

*Toxic Bodies that Matter: Trans-Corporeal Materialities in Dionne Brand's Ossuaries*

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What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of *all* bodies—'human' and 'nonhuman'—and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked.

Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" (2003)

there were roads of viscera and supine alphabets, / and well, /  
fields of prostration, / buildings mechanized with flesh and  
acreages / of tender automobiles / heavy with our tiredness,  
solid with our devotion / after work we succumbed / headlong  
in effusive rooms / to the science-fiction tales of democracy.

Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (2006)

The first decade of the 21st century has been dramatically shaped by a series of geopolitical events that partly originated in the aftermath of a post 9/11 scenario of destruction and death. Considering that nearly 3,000 bodies perished in the attacks, that many families received only body parts of their loved ones, and that 1.5 million tons of debris were pulled out of the site, I suggest referring to this material ethnoscape<sup>1</sup> as one of 'monstrous trans-corporeality' (Alaimo 2010). However, as Zîzêk and others have argued, coverage of streets filled with soot and rubble consciously avoided providing viewers with footage of the actual carnage, in contrast to common coverage of disasters and conflicts happening in the so-called Third World. Mostly through mediated ways, millions of people witnessed the US superpower become vulnerable territory to external threats thus generating a sense of collective trauma, as

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<sup>1</sup> In "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes ethnoscape as "the landscape of persons who make up the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest-workers, and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (192).

Judith Butler eloquently puts it in the collection *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). And yet, in a perverse turn of events, the September 11 attacks granted the country with illegal military nation-building interventions and foreign policy actions self-justified under the supposedly unavoidable 'war on terror' that has contributed to the uneven restructuring of the world for the last decade. This ongoing war has been accompanied by a 'rhetoric of mass deception' (Lai 2009), characterized by such widespread sentences as 'enduring freedom,' 'infinite justice,' 'state of exception,' and the threat of 'bioterrorism.' For the purposes of this article, I would like to particularly focus on how biopolitics has been employed not only in the context of post 9/11, but also in the contemporary climate of global crisis in order to create a global 'culture of anthrax' (Hage 2003). In this climate of fear, endless references to toxic bacteria, virus, disease, contagion, and suspicious liquids have permeated both political and cultural discourse in an attempt to regulate and control a variety of so-called 'deviant' populations.<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to address and counteract some of these hegemonic structures of power, many contemporary writers within and outside the US have voiced their opposition to such strategies of power and domination in a variety of ways. I propose to begin the discussion by posing a series of questions: How did events such as September 11 and its aftermath affect cultural practice within Canadian borders? What spaces of critique have been generated? What are the ethical responsibilities that writers face towards the politics of terror, paranoia, and fear that have shaped the turn of the 21st century? Within the field of contemporary TransCanLit, queer women writers, such as Hiromi Goto, Emma Donoghue, Dionne Brand, and Larissa Lai, among others, have ushered in new material representations of corporeality and alternative forms

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<sup>2</sup> The threat of the Other as a source of pollution is definitely not a new phenomenon. Yet, it could be argued that the feelings of paranoia and anxiety have definitely increased within the last few years, particularly as a consequence of both the US 'war on terror' and the global economic crisis.

of embodiment in an attempt to develop counter-hegemonic ethical and political frameworks<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, the first decade of the 21st century has also seen the emergence of new material feminist theories that have also proposed alternative logics of corporeality allowing for the articulation of counter-hegemonic ethical and political practices. Today we inhabit what feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo refers to as a 'trans-corporeal' time-space framework where human materiality is inseparable from the natural and technological worlds. In her discussion on trans-corporeality, Alaimo stresses the need for a theoretical rearticulation of the 'contact zones' between human corporeality and the more-than-human worlds in an attempt to situate materiality at the centre of feminist analysis. As such, trans-corporeality becomes a theoretical site where corporeal approaches meet environmental methodologies in productive ways. Along similar lines, feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad claims that "what is needed is a robust account of the materialization of *all* bodies—'human' and 'nonhuman'—and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked" (128). In order to challenge the supremacy of language and culture over matter, Barad articulates a posthumanist notion of performativity that interrogates the assumptions around given differences between human and nonhuman categories. In an attempt to reinvigorate interdisciplinary approaches, feminist critic Nancy Tuana also urges all theorists to embrace an ontology that rematerializes the social and takes the agency of the natural seriously, stressing the interaction between humans and the environment; between social practices and natural phenomena. As these material feminist scholars aptly argue, the literal 'contact zone' between human, natural, and non-human

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<sup>3</sup> I follow the term 'TransCanadian,' proposed by Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki (2007), in an attempt to dislodge a series of cross-border writers from traditional definitions around national literatures and instead, understand how their work is invested in rearticulating new ties of affect and coalition in a two-way dialogue between Canada and the rest of the world.

materialities would allow for the emergence of non-normative ethical and political subjects, relations, and positions.

Drawing on recent developments in material feminist theory (Alaimo 2010, Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Tuana 2008), this article examines the representation of the female body as a site of trans-corporeal toxicity in Dionne Brand's latest poetry collection *Ossuaries* (2010). Yasmine, the central figure in the text, embodies a trans-corporeal toxicity inscribed by the violence of multiple histories and discourses across different temporal and spatial frameworks. Significantly, as Brand's collection illustrates, trans-corporeality is not only a site of violence and death, but also a place of desire and resistance. "Thinking through toxic bodies," Alaimo claims, "allows us to re-imagine human corporeality, and materiality itself, not as a utopian or romantic substance existing prior to social inscription, but as something that always bears the trace of history, social position, region, and the uneven distribution of risk" (261). Brand's *Ossuaries* brings the paradoxical nature of trans-corporeality to the forefront by providing a material feminist account of the intimate, and sometimes lethal, outcomes of the crossing of material borders, particularly for the female body. By dealing with the permeability of boundaries between the human body, technology, and the natural world as a site of interconnectedness, agency, and dependency, *Ossuaries* provides a feminist critique of the material, ethical, and political impact of hegemonic structures and practices of power in an unevenly globalized 21st century.

For the last three decades, Dionne Brand's fictional landscapes have been populated by a sense of loss and desolation, particularly in her examinations of racist, nationalistic, and sexist structural violences within the Canadian context. As critic Cheryl Lousley claims,

throughout her poetry, fiction, and criticism, Brand has shown, like Spivak, an attention to the violent exclusions enacted through normalizing universals, such as standard English, Canadian national identity and heterosexuality, and an acute interrogation of the danger yet necessity of collective identities for political mobilization. (38)

Brand's recent work, I would argue, though still focusing on such environmental, cultural, and political ruptures, is now more invested in addressing the subtleties of transnational and globalization impulses characterizing the first decade of the 21st century (Brydon 2007). Her latest poetry collection, *Ossuaries*, opens with an image of environmental toxicity where the narrative persona looks at the past as a site of contaminated dreams and imprisonment. This exercise of looking back, of tracing the past, is not one of nostalgia, since the sense of violence and paralysis is rendered as never-ending. Human beings seem to have lived a genealogy of toxicity and despair through time and history and thus bodies bear the trace of such ruptures:

let us begin from there, restraining metals / covered my heart, rivulets / of some unknown substance transfused my veins / at night, especially at night, it is always at night, / a wall of concrete enclosed me, / it was impossible to open my eyes / I lived like this as I said without care, / tanks rolled into my life, grenades took root / in my uterus, I was sickly each morning, so dearly. (11)

References to bodily organs collapse with material objects saturating the woman's body with a multitude of toxic materialities. As a result, it is not a foetus but grenades that grow in Yasmine's uterus thus disallowing the possibility of reproduction for the human species. Critic Wendy Pearson claims that the pregnant body is a public body in the sense that it is the locus of future citizens and nations. As she argues, "the ownership of national futurity by iconic citizens erases the possibility that racialized and sexualized bodies can themselves bear futurity" (78). The female body in Brand's long poem is scarred by the violent traces of history; it is exhausted after centuries of exploitation; it is forever rendered unproductive. The result, Brand suggests, is that there is no escape from this barrenness; there is no space for an alternative futurity. *Ossuaries* depicts a landscape populated by bodies that are not only presented as wasted and toxic, but also subjected to systems of surveillance and imprisonment: "an arm electrified and supplicant, spiked / with nuclear tips, its transmutation / in the verdant shoulder of penitentiaries

/ to come, who would mistake these wounds, / who call these declarations nothing, / these tender anatomies" (85). Notice how the reference to tenderness in the stanza suggests certain innocence and redemption for humanity, despite our characteristic impulse for destruction and annihilation. And yet, is there hope for these 'tender anatomies'?

Brand's collection introduces a non-linear sense of time together with a transnational sense of space, where bodies have been abused through history's perversities across past, present, and future temporalities. The central character, Yasmine, not only traces a genealogy that challenges chronological temporal frameworks, but also moves across a multiplicity of spatial locations thus infusing the collection with a general sense of wandering and purposelessness. The contradiction here lies in the fact that this apparent lack of purpose is systematically counteracted by the imperative to 'undo,' in Penelopian fashion. The need to unravel fuses Brand's poems with what could be referred to as a queer rendering of time and space:

this is how she wakes each day of each underground year, / [...] the atmosphere coaxed to visible / molecules, definite arrangements of walls and doors / [...] how then to verify her body, rejuvenate the blood-dead / arm, quell her treacherous stomach, [...] / but where was she, which city, what street / [...] the prepositions are irrelevant today, whichever house, / which century, wherever she was. (22, 23, 26)

The woman's dislocation and strangeness, however, do not prevent her from providing a summary of the world, as she puts it. Yasmine's attitude resembles that of the central character in Brand's long poem *Inventory* (2006), who sits in front of her television every day and night exposing those science-fiction tales of democracy that I referred to in the epigraph to this article: "nothing happens / the wealth multiplies in the garbage dumps, / and the quiet is the quiet of thieves / there are cellphones calling no one, / no messages burn on the planet's withered lungs / [...] it's all empty, she thinks, but then again / that's not news" (41). Both female figures in

Brand's long poems generate a political and material archive that reflect the trans-corporeal materialities characterizing today's contaminated world.

Brand's insistence on dealing with the on-going deterritorialization and reterritorialization of space is combined with a strong sense of place<sup>4</sup>. In fact, her poetry manages to negotiate seemingly contradictory strategies like the deterritorialization of space with a redefinition of a politics of location for non-normative subjects. I therefore suggest the need for a theorization of a deterritorialized politics of location to decipher how Brand incorporates these apparently conflicting devices in her work. What I previously referred to as the queer rendering of time and space that characterizes the beginning of *Ossuaries* suddenly clashes with the explicit reference to the twin towers thus localizing the narrative in a crucial moment and place in recent history:

September 11 in Manhattan:

the spectacular buildings falling limpid, to nothing, / rims, aluminum, windowless, fragile staircases, / she wanted, wanted to whisper into telephones / it's done, someone had done it, someone, had made up for all the failures, / she looked, pitiless, at the rubble, the shocked / [...] the flights of starlings interrupted, / the genocides of September insects, / [...] outside everywhere burned skin. (26, 27)

The image of the 'powdering towers' encapsulates a variety of discourses and materialities such as the vulnerability of solid contained spaces, the boundaries of material objects, and the pervasiveness of imprisonment and surveillance in our globalized world. Once the towers fall, what remains is rendered in terms of destruction, desolation, and loss. Also, the inevitable absence that characterized ground zero for a time further suggests an openness of boundaries, together with the triumph of the unexpected and the unpredictable. Containment, control, and power proved to be an ephemeral illusion that vanished in minutes only giving way to the absence of presence and the presence of ghosts. This trans-corporeal landscape is saturated

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<sup>4</sup> See Goldman (2004) and Johansen (2008) for a discussion on the ongoing deterritorialization and reterritorialization of place in Dionne Brand's *oeuvre*.

by the collapse of material human bodies with concrete, glass, dirt, and other toxic materials; a toxic space where the future is only understood backwards.

Despite the fact that 9/11 was primarily experienced through the medium of television, Brand insists in portraying the trans-corporeal materiality of such an event in history thus reminding readers of the unavoidable relationship between the human and the more-than human worlds. In her discussion of posthumanist performativity, feminist physicist Karen Barad argues that "'We are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity" (146). Barad thus breaks down the binary opposition human vs. non-human and instead advocates for a materialist approach to the world's 'becoming.' Dionne Brand similarly points to the interconnectedness and dependencies between human and more-than-human organisms in her poetry in an attempt to raise a series of political and ethical issues. It is not *any* body, but the female body that appears at the centre of material, social, natural, and cultural factors in *Ossuaries*. And the traumas that her body incorporate leave marks that remain, so no redemption seems possible:

the crate of bones I've become, good / I was waiting to throw my limbs on the pile, / the mounds of disarticulated femurs and radii / but perhaps we were always lying there, / dead on our feet and recyclable, / toxic and imperishable, [...] / each bone has lost dialectic now, / untranslatable though I had so many languages. (49-50)

The materiality of the body remains despite the feelings of despair and purposelessness that Yasmine experiences. But what about the materiality of language? As material feminists such as Barad and Alaimo have argued, language has been granted too much power, and so they advocate for a material turn in feminist theory. In similar ways, Brand calls for an interrogation of language and master narratives through a re-evaluation of materiality in contemporary times. Interestingly, the narrator's loss of sight and name is accompanied by a mistrust for linguistic structures: "I had nights of insentient adjectives, / [...] after consideration you will discover, as I,



/ that verbs are a tragedy, a bleeding cliffside, explosions, / I'm better off without [...] / a promise of blindness, a lover's clasp of / violent syntax and the beginning syllabi of verblessness" (14, 20). Then, what kind of alternative discourses should be used? What is the solution for despair?

Brand seems to suggest that neither trauma nor mourning is enough for political transformation: "and she had mourned enough for a thousand / broken towers, her eyesight washed immaculate and / caustic, her whole existence was mourning, so what?" (30). The usefulness of mourning is questioned as pointing to a lack of political and ethical action. In the influential essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics," philosopher Judith Butler asks a crucial question that can be applied to Brand's narrative: "Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?" (29). This vulnerability is exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, particularly when violence is a way of life. Arguably, Butler claims that grief and loss, instead of leading to passive powerlessness, can lead to a sense of human vulnerability where collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another is experienced. And yet, Brand's poetry seems to suggest that human beings as such form a paradoxical community where no clear boundaries between victims and perpetrators are delineated: "if we could return through this war, any war, / as if it were we who needed redemption, / instead of this big world, our ossuary" (82). In Brand's poetic *oeuvre*, human beings are systematically exposed to violence, while simultaneously being complicit in it.

In similar fashion to Larissa Lai's provocative poetry collection *Automaton Biographies* (2011), Dionne Brand's *Inventory* and *Ossuaries* introduce several female figures that

problematize the role of bearing witness to the contemporary world<sup>5</sup>. Which populations are allowed to bear witness today? Are these women portrayed as mere spectators, indulging in voyeuristic pleasure? Are they instead alternative populations capable of introducing new ways of engaging with today's panorama of global crises? In order to transform contemporary evils in society, it is not enough to "change the bourgeois state," the narrative voice in *Ossuaries* explains, you have to "bring it down" (29). This call for action introduces a shift in the tone of the poem, providing the characters portrayed with a higher degree of social and political agency. Inspired by the riots in Egypt in 1977, the woman now has awakened from her slumber: "conscious as bees, / to the finest changes of sound, / and shadow, sweat and heat, she knows what she is to do" (46). Interestingly, the antigovernment protesters in Egypt in the so-called 'Bread Uprising' denounced the corruption that characterized the political situation at the time, when the population was punished with the elimination of public subsidies. Months after *Ossuaries* was published, the 2011 Egyptian revolution began, again a popular spontaneous uprising protesting against a series of political and legal inequalities and injustices. The timing is relevant here in that Brand's poems somehow bridge a series of political events that happened in the late 1970s with the contemporary moment, establishing a genealogy of revolutionary practices and resistances. Current global phenomena, such as the so-called Arab Spring revolution or the worldwide Occupy movements illustrate how collective action is every day present thus allowing for the appearance of a series of practices of freedom and resistance. As part of the 99%, the underground activist in *Ossuaries* is fully aware of the axis of differentiation that excludes her from public visibility and discourses: "Yasmine knows in her hardest heart, / that truth is worked and organized by some, / and she's on the wrong side always" (53).

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the role of the poet as witness see Brydon (2007). As she claims, "Brand's practice of affective citizenship begins from the emotional register in which injustice lodges itself in the very body of the poet as a special kind of witness" (991).

An eternal migrant, Yasmine finds herself yet again in a different location; this time in an unidentified North American urban space where she reflects on the toxic relationship she has had with a man. Surrounded by this city's 'calculus of right and left angles,' Yasmine reflects on the death of love and the power dynamics involved in her heterosexual relationship:

how she'd become, / some receptacle for his spit, his sperm, his combed-out / hair the shavings of his fingernails, each liquid phrase / he had uttered, she had drowned, / [...] until his voice seems seemed to come from her / [...] she'd pinned / her life to his existence when what she wanted was to be / at the crossing. (58)

Her identity had become exclusively defined by his bodily waste, further intoxicating her corporeality into paralysis. On the other hand, the woman's constant nomadic movement across time and space systematically highlights her singularity thus calling into question notions of political collectivity and community. *Ossuaries*, then, seems to suggest that we are living in an age of impossible intimacies where love and life can only exist in opposition: "to love is an impediment to this hard business / of living / so I cannot have loved, not me" (34). Yasmine's experience of life is one of survival; a life where prisons and bars prevail, thus disallowing the possibility of love. This lack of love transcends the human world into the natural sphere, which has also severely suffered its effects: "the human skin translucent with diesel, / the lemon trees' inadvertent existences, the satellite whales, GPS necklaces of dolphins and turtles / what can I say truly about the lungs alveoli / of plastic ornaments, erupting, without oxygen" (69). Notice the trans-corporeal qualities of the scene portrayed here where the technological, the human, and the animal worlds collide, pointing to the negative consequences of excessive industrialization on both human and non-human bodies. Again, Brand depicts a landscape of trans-corporeality where human and more-than human materialities collapse with multiple political and ethical repercussions. As Tuana reminds us, the porosity between human and non-human agents can allow us to flourish but it can also kill us. Is Brand therefore suggesting that there is no room for

shared intimacies nowadays? If this is the case, it could be argued that a politically and ethically efficient sense of collective community is yet 'to come' (Derrida 2001); yet to be formulated. It is within this space of possibility, of the unexpected, where a material feminist approach could provide us with a critical lens from which to examine how contemporary transnational women writers are beginning to envision new articulations of political and ethical intervention in today's landscape of global crises.

Material feminist theorists strive for "definitions of human corporeality that can account for how the discursive and the material interact in the constitution of bodies. [...] [They] explore the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the 'environment,' without privileging any one of these elements" (Alaimo and Hekman 7). Dionne Brand's recent work offers alternative possibilities of reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production by introducing a series of abjected and deviant populations that are granted the possibility to activate change. The revolutionary figure of Yasmine advocates for alternative ways of understanding human corporeality and how it is inextricably linked to other material bodies. As Barad argues, "Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (144). Through a series of different strategies around issues of materiality, embodiment, and corporeality, Brand's long poem *Ossuaries* posits an anti-capitalist critique against current issues such as the impact of economic globalization on both environmental degradation and the human body. Her work does contribute to formulating new counter-hegemonic ethical and political positions through alternative accounts of human and non-human materialities<sup>6</sup>.

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