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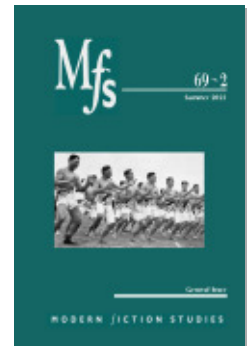
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Mfs Neoliberalism, Critique, and the Contemporary Novel: Tom McCarthy and Theory Fiction

Marc Farrant

Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of critique that could be called a generalization, if this loaded word did not entail a meaning that it is precisely the function of critical thought to reduce or suspect. This generalization goes by the name of “postcritique.” One of the driving forces behind theorizations of postcritique is a desire to account for the singular character of works of literature, as Rita Felski observes: “Their singularity and their sociability are interconnected, not opposed” (*Limits* 11). In opposition to this is what Felski in *Uses of Literature* calls “critical reading” (2): “a slogan that peremptorily assigns all value to the act of reading and none to the objects read” (3). In other words, critique is seen to swallow a work whole, subordinating it to the theoretical agenda of the critic. Postcritique seeks to evade this doubling violence; as Felski writes, “humanities scholars suffer from a terminal case of irony” (2). In this essay I explore issues of critique and postcritique by attending to the genre of theory fiction, notably that of British

novelist Tom McCarthy. By focusing on McCarthy's 2015 novel *Satin Island*, I explore the separation of theory and literature assumed by the movement of postcritique. I argue that *Satin Island* poses a problem for both the critic and the postcritic: what to do with a work of art that already knows too much and whose knowing too much may even compromise it from being a novel in the proper sense?

By challenging this assumed separation of theory and literature, McCarthy's novel underscores that to isolate critique or critical practice is to turn critique itself into an object. As Judith Butler reminds us, the objective character of critique is rather difficult to define: "Critique is always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice" ("What is Critique?"). Indeed, as an attempt to delimit the epistemological domain of a certain practice, postcritique is itself a critique of critique, often reducing critical theory in line with the definitive move of critique, which Butler describes as a subsuming of the "particular under an already constituted category." This essay challenges Felski's implicit monolithic category of critique, which can be seen across a range of postcritical and new formalist writings.¹

The first section of this essay investigates the genre of theory fiction as a literary mode of bearing witness to the historical exhaustion of critique, as diagnosed by Felski (an exhaustion framed in terms of an appropriation of both critique and the critical energies of the avant-garde because of what McCarthy frames as our neoliberal contemporary). Theory fiction thus substantiates a literary counterpart to the debates and issues raised by postcritique yet also challenges some of its fundamental premises (notably the premise that critique is categorizable and generalizable in the first place). Indeed, the manifold form of the genre of theory fiction—epitomized by *Satin Island*—destabilizes Felski's claims about both critique and culture. Like its predecessor *Remainder* (2005), McCarthy's *Satin Island* follows the pattern of its author's longstanding attack on liberal humanism, a sensibility seen as intrinsic to the conventions of the realist novel and its supposed capacity to render human depth or interiority. Like Felski's project, McCarthy's literary enterprise emphasizes surface phenomena and material forms beyond subjective agency, thereby attesting to the exhaustion of the liberal humanist subject (the private individual) of the novel genre itself. In *Satin Island*, this sense of novelistic exhaustion is represented by an exhaustion of critical thinking at the hands of neoliberal capitalism.

In the essay's second section, I juxtapose McCarthy's aesthetics of the postcritical with Felski's sense of postcritique, arguing that the

latter not only describes an historical phenomenon (theory) and its exhaustion but also symptomatizes neoliberalism's co-opting and depoliticizing of critique. I discuss this co-opting or appropriation of critique in reference to Adorno's famous critique of the avant-garde and jazz, demonstrating a line of thought that runs up to and includes Rachel Greenwald Smith's recent writings on compromise aesthetics. Felski's own engagement with the literary conventions of novelistic realism and mimesis serves as a crucial component of assessing postcritique's framing not only of critique but also of culture, specifically the relation of culture to context. Felski observes a homologous logic that links both novelistic realism and critical theory, an implicit hierarchization involved in their indexing of the relation between world and work. Whereas Felski appears to embrace a depoliticized apprehension of culture, McCarthy's postcritical and antirealist aesthetics build on this homologous logic to reenvision critique in light of neoliberalism's depoliticization of the social and against the return to an implicit liberal humanism. Drawing on the writings of Rancière, I suggest that by situating critique as integral to culture, as integral to the literary work itself, McCarthy's work rethinks the relation of literary autonomy or singularity to context in a way that does not involve jettisoning an engagement with the sociopolitical present.

Satin Island is an allegory of the toothlessness of critical thought in an age of neoliberal globalization that postcritique both diagnoses and epitomizes. McCarthy's contribution to the genre of theory fiction is ultimately not only wise to the emancipatory hyperbole of prior modes of critical thinking, but also suspicious of the attempt to escape critique and therefore itself constitutes a form of critique after critique. Finally, by attending to the contrast between two polemical essays by Zadie Smith, "Two Directions for the Novel" and "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," I turn to the changing political stakes of critique in contemporary literary practice and more broadly.

Postcritique and Theory Fiction

McCarthy's avant-garde credentials were established in one of the most influential essays of the 2000s, Smith's "Two Directions for the Novel." In "Two Directions," Smith casts McCarthy as the premier postmillennial novelist, a writer vehemently opposed to the clichés of "lyrical realism" (73), which Smith takes to be the hegemonic mode of contemporary anglophone fiction. Such naïve realism is built on firmly liberal humanist ground, namely the premise of "the essential

fullness and continuity of the self.” Despite the “assault of Joyce” (79) and literary modernism more broadly, lyrical realism still assumes a state of authentic being and authentic expression guaranteed by a fundamental relation between the particular and the general. As Smith notes, “this is another rule of lyrical realism: that the random detail confers the authenticity of the Real” (80). Contrary to this, McCarthy’s novel *Remainder*—which is seen in terms of a modernist lineage that extends from Duchamp’s urinal to Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*—concerns “pure facticity” (95). McCarthy, Smith writes, lets “matter matter” (90). On the surface (I use this expression with caution), McCarthy’s novel appears to constitute a postcritical novel *par excellence*. By subverting the ethical pieties and generic conventions of the trauma novel, *Remainder* not only undermines the traditional novel’s “epistemic power to render characters’ interiority” (Vermeulen 28) but also invites a nonindexical kind of reading attentive to the eventlike status of the work itself, to the remainder that remains after the attempt of critical judgement.²

Satin Island very much continues this subversive, or postliterary, project—postliterary insofar as the consistent target of McCarthy’s critical ire is the “liberal-humanist sensibility” (“Technology”) that he sees at work in the novel form itself. Such a sensibility, McCarthy argues, “has always held the literary work to be a form of self-expression, a meticulous sculpting of the thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual who has mastered his or her poetic craft.”³ McCarthy’s literary enterprise thus emerges out of the ashes of the “middle-brow commercial novel” (*Transmission*) and its cult of creative individuality. In this spirit of creative destruction, *Satin Island* can be witnessed in terms comparable to critical readings of *Remainder* as “a natural extension of poststructuralism’s opposition to the subject” (Lupton 515). However, *Satin Island* marks more strongly than its predecessor not only this critique of subjectivity but also the historical exhaustion of the liberal humanist individual in an age of neoliberal capitalism. This sense of privatization having exhausted the private sphere is central to my account of the novel as postcritical, in opposition to Felski’s postcritique, in the second part of this essay.

Like *Remainder*, *Satin Island* features an unnamed narrator-protagonist (or almost unnamed; he is referred to simply by the capital letter U.) and a mode of narration that emphasizes material causality over subjective agency.⁴ *Satin Island* resurrects the bare bones of the novelistic tradition to produce a zombified interrogation of our digital age. Numbered paragraphs create a discontinuous sequential effect that parodies online listicles or processes of information archiving. At

one moment, the narrator mockingly breaks the fourth wall to state: “*events!* If you want those, you’d best stop reading now” (13). Yet as my above reference to poststructuralism suggests (and Smith’s essay “Two Directions” makes clear McCarthy’s poststructuralist inheritance), these novels that appear to be all surface and no depth also appear to be infected with the “style of thinking” (*Limits* 2) that Felski identifies as critique. Given that Felski clearly has poststructuralism in mind as a mode of critique defined by a “spirit of skeptical questioning,” how do we reconcile McCarthy’s postcritical materialism (which we might provisionally term a nondialectical or nonallegorical materialism) and this apparent appeal to deconstruction? The answer is, of course, further critique; we need to define and delimit what we mean by poststructuralism (or deconstruction). Yet before I get to this definition, I want to explore further what makes *Satin Island* an example of theory fiction.

Satin Island is, among other things, a satire of the neoliberalization of the academy, albeit a satire that occurs outside of the academy. The novel is acutely sensitive to a privatizing drive that seeks to incorporate the entirety of civil society, a drive that is only intermittently perceived and historicized by U., who seems equally enthralled by its seemingly ahistorical force. U. is commissioned to help write for a large multinational corporation a “Great Report” (117) that is presented as a definitive anthropology of the present—“Lévi-Strauss 2.0.” U. was academically trained before being plucked from the “dying branches of academia” (24) by Peyman, his boss at the company (an elite consulting firm that has tentacles extending everywhere). Indeed, motifs of networks and systems, flow and relay, proliferate across the text. McCarthy has spoken of how the novel is triangulated via the three interstices of “anthropology, corporate culture, and literature” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 137). This last subject, literature, is revealing, and in an early draft McCarthy confesses that U. was to be a writer, or more specifically, a failed writer.

McCarthy’s implicit critique of liberal humanism in the novel can be traced to his interest in the intersection of literature and systems theory, as is evidenced by his commentaries on Kafka’s cybernetic aesthetics. Writing on Norbert Wiener’s notion of cybernetics, McCarthy elaborates a way of thinking “through which everything from economics to biology, psychology to media or law, can be both mapped and manipulated by being understood as an *information* or *communication* system—understood, that is, as a networked mechanism formed of and driven by a set of circuits, relays, and most important, feedback loops” (“Introduction: From Feedback to Reflux”

vi). This is very much in keeping with U., who interprets the world around him as fundamentally mediated, as textual (from oil spills to failed parachute jumps). U. inhabits a paranoiac state of mind where everything is understood as a cipher. Toward the end of the novel, envisaging the great labor of Lévi-Strauss composing *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) and seeking to map everyday language onto mythic structures, U. contemplates his own endeavor:

On one side, scientific, evidence-based research; on the other, epic art. If my Report had come to be completed, which side of the paper would it have been written on? More to the point: to which side does this not-Report you're reading now, this off-slew of the real, unwritten manuscript, belong? Perhaps to neither side, but to the middle: the damp, pulpy mass that forms the opaque body at whose outer limits, like two mirages, the others hover. (115)

For Christopher Tayler, in his review for the *London Review of Books*, McCarthy “gives the impression of being a messianic convert to all things theoretical who went into cryogenic suspension in the early 1990s, was defrosted only recently and now suffers from culture shock over the ‘stunningly naïve’ assumptions that people still make” (“Is There Hope for U?”). For other commentators, however, McCarthy’s theoretical credentials are qualified. Citing *Satin Island* as a work of petrofiction, Christa Grewe-Volpp notes that “McCarthy criticizes postmodernism’s strong reliance on discourse by presenting us with a character who has internalized the idea that only a sophisticated reading of texts will enable us to make sense of the world, and who utterly fails” (142). This sense of theoretical disenchantment certainly seems apt. U. frequently notes not only his indebtedness to High Theory but also his sense of belatedness: “This stuff bewitched me. Master-meaning! Concealed revelation! I spent my twenties wanting to be Lévi-Strauss” (29).

In a world of pure surfaces, critique seems impossible. Indeed, *Satin Island* shows how critique itself has become wholly incorporated. No longer a marginal endeavor, critique is seen as an epochal reflex, integral to the new economy of satin-smooth, frictionless flow: “The amazing thing about, let’s call it capitalism, this system,” McCarthy states, “is that it can recuperate anything” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 145). As U. tells us, “The machine could swallow everything, incorporate it seamlessly, like a giant loom that reweaves all fabric, no matter how recalcitrant and jarring its raw form, into what my hero would have called a master-pattern—or, if not that, then maybe just the pattern of the master” (31). U.’s hero is Lévi-Strauss, yet he is

highly aware of the double-bind of the anthropologist-theorist: that the cultural critic is doomed to override the object of their study by virtue of seeking a totalizing “purity” (18) that is always in fact a projection onto the object rather than a discovery extracted from the object. As McCarthy explains, “The anthropologist is a perfect stand-in for the writer. He looks at the world and reports on it. That is the classical model and, of course, as Lévi-Strauss already understood, it’s a model that is not workable in the modern era because there has been a set of implosions and that sort of distanced mastery has been lost” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 139). This classical model is also, of course, Felski’s model for the top-down mastery of the critic, for whom the work of art is always a means to an end. As Felski reiterates in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, “aesthetic relations involve more than power relations” (xii). However, by refusing to provide the anchoring points of the realist novel—such as characterization via deep interiority—*Satin Island* disrupts our own critical mastery of it as a novel that is generically unstable. Indeed, McCarthy also invites us to witness—in a seeming contradiction—both the proximity of theory and the subsuming logic of contemporary capitalism in addition to the correlation of postcritique (which emphasizes surface or antisymptomatic approaches, such as affect and embodiment theory and Latour’s actor-network theory) and the depoliticizing effects of neoliberalism.

McCarthy’s contradictory combination of critiquing neoliberalism while also exposing the commodification of critique can be usefully explored in terms of the generic classification of theory fiction. As noted by critics such as Nicholas Dames and Mitchum Huehls, theory fiction in its inaugural incarnation is an act of domestication. Huehls, taking Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot* (2011) as exemplary, defines early theory fiction as “those contemporary works of fiction, written in the wake of theory’s decline, that use well-known theoretical concepts—for example, the death of the author, the materiality of the signifier, the textuality of the world, the recursivity of reference—without reflexively applying those concepts to the fictional text itself” (282). Such works subordinate theory by treating it as the content of an essentially realist mode of representation.⁵ This type of theory fiction—including Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Sam Lipsyte’s *The Ask* (2010), and Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009)—are notably different from prior postmodern modes of writing (notably Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* [1985–86], Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* [1980], Byatt’s *Possession: A*

Romance [1990], and Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* [1979]).⁶ Postmodern fiction, in its various guises, was characterized by a similar reflexivity, yet such a reflexivity was integral to the form rather than merely the content of the work.⁷

In form, *Remainder* and *Satin Island* feel closer to this earlier strand of postmodern fiction. Yet we might borrow Huehl's account of contemporary or second-wave theory fiction to describe McCarthy's enterprise more accurately. Huehl writes, "The post-theory theory novel has taken the theory novel's flattened caricature of theory and repurposed it, even revitalized it, for newly aesthetic ends" (306). Rather than yield to the demands of realist representation, the "authors of post-theory theory novels use the well-known tropes of poststructural theory as the tools and building blocks for various forms of unreal realism, for speculative fictions that contribute to the composition rather than the deconstruction of the world" (283). Accordingly, I argue that *Satin Island* can be seen as neither simply a negatively inflected debunking of neoliberalism—in the mode of the critical mastery that Felski seeks to move beyond—nor as a mere aesthetic rendering, without political import, of the contemporary world order.⁸ Ultimately, as I argue below, McCarthy's post-theory theory fiction shows how the negativity of critique, inscribed within the literary enterprise itself, need not coincide with a sublation of the material contexts of art and life. Indeed, McCarthy's postcritical novel offers a way beyond the naiveté of symptomatic readings that pigeonhole both works of literature and the work of critique.

Neoliberalism, Context, and Compromise Aesthetics

Absent from Huehl's account of first-wave theory fiction is a sense of the historical relation between "realism's ultimate defanging of theory" (282) and the ongoing neoliberalization of the academy, a process partially parodied in *Satin Island* and famously apotheosized by David Lurie's account of "the great rationalisation" (3) in Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*. It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully historicize the generic evolution of contemporary literature—from theory fiction to the "post-theory theory novel" (Huehl's 306)—but the category of theory fiction affords an opportunity to historicize the change in criticism. Like theory fiction, postcritique refuses theory's reflexive turn to think its own conditions of possibility and incorporate those into its very form, and postcritique can similarly describe theory—and its legacy of critique—as a symptomatic and contingent historical phenomenon. Yet what if the realist domestication of

theory in theory fiction, and the eclipse of critical reading marked by postcritique, are also both contingent phenomena symptomatic of the new market rationality of twenty-first century academia? And what does it really mean to reappropriate a notion of the postcritical to describe McCarthy's literary project as distinct from Felski's account of postcritique?

In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Huehls and Greenwald Smith write of the notorious difficulty of pinning the term down; neoliberalism has economic, political-ideological, sociocultural, and ontological designations. Together these constitute "four different phases or modes" (3), with the last seen as most prescient to both our contemporary moment and McCarthy's writings. *Satin Island* is certainly attuned to how "neoliberalism expands granularly into the sociocultural and ontological fabric of everyday life." This ontological phase is aligned with recent shifts in scholarship, including postcritique. Huehls and Greenwald Smith write, "the much-discussed decline of High Theory that began in the 1990s finds its fulfilment here in neoliberalism's ontological phase: the critical power of poststructurally inflected Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and other politically committed theoretical approaches loses purchase on a reality fully subsumed by capital" (10). Felski's claim that aesthetic relations are separable from power relations therefore tracks alongside this ontological moment of neoliberalism and "the increasing sense that the world has become post-ideological and post-political."

Certainly, for one of postcritique's principal detractors—Bruce Robbins—Felski's enterprise is inherently neoliberal given its disavowal of the notion of context. Whereas for Felski the reduction of a work of art to its historical-social context suggests symptomatic or critical reading, for Robbins context functions as a bulwark against universalizing claims. Robbins writes, "What the postcritique people seem to be trying to get away from, in other words, is not critique but context, conceived (correctly) as a relativizer that impedes universalistic statements" ("Fashion Conscious Phenomenon" 6).⁹ What makes this denial of context neoliberal in tenor is the extent to which universalism aligns with a depoliticization of culture, which, as Greenwald Smith argues, has characterized neoliberalism since its inception. More specifically, such a depoliticization manifests as a dethroning of democracy: "The result of the elevation of these liberal values [individual freedom and universal human rights] over other democratic values [equality and popular sovereignty] is a general abdication of politics" (295). In terms of literary and cultural

production, this depoliticization has given rise—since the 1990s—to what Greenwald Smith terms “compromise aesthetics”: “compromise aesthetics envision the artist as having the freedom of the entrepreneur—radical, insofar as all formal tools are up for grabs for innovative refashioning, but not political, because collective meaning is shed from stylistic modes previously associated with ideological positions” (293). Compromise aesthetics is thus concurrent with both the realist turn of theory fiction and postcritique. (Note the affinity between Greenwald Smith’s idea of the artist-entrepreneur and Felski’s idea of the reader as newly attuned to more affirmative and affective dimensions, including bodily experiences of enchantment and shock that are usually deemed naïve by critique).¹⁰ Indeed, fundamental to the rise of compromise aesthetics is a growing distrust of the assumed anti-authoritarian impulses that were “at the heart of 1960s and 1970s critical theory” (296). An extension of this argument follows that the universalizing claims of postcritique are thus inherently tied to a universalist or depoliticized account of literature or at least to a model of literature whereby enchantment, shock, and surprise are positively rather than negatively defined (where shock is somehow preserved from being contaminated by the affective dimension of estrangement or the epistemological operation of debunking).

Despite this universalizing risk, and especially in light of McCarthy’s novel, it is worth taking seriously Felski’s awareness of the gap between intellectual work and politics and of the problem of translation between academe and activism. Certainly *Satin Island* shares this awareness, and thus both Felski and McCarthy can be seen as writing in the wake of Adorno’s famous account of the capitulation and commodification of the avant-garde in his 1936 essay “On Jazz.” Therein Adorno writes that contrary to the putatively transgressive improvisational forms of jazz (syncopation), such moments are merely

added in their naked externality to the standardized commodity character in order to mask it . . . Through its intentions, whether that of appealing to an elevated “style,” individual taste, or even individual spontaneity, jazz wants to improve its marketability and veil its own commodity character which, in keeping with one of the fundamental contradictions of the system, would jeopardize its own success if it were to appear on the market undisguised. (48–49)

Adorno’s “system” functions here as an antecedent to the rampant neoliberalism of atomized individuals depicted in McCarthy’s *Satin Island*; individuals whose interactions are more or less exclusively mediated through screens and software systems that purport to liber-

ate the individual (across time and space) but function, much like jazz, “with its individual or characteristic stylistic moments . . . [Jazz] appeals to the ‘taste’ of those whose sovereign freedom of choice is legitimated by their status” (49).¹¹ For Adorno, the capitulation of jazz to the market marks a more fundamental “psychic mutilation” that at its worst engenders for the oppressed a “mechanism of identification with their own oppression” (67). For Adorno the freedom of jazz is a false freedom that marks it as a pseudo- (or, following Greenwald Smith, postdemocratic) form: “The more democratic jazz is, the worse it becomes” (50).

The notable affinity between Adorno’s critique of jazz and Greenwald Smith’s account of compromise and entrepreneurial aesthetics underscores the continuity of a capitalist system able to recuperate and appropriate the nonstandard or critical within a normative model and thereby exhaust the political. The question is perhaps to what extent Felski’s postcritique describes such a process in its critique of theory’s radical politics, or rather, to what extent it is itself symptomatic of such a process (as Robbins seems to indicate).¹² An answer to this conundrum emerges through Felski’s re-evaluation of the concept of mimesis. In *Uses of Literature*, Felski asks us to reconsider how literary texts come to embody knowledge, the way that “works of art reveal something about the way things are” (77). She illustrates a continuity between traditional models of mimesis and twentieth-century models of ideology critique; both Plato and Althusser suspect the artwork of mendacity. Whereas traditional models of representation pose an iconic relation between work and world (“based on putative likeness” [80]), theoretical models pose an indexical relation between work and world, which allows even nonrealist texts to be seen as “driven by a suppressed causality.” This latter critical approach is associated explicitly with poststructuralist Marxism: critics understand the literary text as “riven by absences and fissures that call up social contradictions it cannot consciously address.” Felski’s alternative approach is to recuperate mimesis as “an act of creative imitation, not mindless copying” (85). If naïve liberal humanist realism is seen as totalizing in its attempts to master reality (as McCarthy is also keen to observe), then so too have “the truth claims of literary theorists turned out to be more totalizing than anything that nineteenth-century novelists could have dreamed of” (82). Instead, Felski’s alternative account of realism, of the correspondence between text and reality, stresses multiplicity and interaction: “not the correspondence of words to things, but illumination of words by words” (85). Vincent B. Leitch describes

this approach as a “neophenomenology” (36), and Felski stresses how literary works yield a “deep intersubjectivity” (*Uses* 85) derived from the “epistemological shakiness of fiction” (90). Unconstrained by evidentiary argument, the novelist is free to shuttle between inner and outer worlds, to render subjects from the inside, from within the embedded fabric of discourses and social norms as others would see them. This is complemented by the novel’s ability to ventriloquize idiomatic speech patterns and expose how linguistic forms match up with political ones. Felski’s point is that fictions yield a “means of knowing” (92) that cannot be substituted by the diagnostic tools of the critical theorist wishing to subordinate the particular to the general; for Felski, society is not “opposed to the particular, but [is constituted] through the accretion of endless particulars” (88).

Satin Island presents itself as such an accretion, yet it also seems to highlight that Felski’s desire to transpose the endlessness of the material particulars of contemporary life beyond any frame of reference (or context) is precisely endemic to neoliberalism’s exhaustion of politics and critique.¹³ The difference between Felski’s postcritique and McCarthy’s sense of the postcritical is represented by the recurring motif of an oil spill throughout the novel. For Grewe-Volpp, U.’s grappling with this mediated image of the oil spill, trying to render its satinlike material form through discourse, criticizes a postmodernist or poststructuralist privileging of discourse over matter. And in U.’s discourse, there is indeed something tacked on that can’t be subsumed. He contemplates: “An anthropologist’s not interested in singularities, but in generics. Oil spills are perfectly generic: there’s always one happening, or one that’s recently transpired” (34). Yet after printing off numerous tables and statistics, U.’s narration gives way to the singularity of an image that avoids his tabulating impulse: “The oil, still unguent, stretched as it rose. Threads, strands and filigrees appeared, thinning as they lengthened before thickening and folding in on themselves as they were gathered back by the black, undulating mass. Every time I re-watched this last piece of footage, I sensed, or thought I sensed, a smell: the sweet, familiar scent of homemade toffee at the point—that magical instant—of caramelization” (35). For Grewe-Volpp this points to the new materialism of Jane Bennett and to the “agentic influence” (141) of matter on life that “cannot be controlled by discourse” (148). Like Felski, Grewe-Volpp stresses that we attend to the surface layer of the text, and its multifarious interacting elements, rather than seek to explain them away as mere linguistic signifiers. Yet this reading turns McCarthy’s antirealism and what Smith describes as the excision of psychology

on its head; the affectlessness of the narration and the novel's aversion to interiority become a sign of the yearning affect or agency of a new materialist ontology. By appealing to an "energy unconscious" (150), Grewe-Volpp is, unlike Felski, willing to use the language of critique, even if this language derives from the poststructuralist/postmodernist theory that McCarthy purportedly denounces.¹⁴ Indeed, by making the material remainder an allegory of an abstract idea of materiality (or material agency), Grewe-Volpp falls into the critical trap and perhaps fails to register the truly postcritical thinking at work in the novel itself.

So, what is this thinking? It's no surprise that an allegorical or critical reading of this work functions in accordance with the epistemology Felski attributes to conventional mimetic realism. The critic is thus able not only to subsume the particular under the general, but also to separate content (the "energy unconscious" as referent) from form. McCarthy's novel challenges this purportedly critical or realist way of thinking not by positing a deep intersubjectivity but rather by destabilizing the generic boundary between theory/critique and fiction. This destabilization asks us to rethink what we mean by critique and its epistemological structure.

In Felski's neophenomenological revision of novelistic mimesis, we can see the influence not only of Ricœur (who is a direct reference) but also of Latour and actor-network theory, a theory endorsed by Felski and Elizabeth Anker in *Critique and Postcritique*. Latour has famously argued that critique has "run out of steam" ("Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" 225) and that social constructivism pushes its self-appointed mission to demystify so far that it not only undermines hard-won evidence, but also risks conspiracy theories.¹⁵ In response to this, Latour's actor-network theory is a social-scientific approach that favors a closer look at the associations contingently drawn by agents and rejects explanations based on predetermined social contexts. This theory, Felski and Anker write, allows one "to replace the notion of 'society' with an emphasis on networks of associations, conceiving of the artwork as embedded within multiple chains of mediation rather than serving as a microcosm of a social totality" (17). One such site of mediation is that of the reader, as Felski writes: "reception [is] as vital as production" (*Uses of Literature* 87). Instead of reducing narratives to their historical-political contexts, postcritique thus looks at the networks formed by the various agents, technologies, and institutions involved in the interpretive scene.

Yet this emphasis on embedded networks and on the reader as a producer is parodied throughout *Satin Island*. U. not only stands

for you, the reader, but also is himself an archetypal prosumer, in charge of consuming images in order to produce “content,” cultural patterns of meaning: “The concepts were all generated in-house and collectively . . . Seeing these in print, observing them being cited, appropriated, sampled, cross-bred, both by others and by Peyman himself, was like encountering an amalgam of our own minds, our own thoughts, returning to us on a feedback loop” (40–41). U.’s crisis is not one of linguistic idealism or postmodern textuality that can be simply opposed to material or embedded meaning. Indeed, this idea of an oppositional form of pure materiality is parodied in the novel when U.’s anthropologist friend in Frankfurt repeatedly uses the phrase “material culture” (96) to such an extent that (ironically) the term comes to function as an empty signifier. U.’s crisis is that no line of causality can be drawn from text to world or vice versa. This crisis is not only written into the character but also infects the very form of the novel and its disruption of the very category of character. U.’s inability to isolate adequate correspondences, to discern patterns of meaning, becomes our problem as readers. U., like the reader, is lost, not liberated, in a sea of surface or material data that mirrors our grappling with the materiality of this text.¹⁶

Tom Eyers draws attention to this problem of causality in writing on actor-network theory in the work of Caroline Levine. Levine’s horizontal approach seeks to isolate particularities without subordinating them to general structures or contexts. Levine writes, “I will make the case here that no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates or organizes all others” (16). Yet, as Eyers notes by focusing on Levine’s analysis of the TV show *The Wire*, describing the interaction between race, economics, and various other social forms does not require us to fix an “absolute pattern” (26). Nonetheless, as Eyers argues, “in practice, social forms, indeed aesthetic forms, are limited in their trajectories; retrospectively, one is often able to identify dominant factors that caused a particular event or made one thing more likely than another.” It seems that to move beyond sophisticated description to analysis some recognition of causal impetus is required. After all, to discuss how various forms collide and intermix “already presumes a set of conditions within which such events could occur.” In other words, networks happen within, and therefore presuppose, contexts. In terms strongly resonant of *Satin Island*, Eyers notes that the “contemporary surface complexity [of neoliberal capitalism] should not become an alibi for our losing sight of its . . . disproportionately adverse impact on . . . the contemporary human condition” (27).

This same problem of causality is also at work in Felski's neophenomenology. Felski writes that the "point is not to announce some general epistemological crisis but to make manifest how forms of knowing are tied up with distinctive ways of thinking and speaking that resist translation" (*Uses of Literature* 95). This seems incontrovertibly true, but to finish the claim here is to open onto a tautology. If forms of knowing are tied to ways of thinking and speaking (the surface level), then presumably ways of thinking and speaking are also tied to forms of knowing (in other words, context is irreducible). This tautology frames the eternal present of U.'s postcritical state; U. is a contemporary Bartleby stuck in a perpetual nowness. U. cannot comprehend causality, and as such his psychology is in a mutilated state; this content-led or character analysis becomes indiscernible from U.'s formal rendering as a nonrealist character deprived of introspection and depth. What makes *Satin Island* postcritical is thus not its abandonment of critique but rather its transformation of critique from an enterprise that seeks to subsume particulars within a context to an enterprise that proliferates the particularity of contexts.

This second sense of critique is arguably integral to the very definition of the term culture, as Robbins—drawing on the writings of Raymond Williams—argues in *Secular Vocations*. Culture is configured, according to Williams in *Culture and Society*, as a separate domain of intellectual and moral activity that operates "as a court of human appeal . . . over the processes of practical social judgement and . . . as a mitigating and rallying alternative" (xvi) to modern society. For Robbins, the historical account sketched out by Williams "produces a concept of 'culture' that is 'critical'—set against social actuality—by its very definition" (*Secular Vocations* 60). And literature occupies a central role in this project: "It was precisely because literature was not central to society or representative of its dominant trends that it could serve as a condensation and epitome of culture, 'an abstraction and absolute,' against which society would be judged" (61). The coextensive relation of culture and critique exceeds postcritique as a discourse because its object is not literature or culture as such but more often than not works of critical theory. However, if critique is not merely a philosophical attitude or skeptical ethos, but integral to culture, postcritique cannot move beyond the caricature without first theorizing its own definition of culture and therefore of literature.

Such a project may commence by turning to the work of Rancière, whom Felski and Anker praise in *Critique and Postcritique*. They write, "Rancière insists on art's resistance to established modes of political analysis. . . . While Rancière rejects any idea of emancipation

based on the intellectual's unmasking of ideology, for instance via endless demonstrations of the secret machinery of capital, he shows how instances of aesthetic dissensus can reshape established capacities for political expression—enabling disagreement and disruption that may emerge in the most unexpected places” (16–17). Similarly, Rancière insists on an historically specific account of literature (tied to his notion of the aesthetic regime of modernity) that declares a rupture “from the system of representation” (147). Yet unlike a neophenomenological rethinking of mimesis, Rancière in his essay on Melville's seminal short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” grounds literature in an “infinite contradiction of autonomy and heteronomy” (150). The democratic force of dissensus—which derives from literature's freedom to think or do anything once unshackled from the “normative power” (147) of representation—is thus tied to an aporia or contradiction that situates critique in a perpetual present without telos or program. It is ultimately the dual emphasis on equality as well as freedom that situates Rancière's account of aesthetic modernity as inherently critical. He writes, “The population of the novel is also the promise of a people to come. This political stake is inscribed in the very project of literature, in the principle of non-preference” (157). Literary autonomy—which decrees the Bartleby-like principle of nonpreference—is thus not to be mistaken for entrepreneurial invention *ex nihilo* but rather it is to be linked to the heteronomy of context that Rancière translates as “unsensed sensation” (151) (which constitutes the ineluctable embeddedness of both affective and intellectual forms that literary autonomy depends on). In the final analysis, literature is context bound, but context is boundless.

By drawing on Rancière, it is thus possible to read McCarthy's *Satin Island* as postcritical not only in terms of the neoliberal appropriation of critique and the exhaustion of politics. Although Felski provides tools for thinking about the effects of literary representation beyond the shared hierarchization imputed to both critical mastery and novelistic realism, what constitutes the key difference between Felski's postcritique and McCarthy's postcritical aesthetic is the awareness built into *Satin Island* that the neoliberal exhaustion of politics also manifests as a totalization of politics, and thus an aesthetic relation—or any other relation—cannot be wholly separated from power. Discussing the writings of Claudia Rankine, Ben Marcus, and McCarthy (namely *Remainder*), Huehls and Greenwald Smith write that “much of this work seems on its face to be . . . post-political. But that diagnosis misses the fact these authors are also trying to think about politics immanently, biopolitically, and non-dialectically” (11).

In other words, we can witness McCarthy's writings as engaged in a mode of literary critique not as a monolithic act of top-down dialectical synthesizing or sublation. *Satin Island* is alive to the danger of reducing meaning to single contexts (and this is built into its own evasion of meaning as a literary text at the unstable edge of genre classifications). But the novel is also alive to the fallacy of supposing we can evade context altogether, a fallacy of a pretheoretical past that pervades Felski's writings. This is evidenced especially in her appeal to a "lay response" (161) of general (decontextualized) readers in *Hooked*, an appeal that is consistent with the depoliticizing impulse of compromise aesthetics, defined by Greenwald Smith as the belief that "stylistic decisions [can] be rid of their ideological baggage and be made in a purely tactical fashion" (298). Felski's actor-network theory-inspired evasion of such contexts ultimately returns us to McCarthy's vehement critique of liberal humanism. If the depoliticizing impulse of compromise aesthetics and postcritique is symptomatic of the depoliticizing logic of neoliberalism, then this impulse is inseparable from a liberal ideology of the private, autonomous, and unconstructed individual. I explore the implicit politics of postcritique's turn against politics in the next section.

The (Post)Critical Difference

In this essay, I have suggested that postcritique's account of the impotency of theory not only describes the neoliberal exhaustion of critique but also manifests as a symptom of the postpolitical compromise aesthetics of our contemporary moment. Through a reading of McCarthy's *Satin Island*, I also have suggested that the attempt to isolate critique as separate from culture is doomed to mischaracterize both. The danger of this is palpable and suggested by Felski and Anker when they write: "Tactics forged by the Left—skepticism about the status of facts, exposure of the problematic motives of scientists—now drive the arguments of the Right" (15). *Satin Island* is similarly motivated to demonstrate the co-opting of critique by reactionary forces, albeit with a focus on neoliberalism rather than populism.

As noted above, in her 2008 appraisal of McCarthy's *Remainder* Smith notes McCarthy's indebtedness to a theoretical tradition that takes from "Blanchot, Bataille, Heidegger, Derrida and, of course, Robbe-Grillet" ("Two Directions" 92). Yet McCarthy's assault on authenticity and selfhood constitutes more than an exercise in the debunking of liberal humanism that still mires the novel in its contemporary mode of "lyrical realism" (71). Instead, McCarthy's post-theory

theory fiction is an act of “constructive deconstruction, a quality that, for me, marks *Remainder* as one of the great English novels of the past ten years” (93). Ten years later, Smith returned to some of the key ideas of her earlier debate. In the former essay she speculates that McCarthy’s avant-garde deconstruction of authenticity is inseparable from his cultural situatedness. As Smith writes, “the authenticity baton (which is, of course, entirely phoney) has been passed on. Passed to women, those of colour, to people of different sexualities” (88). Smith adds that “it does seem rather hard to have to give up on subjectivity when you’ve only recently got free of objectification” (87). From the perspective of her later 2019 essay, these speculative comments seem prophetic. Smith writes, “I’ve noticed, in the classroom, the emergence of a belief that fiction can or should be the product of an absolute form of ‘correctness.’ The student explains that I should believe in her character because this is *exactly* how X type of person would behave” (“Fascinated to Presume”). Implicitly it seems that the realist turn of contemporary fiction (Huehl’s early theory fiction or Smith’s account of lyrical realism) is aligned with a recuperation of mimesis and a dangerous theory of likeness that risks totalization, precisely as Felski notes in her comparison of nineteenth century novelists and literary theorists. Smith goes on: “We’re eager to speak for ourselves. But in our justified desire to level or even obliterate the old power structures—to reclaim our agency when it comes to the representation of selves—we can, sometimes, forget the mystery that lies at the heart of all selfhood.” Contrary to the indignant triumph of authenticity over ambiguity, literature, Smith argues, should have the right of a “fascination to presume”: to write the lives of others, to establish a bridge to otherness whereby the possibility of hostility is a necessary and constituent risk of hospitality.

Although Smith resorts to the language of liberal humanism in her defense of literature’s capacity to reveal the “mystery that lies at the heart of all selfhood,” what is fundamentally at stake is not a return to universalism at the expense of difference but rather a recovery of a kind of critical difference that she implicitly argues is absent from the contemporary literary scene. After all, it is the impulse to universalization that underlies the solidification of particular identities, divorcing them from context. In other words, the belief in an inviolable I, an authoritative self, runs “the risk of caricature” (“Fascinated to Presume”) or stereotyping. Worst of all, this kind of branded selfhood risks easy quantification and manipulation in a system of neoliberal capitalism and thus a general depoliticization of the public sphere despite rising authoritarianism and populism.¹⁷

Apropos *Satin Island*, Smith talks of an essential victory of the language and culture of authenticity, noting how the new “supposedly unquestionable authenticity of personal experience . . . shares some DNA with the late capitalist concept of brand integrity.” The “dark joke,” she writes, is that “these unique selves to which we feel so attached . . . are entirely irrelevant to that second, shadow text that lies behind it all. To the technological monopolies that buy and sell your data . . . They do not care that you are woke or unwoke, patriot or activist. To that shadow text, all you are is data.”

In light of the phoniness of authenticity and its complicity with exploitative practices of neoliberal Big Data, how can literary practice institute a critical difference that aims to make a difference, that aims to go beyond a return to a postmodern or poststructuralist deconstruction of subjectivity? McCarthy’s theory fiction offers such a model insofar as its self-reflexive awareness of theoretical pitfalls correlates not with the theory of postcritique but rather with an aesthetics of the postcritical. Such an aesthetics is palpably captured by the key trope in the work of buffering, which is seen symbolically as a perpetual circle spinning on a computer screen. Just as *Remainder* disturbs a linear temporality by announcing a traumatic gap between knowing and experiencing, *Satin Island* too concerns a sense of belatedness or buffered experience. Here buffering is a metaphor for the failure of critical capture, where consciousness catches up to and incorporates the experience, subsuming the particular. Indeed, taken together, these two novels speak to the relation between corporation, corpus, and corpse.¹⁸ By withholding novelistic interiority, a sense of causal progress, and any access to empathic identification, McCarthy’s blurring of theory and literature performs a thinking that is also one step ahead of us as readers. This not only prevents us from treating the particulars as means to an end (to unearthing some ideological or critical unconscious of the text), but also prevents us from universalizing those particulars as (aesthetic) ends in themselves. In other words, there can be no insistence on the surface without presupposing an idea of depth. McCarthy’s theory fiction thus speaks not to an overcoming of critique but rather to its perpetual or “eternal present” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 144). By maintaining a critical difference at the heart of critique, McCarthy’s novel shows how critique might be transformed in our neoliberal age away from its monolithic caricature as High Theory and into a mode or practice of dissensus or democratic buffering that, as Butler writes, would seek “to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself” (“What Is Critique?”).

Notes

1. In their recent essay “Form and Explanation,” Kramnick and Nersessian make a case for methodological pluralism, suggesting an affinity between postcritique and recent accounts of form in the writings of the “New Formalists”:

This shift from extravagant flights of critical fancy to a more sedate norm of accuracy means to signal an end to both the paranoia and the epistemological relativism marring the kind of critique that, in Latour’s memorable phrase, has run out of steam. . . . This relatively new appreciation for the empirical—for what is not only modest but also verifiable—shares in the wider postcritical reconciliation with the natural and social sciences. (654)

2. As Vermeulen argues, McCarthy presents an implicit challenge to the ethical pieties of “trauma literature” (28) insofar as trauma literature continues to adhere to “the novel’s unique epistemic power to render character’s interiority.” By pushing trauma beyond the individual psyche, McCarthy violates the novelistic tenets of interiority, emotional solicitation, and readerly empathy.
3. For further discussion of the postliterary, and in reference to McCarthy, see my essay (“Literary Endgames”).
4. McCarthy notes that: “The character. . . is called U. because it’s an abbreviation of [Robert] Musil’s Ulrich and he is a kind of modern man without qualities, but also U. as in ‘you, the reader,’ like Baudelaire’s hypocritical reader, the double, the brother” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 148).
5. As Huehls notes, “This version of [theory fiction] might thus be seen as participating in what several scholars have described as the realist turn in contemporary fiction” (282).
6. Dames observes that these fictions describe but do not reproduce “the slippery nature of signs” (165).
7. This emphasis on form is integral to what Currie terms “theoretical fiction” (70). For more, see Greaney. Form reflexivity is also key to Hutcheon’s famous account of “historiographic metafiction”: “Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel” (40).
8. It is worth noting how description has recently been recuperated as a category of literary analysis as a countermeasure to critique, notably in the work of Love. Description, Love writes, enables the critic to get “close but not deep” (375).

9. Alongside “Fashion Conscious Phenomenon,” see Robbins’s essay “Critical Correctness.”
10. Felski emphasizes the importance of a “text’s entanglement with its readers” (*Limits* 175), and endorses a new “language of enchantment, incandescence, and rapture without embarrassment.”
11. U. talks to his girlfriend Madison using Skype: “Her face, on my screen, jumped in small cascades of motion from one pool of stillness to another” (8). In an interview, McCarthy notes, “So, my model for subjectivity—that way I stage it in this book, at least—is just U. in front of the screen” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 148).
12. Postcritique’s generally affirmative posture suggests the latter, therefore aligning with the overall affirmative character of the culture industry itself. As Adorno elaborates elsewhere, “The concept of positivity in itself, in abstracto, has become part and parcel of ideology today; and . . . critique in itself has started to become suspect, regardless of its content” (*Lectures on Negative Dialectics* 23).
13. The irreducibility of critique is again attested by the slipperiness of genre, as McCarthy notes: “I’m wary of this distinction between literature or fiction and theory, because all fiction is theory, it’s just usually bad theory. Unexamined naïve realism—that is a construct just as much as anything else” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 141).
14. Grewe-Volpp also relies on an allegorical reading of character analysis to substantiate the meaning of the novel as a whole.
15. Postcritique is also notably indebted to the queer theorist and literary scholar Sedgwick. In the essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,,” Sedgwick expresses her discontent with the philosophies of suspicion, which have led to a negative mode of reading she calls “paranoid.” As an alternative, Sedgwick proposes a “reparative” reading, an interpretive position that allows the critic to be open to what is new and unexpected. Felski borrows Sedgwick’s analysis of the negativity of suspicious readings but prefers not to use the terminology of paranoia in order not to fall into the (Freudian) diagnostic style she is committed to counter.
16. McCarthy notes, “For [U.,] writing forms part of material culture. When he is obsessed with oil spills he is looking at this black matter, hitting and staining a white snowy coastline, and that’s writing for him—it’s a stain, a very material thing. And even digital culture is totally material for U.” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 142).
17. That neoliberalism and authoritarianism are coextensive is central to Greenwald Smith’s account of compromise aesthetics and “postdemocratic form”: “How, then, to account for the convergence of these two seemingly opposed political tendencies? The answer, I argue, can

be found in the fact that neoliberalism and authoritarianism share a reliance upon the depoliticization of a citizenry, a skepticism toward the democratic notion that citizens are responsible for managing the political distribution of authority” (292).

18. Motifs of buffering and incorporation abound in the novel and are intimately connected. U. notes:

We require experience to stay ahead, if only by a nose, of our *consciousness* of experience—if for no other reason than that the latter needs to make sense of the former, to (as Peyman would say) narrate it both to others and ourselves, and, for this purpose, has to be fed with a constant, unsorted supply of fresh sensations and events. But when the narrating cursor catches right up with the rendering one, when occurrences and situations don’t replenish themselves quickly enough for the awareness they sustain, when, no matter how fast they regenerate, they’re instantly devoured by a mouth too voracious to let anything gather or accrue unconsumed before it, then we find ourselves jammed, stuck in limbo: we can enjoy *neither* experience *nor* consciousness of it. Everything becomes buffering, and buffering becomes everything. The revelation pleased me. I decided I would start a dossier on buffering. (69)

Asked “where would the point of resistance—the point of criticism or critique—be?” (“The *CounterText* Interview” 145), McCarthy responds by relating this idea of buffering to a “kind of resistance” internal or incorporated into the machine, like a bug in the system, which is seen as opposed to “old school resistance . . . a model of political resistance that has become shipwrecked on the stealth and invisibility of contemporary networked power.”

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