

# Oluwaseun Olayiwola reviews *Nomenclature* by Dionne Brand

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## **Nomenclature**

Dionne Brand  
Penguin Poetry, £16.99

Dionne Brand's oeuvre, collected and published in ***Nomenclature*** for the first time in the UK, suggests the most literal iteration of what we mean when we say 'a body of work': there is no way to encounter this voice and not feel touched or embodied. Coming in at 619 pages, spanning 40 years, it is a catalogue (one might say 'inventory') of a life spent in the serious soul-making work of poetic imagination; and even then, it is not exhaustive. Omitted are what Brand calls her "juvenilia" (some earlier works of poetry), and her notable non-fiction and fiction works. Nonetheless, what is collected here is an exemplar of a consciousness that refuses to be numbed into the static dimension of nostalgia, a voice enmeshed in the truth that "to be awake is / more lovely than dreams."

Brand's more than twenty books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction have garnered her numerous awards and appointments such as the Griffin Poetry Prize, OCM Bocas Prize, and the Windham Campbell Prize, as well as being the poet laureate of Toronto from 2009 to 2012. ***Primitive Offensive*** (1982) announces Brand's searing poetic strategy as the speaker comes into a consciousness meleed by the violence against the

Diaspora of Black people. Brand's poems however, as Christina Sharpe designates in the helpfully extended introduction, are not poems of spectacle, of simply archiving atrocities committed in the name of white supremacy and colonialism. "Recognition interrupts the spectacular", Sharpe writes. I'd posit *repetition* does this work as well, and Brand's knack for the device of repetition, for song-making, categorises much of ***Primitive Offensive***:

dead things  
dead leaves  
dead hair  
dead nails  
tongue, a swollen flower  
glottis, choked with roots  
my teeth fall bloodless  
a damp mange covers me  
I cough a velvet petalled herb  
my neck bleeds

(*Canto IV*)

***Primitive Offensive*** is composed mostly of these arrestingly short-lined cantos. Brand is first and foremost a poet of the body and would make a career of cataloguing it with anatomical precision. But ***Primitive Offensive***, in its refusal to align with the normopathic lyric tradition of stasis, abjection and

contemplation, offers a critique-turned-method for anti- and postcolonial poetics that do not centre whiteness. “after all, what is the political / position of stars?” one speaker asks in the ars poetical *Canto II*.

In continuing a postcolonial poetics, Brand’s poems are enmeshed with place, which is to say, they do not operate in a constructed, often white, “nowhere” for psychic battle and reprieve. Throughout the collection we travel through Guayaguayare – where the poet was born –, Grenada, Toronto, Havana, New York. Because of their enmeshed-ness in place, the poems, however filtered through the consciousness of the poet, feel as if they take on what Black feminist scholar Sarah Clarke Kaplan defines as: “an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievances that traverse continents and time.” Even the pithy short-forms Brand writes in *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* (1983) take on this collectivity:

Two things I will not buy  
in this city;  
mangoes and poinsettia;  
exiled,  
I must keep a little self respect.

(53)

Weaving in Brand’s tonal capacity for humour, the city in question is Toronto where a “white boy with a dead voice / sings about autumn” (7), a city that is “a liar” because “there is no other season here” (9). It’s poems like these that prompted Barbadian poet Kamau Braithwaite to prophesy Brand as “our first major exile female poet.” *Chronicles Of The Hostile Sun* (1984) – organised in three sections entitled *Languages, Sieges, and Military Occupations* – tells a story of the US invasion of Grenada, where the US quashed the socialist People’s Revolutionary Government that had come to power in Grenada. Brand’s poetics, here, are fragments of diaristic notes, conversations, and elegies that swirl in their insufficiency: “this poem cannot find words / this poem repeats itself...dream is dead / lesser and greater” (*October 19th, 1983*).

In the wake of the en masse damage, destruction and destabilisation caused by the US and other imperial forces in the late 20th century, come the collections *No Language is Neutral* (1990) and *Light to Land On* (1997) that reify a sentiment Brand espouses in an interview for ‘Between the Covers’ with David Naimon: “I have no use for nostalgia.” This is why Brand’s poetics, her individual lines, exemplify an Afrofuturist impulse. “still I must say something here / something that drives this verse into the future” (*Hard Against the Soul, VII*). Yet Brand intimately understands the present as the remains of the past, as musically imbricated with the repeated “still” of “Return”:

So the street is still here, still melting with sun  
still the shining waves of heat at one o’clock  
the eyelashes scorched, staring the distance of the  
park to the parade stand, still razor grass burnt  
...  
still the faces,  
masked in sweat and sweetness, still the eyes  
watery, ancient, still the hard, distinct, brittle smell of  
slavery.

The next three books, *thirsty* (2002), *Inventory* (2007), and *Ossuaries* (2010) enact a sort of procedure in Brand’s poetics, a sort of accumulative form consumed with the ordinary inclusion of the everyday. Here, it is worth mentioning Brand is a master of the adjectival. In these books are “the unrepentant cheekbone” (*XXXI*); “the unremitting malls of all desires” (*I*); “the lightning geometry” (*Ossuary I*), which, in my view, are not solely a vivid expressivity, but a wielding of a wakeful imagination meant to wake us, as readers, up. Brand’s language is not interested in the “nothing” of imperialism, the “nothing” of beauty, the “love stories” and “war epics” where Black people were erased or battered. Rather, Brand’s use of language is an ethic, “Most people can sleep through a siren. I can’t”:

It isn't the proximity that wakes me, as shores,  
it is its emotion. Its prophecy. Even at a great distance  
you sense its mortal discoveries  
whoever it is calling for, whoever is caught  
human, you can hear their gnawed substance in its song

(XXXIII)

This brings us to *Nomenclature For The Time Being* (2022), the new long poem at the beginning of the collection. The poem traffics in the ineffable abstraction of time, with a roving speaker-anti-God whose diction graduates into itself, absorbs, the scientific, the chemical (“to atomize // they used copper, lead, aluminum, iron and tin), the ecological (“our feet against the ocean crust, palmate / with every intention to listen like moths and leaves / we freeze in summers”), the aerial (“the faecal planes, the drooling sky”), the masculinized ... the list goes on. The girth of diction here is purposeful – as if there is no diction, no language possible to answer one of the central questions in the sequence: “What is it to talk as if the world you know is the world” – though we are not given a question mark, not given time to pause as the poem accelerates, mirroring time’s unstoppable momentum:

all they made of it is

Money and something named sex, made out of a

kind of self-hatred of their testicles, all they’ve made  
of it is the law of testicles made of  
their hatred, how jealous

when I was happy, and when I was lonely, all they did  
was laugh

The word ‘nomenclature’ defines the process by which we name things. *Nomenclature For The Time Being* has then, the quality of giving a name to the ethics, discoveries, and conclusions (private and public) Brand has explored throughout her poetic endeavor, articulated fiercely in direct statements like “I refuse to reproduce whiteness” or “the beautiful innocence of those // who live at the centre of empire, their /

wonderful smiles their sweet delight and / their singular creation of the / word *hope*”.

The word “dance” – in addition to “blue”, “police”, “dreams,” and “believe” – is in almost every work collected in this book. I want to say it’s because Brand’s poetics are a balm, a vehicle towards embodied and liberatory thinking, living, and loving. “I lived and loved, some might say / in momentous times, / looking back, my dreams were full of prisons” (*Ossuary I*). Dance, consistent movement, or “exquisite improvisation,” as one poem has it, might be our way through oppressive power structures, “grubby economies”, and the “innocuous procedures of good morning.” To dance one must be awake, and Brand’s work over a lifetime is a tome of how one might keep the beat pulsing.

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