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Beautiful the beauty—Dionne Brand’s Theory and Canisia Lubrin’s *Voodoo Hypothesis*

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ABSTRACT

Against the reductive and the often universalizing poetics of much poetry and much theoretical discourse that abandons feelings from its rhetoric, the works of Dionne Brand’s *Theory* and Canisia Lubrin’s *Voodoo Hypothesis* promote layered, black and multivocal reflections on beauty. They act out self-interrogating dialectics rather than provide symbolic clarity of their subjects. There is no aesthetic consolation in these works and that’s where the beauty lies. Their works ask readers to enter into irreducible complexity as a form of attention. I posit that these black creative politics - in this poetry - are tied up in reading-work that can newly anticipate our global condition through ethical collectivity.

Keywords

Poetry; Poetics; Canadian studies and literature; Black Canada; Black aesthetics; Diaspora; Decolonization; Intersectionality; Gender; Race; Sexuality; Feminist pedagogy; Caribbean studies and literature; Social Justice; Spatial intervention.

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Anybody who thinks that they can understand how terrible the terror has been, without understanding how beautiful the beauty has been against the grain of the terror, is wrong.

– Fred Moten

When Derek Attridge, at the end of *Peculiar Language*, describes the possible interpretations of the preceding pages in which he has discussed the political dimensions of language and etymology, he states: “Fortunately, the logic of my argument frees me of any obligation to settle the question, and I can leave it to the reader to produce—within the limits imposed by a particular position in time and space—her or his own structure of center and digression” (Attridge 231). Perhaps only a theorist can feel this way. Whereas an artist is more implored, by the very nature of her or his artistic ambition, to *try* to query the questions further—not to settle them but to try to attach meaning and morality to the pursuits while enregistering their works with the production of an aesthetic beauty. While Attridge can *get away with* this freedom in regard to authorial intentions, I do not believe conscientious writers, such as Dionne Brand and Canisia Lubrin, equate their work with the same such freedom. Or at least they are not inclined to feel such freedom as a liberating thing.

To borrow a phrase from *Double Negative* (a queer feminist collaborative long poem by Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland and Cheryl Sourkes), I want to continue questioning the question of whether, when we add it up, the poetics of paradox presented by Brand and Lubrin is a double bind or whether “two negatives make a positive.” And whether a “positive” has virtue. It can be hard to examine the ideological writer because it is hard to recuperate all the complexities of reader responses, surely, and because it generally feels grossly inadequate to make generalizations about such ambitious works or to speculate on authorial intention as if such intentions are a wholly fixed affair. Luckily, I think both *Voodoo Hypothesis* and *Theory*, recent works by Lubrin and Brand, subject themselves outright to this sort of “hypothesizing” and “theorizing,” revealing often the ruptures of their own arguments and estimations of representations of beauty—in the physical world and of the human body—and thus give us entry into the very speculative practice of their own work to allow us to examine these aesthetic and moral-dilemmic productions and reproductions. Support for that irony’s intentionality may be gleaned from the critical practice behind Sophia Forster’s discussion of Brand’s *Land to Light On* in her article on “The Politics of Ambivalence,” but the intentionality of a poetics of paradox opens more possibilities. That a textual conundrum brings this insight into the dynamics of difference, a provocative challenge to previously held aesthetic and ideological doxa.

**i. Thesis x: Beauty is not the absence of ugliness in the physical terrain of
Canisia Lubrin's poetry collection *Voodoo Hypothesis***

*how our literal and figurative world-views are shaped by the mappings
of diaspora, colonization, and the Black Atlantic slave trade
+ the spatial changes of space exploration + the witnessing
of natural devastations in climate change*

In the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times.

– Bertolt Brecht

In her instructive and important essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde noted that writing poetry is an emancipatory praxis, a way to feel the world anew, and an act that can chart "revolutionary demand" (Lorde 38). In the same essay, Lorde reveals that the praxis of poetry, the struggle to write and feel freedom and call for revolution, is necessarily tied to "the deaths we are expected to live" (38). Lorde recognizes that the praxis of writing, for black women, is that of imagining, writing, feeling and realizing dreams that trouble and can potentially undo a world where, as the aforementioned quotes suggest, the increasing expendability of human lives and environmental well-being is permissible and acceptable. If the act of writing poetry weds emancipatory possibility to an otherwise harmful terrain, it also invites one, to borrow from Octavia Butler, to "read every day and learn from what you read" (Butler 139). While writing can certainly be a solitary act—elsewhere in her work Lorde reminds us that the economics of poetry allows for secreted creativity and survival—writing also holds in it reading-work that, like the poem itself, might open up, to follow Roger I. Simon "a commitment to responsibility...the need to imagine an alternative human world and to imagine it in a way that enables one to act in the present as if this alternative had already begun to emerge" (Simon 4). To return to the initial Lorde quotes, again: the history that has resulted in our contemporary colonial struggles with genocidal and ecocidal practices, in part, urgently requires that we learn from what we read and that, in the face of the increasing expendability of the poorest peoples and regions, we notice that black creative politics—poetry—and other acts of writing our present world anew—are tied up in reading-work that can newly anticipate our global condition through ethical collectivity.

While I'm reluctant to define ethical collectivity through definitions of ugly and beautiful or aesthetics and ethics, I want to provide support for irony's

intentionality, as paradox, that concretizes the poetic devices of folding over and onto each other what has been historically or geographically made disperse or individualized by polarization. Participating, as both writers do, in revolutionary thinking that works against the impossibility of imagining, the negotiations between these positions are what I determine to be most fruitful. Thinking with Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in the “Education and Crisis” chapter from their anthology, does some work on these disturbingly beautiful enigmatic images by addressing Paul Celan’s “black milk”—the breast milk tainted from the blackened burnt ashes of massacre, and more explicitly moves toward “the darkness of murder and death, from the blackness of the night and of the ‘dusk’ that ‘falls to Germany’ when death uncannily becomes a ‘master’” (31). They suggest that this poetry, contrary to popular belief on lyricality and harmonizing, can reject, within its own theory and hypothesis, not its music and its singing but itself as a certain predetermined recognizably *melodious* endeavour. Brand and Lubrin’s versing and phrasing distrust the beautiful and undisturbed while each insists on having musicality side by side with the greatest horrors. The concern of language, through this lens, is in all the unalterable multivalences of its expression: *precision*. Aesthetics that don’t transfigure harm and ethics that don’t poeticize the political expressions. Words that name and place.

Much of Canisia Lubrin’s work in *Voodoo Hypothesis* reveals a world in great and searing distress: the planet and its various inhabitants are struggling with, against, and in the name of a barbarous global, even universal, colonizing system where all forms of life are quite simply wasted or subject to being wasted. And yet, Lubrin neither offers us a simply humanist project nor endorses a classical liberal notion of the self, of the human, and of community. Instead, Lubrin’s vision is in part, driven by the desire to imagine a different kind of human order—one that, as Lubrin herself imparts, “involves navigating the immense contradictions” of being human (Nolan 3). She negotiates the strategy of herself as a writer trying to imagine through the position defined by Rinaldo Walcott as the “impossibility of imagining blackness as Canadian” by defending the disturbing nightmare it takes to dream toward it. She elucidates this hypothesis in continued conversation with Martin E Nolan for *The Puritan*:

I haven’t yet in my few years on Earth encountered any human-created anything that doesn’t have at its germ something contradictory. So, I don’t find that I’m in conflict with tending towards the beauty in language, because this is how I come. I can only hope that you—the reader—will find it beautiful, because you have brought your own range of decoding skillsets to the task of finding whatever beauty lives in the thing for you. It’s important to note that beauty need not mean saccharine and I find that people often conceptually confuse the two. I still

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believe that beauty is part of a poem's integrity and that beauty is not dressing and it can be naked and vehement. But, do I want you to be disturbed by the supposed tension of this paradox? I do. And I am. (Nolan 6)

Lubrin's ethical demand for new places and languages of difficult beauty, poignantly outlined in poems such as "Restoration" and the title poem, but evident across the collection in its entirety, asks the *poet* and *poetry* as well as the *reader* to work towards providing a different account of the harmed and harming world. In "Restorations," by example, we can look at the same places that confront hurricanes *while* the sea sings in them:

and where the sea licks that black Caribbean shore,
out of hurricane season
I see for the first time what they see:
everything the sea sings is untraceable (Lubrin *Voodoo Hypothesis* 76).

Practices of colonization, too, are evoked in the same sites of encountering the resorts and the typified prettiness of touristic island beauty as if finding this same localization taking place upon the speaker's very body and being:

[...] these encounters fall to summon
that same high praise: colonies of resorts along my spine (76)

In the same poem, Lubrin offers that some "safety" is said to be felt while facing the shore, while the "waves toss their comfort," even while she addresses the slave trade of these same waters (76). It follows that it is the work of poetry in witness of this physical landscape of terror and wonder, and as poetry is artistically manifested as "watercolour," that triumphs the representation of beauty, that counters that not even these impositions on her spine can exploit the work of exposure that poetry itself can expose. It introduces the hypothesis in these lines:

lay nothing on the back of poetry
which does its work in pH, in watercolour, in

whatever causes us to,
in some sense,
be cautious of time's dampening dusk

that every place of home must reckon malediction
even the happiness, which was mine—militant (76)

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And concludes:

how lost I feel to watch the sun leave from the belly of the ship
my faith in sunrise narrows to the tip of my pen

in the final couplet of the poem (76). Her writings here call attention to a system that might and can be rendered possible through the relational work of words, sounds, poetics and sharing. It might be narrow on the horizon, but it can be written.

Lubrin, by this process, provides her readers with the opportunity to imagine another world in which human and other life forms are conceived as central to our well-being beyond the realm of their exploitability. From "Voodoo Hypothesis":

Did you not land with your rocket behind
you, hope beyond hope on the tip of your rope
& the kindness of anti-gravity slowing you down
you, before me, metal and earthen. But I am here to
confirm or deny, the millions of small
things that seven minutes of success
were hinged upon when I was little more than
idea and research, in the hypnotic gestures of flame and Bunsen burner
and into parachute
no one foresaw, the bag of rags at the end
of the tunnel (1)

In this way, she asks that her readers account for their inactions, our belief in "the hypnotic gestures" of scientific exploration, as well as the science fiction of their non-colonial adventures and our usual indifference to these local-global-universal violences. The poet, Lubrin, does not offer us a solution; instead she asks us to notice the place we are at and the times we are in and to account for them. It is important to note, then, that Lubrin's work is never about the inability to imagine a different kind of future, but rather about how we might collectively make our present world livable, how our historically present crimes against this world might reorient our political desires, and how the politics of being human is bound up in a difficult and ethical worldview that is not necessarily honoured in our broader episteme, despite all of our claims about progress and human possibility. Lubrin often points us in the direction of how our practices prohibit human possibilities and limit human potentialities. In lines roving the notions of colonized human life on Mars such as:

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but I am Curiosity. If I kill the bitch right,
she'll take us deeper and convince us to send earthlings
to set up Earth's colonies on your deserts. They won't ever
come back but that's not so bad when we trade in the grander scheme

We witness Lubrin's diasporic chartings refuse a commitment to our present order of knowledge vis-a-vis her spatial poetics. She writes geography, and her own political affiliations to space, as assertions of humanness rather than tacked to one side of an insider/outsider world (1). This positioning of the poet and writer as the agent of "Curiosity" is important, because it refuses to venerate the comforts of us/them paradigms as Lubrin herself writes of trading in the "grander scheme" for a new schematization of, say, potential cities, roads, buildings, waterways, streets, oceans, houses, and other spaces anew vis-a-vis her own colonized black diasporic history.

In *Voodoo Hypothesis* we are conscientiously kept from marginalizing or escaping the beauty-terror paradox in a method similar to one theorized by Saidiya Hartman in the following lines: "It is not then a question of escaping blackness but escaping the idea of blackness made during the construction of whiteness" (Hartman 166). Or, to go on, "to produce a thought of the outside while in the inside" (Ka 6) and doing so while "[l]iving inside of a world that is in so many ways uninhabitable" (6). Lubrin speaks directly to this nightmare of being both inside and outside in her language(s) and poetic works because the constraints are directly related to what is happening on the inside:

When later I came to write poetry, my language struggled in its rhetorical firings. There was little craft-specific discipline to hold the subjects that I naturally gravitated towards: the horror, the suffering and troubles of what I could perceive of this life up against any sufficient sense of beauty in the illusory surety of language. For me this was often akin to not being able to speak at all: there is vice and unrest in such a thing as "beautifying" tragedy, yes. But it is a necessary trouble. To think of how to use the language of the colonizer to decolonize. To think of my Creole—the language of the colonized—invented by slaves whose very survival bred this linguistic creativity, a liberty twisted up in their need to communicate external to their masters, in spite of their subjugation. To think of language as a place of freedom for my ancestors: even as their ancient tongues were sliced from their mouths, they grew new speech. I think of what this means for me, the possibility of this dual inheritance. My Creole and my English, like language estranged. And nothing seems more true and cruel to me: both exist in me at once. This is language as a kind of trauma in itself but it is still a beautiful thing. I'm trying to negotiate the larger world that becomes, in fact, divisible because of language. And I often think that the relationship between language and beauty

cannot be adequately considered without deconstructing the silent suspicions of inferiority that lead to the dichotomy in the first place. (Nolan 11)

Picture the work of this collection as a radical refusal of that dichotomy. An elaborate undoing, whereby even the slave trade's "Atlantic under-mapping" is re-marked by a connectedness that outlasts its rupture, that is capable of realignment (Lubrin "On Beauty and Poetry" 4). Looking, with humanity, at human beings even under the inhumanities of the slave trade is made both a pleasurable project and a heavy one here. In this sort of reading as a *re-writing of the history that continues the present* the mind can dart to James Baldwin speculating that "[h]uman beings are too various to be treated so lightly" and following this with the admission that he himself is "too various to be trusted" (Baldwin 37). By elucidating that the wordsmith (i.e. all wordsmiths, i.e. all humans) are untrustworthy (ethically unstable) we are forced to question whether this is so—and there's the fun, the actual fun in a book like this. In other words, truth only becomes true by knowing its oppositions and counter-truths and variants. The correct representations of poetry as the most articulate discourse of human conscience and social concerns are, after all, the foundations of an ideological poets' ideologies. But it is also simultaneously well-known by these same conscientious writers that ideology itself is *produced*, and reproduced, in iterative material processes of social ritual and conscience *through* their works, their words, their rewrites. The moon is white until it is black, and even this depends from which side of a non-dichotomy you're looking at it from after all.

Paradoxically, when we let go of ideologizing, when we give up on figuring out the bigger picture as one picture, we find powers of resistance, too. We get into the landscapes of who would be marginalized by creating a picture that is inaccurately universal. And we get art we can *feel*. Poetry that can move us. Lubrin exonerates us from stasis. She, turn and turn again, shows that "poetic form is not immutable; it is in motion. It cannot be divided into positive and negative space, as if it were a still life" (Willis 6). Being here, now in this flux of things begins with relinquishing the presupposed perfection of art. And there's the beauty in Lubrin's shards of written orality and experimentation of her theses, in her critiques and assertions that evade binary oppositions as they have been shaped by the conditional. Agitate the line between aesthetics and politics in each poetic line to feel just how her work turns between moments of surveillance and action, how the agitation is indeed the beautification.

The previously quoted line from Lubrin's "Restoration" ("be cautious of time's dampening dusk") brings to mind Sue Sinclair's article "As the World Ends, Has the Time for Grieving Arrived?" in which Sinclair locates her feelings of defamiliarization with the beauty of beached starfish—and beauty, generally, as it is transposed in scenes of the effects of climate change and environmental devastation

(Lubrin VH 76). Sinclair, by contrast to Lubrin, found herself “distanced from the beauty of those starfish” and confesses that, though she could “see it” she certainly couldn’t “feel it” (Sinclair 4). She asserts that “the *dampening* of the effect of beauty [she felt] wasn’t just the result of dissonance between beauty and the awfulness of climate change” but also a “protective instinct: [as she] didn’t want to attach to, or care about the beauty of nature that was vanishing” (4 my emphasis). Sinclair sees herself as failing to be grateful and, like poet Jan Zwicky, “turns away from the beauty that is” (qtd in Zwicky, Sinclair 4). Lubrin’s work, however, speaks not only of the human-created beauty-horror paradoxes that have changed our conceptions of our geographies through the Black Atlantic slave trade and colonization both globally and universally, but also of this climatic nature of earthly devastation. In a conversation with an anonymous poet for “The Writer in the World: On Beauty and Poetry,” Lubrin offers this insight into her own representation of non-binary beauty in these predicaments:

I suppose I should start by disclosing why I don’t subscribe to the idea that beauty is the absence of ugliness. [...] One central consideration is why such binaries could be or is or has been unhelpful to the poet. (Lubrin “OB&P” 3)

It is here where she fully discloses her process:

Let us take stock of imagery (sight) in this brief study: imagine what you can about Hurricane Irma, with its destruction of whole towns, whole countries, whole lives—things by all accounts that call up in me the expression of the catastrophic. Then I see Irma in an image (caught moving across the crown of the Atlantic). Irma as photography, as painting, cinema, as language—and the first few moments of this encounter without my willing it, produces something beautiful. It is a beauty that breaks. (3)

Lubrin doesn’t turn away from the points of breaking in her work, from the catastrophe; she stays inside the eye of the storm with her own eyes wide open. She posits, instead, that an art that can transmute the obscene without being a redemptive act is perhaps the most worthy. After all, the artist who is in solidarity with beauty is not the artist who sets out to undermine the trueness of the treachery of things, but the one who knows that in spite of treachery, we are “elevated towards saving—or hopes of saving—ourselves” (8).

So if, commonly, we tend to think the hard-nosed work of moral conscience is better suited to politicians or scientists than the smaller seeming imperatives of poets, we will continue to be the ones suffering the consequences—as indeed, we already and always do. As literary scholars, we have the opportunities to see that ambitious and conscientious poetry necessarily shifts definitions of quality to contribute to a new mode of value of what is/can be beautiful. It can

then be hypothesized that the most sincere of desires for this discourse—and the many discourses in them—is to make cultural room for poetical works to shift the ethos of collective imagination. Lofty in my poetics, admittedly so, but I do, I just can't help it, believe that poetry has a unique potential to fathom our new universes much like the enlarged world created by Lubrin's worldview—not just an utterly fresh poetic idiom but one that is powerfully kinetic in its resources, that makes new spaces beyond current constraints.

ii. Theory x: All the beautiful pages written on the human bodies of Dionne Brand's novel *Theory*

*how held/withheld genre categories and beauty/intellect binaries are
reassigned onto new mind/body politics of the aesthetics/ethics of the female
form and formulations*

PURE REASON would be the source of Intelligibility, and Cause too. It must have to do with love, and beauty at its root. No matter how it is obliterated after that.

– Erin Moure

The best poets demand something of their readers. The language of poetry is both a call to thought and an ethical command to humanness. And thus, perhaps, the best theorists must be the best poets. Across a range of genres, the one constant in Brand's work is what we might call the poetic-ethical dimensions of humanness. It could be suggested that in her earlier works—for example *Sans Souci* (1988), *No Language is Neutral* (1990) or *Bread Out of Stone* (1994)—Brand's political commitments to her representation of the black female body are more evidently clear than in this newest philosophical novel, *Theory*, but such a claim does not mean that Brand has recoiled from the political here; rather that she asks her audience to work through her narrative demands more perceptively, to see anew her formal representations of aesthetics and the value of such aesthetics. In this context, *Theory* is a metaphor for Brand's struggle with this position in Canada and her speaker/theorist's struggle with the vastness and variety of this country's politics and social ethics. It symbolizes her attempt to understand what she must do politically by living where she can neither have full participation in national citizenship nor revolution. It is not so much liberation politics dogma as it is the strategy of a writer trying to negotiate her in-between and paradoxical positions, as defined by Rinaldo Walcott as "the simultaneity of being here and not being here" due to the "impossibility of imagining blackness as Canadian" (43).

The aesthetic, as the moment of letting the world go and clinging instead to the formal act of knowing it, is given a reunion with the meritorious in *Theory*. Brand tempers essentializing effects by admissions and counter-admissions. She brings together the poles of subject and object, value and fact, nature and reason, beauty and intellect, body and mind, which are often riven apart by social trends and politics or delineated by strict poetic or literary generic conventions or limited-perspective narration or adherence to fixed theorizations, even. She lets it all go and clings to it all, at the same time. Simultaneous with an apparent objectification of female beauty in relation to the narrator's first accounted lover, Selah, as "carnal object" experienced "at the level of skin," for example, she explains a very opposing position (Brand *Theory* 19-20, 84). The objectification is qualified not only as an aspect of the woman's personhood but as an elemental human truth: she explains, for example, "I don't mean to dissociate Selah, the body, from Selah, the intelligence, in the way that most people do. We are mainly body after all, and the body is intelligence" (7-8). This is part of what makes Brand's *Theory* a "difficult pleasure" to read (qtd. in McKittrick): the insistence on maintaining the cohesion between body and intelligence, the exhibition of a self-awareness that sometimes prevents our first impressions from doing so, and the self-directed necessity to analyze the female form from being passively objectified to embodying more dynamic humanness itself. Brand and her narrator know the inherent difficulty of her projects—and yet we *are* allowed access. Not accessibility, but access to this difficulty. Her always co-mingling aesthetic choices and ethical deliberations suggest that Brand is grappling with all these constitutive aspects of being a wholly conscious writer (theorist, in this case) with the elements of being a wholly embodied human (lover, in this case). In other words, Brand's moral and aesthetic and body conscience seem inextricably linked and it would be unethical not to represent her narrators and their lovers to the fullest forms of their beings (being her being).

The only way Brand (et al in *Theory*) has been able to work through the incompatibilities of scripting life as she knows it and life as she might desire it to be revolutionized is through a mortal *and* spiritual perspective to embody all these inconsistencies within her character/speakers. There's one of these mortally/transcendent moments in the novel's section recounting her love affair with Odalys:

I loved Odalys because she reminded me of a certain affect I experience at certain times or, shall I say, over the time of my life. [...] You are born into time and place, more place than time, and the sounds, the colours, the gestures and movements of people around you come to form your aesthetic. I was in thrall to this aesthetic before I came to know Odalys. And so Odalys walked into my

aesthetic practices. When I say practices, I mean the way I see, the way I apprehend pleasure, the sounds that are most pleasing to me, et cetera. [...] I loved Odalys' skin, pure and simple. [...] Let me say from the outset I loved Odalys' body the way one loves a theory. Not, say, the theory of relativity—that would be too simple and unitary, I suggest. [...] A theory such as the theory of language is more the theory that comes to mind. How it is acquired and why certain sounds occur in certain regions; the uses of the tongue, et cetera. [...] To be more precise, it wasn't Odalys' body but the *sense* of Odalys' body, like a universal weight in the world. [...] Sometimes I think I created Odalys out of what I needed, and what I needed was a balancing weight to my theories—some presence that would deny or counter those theories through embodiment. (Brand 138)

It's enough to make you sigh aloud. *Like a universal weight in the world. A presence that would deny or counter those theories through embodiment.* It is a sort of mercy that writers must possess to exert, again and again, their ambition in lieu of their own best interests. She knows she fails; she continues. It is as always: duty and inclination, and a trying to harmonize with its aesthetic advances that Brand undertakes in her projects, or Brand's narrators undertake in their projects of work and/or love.

Brand has, of course, become aware of her reader—aware that her work will be widely read—thus she has this sort of social responsibility to us. Aesthetic sensibility is socially necessary: it is this struggle and tension that develops a conscience in general—if you are aware of your observable behaviour, you can be aware of the repercussions of who you are. That said, there is very little that is solely self-indulgent here, even when it portends to be. When the narrator stands at the bus stop across from Odalys' place, recalling "Adorno's statement, 'There is no aesthetic refraction without something being refracted, no imagination without something being imagined,'" it does not feel navel-gazing, but the opposite (133). It harrows when she follows this perception with the acknowledgement that "[she] lacked the 'imagined' that would imagine what Odalys imagined in that derelict place. And in [her] dissertation [she] was investigating that very imagination, the ability to see beyond the flatness of the existence that [she] attend[s] to—[her] own" (133).

Rather than ever limiting the prospect of herself as main speaker, it is this sort of flexibility and mutability of consciences within the single mind that is evidenced in this working conscience as it is made up utterly of dynamic components when exposed to the different conditions of different characters and loving them differently. Brand is at once telling the story and its anti-story of each representation of beauty, its deconstruction and construction—linking together these co-existing playing fields in—and throughout—the body (and mind) of her poetic (and theoretical) life thus far.

Bakhtin articulates how unavoidable the strictures of each particular poetic and literary genre make themselves manifest on the ethical choices of the writer in these lines: "Each genre is only able to control certain definite aspects of reality. Each genre possesses definite principles of selection, definite forms for seeing and conceptualizing reality, and a definite scope and depth of penetration" (131). Brand does away with that and transgresses all the borders of all the conventions here. Driven by the imperative of making good judgments, complexity is often obscured, or redacted or made into theorem or manifesto in the fulfillment of linking justness to the artistic aims of lesser writers. In other words, genre is sometimes affixed to connect to larger thematic concerns addressed by the discipline itself but, conversely, it is these very estimable concerns that create limitations. Brand, instead, uses no limits. What can it mean to volley one's entire poetics against potentialities of love? Brand doesn't volley her poetics against these possibilities—she lets them volley against her work (her theorizations) to illustrate this aesthetic predicament. Reading *Theory* made firm my imperative that Brand has made seeable, throughout the dissertation's oeuvre, her most moral character (no matter how ambiguous or ambivalent or enigmatic) by keeping it in check with her own ever-shifting poetic discourse. It is part of Brand's strategy to foster and exploit perception—past its limits.

Readers can see Brand's labouring, and labouring still—unfinished as the thesis remains in the final pages of the book after all. And we, as readers, must labour to see the whole, and the more we scrutinize, the more we see. The poetry of *Theory* requires a telling that is at once personal deliberation and public discourse, that involves in it a challenging history, a conflicted present and demanding future and that features an aesthetic voice that can transcend the borders of any known limitation—linguistic, material, philosophic etc. One that can witness humanity, as much as being equally a part of it, and one that somehow (how?) has access to greater knowledge beyond our human existence than we ourselves can.

In this way, *Theory* explores her imperatives for accounting for the world we presently occupy, how we might have arrived in our present global position in the first instance, and how we might imagine ourselves beyond its present confines without giving up the difficult beauty and "beautiful pages" of poetry and the poetic in theoretical process (Brand 137). Here we see how her writings foster conversations that transgress disciplines and political perspectives, in local and diasporic contexts—at home and abroad—while also holding steady an artistic imaginary and political reality that challenges readers to live with the difficult mis/representations of the beauty of love and the love of beauty. On the bodies/minds of her lovers, the narrator inscribes various intellectual and geographic terrains, thus highlighting the ways which her writings contend with and trouble nation-based and discipline-based affiliations. Underlining

her love of her lovers is also always her acknowledgement of her unknowing of them—often unclear of their origins, backstories and family histories as the narrator is.

Theory might be read as informed by an interdisciplinary framework, an analytic scaffolding that allows us to notice the uneasy, migratory, creative and intellectual spaces that Brand herself inhabits and produces when creating and imagining the world, and the collaborative form of knowledge making that arises from such histories, events, conversations, debates, and love affairs. In *Theory* the work of the artist is the template, the palette, and the insistent reminder that all is not right in our world—but it is beautiful nonetheless. By recognizing and “feeling” along with the poet/artist/theorist Brand, the conditions of the present human existence—as a sometimes disembodied black female person (as figured by Odalys in the Teoria section where the narrator recounts “I had no body, [Odalys] said that I walked around her place like a floating head”)—we take up her challenge to cast our own thinking beyond the confines of textuality, to account for real encounters with the material and actual political work of living a life in our human bodies (218). Brand, as Leslie Sanders writes, asks that we “take witness beyond itself,” and thus think our world through a register that refuses to simply watch and survey our unbearable world in familiar ways (Sanders 16). In the final section of the novel, we see Teoria’s mortality being measured by her capacity for her theoretical output in a way similar to Teoria’s initial objectification of her lovers’ bodies and beauty: her body as theory is now laid bare and exposed to the reading eye (Brand 157). We must, indeed, *take witness beyond itself* here and see, finally, that the initial hypotheses of Teoria’s theories as body and bodily representation are actually manifested rather as theory as *beauty* and this is finally encapsulated in the aesthetic dimension of “all the beautiful pages” (157) of her work and being.

In her creative imagination and the difficult stakes and mistakes that she considers in *Theory*, Brand’s narrator then provides a pathway, many strategies, through which we cannot easily reproduce the world that we live, witness and survey. She suggests we must physically manipulate our being in it as well. Brand’s writing, and the reading-work of her writing, invokes us to both see the world for what it is, and through this witnessing, ask how we might collectively desire, live and physically inhabit the planet, and our local worlds, and our given bodies, differently. It is a criticism that imagines, calls for and desires ethical responses to reading, living and writing the world; and it is a criticism that as read from its “beautiful pages” identifies the ethical imperatives to which we account for our intimate and troubled relationships with each other and with our differential planetary lives (157). Brand lays bare the body of her work and its inherent difficulty to embody. But this work also points to the beautiful theorems of her critical and creative challenges of being human.

Concluding remarks

if i know anything, it is that "here" is a trick of the light, that it is a way of schematizing time and space that is not the only one available to some of us. maybe i am not here in the objectivist sense. maybe i am here in the way that a memory is here. now, ain't that fucking sad and beautiful?

– Billy Ray Belcourt

Lubrin's poetry is at least partly about an insistence on questioning, hypothesizing the negotiation of the private, interior imagery and mythology of ourselves in this "complicated relationship with a vast, public, political, realm we can't ever wholly grasp. A realm in geologic and genealogic time" (Lubrin "OB&T" 3). She knows she is complicit, trying to allow "the world in its immensity to pierce you through the poem" (3). As for beauty, she suggests "it's easier to see what beauty is if you consider that we disregard what we believe is ugly. We regard what is beautiful" after all (6). But Lubrin's work changes that: she asks us to regard, "to teach ourselves to regard, to practice the look long—that isn't safe and of itself," and to find the "willingness to risk safety, and at the same time to create conditions of safety, for the one who is seen, and for the others who want to see with you"—that sounds like the most beautiful project possible (6). And Brand's novel is at least partly to explain the theory that to *feel* is to make of understanding an embodied experience: when you have a feel for something, you actually "get it." By undoing the objectification of desired subjects, she frees up the agencies that have imprisoned and policed bodies to revolutionize a body of work that agitates aesthetics and ethics beyond their delimitations, to create new resistances of being solely gazed upon even when being gazed upon. You "hold with when you with hold" and this is beholden in this notion's transmutation of beauty (qtd in Barrett). As Moten says:

The black aesthetic turns on a dialectic of luxuriant withholding—abundance and lack push technique over the edge of refusal so that the trouble with beauty, which is the very emanation of art, is always and everywhere troubled again and again. New technique, new beauty. (Moten *Undercommons* 55)

Forging a beautiful existence, without the separability imposed by the categories of an *earthly beauty without ugliness* or a *humanly beauty without intellect*, yields the possible inhabiting of a black female political environment that sustains life rather than absolves responsibility. These writers chart the difficult paths. Here, in *Voodoo Hypothesis* and *Theory*, is language that honours the ethical impossibility of achieving a single position, and the necessarily vulnerable climate of that impossibility. In the face of irreparable injustice and the

fragility of the continuously devastated present, these works call on the dignity of the skin and the body. In such a world, it's this sort of spiritual stubbornness in both writers that I find most blessed as a reader. Against the reductive and decisive expletives of mass-media language and against the often universalizing poetics of much poetry and much theoretical discourse that abandons feelings from its rhetoric, their lines are thick, layered, black and multivocal. They act out the self-interrogating dialectic rather than provide symbolic clarity of the visual images (world and body) of their subjects. There is no aesthetic consolation. Their works ask us to enter into irreducible complexity as form of attention. Formally, the complexity (as suggested by the very titles of these books) expresses itself by pushing beyond simple closure. From the fundamentally unstable ground between beauty and nowhere, acts of both negation and embodiment forge the will to continue. But for both Brand and Lubrin the will is not an accretion of power focused and exercised upon an other; rather it quickens the register and resolve of perception as a meditative engagement with the world. And it gives the world its serious gorgeousness.

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