

With Love and Words

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I have long admired how Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, and Christina Sharpe each, in their different ways, not only write about black life but *love it*, care for it, especially in language. They create new languages for poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and for theory and cultural and literary criticism, too, charting the complex range of black and colonial writings in the Americas. This is my way of noting two things: the network of support (the friendships) that exist across and between these spaces irrespective of language, territory, nation, history, capitalism, colonialism; and the ways this careful support suggests that distance does not always create a barrier to conversation.

I see the conversation between Brand, Sharpe, and Chariandy as an intergenerational collaboration, one which is not caught up in circuits of debt and does not establish standards against which to mark off each other's blackness. I say this because Brand's and Sharpe's and Chariandy's works have taught us to foster spaces and languages of self-reflexive debate—an ethics of conflict—which many of us draw upon to create modes of disagreement that do not draw lines of separation or replicate long-established boundaries of stifling literary propriety present in canon-formation. This is possible, in part, because all three writers trouble the limits of generic boundaries, pulling against categorization and offering a thick and intricate demonstration of generic vulnerability. Being in the company of their work is an encounter with infinitely pleasurable explorations of the ways in which language allows access to ideas, images, and forms for consciousness that break from both social and syntactical norms. Such work helps us see how black cultural production sits at the intersections of many (and oftentimes conflicting) epistemologies, fields, disciplines: Canadian Literature, Black Diasporic literatures, Postcolonial Literature, Queer Writings, Memory Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Avant-Garde Poetics, and so on. Not only do their narrative and poetic experimentations yield innovative criticism, breaking the capsule that seals us off from awareness of the full complexity of what it means, and the forces required, to be humans in the modern world; they also deny readers the historically explained simplifications of black life forms and compel us, in Sharpe's words, to attend to "the known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires, and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous" (*Monstrous Intimacies* 3).

Dionne Brand's writing is equal parts delicious prose, complex meditations on the function of language, raw examinations of erotics—in the Lordean sense—and stunningly bold disruptions of largely unspoken notions regarding what constitutes respectable discourse. What is magical about reading Brand's work is the ways her aesthetics attune readers to the converging rhythms between history and language, ethics and politics, hopefulness and despair; nestled within these interplays, the range of Brand's work emphasizes the terrible fragility of human life. Her aesthetics drum up a plainness of diction and, by fearlessly favouring this diction, tilt the poetics of everyday life and speech, standing upon this skewed ground to better articulate the interiorities of our social relations. Common threads run through her body of work. One is the racially gendered inventory that Brand mobilizes to record grief and grievances of the “earth,” “its history of harm,” “and the carelessness of [that] history” (*Land to Light On* 48). It is not an overstatement to say that Brand's work as a whole is an inventory rerecording recorded harms: at every turn it is eager to *unseed* the unjust realities otherwise lost among the overproduction of media, demanding that each one of us part ways with our addictive complicities and, as the poet-speaker in *Inventory* does, commit ourselves to “hear what is never shown”: “the [mundane] details” (28). To hear what is contained in the never-shown requires an ongoing commitment to vulnerability, to the weight inside and outside the details, but, at the same time, an ensuring that we do not feel trapped by them. Simply put, we are lucky and privileged that at this moment in our history, amidst a cascade of seemingly unrelenting geopolitical crises, we have available to us a writer, poet, and intellectual whose work has for more than twenty years focused on embracing the possibilities inherent in the disruption of all-too contemporary prejudices and antique certainties and who helps us live with the vulnerability, precisely, of what it costs to be living in the twenty-first century.

The ethics of care and vulnerability that we see in Brand's work also characterizes the worlds that David Chariandy quietly and powerfully conjures up for us in his critical and creative work. The release of *Brother*, Chariandy's second novel after *Soucouyant*, amplifies the tone and texture of diasporic romance. The romance, we learn, is not a move away from the difficult complexity of living in diaspora; the diasporic romance Chariandy captures for us here is the unseen, unvoiced, undoing tenderness of black kinship. Whether it is the joy celebrated by two brothers in spite of their different poses of masculinity or the daily negotiations of the violence that conditions black lives—informing how we love and how we language our love—Chariandy sits us in the differentiating soundtracks of black kinship, audibly and visibly highlighting how violent histories shape our insecurities and vulnerabilities along class, race, gender, and sexual lines, while also showing how no one is without love in our world. There is a literacy to black love in

Brother: we hear it in the set of noises language in the barber shop; in the worry in the mother's volume over her sons; in the tension of sexual desires wrapped in the brother's life. While readers are invited into this literacy, they should read the lives of black people not for their transparencies. The bodily joy and lingering tenderness of *Brother* offer a caution to readers not to expect the violence in and against black lives flashed across screens and headlines to be the interpretative mode in the novel.

Some of you also know Chariandy as a critic who specializes in English-Canadian, Anglo-Caribbean, and African Diasporic literature, as well as interdisciplinary theories of postcoloniality, diaspora, and "race." Chariandy's essays are among the first critical studies to prize the intersections of Black Canadian and Caribbean Canadian writings as crucial to an understanding not only of Canadian literature but of the lives and cultures of the African Diaspora. Essays like "Postcolonial Diasporas" and "Fictions of Belonging" are now among some of the most referenced essays in the fields of postcolonial and diasporic literatures. These essays remain astute and relevant to the disciplines today because much of what Chariandy argues in them shapes our ability to understand how localized micro-histories can calcify into centres of epistemic justification for the same injustices fostered by macro-histories. He also underscores the differences between diasporic groups and how these differences come to bear on the ways in which the effects of race are lived and read. I'm always looking forward to a Chariandy essay because his writing, which straddles the creative and the critical (if such a distinction is necessary), is continuously shifting, in the sense that he is continuously grappling to find ways to exemplify the best in the critical essay genre and in so doing not only shifts the conventional academic lenses through which to think but also models for us how best to do that work.

Christina Sharpe's love for black people shows up in every word I've read of hers since I first opened her book *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. As a graduate student, I was struck by the ways Sharpe's concept of "monstrous intimacies" offered me language to think through the "everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors" (3) that constitute black subjectivity from transatlantic slavery to its afterlives. Her identification of the illegibility of this "mundane horror," the continuous incomplete movement from slavery to freedom, underscores the conditions of terror in the making of self for post-slavery black subjects. Focusing on the "everyday violences that black(ened) bodies are made to bear," she "examine[s] and account[s] for a series of repetitions of master narratives of violence and forced submission that are read or reinscribed as consent and affection: intimacies that involve shame and trauma and their transgenerational transmission" (4). Sharpe's examinations of the "sadoomasochism of everyday Black Life" challenge the moral philosophy enmeshed in romantic

readings and stagings of black suffering that unhears black vulnerability and unsees the lingering tenderness of black kinship. What was instructive for me then (and remains so now) was not only the scope of Sharpe's archive, but the ways in which *Monstrous Intimacies* stretched the temporal boundaries of studies of slavery and freedom from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century and from the US South to the global South. Insisting that black freedom is enmeshed in the violence of the past—that these violences “are markers for an exorbitant freedom, [and] to be free of it marks a subjection in which we are all forced to participate” (4)—Sharpe emboldened me to continue asking: How do we grapple with this forced participation? This haunting that is also our inheritance?

As in *Monstrous Intimacies*, where the artist Kara Walker's silhouette cutouts “represent a violent past that is not past” (156), Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is a reminder of ways black lives exist in a modernity that has made black death the condition of operation. The aesthetic ambition of *In the Wake* also straddles that putative creative-critical divide and offers us an example of the generic vulnerability that is a hallmark of the work these three writers do with words. Words, in Sharpe's hands, are matter for liberation work. Words portray visions of freedom, depict the sacred, express power and protest, offer revelations of social forms, and foreground the treatment of black life forms. Words have poetic relations: Sharpe is keen to depict the elastic pitch of trauma in words, the fugitivity of words, and the need to undiscipline their archival force on our lives. Words, like weather, take on new live forms in *In the Wake*, highlighting value in the ordinary.

To conclude, here are three writers who love black life in words, in actions, and in a context of vulnerability and a culture of violent disposability. Their love and care and joy offer us a method, a theory, a politics for the work of words.

Works Cited

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