MaComère

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“NOTHING SOOTHING”: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORK OF DIONNE BRAND

LESLIE SANDERS AND HEATHER SMYTH

I have nothing soothing to tell you,
that’s not my job,
my job is to revise and revise this bristling list,
hourly
Dionne Brand, *Inventory*

Dionne Brand’s poetry, novels, nonfiction, film, and historiography have profoundly shaped the terrain of contemporary Canadian literature and criticism and attracted an international following of readers and scholars. Numerous essays have taken up individual works, situated her œuvre within various theoretical and ideological landscapes, and traced her powerful evocations of struggle, migrancy, loss, racism, and the history of African Caribbean peoples. Yet to date no full-length monograph or collection has focused exclusively on her work. Maria Caridad Casas (*Multimodality in Canadian Black Feminist Writing*) and Carol Morrell (*Grammar of Dissent: Poetry and Prose by Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand*) have valuably situated her writing in the context of that of her contemporaries, but we are long overdue for an extensive study of Dionne Brand’s work on its own. Our special double issue of the Caribbean women’s writing journal *MaComère* is, we expect, only the first. It offers scholarly criticism of Dionne Brand’s work in its own

frame: her poetic and political trajectory; her relationship with her precursors and contemporaries; and her continual exploration of the possibility of politics and of ethical witness.

While some essays in the collection offer thematic readings of individual or multiple works, others comprise sustained and close attention to Brand’s poetics and literary form, an approach as yet neglected in Brand scholarship. Analyses of her latest long poems *thirsty. Inventory*, and *Ossuaries* are discussed here in depth in essays that explore the importance of poetic form, of voice and audience, and of Brand’s precise attention to language. As the contributors make clear, this attention to form does not leave behind the insights of Brand criticism to date; rather, these essays demonstrate how Dionne Brand’s great power lies in her revelation of how poetic image and structure can so precisely trace the emotive and political commitment of a compassionate ethics and political praxis.

Imagistic and thematic tracings through Brand’s oeuvre appear in four essays: Winfried Siemerling unfolds the image of Yemaya in Brand’s work as a continually appearing (though not always foregrounded) representation of disruption and connection. Yemaya, orisha of the sea, signals Brand’s insistence on alternative and non-Western cartographies of knowledge as underpinning the existential disruption and continuities of the African Diaspora and its communities. Siemerling argues that Yemaya enables Brand’s poetic tactics of connecting past and present, and “here” and “there,” using improvisation to create “cohesion” over the “discordant realities of diaspora,” much like Glissant’s “poetics of relation.” He examines this theme across Brand’s work—in *Sans Souci, No Language is Neutral, In Another Place, Not Here, At the Full and Change of the Moon* and *Map to the Door of No Return*, where Yemaya is finally brought into full presence as Brand’s image of “way-finding,” both “loss and transformation.” The presence of Yemaya posits a matriarchal lineage “governing forces of the black Atlantic.” His reading illuminates how Brand narrates the intensity of desire that provides communality within and among descendants of the door.

Veronica Austen similarly revisits continuities in Brand’s work by ex-
ploring photography and memory, proposing that photographs in her work are “fickle signifiers” and a “fallible archive,” for their high modality or iconicity “promise[s] . . . that which they cannot deliver.” She offers a rhetorical analysis of photography as prosthesis and trope whereby individuals in diaspora should be, but are not, connected with their familial heritage through photographs. Unlike “postmemory,” she argues, prosthetic memories (the term is Alison Landsberg’s) can be taken off, modified, or exchanged, offering “more agency in one’s confrontation with the past.” Austen’s essay also revisits a recurrent theme in Brand scholarship—the tension surrounding the desire for origins—and confirms that photography foregrounds the risk of a stasis of representation that can attend discourses of belonging or rootedness. She traces Brand’s use of the photograph from early short stories to her most recent novel, *What We All Long For*, as a prosthetic suturing present to past, a relation unreliable in every respect, yet in some sense also a dialogic way of knowing and unknowing.

Reading *In Another Place, Not Here* through psychological theory and Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, and attending to all three of the novel’s characters—Elizete, Verlia, and Abena—Rebecca Ashworth argues that the novel is concerned more with internal decolonization than with the defeated political revolution that shapes its concluding section. Its liberatory trajectory, Ashworth argues, lies in the women’s love and assessment of each other’s possibility for action and change: “what each perceives in the other, and feels to be lacking in herself, provides the women with the revolutionary force that overcomes their individual shame . . . United through their love of the other they symbolize a gendered revolutionary character.” She argues further that the narrative structure, which delays the depiction of the moment of revolution and Verlia’s leap until healing has been achieved, suggests hope for political revolution not as a means of self-liberation, as in the passages of Fanon that Verlia cites, but rather as the construction of a healthy and viable future.

Jim Hannan strikes a rare note of ambivalence regarding Dionne Brand’s popular and acclaimed *What We All Long For*. His concern is that it evinces the “increasingly inextricable relationship between literary represen-
tation and globalization”; he argues further that “What We All Long For makes clear that finding a place outside the prevailing logic of hyper-individualism and non-stop consumerism from which to build alternatives to this form of globalization has become difficult.” This argument is based in part on the idea that fiction, as opposed to poetry, is particularly restricted by its attention to its audience and to the global pressures of the marketplace. Hannan’s judgment about the novel’s embeddedness in this circuit is based on a reading of the novel’s concluding moments, Jamal’s attack on Quy to obtain the silver BMW. Hannan judges that the aestheticization of the “beamer’s silver skin” denies the violence of the attack any transformative meaning, as other only apparently transformative actions in the novel, or treatments of diverse ethnicities, are also aestheticized and commodified. He concludes that the novel positions characters and events so as to show the effects of globalization on the possibility for change, for a commodified globalization “replaces empathy for the other with care of the self.”

Cara Fabre concurs that it is crucial to interrogate the politics of literary form, particularly in terms of the capitalism that underlines colonialism and extends it into globalization, but she argues that the “materialist logic” of Brand’s politics, and her acute awareness of the “incommensurability of movement towards equality within a system of inequality,” is the foundation of her poetics. Fabre’s essay marks the transition point in this collection between thematics and poetics. She is particularly interested in the gap in Brand criticism in attention to how Marxist and anti-capitalist critique informs her poetics as well as her narrative work. She argues that the predominant framework of postcolonial readings in Brand scholarship “does not address the full scope of Brand’s resistance work as it deconstructs the capitalist ideology that informs contemporary forms of colonization.” She revises the role of the flâneur in thirsty as a performance of resistance to “racist, capitalist, and patriarchal power structures” by the speaker’s “remapping [of the city] as a place of surveillance and erasure.” Similarly, the figure of the “ethical lover” in Inventory critiques the manipulation of global subjects by mass media through juxtaposing its workings against an “affect of love . . . laying bare the re/
productive circuitry of capitalist regimes.” If *thirsty*’s speaker warns, through her detachment, that “cultural transformation is a vital step toward, but does not constitute, fundamental structural transformation,” *Inventory*’s speaker is embedded in what she exposes; and by implicating its readers and all citizens in this complicity, *Inventory* may offer a vision of alternate ways of being. Fabre concludes, “If ideology is at least partially imaginative, then new ways of being in the world are infinitely conceivable and possible.”

Paul Watkins joins a number of our contributors in calling attention to the ways Brand’s poetry implicates its readers, but he turns to the role of jazz in Brand’s oeuvre to re-name reading as a kind of listening. He asks, “how can any of us read without considering the listening of our own listenings?” and argues that *Ossuaries* “is a call towards a diacritical reading praxis” grounded in Brand’s use of jazz not just intertextually—although intertextual references to Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane abound—but modally and as a means to “score” her improvisational poetics. Improvisation, argues Watkins, shapes Brand’s appeal to identity in process and to the contingency of a “coming community” (Agamben) built along shifting axes and constituencies. Watkins uses jazz theory to explore Brand’s use of formal and lexical strategies drawn from the “anti-assimilationist” and disruptive tradition of jazz aesthetics, and proposes that the ethical reading praxis built into *Ossuaries* is both a non-authoritative and relational “call to freedom” and an incisive “critical reading praxis of its own sounding.”

Kate Siklosi’s essay echoes these sonic motifs, extending the sonic into the spatial through her use of Deleuze and Guattari’s spatio-sonic concept of “refrain.” The sonic elements of “refrain” signal rhythm, resonance, polyvocality, and repetition, but Siklosi also proposes a deterritorialized “refrain of place” and “collective desire for human place” in Brand’s *thirsty* and Wayde Compton’s story “The Blue Road: A Fairytale.” Siklosi looks at elliptical structures within these two texts to explore how textual/poetic lacunae are negotiations of “the historical lacuna of the Diaspora,” measuring its unbridgeable distance and unsayability, and “transitional doorways and dis-
courses that institute the rehabilitation of historical empty space for the creation of a new collective consciousness.” Although this collective consciousness does not evoke belonging, she argues, the ellipsis can permit a (re) territorialization of city space and the liminality of doorways, which she translates into passage and crossroad, places of architextual possibility. In thirsty, the resonating eloquence is in the ellipsis “... thirsty ...” that surrounds Alan’s dying word; in Compton’s short story, the figuration of liminality is spatialized in the adventures of the nomadic central character Lacuna. Through liminality and lacunae, Siklosi argues, both works engage in the difficult but necessary creation of habitable future space.

Several of the essays included here demonstrate through close attention to form how the relationship between speaker and reader in Brand’s poetry invites responsibility, action, and engaged citizenship from the reader. Dale Tracy, for instance, uses a close reading of Brand’s poetics in Inventory to argue that the poem reshapes the relationship between speaker and reader usually found in witness poetry. The ethics of that poem, she proposes, arise through its engagement of the reader in a “condition of being, an ontology of reading” by shaping the reader relationship through “connections of contiguity rather than ... similarity.” By emphasizing “a way of being over ways of disseminating knowledge,” she argues, “metonymy ... connects and leaves [the reader] waiting,” and ultimately fashions a space within the poem for “attentive response” from the reader. In this way, the poem offers the reader “collaboration and grace” and “compassionate contiguity of feeling from nearby” rather than the transfer of knowledge of suffering.

Pamela Mordecai, in turn, responds to Brand’s work as one poet to another: first through the extract from her poem “Reading at 4:00 am,” in which she engages Brand’s Inventory; and secondly, when she engages with Brand, through her essay offered here, as a maker of “song-and-story” where all writing is poetry and all poetry is an intuitive way of “teasing out the world, attending to it and listing it while at the same time being reluctant to conclude.” For Mordecai, the “listing” feature of Brand’s poetics derives from a creole relationship with language and experience characterized by “unre-
solved pluralities,” prismatic vision, and the poetic device of “marked litany.” Although Brand’s recent long poem *Inventory* lays bare this technique of formal litany and accumulation, Mordecai explores the roots of this poetics in Brand’s earlier work—primarily *Land to Light On* but also *Foresday Morning* and *No Language is Neutral*—and demonstrates how this mode of creole syntax extends responsibility to the reader/listener. Far from leaving the social or political behind in favour of the aesthetic, Mordecai argues, this poetic technique is an instrument of Brand’s ethics and praxis: “She trusts the power of the litanies of specific accumulated experience to persuade her readers to open *their* chests, as she puts it in *Inventory*, ‘to hold the wounded’ (100).”

Finally, in Franca Bernabei’s approach to Brand’s *Ossuaries* we see again how a focus on poetic form reveals and crystallizes other themes in her work. Bernabei focuses her attention on the tercet structure of *Ossuaries* and how it enables “the discontinuous continuity that formally and thematically links each [bone] box to the others” but also “thematically and formally (dis) connects her sequence of works.” And she reveals how Brand uses the lyric form both faithfully and critically as “lyrical anti-lyric” in her use of a “dis-embodied twoness” of narrators that “allows her to confront, more provocatively than ever, the foundational notion of life which she explores in its threefold dimension as life of human beings, life of the species, and life of the world.” More than simply gesturing to intersubjectivity or challenging the individualism of the lyric, Brand’s anti-lyric, argues Bernabei, both “endorses a relational ethics of responsibility” and frames that responsibility and those relations in terms wider than modern biopolitics can embrace: if flesh is “common to a plurality of—always singular—beings,” Bernabei suggests, through its bones “stripped of flesh” *Ossuaries* asks, “which kind of life and which humanism can be envisaged today.”

We end with this gesture to the directions in which Brand’s work is moving, for as Mordecai puts it in her essay, “Dionne Brand’s poetry is committed to revisioning increasingly large landscapes—landscapes that extend not just to a province, country or region, but to the planetary home of animal and mineral, plant and person—earth being all.” As several other essays in
this issue insist, Dionne Brand’s gaze is global, and her interrogation a search for the ethicality of witness. The attention to the global in her most recent poetry, *Inventory* and *Ossuaries*, does not mark a turning away from earlier preoccupations with the traumas of a particular history, the dislocations of the migrant, or particular geographies of injustice. One rather might consider these earlier foci both foundation and lens for a broader vision: they ground and enable the acuity of her witness, and her insistence that her readers attend.

**Work Cited**

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