

Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries* Songs of Necropolitics

In 2003, Achille Mbembe argued that Foucault's concept of biopower as the governance of biology through regulatory mechanisms could not account for contemporary forms of sovereignty. In particular, the colonial occupation of Palestinian territory, or the resistance to power through acts of excess and negation such as suicide bombing, points to a different mode of governance. According to Mbembe, colonial occupation and warfare at the turn of the twenty-first century are characterized by necropower, resting on a "concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege" (22). While most of his analysis is devoted to warfare and colonization, his conclusion provides terms of analysis that allow for a broader conceptualization of necropolitics as an ominous mode of governance instrumentalizing everyday practices. Indeed, Mbembe concludes by referring to the creation of "*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (39-40). Since 2003, writers have expanded on Mbembe's analysis to demonstrate that the object of everyday practices of necropower is not so much the life as the death of the body politic according to a capitalist calculus of loss and benefit. Whether we consider the management of endemics and famine, drone-driven surgical hits, or the measured risk of shipping highly inflammable oil through small towns, we are confronted with a production and regulation of death, which in its relentlessness draws on the logic of the circulation and dispersal of capital aided and abetted by technological diffusion and ubiquity. Randy Martin identifies the political stakes of a death-world where capital operates as a social force: "An empire

of indifference is a specific response to the multifarious discretions and capacities of life that, if not subjugated to the whims of accumulation, can squeeze capital's conditions of possibility" (269). In conceiving necropolitics as an "empire of indifference," Martin echoes Mbembe, who associates the rise of colonial power with the emergence of necropolitical governance in the plantation system where one sees "the first syntheses between massacre and bureaucracy, that incarnation of Western rationality" (23).¹ Common to colonial and warfare practices and the polis is a governance of necrosis spurred by the instrumentalization of death and the parasiting on life processes. Jasbir K. Puar describes this form of governance: "bio-necro collaboration conceptually acknowledges biopower's direct activity in death, while remaining bound to the optimization of life, and necropolitics' nonchalance towards death even as it seeks out killing as a primary aim" (35). It is in this context that I propose an interpretation of Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries* as songs of necropolitics poised between carnage and commemoration.

Ossuaries belongs to a poetic genealogy that includes Kamau Brathwaite's 1973 reflection on the effects of the historical slaughter of the Black people on the capacity to generate and create. In "Eating the Dead," he writes: "But if to live here / is to die / clutching ashes / the fist tight / the skull dry / I will sing songs of the skeleton" (219). The paradox of the two tercets, which derives from the coupling of the lyrical and the mortal, resonates throughout *Ossuaries* as it struggles to make sense of a world engulfed by genocidal violence.² The poem throws the reader into a vortex of everyday practices of aggression and destruction and stages the exercise of violence with death as a normalized experience. Juxtaposed to *Thirsty* (2002) and *Inventory* (2006), *Ossuaries* reads like the third piece of a trilogy devoted to a reflection on epochal violence in the early twenty-first century. The long poem consists of fifteen sections, what traditionally might have been called cantos or songs, but what in sepulchral times Brand refers to as ossuaries, or the charnels of poetic and historical meaning. Maintaining the lyrical and the necropolitical in agonistic tension, and shifting from the binary I/she to pluralizing pronouns, the poem contextualizes the necrobiography of Yasmine, the speaker of the poem, and turns it into a lightning-rod for an account of violence revolving around a governance of metrics whereby to measure is to rule—to death. Tanis MacDonald argues, "considering that the memory of the Middle Passage as a legacy of Black Atlantic culture has been mediated and sometimes almost erased by colonial history, Brand also notes the ways in which the trace of such memory is re-experienced in the bodies

of diasporic peoples” (94). I propose to further this interpretation to suggest that if the poem originates in Brand’s political reflection on Black historical memory, it also expands the analysis of colonialism to encompass a global politics of death. It is precisely because Brand has an intimate knowledge of colonial necropower that she is in a position to write a sharp critique of a genocidal violence that has become planetary.

While theories of necropolitics tend to totalize the processes and effects of this form of sovereignty, I will argue that *Ossuaries* departs from a discourse of absolute sovereignty by injecting the self-compromising subjectivity of Yasmine into the circuitry of necropolitics. This subjective presence gives voice to a cultural necropolitics of emotion whose configuration constitutes the singularity of Brand’s approach, whereby the body politic wrestles with an overwhelming and noxious materiality. The body politic of *Ossuaries* is a sensorial, sexual, and speaking body who struggles to make sense of the sovereign addresses of necropolitical violence. If this violence causes material devastation, it is also constituted as a system of signs through technology, political discourse, and cultural practices. On this basis, I suggest that, eschewing the Manichean binaries of the ruler and the ruled and the neo-liberal belief in an autonomous political consciousness, *Ossuaries* traces the ways in which necropolitical violence courses along the path of desire. To analyze this political torsion of Eros by Thanatos, I expand on Jean Laplanche’s post-Freudian concept of the enigmatic signifier and read the poem as an account of the ways in which necropolitical subjects are seduced by and respond to enigmatic signifiers of violence that they do not master. While Laplanche focuses on the family as the source of enigmatic signifiers, I broaden this source to encompass culture.³ The family is but one source of unconscious formation, and today citizens interact with a broader matrix of formative affects through media.⁴ In this context, Laplanche’s theory of the formation of the unconscious through a power relation between the psyche and the primacy of the other on which it depends can be deployed to account for the exercise of sovereignty and its production of a political unconscious. In the poem, the sign of the necropolitical unconscious is hysteria, a word that recurs three times in nominal and adjectival forms and functions as a trope of trauma.⁵ Operating according to a capitalist logic of circulation, the trope manifests a traumatic violence whose intensity accrues as it circulates among things, bodies, and readers, generating what Sara Ahmed describes as a surplus of affect.⁶ Branded by this traumatic encounter with violence, the syntax of the poem operates according to a

poetics of catachrestic rupture through which the necropolitical subject strives to make historical sense. Yasmine's narrative is the medium through which Brand initiates a reflection on the relation between necropolitics and historiography. Acknowledging massacred bodies as "simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities" (35), Mbembe responds by conceptualizing the historical origins and evolution of necropolitics. In contrast, Brand is preoccupied with the travail of writing history in the grip of necropolitics. Under the pressure of necropolitical violence, the writing of the past presents itself as an exercise in assemblage from which meaning and telos have absconded. Nevertheless, in its ekphrastic section on Jacob Lawrence's *War Series* and its references to jazz, the poem does offer sensorial and affective reorientation through a recoding of a colonial history of violence and provides signs for a regenerative and commemorative understanding of ossuaries.

The political significance of *Ossuaries* is signalled by a narrative framework resting on the use of pronouns that create a tension between the subject and the multitude. One can first identify the bipartite oscillation between sections that are told by the "I"—"the slippery pronoun, the ambivalent, glistening, / long sheath of the alphabet" (22)—and sections that offer an account of Yasmine's life through the third-person pronoun "she." While the fifteen ossuaries alternate between these two modes of narration, the narrative mode is not confined to this binary; instead, it expands to a collective level through various pronouns such as "we," "they," "someone," or "anyone" in a pattern that disrupts the initial apposition, endowing Brand's reflection on humanity with plurality beyond the microphysics of subject and object. This tension between the multitude and the singular is introduced right from the beginning in the first tercet of Ossuary I, where the narrative shifts from the collective "our" to "mine": "in our narcotic drifting slumbers, / so many dreams of course were full of prisons, / mine were without relief" (10). *Ossuaries* is therefore an account not only of Yasmine's personal history, but also of the ways in which a governance of necropolitics dispossesses political subjects of citizenship and habituates them to violence: "we live like this, / each dawn we wake up, our limbs paralyzed, shake our bones, deliver ourselves / to the sharp instruments for butchering, to appease which rain god, / which government god, which engine god" (123). The power to rule life out—"a sudden unificatory nakedness, bifactory nakedness, / of numbers, of violent fantasm" (16)—operates through an invasive ruling of things, spaces, subjectivities,

and events in the midst of contingency. Violence contaminates everyday practices, propagating through “the vicious telephones, the coarseness of / daylight, the brusque decisions of air, / the casual homicides of dresses” (10). While Yasmine itemizes the world surrounding her, she does not derive any sense of orientation and belonging. The city is “this exact city” (54), regulated by an implacable circuitry of metrics:

where was she, that again, which city now,
 which city's electric grids of currents,
 which city's calculus of right and left angles
 which city's tendons of streets, identical,
 which city's domestic things,
 newspapers, traffic, poverty
 garbage collections, random murders,
 shoplifting, hedge
 cutting. (55)

Reiteration culminates in a catalogue of lethal nonsense whereby ratio and randomness collide.⁷ To this extent, ruling assumes a double meaning, as it refers not only to political governance but also to quantifying and measuring.

In this world of controlled chaos, to rule is to measure and vice versa. Yasmine gives a name to this instrumentalizing power by referring to “anthropometric spectacles” (*Ossuaries* 13), which can be identified as the root principle of the governance of the polis.⁸ At stake in what can be called the discourse and practices of anthropometrics is the reduction of subjects to dehumanizing metrics and its necrotizing effects. Caught between the time of anthropometrics and the time of the lyric, the poetic line performs as “a lover’s clasp of / violent syntax and the beginning syllabi of verblessness” (20). The anthropometrics of ruling takes on megalomaniac proportions through the syntax of the latter half of *Ossuary* I, where verbless enumeration signifies a hegemonic principle of governance that causes loss of agency: “I lost verbs, whole, like the hull of almonds” (14). As soon as verbs are abstracted from the syntax of the poem, reiterative deictics emerge by which Yasmine attempts to locate herself in time and space: “this bedding, this mercy, / this stretcher, this solitary perfectable strangeness, / and edge, such cloth this compass” (15). However, an overwhelming process of enumeration seizes upon a poetic line that is subjugated to metrics rationalizing and regimenting bodies, nature, and actions. Through this staging of necropolitical governance, Brand’s poem offers a political reflection on the ways in which citizens are confronted with a necrotic system that is profoundly noxious, but whose traumatic signs of violence

they do not always decipher because, seduced by its signs, they actually embrace it. In creating Yasmine as a major antagonist in a toxic narrative of desacralization, Brand is able to foreground the torsion of desire through the seduction of violence as a signal affect of necropolitics.

In his critique of Freud, Jean Laplanche proposes a theory of seduction whereby the ego forms itself in response to sexual addresses that remain fundamentally opaque and enigmatic. The child's encounter with the adult world is governed by the primacy of the other as the determining factor of self-constitution. In this scenario, the child is vulnerable and dependent upon the other. Laplanche uses the term primal seduction "to describe a fundamental situation in which an adult proffers to a child verbal, non-verbal and even behavioural signifiers which are pregnant with unconscious sexual significations" (126). Besieged by the other's process of signification, the child cannot master and therefore cannot symbolize these enigmatic signifiers. While Laplanche focuses on the family (*socius*) and sexual seduction, I propose to expand his analysis to the seduction of violence in necropolitical times. The enigmatic signifier is not limited to the constitution of the sexual unconscious, as it can also be used to refer to the way the child is besieged by violence as the twin enigmatic signifier of sexuality. Violence is something the child cannot encompass or symbolize, and whose trauma is repressed only to reappear in the form of various symptoms. Thus, to some extent, to reflect on the enigmatic signifier of sexuality is also to reflect on the enigmatic signifier of violence. As Laplanche underlines in his analysis of the life and death drives, "*both* types of drives described by Freud *exist within the field of the sexual drive*" (146). Furthermore, the poem signals a major cultural shift whereby the analysis of disciplinary power reproduced in the family cannot solely account for a subjectivity of desire enthralled by a violence that, on a technological and biometric level, hinges on the switch of Eros into Thanatos. While *Ossuaries* stages Yasmine's early familial development by referring to her walking "beyond the broken parts, beyond her mother's / skirt, her brother's preacherly advice, his certain god" (43), it also shifts to a narrative of necropolitical governance through the seduction of cultural and political messages of violence.

On this basis, I suggest that *Ossuaries* stages a governance of necropolitics that besieges subjects with enigmatic signifiers of violence which they do not master.⁹ By reanimating the primary process of seduction through the primacy of the other, necropolitical subjects embrace and are seduced by violence through the path of desire. With its attention to the material and the physical,

the poem stages a historical moment when Yasmine responds to necropolitical violence. In *Ossuary II*, she wakes up to the radio announcement of the 9/11 terrorist attack, and it is as a sentient being that the persona is progressively coming back to wakefulness. What comes to the fore is not an ideological or intellectual response to the significance of the radio message; rather, Yasmine responds to the mediated violence as a sensorial body that is invaded by the violence of the message: “she flew like shrapnel off the bed, / felt her way blind, as fire with slender strands” (25). In this response to a message of violence, which destroys the distance between subject and object, it is as if the body were grafted onto and derived pleasure from violence: “she felt a joy innocent like butter open her, / blinding stratus, ants, tongs, bolts, rust, / the whole ionosphere bounced into her mouth” (25). In effect, Yasmine is invaded through the mouth by the outer atmospheric region, an incongruous vision that conveys the singularity of necropolitical times in which citizens do not master the technologically fuelled violence to which they are exposed. In this governance, the sensorial is the necropolitical.¹⁰

The analeptic jumps of the narrative convey the sense that Yasmine reflects on the fatal process of adherence through which she shaped her personal and political trajectory, and for which she pays, gnawed by “the lack of self-forgiveness, / aluminium, metallic, artic, blinding” (58). The enigmatic signifier of violence thrives on the desiring body, and it is through desire that Yasmine embraced a radical philosophy of destruction of the capitalist world. Thus, her resistance to sovereignty shares with necropolitics a production of death. This paradox is conveyed in the account of her relationship to the leader of a small radical phalanx. In *Ossuary IV*, *VI*, and *XII*, she repeatedly recalls her response to, and later detachment from, Owusu’s doctrine of violent resistance:

each liquid phrase
 he had uttered, she had drowned,
 in the shell of her ear,
 until his voice seemed to come from her
 all because of attention to the wrong thing,
 the still unknown-unknown she’d been, she’d pinned
 her life to his existence when what she wanted was to be
 at the crossing, when I am in the world (57-58).

Further, the torsion of Eros into Thanatos is captured in the following oxymoron:

if I have lived, I have not loved,
 and if I have loved, I cannot have lived

it was difficult to live and love at the same time,
you see what I mean,
since to live is to be rapacious as claws. (33-34)

Ossuaries thus offers a complex paradox whereby its lyrical lines maintain the desire for life while at the same time they function as vectors of violence over bare life. The poem threads a threnody of violence that demands to be told yet runs into ossification. Haunted by the unburied pain of necropower and the undifferentiated mass of ossuaries, Brand's poem is at the nexus between the necropolitical and the lyrical, a paradox captured in the following lines: "the presumptive cruelties, / the villages that nursed these since time, / it's always in the lyric . . . the harsh fast threatening gobble, / the clipped sharp knifing, it's always, / in the lyric" (108). If the lyrical is the political, and if the world of politics is chaotic and violent, then the traditional rhetoric of subject and object—the "I" and the "she"—is bound to display the traumatic signs of an enigmatic signifier of violence that it seeks to grasp and recall. It is through this enthralling of violence that the lyrical hinges on the hysterical as the rhetoric of necropolitical trauma.

The Freudian concept of hysteria typically draws the line between the psychoanalytical master and the hysterical body insofar as the latter performs a spectacular and traumatic memory that remains beyond the verbal. *Ossuaries* dismantles this master-slave conception of the hysterical body. In particular, the "I" sections convey Yasmine's struggle to articulate the trauma of violence through language as she is assaulted by "lumens of aches, such aches / the horizontal and the vertical aches of lightning / its acoustics, loud pianos, percussive yet / strings and quartets" (18). Further, the rhetoric of hysteria circulates in the polis through the channels of communication. When Yasmine becomes aware of the 9/11 event, the third-person narrative reports: "some violent drama was as usual surging, / on the airwaves and 'plane' she heard, the usual / supercilious timbres hysterical, a cut larynx" (23). So we are not dealing with a subject somatically enacting a verbally unrepresentable trauma. Instead, we are dealing with the verbalization of a political urgency whereby the trope of hysteria signifies the distress of the body politic in its wrestling with the significance of the blows that befell her. In these necropolitical songs, the somatic furrows through the lyrical in a tenacious desire for a voice in the face of an overwhelmingly genocidal materiality.

In this context, biometrics breathes through the meter, ossifying the lyrical, while the metrical struggles to lyricize beyond ossification. The

arena for this agon is syntax, which etymologically means “putting together.” However, syntax is a practice for better times when it is possible to dream of syncretic bodies of beliefs, synthetic bodies of knowledge, and synergies of political aspirations. If the lyrical becomes the hysterical as the trope of necropolitical trauma, then the plenitude that the lyrical evokes is affected by dislocation and rupture. According to Laplanche, “[t]he so-called ‘life’ sexual drive . . . relates to a totalizing object or to an object that can be totalized. . . . The death drive, on the other hand, corresponds to a part object which is scarcely an object at all, as it is . . . unstable, shapeless and fragmented” (146-47). In the poem, the torsion of Eros by Thanatos manifests itself through this tension between the desire for totality and the relentless experience of fracture. In the following lines, the effect of the reiteration of the word “kisses” is to undermine the very desire that it wishes to name: “I tried love, I did, / the scapulae I kissed, I did, / . . . the jugular notch I ate in kisses, / I devoured in kisses, / teeth-filled kisses, throat-filled kisses, gullet-stuffed kisses” (37). Through an infinite recession of declensions, the promise of love as a totality is pulverized into synecdochic smithereens. Further, Brand appropriates traditional schemes of rhetoric whereby each line, each tercet, each Ossuary undergoes the tension between the pressure of trauma and the mere metonymic push to the next line in search of meaning. Chief among her linguistic schemes is catachresis, which by predilection is the sign of dislocation when the putting together of words ceases to make proper sense. Where Surrealistic writing thrives on catachresis to dismantle hegemonic ways of thinking and celebrate anarchy, *Ossuaries* draws on the same scheme to represent a world in which necropolitical traumas operate like Dadaist incongruities without the least sign of transformation.¹¹ Catachresis can be seen at work in lines yoking bone with desire, as in “the lit cigarette tip of the backbone / [that] leans for its toxic caresses” (124), or in lines such as “the starving boats and lithic frigates, / stingless bees, the canvas shirts, / the bright darkness, the clotted riverbeds” (111) where disarticulations pile upon oxymora and impede the reader’s comprehension while demanding attention and deciphering. The effect is to disrupt normative processes of meaning and the sense of place: words are put together, but cracks and gaps appear between these words, derailing the conventions of the metonymic line. This anti-syntax is the phrasing of “ugly, momentous, ravenous times” (33), reinforced by asyndeton whose function is to fragment syntactic flow. In other tercets, this fragmenting effect is exacerbated by the recurrence of caesura, inversion of word order (anastrophe), and interpolation.

In this poetics of rupture, the tercets hurtle with the velocity of what Sara Ahmed describes as a surplus of affect (45). While language is used to upstage the violence of biometrics and its necropolitical effects, it is also caught in the vortex of this political violence whose intensity and power derive from an economy of exchange among bodies, nature, texts, and readers. Manifesting a necropolitical unconscious, hysteria is this surplus of affect swirling across continents and accruing through the body as it hybridizes with that violence and projects it onto nature and its “loose hysterical trills of wood / winds” (*Ossuaries* 43). Soaring on anaphoric reiteration and epistrophe, tercets reach crescendos, as exemplified in the following lines: “like this, in the eye-filled years, the wall-filled years, / the returning years, the formaldehyde years, / the taxidermy years, the dishevelled years” (112). Yasmine is thus the subject striving to make sense of violence while in its traumatic grip. Resisting and obsessive, the lines go the way of “stammament,” to borrow from Kamau Brathwaite in “Hereroes” from *Sun Poem*: “& yet there are these stammaments in stone / that smile / are fat or romanesque. athletic like good / traffic cops. piercing or blind to the world / but nvva look. in like us” (282-83).¹² Further, the poem is shadowed by Beckettian solipsism. In various *Ossuaries*, Yasmine seems to be addressing the reader, or a hypothetical listener, who may also be her own self, as she struggles with her memories and emotions: “if only I had something to tell you, from here, / some good thing that would weather / the atmospheres of the last thirty years” (103). However, her apostrophes also intensify the enigmatic signifier of violence: just as citizens are heckled by violence, she heckles the reader with the violence of her acts, thoughts, emotions, and intrusions. A statement such as “you will discover, as I, / that verbs are a tragedy, a bleeding cliffside, explosions” (14) makes violence a trope of poetic address and hits at the very core of the belief in redemption through poetry. Thus, circulating among the tercets, between the “I” and the “she” sections, bodies and things, and Yasmine and readers, necropolitical violence accumulates surplus.

It is in the context of this poetics of traumatic excess and rupture that Brand reconsiders the writing of history. Governed by and fuelling the compulsoriness of biometrics, citizens are confronted with the absence of telos or any means of making sense of the past. Time is gaping at the beginning and the end and is eviscerated in the middle. There is no finality at the end of each *Ossuary*, as the last lines are left without full stops and the tercets are sent adrift among commas.¹³ Thus, the writing of history

is compromised by the regime of Thanatos and threatened with tropes of permanent catastrophe and disarticulation. Yasmine does seek to create a new genealogy through the braiding of various textual traditions. The epigraph to Ossuary VI and its metaphors of edge-stitching, braiding, and plaiting—“this genealogy she’s made by hand, this good silk lace” (52)—convey a careful labour in contrast to the violence of the catachrestic paratax. However, a tension exists between the attempt to create a pattern of meaning and the inability to make it hold and signify: “these names would help / here, but / such, such did not create the world or fix time” (53). The scope of devastation is such that giving an account of necropolitics is threatened with aphonia, as in the one-page Ossuary IX where, repeating the words “what can I say,” Yasmine struggles to convey the state of disarray under anthropometric assault. In Ossuary XIII, the tone rises and culminates in a nihilistic injunction: “look for nothing it will say, the cataclastic sacral crest, the gutted thorax, except the schistic rib cages, / the feldspar wrists, the hyoid bone, what’s left / the prosthetic self and all the broken bodies, / collapsed chest caves, will appear dressed, clattering / down streets, in all fashions of all years” (113). In fact, the very concept of time is under erasure: “I’ve got no time, no time, this epistrophe, no time, / wind’s coming, no time, one sunrise to the next is too long, no time” (61). Caught between mutism and a voice under duress, the poem cannot offer an ordering of time.

Instead, operating according to the logic of the assemblage, *Ossuaries* juxtaposes the mundane with the monstrous and spawns a chronicle of loss and crisis. From the death of Creeley and the explosion of a bomb in Peshawar to a bank robbery and the habit of biting one’s lip, events occupy the same poetic space of the tercets without rhyme or reason. Oscillating between parody and imminence, the account of the robbery in Ossuary X stages the seduction of violence and its theatrical temporality. The verb tense is the present of action; the objective is to rob a bank. Yet this spectacle of purposeful action is undermined by satirical taunts such as “justice pumped through their veins, history will see” (72), which conveys the self-righteousness goading the purpose. In a delirium, the car “coughs its reluctance, its indecisions” and “understands occasion, urgency” (78), while the heist worthy of a Hollywood script is observed from the vantage point of pigeons who “mind their own business, as they should” (78). The account of the anticipated escape proceeds with gusto and ends with the description of the escape car as a Vorticist four-wheeled creature: “the brown dragonfly, rusted wings, / flies along the highway out of town in long leaps,

/ it defies its cratered flanks, its overheated gasket / the earthbound metal of its thorax, / its compound eyes survey each angle of the flight, / for cops, patrols” (79). The event is replete with violence—including the violence of Yasmine’s “small talon of her right hand [that] sets to the massacre” (75)—and its meaning is as hollow as the rusty wings of the car. The full import of the event does not appear until Ossuary XII, which refers to the “hysteria” (94) of the radical group and reveals that the time of action is the absurd yet irreducible time of necropolitical violence to which Yasmine and her accomplices have adhered:

they suddenly see their wounds in him,
the gashes in their skins, the gouging, scraping
places left, open raw cavities of their long, long losses

history will enter here, whistling like train wheels,
boat winches,
the road will either end or won’t, the cops catch up or not.
(102)

The recurrence of violence is further conveyed by the spectral *revenance* of history. After the bank robbery, Yasmine and her fellow radicals part company. Although the plot is situated in the state of New York, the characters’ destinations of Syracuse, Utica, and Corinth recall the ancient history of Rome and North Africa. So the coordinates of the setting are ambiguous if not disorienting: on the one hand, the reader is provided a precise location; on the other, there is a displacement to an earlier historical period when North African cities were embroiled in imperial conflicts. In other words, the events of Ossuary XII are haunted by the colonial past: “and this is how she disappears, this is where, / into an ancient city, since no city here could offer / anything but brutal solitudes, ashen mirrors” (91).¹⁴ What began as a histrionic bank heist plugs into the spectral recurrence of political violence: “fitting, phantom limbs, intermittent hearts, / they’ll all return to start this epoch again, / catastrophes will swing their way” (92). If for Yasmine this is a moment of disruption when she estranges herself from the radical group and its leader, it is also a crab-like re-entrance into a broader plot of necropolitical violence that will lead to the catastrophe of 9/11 with which Ossuary II begins.

The absence of an apocalyptic moment that would generate a new beginning means that the experience of time translates into an excruciating sense of confinement.¹⁵ Forever drifting across borders from one continent to another, from one city to another, Yasmine is haunted by the absence of an

exit from the world of violence, hemmed in by “the chain-link fences [that] glittered like jewellery, / expensive jewellery, portable jewellery” (14). Escaping once again, Yasmine crosses the Canadian border in April, using a forged passport. If “April is the cruelest month” (Eliot 1), it is because Yasmine’s flight is cut short by the horror of necrotic practices whereby the slaughter of birds at the Maple Leaf factory has become industrial routine, enacted by knowledgeable and knowing hands (Ossuary XIV). Even Havana, where she experiences a soothing nature, remains a place of exile. In *Ossuaries*, to write the past is to know a history of violence and to witness helplessly its future recurrence. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Anne Michaels’ main character Jakob Beer, a poet, states: “It’s not the unknown past we’re doomed to repeat, but the past we know. Every recorded event is a brick of potential, of precedent, thrown into the future. . . . This is the duplicity of history: an idea recorded will become an idea resurrected” (161). This statement goes against the belief that knowing history prevents one from repeating it. This belief is contradicted by a complex passage where, in Ossuary XIII, Yasmine imagines herself sending a letter to the past to warn the addressees of the dangers of the future so that they can perhaps prepare for the worst. However, she refers to the message as if it were made of metal glyphs that would have been corroded by the violence of history, and whose effect on the addressees she describes as “rust bleeding” (104). Short of regurgitating the same old narrative patterns, Yasmine as historiographer sounds like Alice in Wasteland.

The poem ends with neither a bang, nor a whimper. The lasting image is sepulchral, fractal, and collective—“here we lie in folds, collected stones / in the museum of spectacles, / our limbs displayed, fract and soluble” (124)—while Yasmine concludes with yet another catachrestic statement: “I can hardly hold their sincere explosions” (124). However, two displacements occur that seek to counter necropolitical violence and that hinge on references to jazz and to six paintings from Jacob Lawrence’s World War II series. It is not so much that the poem escapes from the history of violence through an aesthetizing sleight of hand; rather, Yasmine is able to achieve momentary peace by translating to another time and another place, a process that allows for a sentient and affective reorientation from Thanatos to Eros.¹⁶ The process occurs through the well-established form of ekphrasis and through what could be called “jazzphrasis.” Seeking a new phrasis that is not hacked by the enigmatic signifiers of necropolitical violence, Yasmine engages in a historiographical project through an affective, meditative, and regenerative interaction with the signs of music and painting.

As the source of lyricism, jazz imparts to Brand's lines the rhythm of Eros when meter and prosody are not necrotized by the anthropometrics of violence. Music generates prosodic patterns deriving from phonetic and alphabetic permutations in lines such as "right or fully, not **live** right, / the **liveried** skin" (111; emphasis added) and "**leapy** calves, **leaden** breath, **sodden** / **leaden** sickliness, baked songs" (112; emphasis added). The time of music transcends the grotesque dislocations introduced in the first Ossuary, as it ushers a reassembled, sentient body in tune with time, space, and the other:

the body skids where the light pools,
each bone has its lost dialect now,
untranslatable though I had so many languages
in the rooms above, / the hours spin their bangles,
supine, we listen. (50)

In Ossuary IV, Monk's "Crepuscule with Nellie" and "its deliberate / and loving notes scoring her back" (41) shelter Yasmine from Osuwu's verbal assault and sexual objectification. Jazzphrasis also allows for a rephrasing of the "momentous, ravenous, ugly times" (33), particularly with Yasmine's reflection on Mingus' "Pithecanthropus Erectus," a musical piece inspired by the anthropological discovery of the earliest traces of humans in East Africa, and to which she listened as a three-year-old. She quotes Mingus' statement that "the last movement / suggests the 'frantic burst of a dying organism'" (43). Thus, the major themes of death, genealogy, and meaning-making are reshuffled through the invocation of an ancestor whose archaeological discovery reinjects for a brief moment the sacred significance of an ossuary. Further, jazz is associated with the dream of freedom through the recurring paronomasia "Bird," which refers to Charlie Parker and entails repeated puns as in "Miles kept living, till life was rancid, Bird flew off" (45). A sign of Black history, jazz simultaneously offers the promise of a regenerative time.

Ossuary XI revolves around an ekphrastic reflection on Jacob Lawrence's paintings and reads like a humble moment of poise. In a mythopoetic gesture, Yasmine attributes the origins of Lawrence's art to Venus, planet of love: "he lifts these paintings from their ultraviolet vats, / from the Venusian winds that blow only west" (81).¹⁷ Again, the ekphrastic rephrasing is performative to the extent that the paintings offer not so much an exit from the history of violence as a re-encoding of the violence that Black people have endured. The difference, which is conveyed by the fluidity and calm of the tercets, lies in a treatment of violence that does not operate as an enigmatic signifier of seduction, but as the occasion for a history of affect that creates a sense of

commemoration and a soft hope for release from gravity. This hope is the reason why stammering as the sign of necropolitical trauma recedes. The poem displays only three repetitions: “the fragile, fragile promise of humanity” (83); “that crucifix, that crucifix” (84); and “‘reported missing’ again, missing again, / missing, again missing” (86). In all cases, the repetitions convey vulnerability, trauma, and non-being, the three signifiers of violence in Black history, which Yasmine retraces in Lawrence’s six paintings. In “Victory,” Yasmine deciphers defeat; in “Shipping Out,” she identifies the Middle Passage and the “mass graves” (81) of the slave ships; in “Another Patrol,” she stares at “the steep gradient / of nothing” (83); in “Beachhead,” she witnesses the “sacrificial work” (84) of the bayonets and sees in the central figure of the painting the crucified, the scarecrow, and the skeleton all at once, “the wind whiffing through / ribs” (84); in “Going Home,” she mourns the assault on bare life; and in “Reported Missing,” she pauses on disappearances, this ontology of necropolitical governance. Yet, stitched to these tableaux of destruction runs a tenuous thread of regeneration, as in Lawrence’s knowledge of “the rimlessness of any hopes, / the limitless vicinities” (83). Above all, Eros makes a re-entrance when, empathizing with the “tender anatomies” of the returning soldiers, Yasmine exclaims: “love should meet them, nothing short, / these broken heads and propitiatory arms, / clean love should meet them” (85). Reanimating a poetics of commemorative history, Ossuary XI is suspended beyond the time of necropolitical trauma and the space of gravity: “here we morph as twig and ice and bark / and butterfly, weed and spider, vespids, hoping against predators / convergent mimesis, all means, / stand still and hope it passes, the diatonic, / ragged plumage of our disappearances” (89). This is the mythopoeic time for reprieve beyond predation and anthropometrics when, thwarting catastrophe, survivors of the Middle Passage join in mimetic camouflage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of two undergraduate students, Alexandra Fournier and Ceileigh Mangalam, in the preparation of this article.

NOTES

- 1 For the spectral presence of slavery and capitalist ideologies in *Inventory*, see Brydon, 996.
- 2 See Nathaniel Mackey’s analysis of skeletonality, 736.
- 3 See Jean Wyatt’s use of the familial model in the transmission of enigmatic signifiers to interpret Bush as the fumbling parental figure to whom Americans respond in supporting the Iraq invasion.

- 4 In *Thirsty*, Brand depicts the cop who killed Allen as an obscene coupling of seduction and lethal power, a necropolitical and mediatized subject in action. Emerging from the courthouse, he walks towards TV cameras: “A showy stride / with the sexy swagger of a male model / all muscle and grace, his virility in hand / his striking the match like a gunslinger, / this élan, law and outlaw, SWAT and midnight rider, / history and modernity kissing here” (48). On the subject’s response to the bombarding of cultural messages as enigmatic signifiers, see Allyson Stack, 67-68.
- 5 The trope of hysteria first appears in *Inventory*: “the underground subways are hysterical with gurneys” (42) and later, in reference to a bomb explosion, “how is it there, only hysteria” (50).
- 6 Drawing on Marx’s theory that surplus value accrues from the movement of commodities, Ahmed proposes a theory of passion “not as the drive to accumulate (whether it be value, power or meaning), but as that which is accumulated over time. Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs . . . the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (45).
- 7 See Sophia Forster on Brand’s cataloguing technique in *Inventory*.
- 8 Anthropometry refers to “the measurement of the human body with a view to determine its average dimensions, and the proportion of its parts, at different ages and in different races or classes” (“Anthropometry” n. pag.).
- 9 For an analysis of vulnerability in *Thirsty*, see Heike Härting.
- 10 On a Barthesian and Deleuzian reading of language, pleasure, and violence in *Thirsty*, see Jordana Greenblatt.
- 11 For another instance of catachresis, see Heather Smyth’s analysis of Tuyen’s *lubaio* in *What We All Long For* (2005) as an exercise in Surrealist *cadavre exquis*.
- 12 See Mackey’s analysis of stammament, 734.
- 13 Brand’s strategic use of periods coincides with dogmatic assertions in Ossuary IV, 41; Ossuary IV, 42; Ossuary X, 72 and 73; and Ossuary XII, 93.
- 14 For an analysis of “hauntology” in Brand’s writing, see Jody Mason; Franca Bernabei.
- 15 In cataloguing five pages of bomb explosions on various continents, Section III of *Inventory* conveys this obsessive experience of time.
- 16 For a critique of the pursuit of aesthetics as a political strategy, see Marlene Goldman.
- 17 See Omiseëke Natasha Tinsley on the Black Atlantic as a diasporic site of queer love and resistance to colonial violence.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- “Anthropometry.” *OED*. Oxford English Dictionary, 2010. Web. 17 July 2014.
- Bernabei, Franca. “Transatlantic Poetics of Haunting.” *Atlantic Studies* 8.4 (2011): 485-506. Print.
- Brand, Dionne. *Inventory*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006. Print.
- . *Ossuaries*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010. Print.
- . *Thirsty*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2002. Print.
- Braithwaite, Kamau. “Eating the Dead.” *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973. 219-21. Print.
- . “Hereroes.” *Ancestors: A Reinvention of Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self*. New York: New Directions, 2001. 271-83. Print.
- Brydon, Diana. “Dionne Brand’s Global Intimacies: Practising Affective Citizenship.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76.3 (2007): 990-1006. Print.

- Eliot, T. S. "The Wasteland." *Verse*. Bartleby.com, Aug. 2011. Web. 28 Jan. 2015.
- Forster, Sophia. "'inventory is useless now but just to say': The Politics of Ambivalence in Dionne Brand's *Land to Light On*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 27.2 (2002): 160-82. Print.
- Goldman, Marlene. "Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand." *Canadian Literature* 182 (2004): 13-28. Print.
- Greenblatt, Jordana. "Something Sadistic, Something Complicit: Text and Violence in *Execution Poems* and *Thirsty*." *Canadian Literature* 197 (2008): 80-95. Print.
- Härtling, Heike. "The Poetics of Vulnerability: Diaspora, Race, and Global Citizenship in Dionne Brand's *Thirsty* and A.M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 89 (Spring 2007): 10-20. Print.
- Laplanche, Jean. *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. Trans. David Macey. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989. Print.
- Lawrence, Jacob. *War Series. 1942-47*. Whitney Museum of American Art. The Whitney's Collection. Web. 5 Aug. 2013.
- MacDonald, Tanis. "Rhetorical Metatarsals: Bone Memory in Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries*." *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*. Ed. Eleanor Ty and Russell Kilbourn. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013. 93-106. Print.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Wringing the Word." *World Literature Today* 68.4 (1994): 733-40. Print.
- Martin, Randy. "From the Race War to the War on Terror." *Beyond Politics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*. Ed. Patricia T. Clough and Craig Willse. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. 258-74. Print.
- Mason, Jody. "Searching for the Doorway: Dionne Brand's *Thirsty*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.2 (2006): 784-800. Print.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." Trans. Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40. Print.
- Michaels, Anne. *Fugitive Pieces*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996. Print.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Smyth, Heather. "The Being Together of Strangers: Dionne Brand's Politics of Difference and the Limits of Multicultural Discourse." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.1 (2008): 272-90. Print.
- Stack, Allyson. "Culture, Cognition and Jean Laplanche's Enigmatic Signifier." *Theory, Culture & Society* 22.3 (2005): 63-80. Print.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ* 14.2 (2008): 191-215. Print.
- Wyatt, Jean. "Laplanche's Reconstruction of Freud's Other-Centered Subject: The Enigmatic Signifier and Its Political Uses." *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 11 (2006): 190-98. Print.

