

Ravaged Bodies, Ravaged World

More than ever before, the issue of violence has become a major challenge for social commentators and has raised questions regarding both its significance and applications.¹ While scholars have focused on its anthropological, phenomenological, historical/political, and symbolic aspects,² quite recently two important gender theorists and philosophers – both influenced by Hanna Arendt's pathbreaking meditations on the subject – have cogently probed into the ethical and political implications of the modern and contemporary manifestations of war and conflict. In *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*,³ Judith Butler provocatively wonders if it is possible to find a ground for community starting from the condition of vulnerability which is inherent in natality when, in being born, one is exposed to the *vulnus* which the other can inflict.⁴ In her view, this condition of being given over, this openness – either to 'the wound' or to sustenance – entails violence. Violence is "a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another".⁵

Butler further elucidates this notion by pointing out that the commonality of this primary condition is differentiated according to the various circumstances that mark human life:

In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability This violence, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited.... It would be difficult to understand how humans suffer from oppression without seeing how this primary condition is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied.⁶

In *Orrorismo. Ovvero della violenza sull'inerme*,⁷ the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero explicitly refers to Butler's *Precarious Life* and expands on its suggestions. She argues that not only is vulnerability inherent in natality, but that at birth there is a conflation of vulnerability and helplessness. She agrees with Butler that in the course of one's life the tension between the wound and sustenance entails violence. However, she further specifies that while violence is always contingent, helplessness is no longer a condition but depends on one's circumstances. Cavarero defines contemporary horrorism – which she discusses after tracing its etymological, mythical, and historical models – as the act of offending

¹ Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Violence: Theory and Ethnography* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 1-14.

² Ingo W. Schröder and Bettina E. Schmidt, "Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices", in Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, eds., *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-24.

³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

⁴ In this case, Butler is elaborating upon Hanna Arendt's thought, specifically her philosophical and political exploration of natality as the time and place of the appearance of a unique, embodied and relational singularity.

⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.

⁶ Ibid., 29-31.

⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Orrorismo. Ovvero della violenza sull'inerme* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2004).

those who are vulnerable insofar as the latter are incidentally helpless and, as such, become the exemplary victims of an indiscriminate, global violence.

The concurrence of violence, vulnerability, helplessness, and power – as analyzed by these two thinkers – is more specifically sounded and creatively contested in the recent works of Andrea Levy and Dionne Brand, two contemporary diasporic women writers, both of Caribbean origin. As we will see, Levy and Brand – who deal with different spatial and temporal scenarios – transcend the scope and legacy of violence in the Caribbean. In doing so, they expose the extra-territorial entanglements and disruptions which have marked old and new empires and question their claims to legitimacy as well as their claim to forge a (new) world order. As a whole, then, the voices of these women – no matter how varied the range of their disciplinary concerns and their different cultural/personal backgrounds – significantly interact, casting a disquieting light on the nature and use of violence, on its alarming capacity of reproduction and metamorphosis and its ability and will to decide life and death. Indeed, in the case of ‘traditional’ warfare this form of power has proved to be the ultimate, spectacular expression of sovereignty.⁸ But today, as a result of globalization and global terrorism, its implications, ramifications, and collateral effects have become not only more and more pervasive, but also more and more complex and hard to extricate. Therefore, it is the continuities and transformations of violent imaginaries, strategies and practices, the impact of their short-term effects and long-term legacies, of their tangible destructiveness and the interstitial, shifting modalities of their location that Butler, Cavarero, Levy, and Brand demand that we confront and, even more importantly, historicize the various contexts in which they manifest themselves.

⁸ Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, “Introduction”, in T. B. Hansen and F. Stepputat, eds., *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

Pitiable whimpering, speechless horror

The plot of *Small Island*,⁹ a novel written by Andrea Levy, a black British author born to Jamaican parents who emigrated to London after World War II, pivots around that watershed event in the history of England. The ‘now’ of the story occurs in 1948, but several sections of the book deal with previous events. In one of these sections racist and bigot Bernard Bligh, a British citizen who had enrolled as a volunteer to defend his country and the world from the Nazis, is sent to India as an aircraft hand (or, in his comrades’ jargon, “erk”). Being a member of the ground crew, he does not have the chance to engage actively in the fight; but when the war ends his squadron, instead of being sent back home, is sent to Calcutta where a riot between Hindus and Muslims is taking place. Although Levy is not explicit about it, the riot in question clearly refers to what has been

⁹ Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004). Hereafter references in the text as *SI*.

called “the great Calcutta killing” or “the great Calcutta blood bath”, which occurred in August 1946 and was unprecedented – in the history of communal violence and secessionist politics in South Asia – in terms of the sheer number of lives lost and the savagery with which thousands were killed in the course of five days.¹⁰ Evidently, the scene Bernard and his ‘chaps’ have to face is appalling: burnt shops, flurries of ash, deserted streets, and the corpses of the dead scattered down every road they travel. Bernard’s mates agree that “this was as savage as anything witnessed during the war” (*SI*, 369). Here, of course, the reluctant witnesses of this racial strife, as Bernard intimates, do not feel responsible for what they consider ‘internal’ rioting between Hindus and Muslims. As Bernard notes: “I’ve no idea what started it. But nothing to do with us, we all silently agreed. The natives rioting. Bloody coolies at each other’s throats for something. Hindu against Muslim. Muslim against Hindu. Everything soon became clear. The truckloads of cheerless RAF erks were there to keep them apart” (*SI*, 369).

The ‘erks’ came to India to fight against the Japanese, or the Japs, the “slit-eyed bastards” (*SI*, 349) – as they are called – who represent the external and easily identifiable enemy, the *hostis*. It is against the Japanese, moreover, that an internationally sanctioned war, framed by legitimate or legitimized rules of behavior and resulting from a process of escalation, was being waged. In this case, however, even if their task is quite ‘clear’, the conflict that the perplexed erks are facing is hard to decipher. In effect, the reasons for these mass killings are opaque (“bloody coolies at each other’s throats for something”), and the British do not appear to be implicated.¹¹ Besides, as Bernard remarks, “How those coolies recognized one another as an enemy was a mystery to all. After two years in India, they all looked the same to me” (*SI*, 371).

Levy has Bernard not only be a witness to the riot but she also has him retrospectively narrate those events in first person. In doing so, she wants to highlight the impact of the chaotic strangeness (strangeness?) of the shrinking empire on a scrupulous representative of Englishness, one who is imbued with contempt for the ‘inferior’ races, “proud to represent decency” (*SI*, 379) and Western civilization. “Had a job to do. Just quietly get on with it. Considered myself a civilizing influence” (*SI*, 376). Moreover, by deploying Bernard’s perspective and way of speaking, the author irreverently and ironically shows that ‘Britishness’ and ‘Englishness’ have never really coincided, that the empire was what it was within the boundaries of Britishness and outside the territory of Englishness, and that the ethnically or religiously indistinguishable natives might well be English subjects but they were indeed totally “other”.¹² In short, these others are ambiguously or symbolically close to that internal enemy (the *inimicus* of classical tradition) that might be exterminated, repressed, or

¹⁰ Durajan Das and others have emphasized the extent of preplanning and the direct and indirect involvement of politicians in fomenting the so-called Partitions Riots. See Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003), 417 note 35.

¹¹ The debate on the causes of communalism is quite controversial, but according to the so-called Cambridge School, in particular, the role of the colonial regime was crucial in its rise, introducing a new class relation to land in Bengal while dispossessing the older classes.

¹² Ian Baucom, *Out of Place. Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6-10.

deprived of full recognition and representation. Later on, in fact, when Bernard understands that “these blood-thirsty little men” who are “butchering” each other are actually “fighting for who should have power when a new independent India comes”, he just smiles at the idea of “that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country. The British out of India? Only British troops could keep those coolies under control” (SI, 375).

As the ‘savage’ scene mentioned above unfolds, it becomes more and more gruesome. Dogs are attracted to the bloody clothing of the dead, flocks of vultures feed off their bodies, and an unbearable stench fills the air around them. Death has suddenly and variously deprived those once living bodies of their singular humanity and their ontological dignity:¹³ “Some might have been taken for bundles of rags – or discarded rubbish. Others were unmistakable. Caught in a silly pose. An arm up, a leg raised. Most carried a look of astonishment. Mouths agape. But all stiff with sudden death” (SI, 369).

¹³ Cavarero, *Orrorismo*, 15.

Even more trenchantly, the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects of violence are broached again a little later, when we find that one of these bodies prevents a truck filled with British military personnel from proceeding. The NCO (non commissioned officer) orders two men to pick it up, but they refuse to do so. “There’s hundreds of bodies – why are we picking up this one?” one of them asks; and to further prove his point, he insists, “What is special about this one ... Sergeant?” (SI, 370). When the sergeant finally points to Bernard, he promptly obeys, given his strict sense of discipline. Here is Bernard’s reaction:

The body was warm The throat was slit. Neck open in a scabby second grin. Stiff as an ironing-board. Stench thick enough to chew. The truck had cracked its arm into zigzagging pieces. An ear was dangling. Came off in my hand. I held it in my palm. Flimsy as a flap of leather from a shoe. ‘Just chuck it, Pop’, Maxi shouted.
I turned away from the truck. Had to vomit. (SI, 371-2)

Here the tangible signs of the injury inflicted on the victims (who, however, cannot be distinguished from the perpetrators) exceed the fact of death itself and definitely prove that the practice of violence “does not depend on specialized equipment, but only on the use of the body to harm others”.¹⁴ Furthermore, the violation which the truck adds to that specific body brutally produces a level of horror which Cavarero traces back to the paradigmatic figure of Medusa: a level which is reached through dismemberment and defacing. The face, in fact, constitutes our most individualizing feature (SI, 14-17). In spite of Maxi’s blunt suggestion, it comes as no surprise that Bernard cannot ‘face’ such a revolting offence if not to the ‘specialness’ of a fellow human being then at least to its corporeal

¹⁴ Stewart and Strathern, *Violence*, 8.

unity. What's more, and Levy proves really implacable in her understated critique, a sudden order interrupts the attempt to lift the mangled corpse, which, after being inadvertently singled out in its individual disfigurement, is therefore returned to the undifferentiated and discarded human rubbish to which it originally belonged.

The reason for this turnabout is that a "horde of men" are coming for the poorly equipped British crew: "All brandished something – a fist, a stick, the blink of a blade Hundreds of scruffy black-eyed coolies – may be thousands" (*SI*, 372). Luckily, a police truck intervenes and disperses them:

The rabble scattered like rodents, scurrying off down side-streets Chased by the ping of real gunfire. One dropped over here, another couple over there, tripping, grabbing at a wound, while some of the fallen were hurriedly pulled away. Chaps cheered, watching them go down. Slapping to the ground like a duck shoot at a fair.

"Wait a minute. Were they Hindu or Muslim?" one joker asked.

Breathing relief, quite a few yelled back, "Who the bloody hell cares?". (*SI*, 373-4)

The crew's cheerful relief at the sight of this massacre seems to have a logic of its own. Made one by their vulnerability and their random exposure to a form of violence which could indifferently be inflicted on any one of them, those dropping bodies have become sheer targets divested of their previous, avowed affiliations, their identifying specialness. At the same time, the felling of individual members of the crowd disintegrates the menacing compactness of this ferocious and depersonalized entity – the hordes, the rabble – which the British squadron had previously feared. In one way or another, the injury which made them fall one by one like ducks at a fair is also – as Elaine Scarry would say – "disowned", "relocated to a place ... where it is no longer recognizable or interpretable".¹⁵

No doubt, Levy's presentation of the 'savage' outcome of the Calcutta riot expresses her urge to expose its ontological and brutal affront to the dignity of being human. However, she sets this affront in the entangled context of Indian communal strife and colonial policy, and, in doing so, she queries the material and discursive violence through which integral identities are contingently both constructed as an exclusive, preeminent factor of self-definition and deconstructed. She also questions the legitimacy and instrumentality of an intricate and imperial staging of power and cultural representation which enacts – as Clausewitz put it with regard to war – the continuation of politics by other means. Furthermore, she highlights how, in deadly forms of conflict, the issue of violence turns on the question of whose perception of order and vulnerability is at stake, as well as on the contingent and shifting relationality of performers, victims and witnesses.¹⁶

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 64, 71.

¹⁶ Stewart and Strathern, *Violence*, 3.

This last aspect is further explored in another episode of the novel, when Levy's proud representative of England's "civilizing influence" happens to be the very perpetrator of a form of violence which poignantly tests his sense of decency and honor. In this instance, the wide-angled colonial Indian scenario is scaled down to a personal, intimate level, and proves as never before to constitute that locus of the "occult instability" of Englishness – that lingering zone of imperial confusion – which Ian Baucom has so cogently investigated in his book *Out of Place*.¹⁷ Prompted by a comrade's sneering comments, Bernard ends up in a brothel where he brutally sodomizes a prostitute. Only after the fact does he realize that she is "nothing but a girl ... Fourteen or even twelve" (*SI*, 413). Devastated by the discovery of his act of "defiling someone's daughter", he recognizes that "the fear in her black eyes – harmless as a baby's – was denouncing me as depraved. What was I doing? This war hadn't made me a hero" (*SI*, 414). He asks her for forgiveness and to corroborate his trustworthiness, he confesses that he is a married man, "An Englishman... me Englishman...". In concomitance with this (not so) odd appeal (or desire to cling) to his national identity as a self-absolving form of defense, "a sob fierce as a child's" erupts from his body after "a long, breathless pause", and transforms itself into "an anguished howl", leaving him gasping for more breath, "which came in short bursts of pitiable whimpering". The girl is moved to compassion by this certainly unexpected manifestation of vulnerability and shame and she wipes a tear from his face with a tenderness that "stings" (*SI*, 414). This seemingly intimate, epiphanic moment of pity, pardon, and reconciliation, is brought about by the participants' reciprocal recognition of a common humanity; but it is abruptly interrupted when, unaware of the implications of what she is saying, the girl compassionately addresses Bernard with what was probably the name of her previous client, Johnny. This name (or act of naming) unfortunately turns into an offense that immediately reestablishes their alterity because it reminds Bernard of the nickname used by the 'Japs' to provoke the British.

The victim's unintended linguistic injury, then, stings more than her tenderness: "Nothing for it. I just threw the money at the wretched whore, then left" (*SI*, 415). Associated with the *hostis*, the harmless baby is inherently exposable and exposed to her brutalizer's wound. In her turn, she is linguistically interpellated, but only to be conceptually relocated into a disparagingly discriminatory category ("wretched whore") which allows the violator to shrug off his shame and sense of responsibility for her ontological integrity. What Cavarero would call the warrior's perspective bluntly reshuffles and blurs the borders between linguistic and physical injury,¹⁸ external and internal enemy, legitimate and illegitimate acts, rational and irrational behavior, pity and self-pity, violation and self-defense. And yet, a 'stinging' sense of shame will continue to haunt Bernard the warrior's

¹⁷ Baucom, *Out of Place*, 4.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

amour propre even when he has returned to England, where, afraid of having contracted syphilis, he decides not to go home until a doctor, two years later, reassures him that indeed he is okay. Only now, then, can Bernard be fully released from the memory of what has conveniently become a “silly error” – “that little madness in India” (*SI*, 427) – and have his life back.

Bernard’s military experience of war has been displaced overseas, in the unknown and disquietingly foreign reaches of Britishness. To this Levy counterpoises his wife’s encounter with its effects on the civilians in London – the familiar but now imperiled imperial city. Here the violence of warfare as “a reciprocal injuring where the goal is to out-injure the opponent”¹⁹ is transposed from the field of battle to an urban stage which bleakly reveals the enemy’s purpose not only “to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue”, but also “to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves”.²⁰ London, as a matter of fact, has turned into an “upside-down world” where it is no longer possible to find one’s bearings: “Roads that should have been familiar turned to wastelands strewn with mountains of wreckage, the displaced intestines of buildings spewing everywhere One morning, looking up a road near home, I recognized nothing, I was a foreigner to this newly modeled place” (*SI*, 281). The ‘model’ which hauntingly reconfigures the landscape of the metropolis is, of course, that of total war, a category implemented during World War I and then fully realized during World War II, which marked the unstoppable march of “rationalized slaughter”.²¹ But there is another, fundamental aspect of this model that Levy wants to highlight. As a consequence of its implementation, Cavarero explains, the civilians were considered combatants. With this asymmetrical strategy of attack, the unarmed and harmless became the modern victims of legitimate, ‘organized’ interstate violence.²²

Queenie, whose fancy name suggests the appeal the Empire exerted on her mother, works at a rest center which takes care of the “bombed-out who’d had the cheek to live through the calamity of a world blown to bits” (*SI*, 278). As she recounts years later, these people who came in “as a crowd like you’d wade through on the Underground or elbow during a department-store sale”, were called “population”, so that the semantic permutation enforced by the depersonalizing language of bureaucracy deletes the incontestable singularity of their “body in pain”:²³ “Not mothers called Mavis who, stunned speechless, clutched two small children Not a ten-year-old son called Ralph, trousers soggy with wee Not a husband called Sid, whose bloodstained arms held each one of his family in turn Not a young woman called Christine Just population” (*SI*, 278-279). Queenie’s task is “to find out who they had once been and where they had once lived straining to hear those weary fragile voices”

¹⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹ See Daniel Pick, *War Machine. The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

²² Cavarero, *Orrorismo*, 84-87.

²³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 62.

(*SI*, 279). Their bereavement is the collateral effect of a so-called just war, waged to save Europe from the Nazis. As she points out, “I would never forgive Hitler for turning human beings into that” (*SI*, 279). Indeed, stripped of their possessions, their bearings and their dignity, the people who apply to the rest center for assistance tragically confirm that bombings destroy not only “objects, gestures, and thoughts that are culturally stipulated but objects, gestures, thoughts that are human”.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

And yet, the human beings reduced to Queenie’s “that” are still alive. Her personal encounter with violence and death occurs, instead, when she is the accidental victim of a doodlebug (a flying bomb) aimed at the defenseless and unarmed civilian population. No doubt, the effects of the rationalized slaughter implemented by the modern, technologically advanced war machine on people’s bodies prove more devastating than those provoked by the rudimentary weapons employed in the course of the Calcutta riot. Here Levy offers an even cruder description of this transformative shift. When Queenie, who has survived the explosion, is taken to the ambulance, she steps into “the upturned palm of a hand wearing a gold ring, clothed in a blue woollen sleeve, but lying there attached to no one”. Her foot, she recalls, “was being cradled by a severed arm that merely ended in a bloodsoaked fraying” (*SI*, 306-7). The retrospective narration of the episode closes on this appalling image of human dismemberment which, once again, grounds modern horror in its mythological models. Before reaching this point, however, the author has staged a less gruesome but nonetheless trenchant representation of the violence of war, which is worth considering.

Suddenly caught by the explosion, Quennie feels lifted off the ground and at the same time starts registering the slow, almost oneiric motion of the dumb show in which she is participating: “I wasn’t the only one flying. Over there a woman, a bundle of rags, was rolling over – a cardigan, a skirt, twisting and flapping A silent ballet so beautiful my eyes were sucked from their sockets with the sight” (*SI*, 303-4). After ‘landing’ and evidently losing consciousness, she wakes up wondering if she is dead. She is, in effect, unable to move, with one of her shoes gone, her coat ripped, her skirt up round her waist, “knickers on view for anyone who wanted a look” (*SI*, 304). And she is so enthralled by the enticing spectacle which is taking place around her that she mentally scales down the *violentia* (in its etymological sense of violation)²⁵ that has been perpetrated – as Scarry reminds us – on people’s bodies, objects and space. She follows the movement of “[a] doll falling slowly from the sky towards a tree: a branch stripped of all its leaves caught the doll in its black spikes”. She notices that “[a] house had had its front sliced off as sure as if it had been opened on a hinge. A doll’s house with all the rooms on show ...” (*SI*, 304).

²⁵ As explained by Glenn Bowman, “The Violence in Identity”, in Schmidt and Schröder, *Anthropology*, 26.

Indeed, the miniaturized gutted house, with all its rooms exposed to view (like Queenie's body), discloses the intimacy and coziness of a lived space; an intimacy that, as the following scene demonstrates, has been abruptly broken into and has consequently become disturbingly uncanny: "And in a bathroom – standing by the side of a bath, caught by the curtain going up too soon on a performance – a totally naked woman" (SI, 304). This scene of violence, which has just occurred, freezes the victim in a "silly poise" and at the same time seems to convey the suggestion that – in the warrior's perspective – men and women are reduced to naked life and, as such, are exempted from a consideration of inalienable rights. The other passers-by, however, are horrified – rather than stunned – by what is happening. What they perceive is not the uncanny, suspended temporality of the performance but the ineluctable and feral factuality of the injury which has been inflicted; so that the doll, "now dangling limp and filthy in a little pink hat", comes to embody not the spectacle but the unnerving spectrality of death.

²⁶ Peg Birmingham, *Hanna Arendt and Human Rights* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 105.

²⁷ The notion of presence to oneself and to the other as fundamental to witnessing is developed by Jacques Derrida in his *Poétique et politique du témoignage* (Paris: Editions de L'Herne, 2005). It implies, however, the presence of an addressee, which in this case is missing.

²⁸ Veena Daas, "Violence and the Work of Time", in Anthony P. Cohen, ed., *Signifying Identities. Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 59-73.

²⁹ Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006). Hereafter cited in text as *I*.

This sight provokes the unvoiced, "noiseless scream" of a woman. Indeed, as Hanna Arendt has powerfully contended, speechless horror at what humans are capable of, not beauty or pleasure, marks the contemporary experience of wonder.²⁶ Now Queenie herself wakes up from her stupor and realizes that she too has become "population", that is to say, "one of the bombed" (SI, 305). In other words, she becomes, as it were, present to herself at the very moment in which she becomes present to the other,²⁷ and by recognizing her communality – and her distance – with the other victims, she inwardly assumes her responsibility as witness, as conscious observer rather than enchanted onlooker. From this newly acquired wakefulness,²⁸ she tries mentally to reconstruct what the "bleak landscape" of wreckage in front of her had looked like before the bombing, and she wonders where the people who had lived in those streets, involved in their everyday life, had gone (SI, 305).

That ravaged world is here

By focusing on World War II Levy's novel unmasks the variable forms of affront and destructiveness which marked a world 'blown to bits' but still governed by an interstate model of warfare. On the other hand, Dionne Brand's long poem *Inventory*²⁹ addresses more contemporary and elusive manifestations of conflict and violence – terrorism and environmental devastation included – linked to the contradictory aspects, both unifying and fragmentary, of globalization. Here the task of seeing and witnessing (which Levy delegated to one of her fictional characters) is associated – as Brand's title clearly suggests – to the responsibility of taking stock of the present. In addition, this task is directly assumed by the poet herself, who

sets out to produce an inventory in the Gramscian sense of “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process.³⁰ And history, as perceived and portrayed in Brand’s polyhedric writing (poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction) is inevitably marked by violence. No wonder, then, that in the light of the contemporary “incendiary circumstances”, as Amitav Gosh has defined them,³¹ she now defies, more straightforwardly and scathingly than Levy, the notion of modernity itself and its civilizational assumptions, denouncing western mythologies and alibis and the entanglement of old and new empires which form and deform the present ‘world order’.

Inventory starts with a critique directly addressed to the United States and carried on in the form of a collective accounting (the subject is ‘we’) which contests the way in which they ideologically and culturally seduce all those (“we poor, we weak, we dying”, *I*, 5) who supinely accept their construction of history and “the science fiction tales of democracy” (*I*, 8). The poem also denounces the fact that western democracy has been seriously imperiled by centuries of slavery, the detention policies at Guantanamo, and the reactivation of “palimpsests of old borders” in American airports, where “blenching queues” are forced “to be all the same, to mince biographies / to some exact phrases, some / exact and toxic genealogy” (*I*, 17). Further on, it condemns the contradictory interdependencies of a world where “wealth multiplies in the garbage dumps” (*I*, 40); where the ‘rabble’ whom Levy’s Bernard had to face in the British imperial margins are now perceived by the West as ‘hordes’ haunting the centre itself; where indifferent hedonisms and empty electronic messages replace the will to connect and/or partake in the public sphere; where various forms of “sick tribalism” (*I*, 71) and fundamentalisms (“the discredited physics of Christianity and Islam”, *I*, 70) menace the autonomy of human beings or substitute the “theory of nothing” (*I*, 48) for the revolutionary impulse.

In the present scenario, terror itself has become an exchange of goods involving consumption and even profit (“a new industry for the stock exchange”, *I*, 44), while nature and its resources are in peril and reduced to a battlefield. Most importantly, the multiple forms of violence and death which are being enacted daily have now been normalized, “neutralized” by the media which insert them in a closed system of recognition that blurs the boundaries between image and reality. Or alternatively, they are substituted by paranoid alerts announcing “imagined disturbances” which reveal the peculiar fragility of power (*I*, 25).

This is in effect a scenery of planetary devastation and, actually, of the world’s absence – in the Arendtian sense of that space which arises among persons, and where everything which individuals carry with them becomes visible and audible.³² History and its traces loom as everybody’s burden because the globe is haunted by the ghost of the past as well as a spatially

³⁰ See Diana Brydon, “Dionne Brand’s Global Intimacies”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 76.3 (Summer 2007), 994.

³¹ See Amitav Gosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

³² Hannah Arendt, *L’umanità in tempi bui*, intr. and trans. by Laura Boella (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006), 54.

overabundant present. Thus Brand's inventory of the contemporary condition becomes the structural, rhetorical, and hermeneutic means through which she not only deconstructs the myth of the triumphant progress of modernization but also identifies the subjectivity of violence as a category of action. And in doing so, she radically exposes the ambiguities of the present debate on war and terrorism. Indeed, she suggests that traditional categories such as war, terrorism, enemy, and, we might add, innocence, are no longer tenable. In its planetary aggressiveness, terrorism makes an exemplary victim of the casual, helpless human being whom Cavarero and Butler also evoke; pre-emptive, legitimized warfare kills civilians 'by mistake'.

In the past, Brand has shown a strong concern with colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal structures in the Caribbean and the Third World at large. She has also embraced Maurice Bishop's New Jewel Movement in Grenada. Subsequently, she has grieved over the wounds of its failure. Mourning and grief for the death of her political creed, for battles lost and the extinguished "blood-red flame of a revolution",³³ now turn into mourning and grief for the many victims of the decentralized and deterritorialized manifestations of contemporary warfare; they also turn into rage against the perpetrators of a global destructiveness which manifests itself as a historically situated practice, never completely idiosyncratic or dissociated from instrumental rationality.³⁴

Brand's poetic persona ambiguously declares its own and our complicity and pushes to its limits this perspective of never-ending devastation and resigned compliance: "let us forget all that, let us not act surprised, / or make coy distinctions among mass / murderers, why ration nuclear weapons, / let us all celebrate death" (*I*, 35). Death is truly the foundation or the unavoidable collateral effect of contemporary politics, to the extent that political accountability and responsibility are foreclosed: "they declare themselves innocent of all events / those that have happened and those to come, / everything / they examine the evidence against themselves / and suggest the victims cunning / they found themselves good, / down to the last general and secretary / of state" (*I*, 73).

In addition, 'they' blatantly display the tendency to contemplate as inevitable the existence of wasted, superfluous bodies³⁵ that represent the economic casualties of what Stuart Hall has trenchantly defined "a global market which we call 'modernity'".³⁶ Hence, as a consequence of the unequal integration of the world-system, vulnerability – as Butler also contends – is allocated differently across the globe (31):

there's laughter on some street in the world, and a baby,
crying same as any street, anywhere, and some say
the world is not the same, but it is you know

³³ See Dionne Brand, *Land to Light on* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 6.

³⁴ Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction", 2.

³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004).

³⁶ Stuart Hall, "Closing Remarks", in "Reinventing Britain: A Forum", *Wasafiri*, 29 (Spring 1999), 43.

now, same as anywhere, still, a baby crying here
may not be about hunger, not that kind of hunger

eating years into the cheeks, making puffed bellows
of the abdomen, ah why invoke that, we know about it

we don't care beyond pity, so the thing is straight and simple,
the suburbs, the outskirts are inevitable. (*I*, 47)

In order to expose and contest this bleak scenario of self-righteous, self-absolving reasoning and perduring – albeit reconfigured – imperial geographies, Brand's poetic persona resorts to several discursive and rhetorical strategies. On a conceptual level, her persona presents a series of permutations of the notion of “another life”³⁷ which is repeatedly evoked, as a wish or a hope, either in relation to ancient, shattered genealogies or to another dimension of time, space, and history. This is, indeed, wish-fulfillment, which is repeatedly countered by the awareness that things have gone too far, that it is ‘too late’ for envisioning another way of being in the world.

More significantly, in the course of the poem the narrating ‘I’ rhetorically displaces itself to various locations that erode the deictic determinations of place; it fragments and disarticulates itself in multiple pronominal subjects, identifies and disidentifies itself, voices and keeps itself at a distance, mimics the speech of the powerful, and also ambiguously camouflages itself as one of the weak. This continual shifting not only compromises the very accountability of the ‘I’, as we have already seen, but by blurring or making slippery the boundaries between ‘I’, ‘she’, ‘you’, ‘we’, and ‘they’, Brand's persona seems to propose de-personalization as a way to reach all those lives that are wasted – by different practices of violence – in different parts of the world. Indeed, such is the urge to reach outwards that the ‘I’ goes as far as to posit – while denying its feasibility – the disintegration of that ‘we’ that had inaugurated the poem: “‘we’, / there is no ‘we’ / let us separate ourselves now, / though perhaps we can't, still and again / too late for that, / nothing but to continue” (*I*, 42). By admitting and at the same time refusing to reduce itself to a generalized will in order to “damage” and “mean each other / harm” (*I*, 42), it opens up to a form of relationality, as Butler would say, in which the others “haunt the way I am, as it were periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded”.³⁸

Hence, in one section devoted to the women of the world, the third person subject affirms that “she'll gather the passions of women” (*I*, 30), and then commits herself to the task of storing “the nerves' endings in glass / ... for divine fierce years to come / when the planet is ruined” (*I*, 31), while the listing of small everyday acts, the banal needs of the quotidian, brings forth those “triumphant details” (*I*, 28) which escape the brutal

³⁷ Which might remind us of Derek Walcott's *Another Life*, a collection of poems published in 1973. In more than one occasion, Brand has ‘written back’ to Walcott.

³⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

³⁹ Vigdis Broch-Due, "Violence and Belonging. Analytical Reflections", in V. Broch-Due, ed., *Violence and Belonging. The Quest for Identity in Post-colonial Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

⁴⁰ Cavarero, *Orrorismo*, 104.

⁴¹ Marina Garcés, "The Inquiry after a Shared World", in Valentin Roma, ed., *The Unavowable Community* (Barcelona: Institut Ramon Llull and Actar, 2009), 141.

⁴² See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴ Garcés, "The Inquiry", 149. The author is here referring to Merleau-Ponty's definition of anonymity. She also explains that in his view anonymity stands for a "truth-to-be-made" (148), and an "awakening in the bonds" (150) that one can only attain with others.

leveling of violence and the serial nature of macrohistory. And yet the space and time of the quotidian *is* invaded by violence, which "infiltrates not just public, political arenas but the most intimate spaces of the personal also"³⁹ and becomes the everyday's 'normal' order.⁴⁰ In another section 'she' imagines she is writing a letter to an unknown addressee, as "an account of her silence / its destination all the streets / beginning with Al Kifah, Al Rashid / ... Mansur" (*I*, 34); and while thus evoking places and people connected to Al Qaeda, she directly addresses this 'you', wondering "What door are you looking through now / ... what sound does the world make there", with a final (and provocative) invitation to join her: "know that I am your spy here, your terrorist / find me" (*I*, 37). The 'you', then, comes before the 'we', when "everything is touched" (*I*, 41) and that 'we' has been emptied of its original emancipatory power.⁴¹ No account of oneself, no knowing thyself, can take place outside of this ethical structure of address.⁴²

Ultimately, in embracing and letting itself be embraced by such a boundless, relational ethics (perhaps a new form of politics) of accountability and caring ("there are atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded", *I*, 100), the self translates its grief into an inventory of the dead. An inventory which is in part drawn from the Iraq Body Count project, in part provided by the poet's personal recording of the number of bodies (children, men, women) that succumb every day under the bombs of democracy and terror. The hammering mass-media accounts of the victims interfere with the 'I's everyday life, intersect the time and space of love and friendship, and pursue it as it travels to various parts of the world. At the same time, having been appropriated as a conscious, relentless task of counting, recounting and adding up, and as a testimony of wakefulness to the perpetration of violence ("this vigil for broken things", *I*, 42), these accounts turn into an obituary meant to make grievable those lives that would otherwise be unmarked because unmarkable or unqualified for recognition, as Butler suggests.⁴³

Consequently, they foreground how the abstract concreteness of the numbers, with their "seduction of infinity" (*I*, 26), replaces the violent erasure both of those unqualified lives and the "givenness" – in Arendt's words – of those bodies and their historical immanence. Thus, while underlining the process of disintegration to which these embodied singularities have been (and are being) submitted, Brand's persona also reflects on the obliteration of their social significance ("consider then the sudden lack of, say, cosmeticians / or mechanics" *I*, 78) and their identifying marks ("tenacious too the absence and impossibility of names" *ibid.*). She proposes, then, voluntary de-nominalization ("let us all deny our useless names in solidarity" *ibid.*) as a way of putting the 'I' into the plural,⁴⁴ or, rather, a way of revitalizing the space of that 'we' which has

been either seduced by identitarian communitarianism or invaded and reshuffled by someone else's history and myths.⁴⁵

In the last analysis, the red thread which links the theoretical and creative explorations of Cavarero, Butler, Levy and Brand is their intellectual and emotional testing and rearticulation of the Arendtian notion of "dark times". Like her, they question the extent to which humanity, human rights, and agency can be preserved in the midst of violent practices. Like her, they ponder the way in which these practices can provide a base for a being-with that is able to transcend both the defensive and offensive boundaries of the 'we'. In Cavarero's view, it is only by adopting the perspective of the helpless, rather than that of the warrior, that we can possibly cope with contemporary horrorism. According to Butler, the question is whether, given the present scenarios of violence, grief and mourning can be made into a resource for politics. By grief and mourning Butler means the slow process by which we apprehend a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who "I" am⁴⁶ and develop a point of identification with suffering itself.⁴⁷ In her latest book *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*⁴⁸ she further elaborates her reflections on the notions of grievability, vulnerability, affective responsiveness, and precariousness specifically in relation to the violence unleashed in the war against Iraq, in the Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo. She argues that moral theory must indeed become social critique and calls for a rethinking of global responsibility and progressive politics with a renewed focus on the social ontology of the body. She then goes on to distinguish the "more or less existential conception of 'precariousness'" from "a more specifically political notion of 'precarity'"⁴⁹ and pointedly stigmatizes the nation-state and its strategic deployment of exclusionary representational regimes or "frames" as essential to the conduct of war.

In Levy's and Brand's case, these critical issues are historicized and investigated in light of a postcolonial concern with deconstructing past and present imperial assumptions. In Levy, Bernard thinks that "Britain required a new backbone. Men to reconstruct the ravaged land back into something worthy of the British Empire" (*SI*, 365). This view is soon impaired when he has to confront what he perceives as his own displacement in a post-war, desolate England which has taken in as 'guests' the 'colored' British citizens of the Caribbean. Indeed, it is by constantly playing on the ambiguities of hospitality and by alternating the experiences and the voices of Bernard and Queenie with those of their two Caribbean tenants, Gilbert and Hortense, that Levy is able to disseminate throughout her text an ironically incisive critique of "radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty", showcasing how they are "disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part".⁵⁰ More than that, the unexpected final twist of the plot which brings Queenie, the white, English

⁴⁵ As the poetic persona maintains with regard to the United States: "so hard now to separate what was them / from what we were / how imprisoned we are in their ghosts", *Inventory*, 8-9.

⁴⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁸ See Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), especially the introduction and chapter one.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii-xiii.

⁵¹ See, for example, how the listing of the victims is at a certain point momentarily suspended by a disquieting alliteration which seems to originate from an intrinsic ‘budding’ quality of the consonants: “... child on bicycle by bomb / in Baquba / why does that alliterate on its own, why / does she observe the budding of that consonant” (38).

⁵² Thus: “then she may stop this vigil for broken things” (42); “at least someone should stay awake, she thinks” (26); “she has to keep watch at the window / of the television” (28).

host, to entrust her bastard, half-breed new-born baby to her Afro-Jamaican guests, dramatizes both the (racial) vulnerability of natality and the potential gift of interracial friendship.

Brand’s *Inventory* destabilizes both the discourse of the world and that of nature and problematizes the poetic word itself.⁵¹ In addition, her relentless counting, recounting, and adding up of the (casual and not so casual) victims of a contemporary violence which ‘makes’ and ‘unmakes’ the world scathingly dissects the new geography of centrality and marginality of our global modernity. Brand’s persona reminds the reader that “nothing personal is recorded here, / you must know that” (*I*, 22). And yet ‘here’ and ‘there’ overlap in her vigilant, wakeful, and watchful⁵² consciousness: “what sound does the world make there” (*I*, 34); “that ravaged world is here” (*I*, 47). It is precisely by being heard and translated to *here*, in this deeply felt, historically (up)rooted, and embodied space of radical proximity and implication (poetic, ethical, and political) that the “whole immaculate language of the ravaged world” (*I*, 11) ultimately condemns and defies the violence which is devastating the bodies Brand is mourning for.