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Situating the Ecological in Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries*

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ABSTRACT
What does it mean to read a poem about anti-Blackness as ecopoetics? How do we account for the ecological in such a work? How does this kind of reading unsettle the notion that ecological literatures are tethered to the environment? These are the questions I tackle in this paper as I undertake a reading of Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries* as ecopoetry—a poem that explores the entanglements between the human and non-human worlds. I argue that through this poem, Brand pushes against such simple definitions of ecocritical works as focused on the impact of human activities on the environment. Her work suggests that woven into the fabric of the narratives that govern such activities are evidence of the destruction of marginalized bodies. As such, I approach *Ossuaries* from the angle of the key elements identified by scholars like Lawrence Buell, Laura-Gray Street, and Ann Fisher-Wirth as evident in ecological literatures. I examine how Brand deploys these features in her poem, using them to nudge us towards exploring Black histories in the context of what Kathryn Yusoff calls "geologic narratives." I contend that these features situate *Ossuaries* within the context of ecopoetics, and therefore allow us to critique the impact of Anthropocenic origin narratives on both the environment, human body, and human history specifically, Black histories.

Keywords
Ecopoetry; Anthropocene; Black Histories; Black bodies; Geologic narratives; Self-conscious Anthropocene.

> What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death? It means work. It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living.
> Christina Sharpe. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016)

> Geologists may say, what has this got to do with geology, to which may be replied, everything!
> Kathryn Yusoff. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018)

Reading Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries* as ecopoetry requires unpacking the features that constitute ecopoetics. It entails a repositioning of the ecocritical framework to extend into discourses beyond the environmental, pushing them into the domains of the cultural. Such realignment is affirmed by Lynn Keller who, in her book *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, notes that debates about the Anthropocene have evolved to embrace global literatures in ways that link "ecocritical with postcolonial as well as queer and race studies" (15). Therefore, to situate *Ossuaries* within ecocritical discourse necessitates a reading that both acknowledges slavery and its afterlife, and implicates colonial histories in the development of the Anthropocene.

This paper unfolds in three main parts: the first section highlights Brand's contributions through *Ossuaries*, engages with notable critiques of Brand's work, and situates my discussion within the context of extant scholarship. The second part focuses on the ecological themes that emanate from the text by drawing on the key features proposed by Lawrence Buell, Laura-Gray Street, and Ann Fisher-Wirth. The third examines the form and language in *Ossuaries* by examining the function of experimentation as deployed by Brand. I assert that this poem, in many ways, engages with ecological concerns and what Keller refers to as "the Self-Conscious Anthropocene" (2018). I thus call for a reimagination of how we interpret Brand's poetics by putting forward the argument that to approach Ossuaries exclusively from the context of anti-Black existence is itself an oversight of anti-Blackness' intricate connection with the Anthropocene.

Among the striking features of Dionne Brand's writing is the provocative positioning of her characters within political and temporal spaces in ways that

make ethical demands of us as readers. Her work requires that we question histories, norms, and politics and situate our understanding of the narratives they tell within the context of Black experience, specifically within the framework of the violence that pervades Black existence. Scholars have mostly approached Brand's work from this angle, reading it through the lenses of contemporary racism and the afterlife of slavery. Katherine McKittrick's "Plantation Futures," for example, examines Brand's *Inventory* as "a creative work that intervenes in the commonsense teleology of racial violence" (12), one that carries out the decolonial work of repositioning as well as providing context through which "black futures are reimagined" (12). Although it is a reading of *Inventory* that conceives of Plantations as sites that hold geographies of slavery and its aftermath, Black dispossession and exclusion, and Black death and survival, McKittrick's discussion also reads like a direct response to Brand's other poem, *Ossuaries*. Opening with the story of the African Burial Ground discovered in New York City in 1991, McKittrick explicates Black bodies' status as testament of Black death and anti-Black violence. For readers of *Ossuaries*, the African Burial Ground enacts an imagery of the "stone pit" that Brand describes—a pit filled with the bones of Black bodies, proof of the traumas of slavery and forced relocation. McKittrick thus asks for a rethinking of Plantation geographies as a prerequisite to the contextualization of contemporary racial violence, asserting that "it is impossible to delink the built environment, the urban, and blackness" (2). Therefore, to think of Brand primarily in the context of her stance against antiblackness, is to perform the "delinkage" that Mckittrick denounces.

Likewise, Anne Quema presents an insightful interpretation of *Ossuaries* as a response to the annihilation of Black bodies and the memorialization of such violence.[1] Referring to the poem as "songs of necropolitics"—one that sings about living in a "death-world" in which Black people continue to experience both social and political death—she argues that it confronts the reader with the "everyday practices of aggression and destruction and stages the exercise of violence with [Black] death as a normalized experience" (55). Quema concludes that while the poem offers no sense of closure for historical traumas, it grants momentary reprieve through the poetic persona's yet continuous escape to different cities, new spaces that gesture hope, no matter how minute, at regeneration (66).

Although my approach to *Ossuaries* aligns to a large extent with that of McKittrick and Quema, and other scholars like Diana Brydon, Libe García Zarranz, Andrea Medovarski, Franca Bernabei, and Tanis MacDonald who

1. See Anne Quema's "Dionne Brand's Ossuaries Songs of Necropolitics" (2014).

have rendered brilliant interpretations of Brand's works, I depart from their assessments on the basis that they tend to read the afterlife of slavery and contemporary racism in these works as isolated from her writing about environment. As such, I further their interpretations by looking at *Ossuaries* through an ecocritical lens, to observe how, as a poem, it is concerned with the politics of environmental justice, to explore how it teases out the relationship between the histories of human existence and the environment, how it investigates the connectedness of living and nonliving things coexisting in an ecosystem, and lastly, how it examines spaces and landscapes and human positioning within such spaces. Ultimately, this essay seeks to expand the unicentric and restrictive conceptualization of ecopoetry beyond its current predominant focus on non-human actors.

Laid out in fifteen ossuary sections, each reading like a chapter in a novel, the poem follows the life of Yasmine, a Black woman, as she travels across Africa and North America in pursuit of purpose and acceptance. Through this character, Brand writes a narrative that explores the impact of the Middle Passage on Black experience. She weaves a plot that does not shy from difficult topics such as domestic abuse, loss of cultures and languages, institutional racism, Black scientific experimentation, and Black activism. By positioning these topics within the context of Black diasporic existence, Brand suggests that conversations about the Anthropocene should include not just the destruction of the environment but also the *destruction* of Black bodies.

Approaching *Ossuaries* however from an ecocritical perspective unsettles the traditional descriptions of ecopoetry as poetry that "persistently stresses human cooperation with nature" (Scigaj 5). Rather than engage with the environment as a geographical space, *Ossuaries* takes on the task of unmasking veiled anti-Black activities by first articulating their forms of representation, and subsequently, connecting them to their colonial underpinnings. She appears occupied with the weaving together of political, historical, and ecological issues in ways that prompt the reexamination of human existence, relations, and spatial occupation.

Several questions emanate from reading this poem through an ecocritical lens: What is the benefit of reading *Brand* as ecopoetry? How does this exercise unsettle the notion that all of humanity is *equally* responsible for the ecological crisis, a notion that ignores 1) the role of developed nations as the major contributors of the Anthropocene; and 2), the varying impact on different communities, especially former colonies? Also, what kind of awareness is Brand trying to instigate? And lastly, what areas of ecological concern does Brand unveil through the language and form with which she has written this long poem? To tackle these questions, I focus on Brand's thematic and formal preoccupation with enacting what Kathryn Yusoff refers to as scenes of "refusal." I examine how

these features force us as readers to explore Black geologic histories[2] in the context of contemporary Black experience arguing that this contextualization therefore allows us to critique the impact of Anthropocenic origin narratives on both the environment and the human body.

Locating the Ecological in *Ossuaries*

Ecopoets explore a variety of themes; depending on the subject matter, poems may address several dimensions or just one aspect. Mostly, ecopoems have a strong sense of environmental inclination, be they yoked to nature or a political stance. They tend to represent the natural world and the complex interactions within it in ways that prompt us to question our knowledge of the world along two lines: firstly, how much do we know of our natural space and what role do we play in its existence? Secondly, how well do we understand the role of cause and effect in the universe? Are we able to see how events and actions have aligned in ways that harm the ecosystem, including the living and nonliving entities within it? It is this reasoning that makes the call to activism and demand for social justice integral to these poems.

In the preface to *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, Street and Fisher-Wirth account for ecopoetry under three categories: 1) Nature poetry—poems that are inspired by and respond to nature; 2) Environmental poetry—poems that are driven by and engage with discourse about environmental activities; such are often as concerned with human injustice as they are about the destruction of the non-human world; 3) Ecological poetry—poems that are experimental in form, often enacting on the pages the ecology they represent (xxviii-xxix). As they note, isolating a universal and encompassing definition of ecopoetry can be a daunting task because of some of its elusive features. Although this categorization serves to guide how we recognize ecopoetics, it is not exhaustive as a means of definition. At best, as a whole "they are some of the many planes that meet at various angles to create the larger whole that is ecopoetry" (xxix). To think of ecopoetry then in this sense is to lean on the *intentions* of the poet rather than on the categorization of the poem. To ask if as ecopoetics it achieves the aim of the poet, which often, as Geordie Miller asks in "To the Bones: The Instrumental Activism of Brand's *Ossuaries*," calls out, and to, the public and

2. I examine these histories in the context of what Kathryn She calls geologic origin narratives in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Yusoff argues that these narratives are necessary because they account for how coloniality and anti-Blackness are inscribed into the Anthropocene (19).

serves as a form of political activism (160). On this basis, I subscribe to the idea that in *Ossuaries*, Brand's objectives to place Black lives in the context of historical traumas while probing complicity and complacency performs this function.

For a more robust understanding of the subject matters that drive ecopoetry, it is useful to turn to Laurence Buell, who in his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, traces the literary history of environmental writing in the United State. He provides a comprehensive account of how literature can potentially influence our perceptions about the environmental. Using Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as a focal point, he traces the place of literary scholarship in the sensitization towards an ecocentric existence. In the "Introduction," Buell identifies four key elements that can be said to be present in ecopoetics: it examines the interconnectedness between non-human environment and human history; it considers and shows concern for the interest of the non-human world; it holds humans accountable for the Anthropocene; and it emphasizes a changing environment (7-8). Examining these key elements in *Ossuaries* does not only establish the ecocritical in Brand's work but also provides a rethinking of how we locate and analyze ecopoetics, especially when the work under consideration defies standard orientations. In the following pages, I undertake a reading of *Ossuaries* in line with these points.

Buell's first point expresses that the non-human environment exists "not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (7). This point gestures at an intricate relationship between history, nature, and human existence/experience. The inclusion of human existence/experience in the acknowledgement of the relationship between the past and the environment allows us to view history, then, not just as an account of events or occurrences but as a momentous past that continues to dictate present and future terms of engagement. From the perspective through which *Ossuaries* engages with the readers, the history of slavery and the modern-day violence against Black people explicates this interconnectedness. Yasmine, the main character, embodies these complicated relations; she symbolizes the multifaceted distressing Black experience rooted in slavery. And through her, Brand illuminates the proximity of Black bodies to harm and death: "this regime takes us to the stone pit every day / we live like this, /each dawn we wake up, our limbs paralyzed, / shake our bones out, deliver ourselves/ to the sharp instruments for butchering" (123). Therefore, to think about how human history is implicated in the history of the environment is to think about the ways in which coloniality was grounded on the categorization of "Blackness" and other marginalized people as commodity, a categorization that permitted the harmful treatment of these bodies.

This adverse proximity is central to Yusoff's analysis of the Anthropocene as a contested concept. She dives into contemporary ecological discourse,

challenging existing perceptions about the origins of the Anthropocene[3] while proposing novel perspectives on humans' historical relationship to and with geology. Contrary to common views about the origins of the Anthropocene, Yusoff's work considers *White Geology*[4] as a critical agent in signaling the beginning of man's global catastrophic influence on the planet. She suggests that social practices—racism and its concomitant categorization of the other as *nonhuman*—that became enabled by the white man's exclusive assumption of earth's material and processes should also be considered as drivers of ecological change. Therefore, she brings critical race discourse into conversation with ecological crisis debates by exemplifying how the language with which geology is inscribed has enabled the *commodification* of other races, theft and pollution of Indigenous lands, unauthorized scientific experimentation on bodies, and the deliberate erasures of colonial histories. In sum, Yusoff's central argument hinges on this statement: "coloniality [history] and anti-Blackness [human existence/experience] are materially inscribed into the Anthropocene [the degradation of nature]" (119). My reading of *Ossuaries* in many ways aligns with Yusoff's viewpoint mainly because I focus on how Brand magnifies the issues summed up in the term "Black Anthropocene" in Yasmin's lived experiences and psychological struggles.

Teasing out the ecological in Brand's poem in the way Buell's point demands, requires that we situate it, as Rinaldo Walcott suggests, within "a series of social, political and cultural movements of the 1960s" and the continuing effect of the Trans-Atlantic slave traffic on Black diasporic experience (88). As such, it becomes necessary to read Brand's writing as a form of what Yusoff describes as "Black Poethics".[5] Borrowed from Denise Ferreira da Silva, the term indicates a Black feminist praxis that proposes a different way of presenting and understanding the socio-economic and geologic drivers that have historically shaped, and continue to shape, Black peoples' experience. Yusoff describes this term as an attempt "to redefine both black subjectivity and 'inert' materiality" (84). For the Black Feminist writer who inhabits such a "poethical" space,

3. Yusoff identifies three possible explanations provided by the science community for the Anthropocene: "the Columbian 'exchange' and 'Orbis hypothesis' event (Lewis and Maslin 2015) (1610); the Industrial Revolution and James Watt's steam engine (1800); and the 'Great Acceleration' and nuclear isotopes from missile testing" (p. 24, Kindle Edition). For more information about Anthropogenesis, also consider Paul Crutzen's "The 'Antropocene'" (2006).

4. I use the term "White Geology" in the context of White man's dominance over the earth's material, structures, and processes as discussed in Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

5. See Denise Ferreira da Silva's "Towards a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World" (2014).

writing becomes a means to reclaim Black narratives, stolen or erased, and an opportunity to reconstruct notions of Blackness. She explains further that Black poethical works enact scenes of "refusal" in which notions of Blackness are reworked to project an alternative and transformative perspective of Black bodies. This reworking is often exercised using "new poetic grammars to create an insurgent geology of belonging, one that refuses capture by geologic forces and redirects their nonstratified forces as a sense of possibility" (88).

Ossuaries as an example of such poethics presents a vivid representation of Black diasporic experience in contemporary society in a way that indicts the Middle Passage (history). To capture this experience effectively, the plot of the long poem centers the unequal grounds upon which Black resistance and anti-Black violence stand. Brand reiterates the inscription of violence on Black bodies through historical narratives, and how such biased descriptions served as justification for the atrocities of slavery. While she does not mention the Trans-Atlantic slave trade specifically in this poem, by referring repeatedly to the disarticulated bones of Black people accumulated over generations, she reenacts an image of the unmarked graves of Black slaves who were victims of colonial cruelty:

> I drowned in vats of sulphurous defences/
> the crate of bones I've become, good/
> I was waiting to throw my limbs on the pile,/
> the mounds of disarticulated femurs and radii/
>
> but perhaps we were always lying there,/
> dead on our feet and recyclable,/
> toxic and imperishable, the ways to see us. (49-50)

Also, later in the poem, she writes:

> here we lie in folds, collected stones
> in the museum of spectacles,
> our limbs displayed, fract and soluble. (126)

In these lines, Brand uses the imagery of remains trapped in scattered ossuaries to explain contemporary society's perpetuation of agential cruelties that habituate Black people continually to harm. In fulfilling the Black poethic mandate, Brand refuses the inscription of violence as organic to Black racial identity; rather, she reframes its construct as a crafting of the trauma of slavery, a trauma that reverberates in contemporary society's perspective of the Black race. Violence in the poem is thus depicted as a response to the unfavorable living conditions that have become mundane to Black individuals, such as

police brutality, scientific experiments on Black bodies, and labor exploitation, to mention a few.

Libe García Zarranz's insightful essay, "Toxic Bodies that Matter: Trans-corporeal Materialities in Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries*," also examines this interconnectedness. In this paper, García Zarranz analyzes Brand's portrayal of the female body as a site of "trans-corporeal toxicity" one that bears the inscriptions of "the violence of multiple histories and discourses across different temporal and spatial frameworks" (28). Leaning on Stacey Alaimo's work on trans-corporeality, she pushes the argument that Brand portrays the female Black body as permeable, holding and carrying forward traumatic histories while simultaneously bearing witness to present uneven global structure (58). She notes that the poem is primarily concerned with depicting the environment as a toxic space in which the Black body is entrapped, one that requires looking back at the past in order to make sense of the present, one that says loudly and clearly that "Human beings seem to have lived a genealogy of toxicity and despair through time and history and thus bodies bear the trace of such ruptures" (59). Such a depiction, García Zarranz seems to suggest, nudges us to consciousness, not just of our existence in a temporal space, but the histories and narratives that inform inclusions and exclusions in present day.

Moving on to the second key element that Buell identifies in his book, he indicates that environmental literature highlights the existence and the importance of protecting the nonhuman (7). He supports this claim by referring to the bird in Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" as a good example of the coexistence of multiple worlds within a single space. This bird, Buell notes, embodies a story, a world, and a history of its own, one that is independent of human interaction, but is often impacted by it. The contemplation of death at the end of the poem nudges one to consider not only an ultimate finale to the state of living, but also the cause of the bird's presumably dead mate.

Ossuaries complicates this stance. It insists that to examine the interest of the nonhuman is to think in two folds: to consider the marginalized "other" who is perceived as less human, and to consider "the other than human" entities coexisting in the ecosystem. These two positions must be held simultaneously in anthropocentric discourse. In other words, if ecopoetics is concerned with the interest of the nonhuman world, such interests should consider how the actions that put the nonhuman at risk also tend to harm marginalized bodies.

It is useful once again to turn to Yusoff, who explains how the extraction of natural resources, justified by the concept of White Geology, precipitated Black violence and death. She writes that "It is an inhuman proximity organized by historical geographies of extraction, grammars of geology, imperial global geographies, and contemporary environmental racism. It is predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body

burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth (xii). Arguing along this line prompts a consideration of the connection between anthropocenic activities and marginalized bodies; it calls into memory historical events such as the 1954 "Castle Bravo," the largest nuclear detonation carried out by the United States that devastatingly impacted the lives of the residents of Mashall Islands;[6] it also recalls the toxic pollution of Ogoni lands in Nigeria by Shell, which caught the world's attention after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa.[7] As Yusoff notes, the history of geology is entwined with that of the Anthropocene, and it tells a story of theft and destruction, not just of natural resources but of bodies too (71). This theft necessitated the creation of a "New geologic identity" (the classification of human beings as fungible commodities), and this new identity ushered in a legacy of colonial "Experiments" (45-48).

The experimentation on marginalized bodies is an experience that Yasmine knows too well:

> let us begin from there, restraining metals
> covered my heart, rivulets
> of some unknown substance transfused my veins
>
> . . . .
>
> Plunged repeatedly to our deaths only to be revived
> By zoos, parades, experiments, exhibits, television sets. (11-12)

Here, Brand conjures an imagery of the past in a way that draws a connection between these lines and the violent circumstances that Black people have endured, such as human zoos and "freak shows" (the story of Ota Banga and Sarah Baartman come to mind), scientific experiments like the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, and the distorted representation of Black people on television. Through the poem, she shows that in all these instances, there is a lingering sense of entrapment, and while such acts presumably end, they have enduring real-life consequences because even after the perpetrators leave, and the shows end, the victim is unable to exit the scene of torture:

6. See Rens van Munster's "The Nuclear Origins of the Anthropocene" and Barbara Rose Johnston's "Environmental Justice."
7. See Eghosa E. Osaghae. "The Ogoni Uprising: Oil Politics, Minority Agitation and the Future of the Nigerian State" and Victoria Brittain's "Ken Saro-Wiwa: A Hero for Our Times" for conversations about Saro-wiwa, his poems, activism, and execution."

> oh we wanted to leave, we wanted to leave
> the aspirated syllables and villages, the skeletal
>
> dance floors, the vacant, vacant moons that tortured us,
> when the jailers went home and the spectators drifted
> away and the scientists finished their work
>
> like a bad dog chained to an empty gas station,
> for blue blue nights,
> I got worse and worse, so troubling. (12-13)

Thinking along the second line, while Buell considers the interest of the nonhuman in the sense of other living things in the ecosystem,[8] Brand, on the other hand, focuses on natural landscapes as the nonhuman in *Ossuaries*. She reflects nature in the context of space, specifically diasporic space. Rather than affix her narrative to a specific setting, Brand becomes what Scott Bryson refers to as a "place-maker."[9] She creates a space akin to nature in her imagery of ossuaries and uses these imagined worlds to demonstrate how Black people have continuously been "on the wrong side" of historical narratives (53). Importantly, in "Ossuary IX," she calls us to consider the degradation in the environment: the gutted sea beds, "the Clouds' soft aggressions," "the moons / which have left the skies," "the satellite whales, GPS necklaces of dolphins and turtles," and in that mix to imagine the human skin (most likely gesturing at the enslaved who embraced the "suicidal blue waters" (35)), made translucent by diesel from the ships (67-68).

In essence, Brand's poems recognize that natural spaces, whether metaphorical or literal, embody ethical stances that should prompt us to question our knowledge of the histories of the spaces we inhabit, of lost dialects, cultures, identities, lives, and worlds. Therefore, to think of the nonhuman interest, is to consider how environmental degradation affects not just the stratosphere

8. This assertion is premised upon the way he uses the bird in Walt Whitman's "Out of a Cradle Endless Rocking" to depict how ecopoets draw attention to the existence of other entities on earth.

9. Scott Bryson borrows this term from the linguistic anthropologist, Keith Basso. Basso, speaking of the Apache storytellers, describes place-makers as narrators who create imaginative "place-worlds" that are representative of "what the world could be" (9). Bryson likens these storytellers' conception of imaginary spaces made into "place-worlds" to ecopoets' creation of conceptual spaces where audiences are moved "out of an existence in an abstract postmodernized space … into a recognition of our present surroundings as place and thus as home" (11).

and other nonhuman beings, but to consider the implication of this destruction on bodies that have been destroyed as a result of White Geology. As Yasmine seems to suggest in the poem, woven into the fabric of this man-made destruction of nature, are the bones of Black bodies, disarticulated, branded, scattered, and held in ossuaries.

As a third feature, Buell asserts that human accountability is central to ecopoetry's ethical orientation (7). By similar standards, social injustice underlines *Ossuaries*. The gaze of the poem rests on slavery, and thus on the countries that have benefited from colonialism. As Yasmine continues in her search for a place to call home, carrying with her the challenges of being on the run, she seems to contend with these questions: How does one ask for accountability without access to power? What would be a justifiable reparation? Can there be respite for the traumatized soul? These questions encourage us to think from the perspective of the histories and contemporary realities that Yasmine symbolizes, and to perhaps attempt to understand the factors that motivate her thoughts and actions. For instance, while watching the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centers on television, "she looked, pitiless, at the rubble" (26). The image of a pitiless Yasmine gestures at a latter violent act in the text. The bitterness she embodies, which carries with it a tinge of righteousness, seems to emerge out of a desire for retribution as she says, "it's done, someone had done it, someone, / had made up for all the failures" (26). From Yasmine's perspective, her life and history have been ended, punctuated, erased repeatedly by institutions that have assumed the status of "metaphoric gods" (123), who justify their wrong doings under the canopy of "greater good." To this assertion Yasmine says: "do not say, oh find the good in it, do not say, / there was virtue; there was no virtue, not even in me" (11). For the Black people living in the afterlife of slavery, the question of reparation is moot. Its credence lies in the acknowledgement that they are owed a moral debt. But as Christina Sharpe asks in *The Wake*, how would such a debt be repaid? Or "Is it that Black people can only be the objects of transaction and not the beneficiaries of one, historical or not?" (60). *Ossuaries* does not provide any kind of grand mapping for recompence, nor does it recognize any form of action to assuage the hurt of marginalized people and/or repair the environment; rather, it serves as an acknowledgement first of the interrelationship between race and the Anthropocene, and second, of the violence that perpetuates more violence.

For Yasmine, who continues to live in the wake of historical and contemporary injustices that permeate Black diasporic experience, recompence is out of reach. But to remain in the hopelessness of this existence is to reinforce the inhuman hewed into Black bodies. Thus, as a push back, Brand enacts scenes of "refusal" through the poem. She projects an alternative transformative perspective

on Black bodies and narratives. In this sense, *Ossuaries* refuses the inhumanity embodied in the bones; it refuses also these atrocities committed against Black bodies as the only point of description; rather, it refocuses our attention on the social injustices that have held Black people captive for so long.

A fourth criterion by which we identify and understand ecopoetry, according to Buell, is that a "*sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text*" (8). In fulfilling this mandate, Brand's poem subtly warns about how human activities have altered existence on the planet in ways that are beyond the popular geological and biochemical lines. This warning aligns with Gary Snyder's notion of the importance of ecopoetics. He notes that writing ecopoetry requires that we "see whatever current crisis we are in as part of an older larger pattern" ("Ecology" 28). It is this imperative duty that Brand performs in *Ossuaries*. She accounts for her characters' personal inadequacies within the context of a larger geopolitical and socio-cultural framework that has historically impacted Black diasporic experience. Finding another world, some new elevation, is not an option for this group who will always have in pursuit an "eternal cops behind them, glacial and planetary" (102). Yasmine's existence is thus fraught with despair; her affective response to the undesirable life she is forced to live is like a call to arms in the context of what Lynn Keller calls "self-conscious Anthropocenes." As Keller explains, the self-conscious Anthropocene is an awareness of how past developments have damaging implications for the present and the future. Thus, in "Ossuary XIII," Yasmine says:

> if only I had something to tell you, from here,
> some good thing that would weather
> the atmospheres of the last thirty years
>
> I would put it in an envelope,
> send it to my past life,
> where someone would open it and warn the world. (103-104)

A few lines later she continues:

> I've been wasted, look, the chest like a torn bodice ripped the guts right out of me, go,
> go, my toes are eaten away by frost and rubber,
>
> some chemical has boiled my eyes the rest of me's been stolen,
> I should say wrecked, well let's say,
> I never knew it, like wire. (105-106)

Yasmine's desire to inform her past self, if possible, of the looming disaster prods us to think of our future, to be conscious of activities and their effect on humans, nonhumans, and the Earth. In its hopelessness, *Ossuaries* asks us to contemplate human histories and the implications they have for our societies today, within the crucial context of ecological ruin and ruining.

To limit the ecological in this poem to the extrapolation of Buell's points ignores other equally important features of environmental literature that Brand employs, for example, the way she manipulates language and form to create a continuous pattern of tercets that are sparsely punctuated and rarely come to a full stop. These blocks of stanzas can be read both as a literal form of confinement as well as metaphor for an actual "ossuary," a box of remains. Brand references this notion in her acceptance speech at the Griffin Poetry Prize award ceremony saying, "I made these ossuaries—these bone cabinets or bone boxes if you will where I wanted to put all the toxicity of our society" ("Dionne" 2011). The form of the poem indicates this notion; however, the subject matter pushes against this contained structure. While the constant boxing-off of the stanzas presents an imagery of bones contained in unmarked graves, the repeated use of enjambment works to emphasize the speaker's struggle to escape this restriction. Yasmine's desperate, yet unsuccessful attempt "to undo, to undo and undo and undo this infinitive" (21) reiterates this struggle. In a way, this box of bones also represents cultures and languages lost as a result of humans' geologic interference with nature. I use the term interference with nature in the context of Yusoff's discussion of geology as the main driver of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. With the removal of African people from their homelands, many cultures, languages, and identities were displaced and lost. It is this loss that Brand references throughout the poem: "the body skids where the light pools/ each bone has its lost dialect now, /untranslatable though I had so many languages" (50). Bringing the poem to a close still in this form portrays a sense of permanent loss in a way that seems to leave one wondering: could there ever be room for recovery and redemption?

Brand also utilizes several literary techniques in this text. Flipping through the pages of this book, the reader is pulled towards the run-on layout of the poem. There are only two full stops in the entire 128 pages of poetry, and these are used in both direct and indirect reported speech: "finally finds a tongue "We got work to do.'" (42) and "safe place, she is in stitches, the Syracuse teenager/giggles." (94). As such, these full stops have no direct implication on the message of the poem, and by allowing her poem to flow continuously till the end, Brand implies the endlessness of Black struggles, not to suggest infinity but to prompt a consciousness to the need to put an end to these cycles of violence and trauma. Similarly, there are many inquiry lines in the poem that are not marked with a question mark: "will my bones glitter beyond these ages,

/ will they burn beyond the photographs'/crude economy" (51); likewise, the whole of "Ossuary IV," which is made up of rhetorical questions made into stanzas. These unpunctuated rhetorical questions subtly call for self-reflection, encouraging the reader to pay attention to the speaker's plight. It is interesting to note too that the unmarked questions she poses are open-ended, thus giving the reader the freedom to answer, if they so choose, based on their knowledge, understanding, and affective response.

Brand's use of comparative literary devices run through the poem. Metaphor and simile are deployed to draw attention to the similarity between the violence of slavery and the recent anti-Black violence. The entire poem, including the title, is symbolic of many things: the historic trauma of the Middle passage, the effect of the Anthropocene on Black bodies, the violence imposed on Black people today, and the anti-Blackness of public spaces and institutional agencies. At times, she describes Black experiences that can be read as representative of both the reality of the Black slave and the Black person today: "we grinned our aluminum teeth, / we exhaled our venomous breaths, / we tried to be calm in the invisible architecture / we incubated, like cluster bombs" (12). There is also sustained use of repetition in *Ossuaries*. For instance, she uses epistrophe, a literary device Brand mentions in the poem itself, to place emphasis on the urgency for action: "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, emphasis mine). Also, at several instances, the narrator repeats the idiom "as I said" (11, 31, and 33) to carry on her narrative and reinforce the theme of exasperation, implying her frustration with having to repeat what should have been already heard. Perhaps even more obvious are those words she repeats in succession: caught,/ caught,/ every comrade caught" (24); "she would love, love to talk" (26); "oh I longed, longed" (35); "run, run" (42); "they drive, drive, drive, drive, drive" (78), and "I gave here, I gave there"(48). The intentionality of her emphatic style serves to reinforce the main character's opinions and abstract truth.

But not all ecocritics will agree that Brand's work fits within the purview of ecopoetics. John Shoptaw in his essay "Why Ecopoetry" argues that an ecopoem needs to be both environmental and environmentalist. By environmental, he suggests that an ecopoem is a kind of nature poem, and in this sense, it is about the nonhuman natural world. He also states that it must be ecocentric rather than anthropocentric because "Human interests cannot be the be-all and end-all of an ecopoem" (396). The other feature of an ecopoem, according to Shoptaw, is in its ability to sensitize us towards its theme. For Shoptaw, ecopoetry should aim to unsettle and create awareness, but not in a didactic way. The purpose should not be in teaching us a new way to act, but in sensitizing us to the need for action (401). In essence, his argument about what ecopoetry is and what it should be doing is summarized thus: "However

self-aware and self-reflexive it may be, an ecopoem must be tethered to the natural world" (396). With this summation, Shoptaw seems to assume that ecocentricity and anthropocentricity are mutually exclusive, with only one form of centeredness possible in a given work. I argue for multicentricity. Such works, as Brand's *Ossuaries*, examine how human activities impact, or have impacted, the natural world, which includes *natural* human bodies. They thereby create a consciousness—environmental, socio-cultural, or political—about relationships and interconnectedness between human and nonhuman entities in the world, and by extension, the relevance of certain events to this relationship.

An overview of how ecocriticism and ecopoetics have evolved is beyond Shoptaw's restrictive characterization. In his introduction to *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction to Ecopoetry*, Scott Bryson identifies three overarching characteristics that are evident in ecopoetry: "ecocentrism, a humble appreciation of wildness, and a skepticism toward hyperrationality and its resultant overreliance on technology" (7). Going by these characteristics, one can say that ecopoetry fundamentally, as Shoptaw too would agree, draws connections between human activity and the environment; it explores the interrelatedness between the human and nonhuman world and often emphasizes how a lack of awareness of this connection accounts for the global degradation prevalent in the environment. But ecopoetry goes beyond a sensitivity to ecological subject matter; it investigates, through its themes and forms, as Forrest Gander puts it, "the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception" (2). Keller also writes about this relationship in her Introduction "Beyond Nature Poetry" in which she examines ecopoems that respond "to environments that have undergone radical anthropogenic transformation" (3). In this study, she provides a critical review of ecopoetry and its complicated relationship with nature poetry suggesting that poems that portray ecological concerns, especially the ones she focusses on in her book, depart from traditional norms of nature writing in the sense that their primary focus lies in the impact of humankind's actions on the planet. But not all ecopoems, she adds, deal with how humankind adversely modifies the planet; scholars in environmental humanities have been pushing beyond the narrow definition of ecopoetics as exclusively ecological by acknowledging that culture is intertwined within this discourse. As a result, ecopoetics now encompasses issues of environmental justice in ways that link ecocriticism to critical race, feminist, and queer studies.[10] Laura-Gray Street and Ann Fisher-Wirth echo this shift. Drawing on Bryson's categorization of ecopoetry, they write that ecopoetry "is also greatly influenced by social and

10. Keller discusses these points in her introduction to *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* pp. 9-13.

environmental justice movements; it is committed to questions of human injustice as well as to issues of damage and degradation to the other-than-human world" (n.p). As such, a poem can be ecological without being explicitly about nature. Street and Fisher-Wirth extend this view by arguing that poems with an "experimental" outlook and that tend to invoke self-reflection in "ways about how poems can be ecological or can somehow enact ecology" fall within the ecopoetry spectrum. Thinking about environmental poetry in this light allows the works of feminist writers like Dionne Brand and Canisia Lubrin to be included under the canopy of ecopoetry. I include Lubrin here because of her recent work, *The Dyzgraphxst*, in which, like Brand, she engages with the ecological. She tackles disruptions, especially of self, of knowledge, and of language, that pervade Black postcolonial experience, and accounts for these within the context of global exploitations.

But why is it important to consider these writers and their works as ecological? It is because they inhabit a unique and important space in ecological discourse, a space that examines ecological crises as part of a complex human history. More importantly, they challenge the assumption that humanity is a homogenous force by illuminating how marginalized groups, perceived as less than human, have been assumed to be non-human, received abuse similar to the environment, and have consequently been more severely impacted by the Anthropocene.

Unlike mainstream ecopoets who continue to largely focus on human impact on the planet and other species in the ecosystem, poets like Brand present an anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist framework through which they indict capitalism, colonialism, and slavery as the drivers of the Anthropocene on Black and Brown bodies and on native lands. By taking on the task of engaging with race, gender, and the history of colonialism in their works, they oppose the hegemonic structures that have enabled the erasure of histories, the commodification of racialized bodies, and the exploitation of lands by centering geopolitical violence and the perpetuating socio-cultural implications of colonialism on marginalized people. Adopting this approach paves the way for conversations about decolonization, not in terms of monetary compensations but in the dematerialization of racialized bodies, in the restoration, preservation, and protection of native lands, and in holding *White Geology* accountable for the Anthropocene.

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