception, as shared experiences of memory and the past bleed from one character’s focalization into another, over and across chapter divisions. The ambivalent color that surrounds Jackie remembering her parents’ night life at the Paramount club, site of the “good times, dancing and fighting and styling” but now “all gone” (Brand 2005, p. 183), invites critique and warmth, but also gestures to the gentrification of a predominantly black Toronto neighborhood, conjuring up the “de facto segregation” in Halifax (Brand 2005, p. 182) that forced the whole family to move to Toronto in the first place. In every lavish, sepia-toned memory of the Paramount, the novel swings, to use Mackey’s verb, suggesting a cool but resonant form of narrative movement that operates within spatial and readerly adjacencies, so that the poignancy of the Paramount’s closure is not confined strictly to Jackie’s recollection. Memory spills into the next chapter, which finds Oku desperately remembering all the music he wanted to play for Jackie, including Charlie Rouse, Billie Holiday, and John Coltrane, all adding up to a blue representation of his desire for Jackie, “Rouse’s hoarse velvet horn” functioning both a metaphor and a visceral encapsulation of the intimacy that he craves (Brand 2005, p. 184).

For what transpires in this scene, and in Brand’s novel generally, neither critique nor postcritique is sufficient. Keep in mind Sarah Beckwith’s moving response to *The Limits of Critique*, in which she argues that “[t]he alternative to [critique] is not to be uncritical”, but rather “to exercise, refine, and develop our capacity for judgment and to read *again* for our lives” (Beckwith 2017, p. 336, emphasis added). So much weight can be read into that tiny adverb “*again*”, a glimpse of a trajectory in literary studies taken to its tedious extreme, leading to “widespread fatigue with the mind-gripping, monotonous, monopolistic *doxa* of critique . . . its well-defended protection of its own high ground; its stubborn, earth-scorching, hegemonic appropriation of sophistication and viewpoint” (Beckwith 2017, p. 332). But there is no ‘again’ afforded to the Afro-Caribbean position of being at risk in spaces policed by institutional racism, by white surveillance. The capacity for pleasure is not there to be regained, innocent and unsullied, after critique’s tyrannical reign. Even the words routinely associated with critique—“questioning, accusing, unearthing, not wondering, acknowledging, judging, evaluating” (p. 332)—reflect the disciplinary and surveillant characteristics of institutional white scrutiny. Only vanguardists have the luxury of questioning, from a safe critical distance. Only those in the hermetically sealed bubble of Anglo-American criticism are capable of being so taken by Felski’s “call for interpretive inventiveness” (Fuss 2017, p. 353), as if black artists, writers, and intellectuals had not been engaged in the same task for decades already.

By contrast, and per Mackey, “black centrifugal writing reorients identity in ways that defy prevailing divisions of labor” (Mackey 2005, p. 171). Brand’s novel performs as much as it critiques institutions of power, and thus invites the reader to enter into the same paracritical mode, in which the echoes of subdued or disguised speech that we find in Glissant acquire artistic expression as a counter-hegemonic mode of being. Pleasure is not forsaken, because it never had the luxury of being suspended in the first place. Movement through the narrative space of the novel is of necessity paracritical, in the same way that Carla, the courier, is forced to confront the ugliness, ambience,

possibility, and hegemony of urban Toronto as she bikes across its surface, experience always fading away into the remembrance of a past feeling no longer suited to a present moment (Brand 2005, pp. 28–29). All these feelings are always to hand.

Quy, conversely, provides an ominous type of connection between the characters, “the forgotten and yet powerful component of globalization [acting as] a shadowy narrative that cannot be documented in any systematic way or fixed with any particular identity” (Leow 2012, p. 207). Lost in the flight of Tuyen’s parents from Vietnam, he winds up spending his childhood years in the refugee camp of Pilau Bidong, experiencing abuse, violence, and trauma before making his way, as an adult, to North America. Quy’s recollections of his experience are marked by distrust and cynicism, his entire posture determined by the need to conceal his intentions, and to manipulate those around him. We are never given absolute certainty that he is Tuyen’s long-lost brother; the name Quy means “precious” in Vietnamese, but can also be phonetically rendered in the French as a question (“qui?” or “who?”). Eventually “discovered” by Tuyen’s brother Binh, who runs a black-market electronics operation, Quy becomes the target of unexpected violence at novel’s end: dozing in Binh’s car while Binh is inside his parents’ house (breaking the news that they have found their missing brother), Quy is stabbed by Carla’s brother Jamal, who is trying to rob the car with an accomplice. The trajectory that brings Jamal to target this particular car is random, in one sense: Jamal has no idea that Quy is the brother of his sister Carla’s friend, and is driven primarily by “an obsession with material wealth and objects as symbolized by the ‘rich motherfuckers . . . [with] great cars to boost in garages off roadways called crescents and drives’ (316)” in Toronto’s Richmond Hill neighborhood (Leow 2012, p. 210). But Jamal’s desires have been shaped by the white Toronto police apparatus, in which he is always already a criminal body, serving as a powerful thematic push toward the violence of the novel’s conclusion.

The trauma that Quy suffers—ambiguous to the last, in that it’s not even clear whether he will die or be rescued—is thus driven by a kind of paracritical momentum that effectively sidesteps the question of narrative plausibility, forcing the reader to swing. What happens next happens, to echo Quy from earlier in the novel. At the novel’s conclusion, Quy’s trauma acts an ethical check on the euphoria of transnational possibility, but it’s a check that is profoundly blue in affect, leaving us with the fatal caress of consciousness as Quy lies “half-dead by the road”, deliriously imagining his parents “finally running out of a doorway toward him, running toward him, and the road between them is like water, and they both grab him as they should have and his mouth splits open and all the water spills out” (Brand 2005, p. 317). The expectation against which we were warned at the start of the novel—not to make plans, not to get ahead of ourselves, because what happens next happens, whether we’re prepared for it or not—has now spilled into the plot, inviting a moment of reverie in which we’re forced to consider the novel as artistic performance alongside a critique of its thematic and ethical meaning.

Immediately after this stark reminder “of the ways the plight of the Vietnamese ‘boat people’ is shaped by the same transnational structures of disparity that define the seemingly more secure communities of the West” (James 2016, p. 62), the novel closes with the almost banal normalcy of Carla anticipating, with pleasure, the sound of Tuyen “chipping and chiselling away next door” (Brand 2005, p. 318). Though there is a body bleeding out to possible death just adjacent to our readerly perception, we are directed here to a moment in time before Quy’s stabbing, and invited to hold these dissonant images in mind as we finish the act of reading. This is stylistic and narrative swing that keeps the moods of tenuousness, risk, suspicion, shock, and languor all concurrently in play. It has the feeling of improvisation, though it is not improvised, and functions as the supremely blue moment at which Brand’s novel decides to bow out, not because we have reached ‘satisfactory’ closure, but because the indwelling creative possibilities of the moment have reached their apotheosis. The paracritical session, one might say, is over. Viewed “as a polyphonic ensemble, shuttling between different narratorial perspectives” (James 2016, p. 45), *What We All Long For* compels us to imagine itself playing past the parameters of its own textual life. What we do with this metastatement is, of course, up to us as readers, as it could only ever have been. Whatever reaction we have—appreciate, condemn, question, categorize—must sit in with the social and aesthetic context that the novel has generated without being

its pure corollary. Our paracritical detour has taken us away from the critique–postcritique cage match, though close enough to keep their struggle still in view.

Have I inadvertently succumbed to the normative academic tendency to critique? Perhaps, just a little, not critique *tout court*, as Felski would have it, but a kind of critique, blue around the edges and in the gaps. As I began this article by noting, *The Limits of Critique* is brilliant precisely because of the way Felski awakens us, her readers, to a sense of our own intellectual torpor. It is refreshing to stretch, to turn our attention to the very business of critique, so that we may avoid being inhabited only by the urge to diagnose. In a real sense, Felski’s book has created the occasion for my argument (for the arguments of many!); denying this relationship would be the height of churlishness. I have taken this detour into Afro-Caribbean poetics not to diagnose and dispose of critique or postcritique, but to expand the vocabulary for framing the terms of this debate, bringing the richness of African-American and Afro-Caribbean intellectual thought into a conversation on how to read literature. In so doing, I hope we may find the door open, in future, for other counter-hegemonic modes of engagement. “The given,” Mackey notes in a suitably parenthetical comment, is after all “only the beginning” (Mackey 2005, p. 152).

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