

from *The Work of Words*

Dionne Brand, Christina Sharpe, & David Chariandy

On June 9, 2017, Dionne Brand and Christina Sharpe delivered the 2017 Shadbolt Lecture, sponsored by the Writer in Residence Program of the English Department at Simon Fraser University. The lecturers were invited to read from recent writings and then use this as a means to discuss “the work of words” more broadly, with special attention to their own celebrated books but also to the broader climate of language today. Christina Sharpe read from In the Wake: On Blackness and Being (Duke UP, 2016) and Dionne Brand read from The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos (forthcoming from McClelland & Stewart and Duke UP, 2018). What follows is an edited excerpt from their onstage dialogue moderated by David Chariandy, author most recently of the novel Brother (McClelland & Stewart, 2017).

David Chariandy: Thank you both for so generously sharing your writings and thoughts with us this evening. I'd like to begin quite simply by inviting you to suggest how the pieces you've read speak to each other. What work does reading these pieces in tandem perform for us today?

Dionne Brand: Well, let me explain first the Lola Kiepja piece. Lola Kiepja was the last speaker of Selk'nam. The Selk'nam people lived in Tierra del Fuego—or what is now called Tierra del Fuego—at the bottom of South America, Argentina, and Chile. They were wiped out by European settlers who were sheep and cattle farmers. Not only were they wiped out by them by 1960, or something like that, but they were wiped out openly and officially, such that a bounty would be placed on the killing of a Selk'nam. And the bounty would be doubled for a woman. So, I walked into the Venice Biennale a couple of years ago, into this long corridor of disappearing or disappeared languages. And we—Christina also was there—we just wandered into this corridor of these speakers along the way, and as you stepped in front of a speaker you would hear the sound of a language that was either dying or dead.

I stepped in front of this particular speaker, and it was Lola Kiepja speaking. It was this incredibly eerie sound, and I burst into tears listening to what was the last speaker of this language. The text read in English, “Here I am singing.

I have arrived at the great mountain range of the heavens. The power of those who have died comes back to me from infinity. They have spoken to me. Here I am singing." I just thought of the great violence that had eradicated these people but the wonderful gift of this voice, even though this voice would never be heard in its full meaning because there would be no one left to understand it in the visceral ways that a language is understood. I thought of violence, the violence that underwrites this part of the world, but also I thought of the singing that overwrites it? So, each of the pieces that I selected to read today suggested this interplay.

That's also connected, to me, to the piece drawing from when I entered the museum at Docklands and found the name "John Brand" on the wall. I wondered who this "John Brand" could possibly be, because my own last name is an unusual last name in the Caribbean. It's only found in a couple places, like Montserrat, where my grandfather was from, and Trinidad. So I kept pursuing this name. Of course, it is a name of some slave trader, as all our names are in this part of the world... unless we changed them consciously. So how that name is underwritten in violence but how, I suppose, I tried to overwrite it in singing. Then, of course, the Borges equally. I thought suddenly these pieces came together with those two words—"violence" and "singing."

Christina Sharpe: There's also a relationship between violence and singing in my own writings, and I think they speak to each other through my work with the word "still." This word appears in Dionne Brand's "Verso 55": "You're still alive, and you've come to greet us. Yes, we are still alive." I'm thinking about "still" both as the *longue durée* of violence that has been enacted against people of African descent over centuries and that continues into the present, but also the *longue durée* of resistance to that violence, survivance of that violence, or something surviving even in the midst of death. I've also written about M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* The book is *Zong!* with an exclamation point, which breaks "Zong" the ship into "Zong" the song. I think it's in an interview Philip did with Pat Saunders where she's quoting somebody else—I think maybe an Akan woman—who says, "We sing for birth. We sing for death. That's what we do. We sing." So, I'm thinking about that relationship, about song's relationship to life, death, and these other occasions. Also—I'll end with this because I could keep going on and on—there's a moment toward the end of the text where I try to think about what I have called "an ordinary note of care," and my one example of that is the ruttier for the marooned and the

diaspora which comes at the end of Dionne's *A Map to the Door of No Return*. The ruttier is a song that you memorize, that sailors memorized, of navigational directions—including what you write about the taste of water, the salt in the water, the movement of tides, etc.

But also, for those of you who have read *Beloved*, as well as *A Map*, there's that moment in the novel where Paul D is on the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, and there's Hi Man who says the "hi" in the morning and the "ho" at night. He takes this on, and it means an end of violence or the end of labour. It's also the thing that gets them to safety during those torrential rains. I think of that as this song that indicates violence—it doesn't *break* the violence that you encounter, but it does create some kind of breathing room to survive, perhaps, to another day within that violence to get to someplace else. So, it's a form of underwriting and overwriting—the underwriting of violence, the overwriting of song—as well.

DC: Thinking again of Christina's work on the word "still," I'm struck by the ways in which each of you, in specific works, animate a specific word, and how that word becomes invested with layer upon layers of meaning—how a particular word becomes a method for a particular project. I'm also deeply struck by how each of you return to particular sites of atrocities. For instance, museums, archives, and ledgers—all bearing witness to the colossal and echoing violence. Can you speak a bit about these particular practices in your writings? The work of the ledger, for instance?

DB: Well, there was such erasure of that ledger, even though that ledger also existed. Because the perpetrators of that violence were quite proud of these acts, and they actually wrote them down. They have long lists of what's been done. But those lists, of course, present those acts as heroic, as civilizing, as civilization-making. So, I think it's my job, sometimes, to go over that ledger with my own forensics—with the forensics of liberation, if you will—and re-see and rewrite the ledger. That is, to highlight the violence, which is often clouded by victory, clouded by triumphalism—clouded by a new narrative, the narrative of conquest, which associates itself with the human, right?

So it's my job. But it's not even my job. I just happen upon it. It is there to be seen. There's the constant *work*, every day, that those structures do in occluding, in erasing violence to make hierarchy seem seamless and—

CS: —to make it seem reasonable.

DB: And reasonable, yes. So, there's a constant work going on as I do this other constant work.

DC: There's a related practice I find so powerful in your work. I guess it involves not only revealing existing ledgers in newer, truer lights, but also actively making an inventory of violence yourself. People might say both are historical methods—but as a *poetic* method, I find that really quite striking. Possibly because they evoke more palpable encounters with atrocities.

DB: If anybody's been to one of those castles on the coast of West Africa called "The Door of No Return," and you walk into one of those castles, it is palpable with history. You think about what you are *experiencing* in there. It's so—present. Those bodies are present. Those people are present, and that violence is present. I don't know. It's just really interesting that they exist anymore and that one has this incredible ambivalence about their existence as museums. But it is as if every day that happened in that castle is happening again. That is the feeling one experiences in those places. But back to the "Inventory" poem...I mean, the inventory poem is a poetic form, anyway. But that particular poem, "Inventory," I made at a moment when there's nothing to do but make a list. That is your job at that moment, to make a list, at a moment of incredible damage? It is all you can do to make that list. You cannot observe the list properly yet.

And as I went along writing that list, which came out of sitting in front of the television looking at, I think, the first war in Iraq, hearing about the bombing, looking at CNN as if they were describing a certain drama that was just coming on, seeing that vague map of the Middle East with a star that said "Baghdad." Nothing in between—no lines, no roads, no people, no trucks, no houses, no—none of the particularities of *actual* human beings who this will have an impact on. And then, the adjectives attached to that war—the "shock" and "awe," etc.—as if one were doing the subtitles to some kind of a movie, but a very explosive movie with lots of planes and lots of things but no consideration of the minute damage to everyday life, yeah? So I just thought, how obscene it was for me to—I'm sure some of you have heard me say this before—to get up and go upstairs and sleep while this was going on. But to sit and to write it down was a form of active witnessing—and to write down the possible life that was going on, the possible lives that were being affected by it?

DC: I wonder if we could return to the practice indicated by Christina a moment ago. That of simultaneously marking both violence and the living voice

through a meditation upon individual words. I'm thinking now of Dionne's book *thirsty*, in which that word "thirsty," uttered by a victim of a police shooting, becomes a means of identifying state violence but also need and desire. This is also what's so striking about *In the Wake*. It is a book about the persistent, enveloping anti-Blackness that is the aftermath of slavery. And Christina analyzes and addresses this through what she calls "the semiotics of the slave ship." Each chapter focuses on specific words, such as "the ship," "the hold," "the wake," and also "the weather." There's perhaps no more powerful term for a depersonalized, all-enveloping environment of anti-Blackness as "the weather." My question, again, is how do individual words animate a particular project—help us see, again, the violence that underwrites, the singing that overwrites?

CS: I started to speak to that in thinking of the word "still." Once, I was about to teach *Beloved*, and I was reading it again, and I realized there's this whole section on the word "still." Sethe is standing on two feet meant for standing still. She's pregnant—heavily pregnant—standing on two feet meant for standing still. Still at the tub and ironing board. Still at the churn. Still at...you know. So, her "still" is not the "still" of a heavily pregnant woman who isn't enslaved. Her "still" is full of labour. It's durational. There's really no end to it? But also, the "still" of the deaths in my own family, which I've noticed I always skip over when I talk about "still." So, thinking of all the different meanings of "still." "Still" as in the opposite of *moving image*. "Still" as in predicatively, as in holding oneself still. "Still" as in the present. "Still" as in non-moving. So, I'm always interested in holding as many meanings of the word? Holding as many meanings together and separately, but always keeping them as activated as possible.

I had also forgotten about how much "weather" appears in both the John Brand and in the Borges—the one with your grandfather's library. Borges, I remember. So that was really interesting, too—and of course, weather was so important in terms of slave management, plantations, navigational instructions for those slave ships. So how much that animates both of our work.

DB: And the amount of science that came out of the study of weather during this period—the period of the slave trade and slavery. The weather for planting. The weather for labour. There's actually that book about it.

CS: Yeah. How the weather would affect lung capacity—but usually that didn't actually affect whether or not the enslaved people were forced to labour in the weather. But it was still a way to measure how these things affected the body.

DB: Yes, all the measurements of weather and time and agriculture that came out of that period are incredible and a thing of their own. But I like the word “still.” In reference to what we’re talking about, it seems to me that “still” also means just halting everything that has happened before and since. I think it’s a very heavy, heavy word, “still.” It also means, in some senses, “yet again.”

DC: Yeah, yeah.

CS: Absolutely.

DB: And “over and over again.” But it also is a measure of breathing space for nothing happening around it. So, I love that word, but I love what you’ve done in *In the Wake* with the notion of the weather. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

CS: Again, that partially comes from that line “everything is weather”? That it’s just weather. So, the way in which you said it—that one both takes note of it and doesn’t take note of it, but it is always present. It is always acting on you. It is, I think, about a knowledge of where one is and also how one prepares in order to encounter the “factness” of where one is. So, you try to dress for the weather. If you know that the weather is anti-Black, you also know you comport yourself in particular ways, but you also work to rupture that? So, I thought that weather really spoke to the ways in which all of these forces are acting. And they enact things on us quite differently. We might be experiencing the same weather, but like those people on the contemporary ships crossing the Mediterranean, the effects of it are not evenly distributed. They never have been. So, I think “weather” gets to all that.

DC: Earlier, Christina was generous enough to visit my class. Some of my students are here right now. And there was a moment in which you invited us—in this powerful way—to contemplate what is the weather like here, how do particular ecologies of anti-Blackness work out in specific sites of the African diaspora?

CS: Right. How do you have microclimates where you can actually get something else done, so that there are lateral moves where you have a kind of microclimate. You’re working toward liberation, but you have these micro-moments—like in *Bail Out Black Mamas* in the US. You’re working toward prison abolition, and you’re working toward the end of cash bail. But you have these moments where, in the *midst* of working toward that, you also do this

other thing. I think of those as microclimates within a larger climate of violence in which you try to create a sustainable life. In which you don't accede to everything that would try to suffocate you, to all of the forces that are intent on that kind of suffocation.

DC: Which is why, I must say, I find work written by both of you so profoundly important in that you allow us to chart those connections between those microclimates, those different spaces, landscapes, and geographies. Your projects have never been confined to specific national or regional spaces. They prove themselves global in orientation while demonstrating close attention to specific places.

DB: I also think that just writing, itself, is that. It creates those microclimates, if you will. Because to make a poem, for me, is to create that space where not only the vulgar and brutal exists but language opens places where someone might actually recognize themselves outside of the short instrumental stereotypic location that in public they occupy—or in the public they occupy. So, I think writing is itself a space where that happens or can happen.

DC: Do you consciously think of how your personal experiences inform your writing? Christina, you begin *In the Wake*, published by a very prestigious *academic* press, with the line “I wasn't there when my sister died.” What's the ethics of writing the personal, if we can still use that term in your work?

CS: I was quite worried about the first part, the first fifteen pages of the book, for several reasons. One, when my mother was alive, she would always say, “Don't write about me.” I'd say, “Well, mom, I won't,” but I think she'd be happy with what I wrote about her. There's a moment at the beginning where I say, “There are other stories to tell here, but they're not mine to tell.” For me, it actually was an ethical decision. I was sitting with—and I got “sitting with” from Dionne's work—*The Map to the Door of No Return*, “sitting in the room with history,” that “history is always there when you enter the room.” History is in the empty chair.

I thought about “sitting with” as a method. I was sitting with all of these deaths that I was recording, in my own family but also Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Stanley-Jones. I could go on? I thought, at the same time, so this is maybe the relationship between the personal, the autobiographical. The personal is always in the text, whether I name it “the personal” or not, it is how

I am oriented to the work. In my book, I think about Michael Brown's autopsy report, though I only use it in the section in thinking about the anagrammatical and Black redaction. But it seemed to me completely unethical to write about other Black people dying and not deal with what I was in the midst of dealing with. To be in the midst of three deaths in my own family—a repetition of three deaths—and other things that were happening in my own family, which was, of course, orienting my relation to the work.

So that was my ethical decision. It's always also been my inclination. I was simply disciplined out of it? When I started writing *Monstrous Intimacies*, I had this whole section that I had to write to get into it about my mother and grandmother, etc. Part of it is speculative, what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation." But I had to remove that, and God knows what happened to it now. That was, like, 500 computers ago. So, yes, I mean, how I'm positioned in the world, how the weather is affecting my and my family's *capacity* to survive—and I think it's always there for everybody in their writing. Whether you name it your "orientation" or not, that is how you are oriented to work.

DB: There is this fallacy of objectivity which dominates in some disciplines—all, actually, even in fiction. There's the fallacy of observing from above and not being implicated, yourself, in it. I do think you're right about it being unethical to suggest that this happens to others and not to me. So, that's on one level. But I am way past not using everything. I use everything because, well, everything is my material. And even I am my material. I *hope* that I then work that material in a thorough way. Not merely in a self-serving way but in a thorough way. Looking at it, looking at myself looking at it, looking at that self looking at that self looking at it. Do you know what I mean? That's my old Communist training, being constantly self-critical about what you are producing and how you're producing it. But my material is just human existence. So, I don't see—I don't make—the distinction, or I don't belong to a discipline that makes the distinction.

I think you can become overbearing, maudlin, self-involved, etc. Those are different things. Those are different questions than whether one uses the personal or the biographical to work as material. The self-serving, you just want pity, or you want affection, or you want love, or you want praise, or you want what... Those are different questions than what you're actually using, which is the actual minerals of living.

CS: But I'd even say that there's a deep history of work within disciplines—like, sociological work—that does that, like Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, *Philadelphia Negro*, etc., there's a long history—Ida B. Wells' *Red Record* too—which, somehow, we are not supposed to remember as we go about doing our current work.

DB: Yes. And it's particularly pointed at certain kinds of people with certain kinds of experience. That you cannot be analytic about that experience yourself because, of course, you are suffering it. But someone else can come in and study you and write about it. So, we can dismiss all of that, and we don't need to even talk about that.

CS: But what about you? As a writer whose work I admire and respect, I want to bring David into the conversation.

DC: One thing that concerns me—I hope I have addressed it, but it does concern me—is becoming a confessional subject such that I am making myself legible to people—to others, to those that hold power—rather than to you, the very people that I write for and to, and whose work sustains me. I start to doubt because I worry that I am, again, being for others.

CS: For capital.

DC: For *capital* and, again, who am I confessing to? And what operation of power is working in that way? And how does that become easier for certain readers rather than others?

DB: But I think that doubt is the good thing, right?

DC: Yeah, yeah, maybe.

DB: Because that holds you or that holds us honest to the project. So, there are people who don't have that doubt at all. You know what I mean? Yes, I understand what you're saying and that one must always be conscious of that possibility, but I think the doubt is what secures the ethics of writing, in this instance. But, this brings me to my argument about narrative and poetry? You've heard me go on about this enough. I try, every time I come here or anywhere to attempt to describe what I'm talking about, and I will make one more attempt. I think that narrative is so implicated in coloniality that that worry that you talk about—that worry is real. That there are ways in which a condition, as Black

people, is already present in narrative. So, one is always talking adjacent to it or against it. But *it* is present, right? The *condition*—the present condition or the ongoing oppression of Black people—is always present in the narrative, and one constantly tries to—one has to address it all the time. So, one gives it *room* all the time. One begins with it, or something. Help me out here, Christina. What am I trying to say?

CS: Well, you said once, “Maybe Black people should just always speak in poetry.” Something about narrative structures already containing the seeds of our own undoing, and that maybe poetry opens up...like you talked about—you extended “still” to think about the breathing space. Maybe poetry allows for that kind of space—a breathing on the page and in the world that you’re getting at.

DB: In a sense, you’re a Black writer, and you say “I,” and immediately it conjures all of these past incarnations of that “I” in terms of the history of narrative or the history of English narrative anyway, right? Nineteenth-century English narrative already contains you in a particular way. And women are also contained in those narratives in particular ways, and you are always struggling against that containment and what is already always present, which you are always writing...

CS: ...against.

DB: ...against, right? Or you are always importing, even when you are objecting, you are importing the argument with you. So, yes, this is the difficulty that I think you’re speaking to there also, yes.

DC: I think it’s a question that comes hard and heavy on the novel, on fiction, on narrative.

DB: And the particular ways in which Black people are supposed to appear in this contemporary moment in narrative fiction.

DC: There we go, that’s it. That’s it.

DB: And attached to the market and attached to a certain kind of personification of Blackness. The success of those narratives is really based on their repetition. You know what I mean? Their repetition and an elaboration of that repetition, right? So, then, they become the spectacular body, not the ordinary going-

about-your-business body, but this spectacular Black body that must appear in a particular way all the time.

CS: But then that's not the body that appears in your narratives.

DB: Well, hopefully not. I mean, my foot, thank God, is always in poetry, which is why those narratives are not very successful.

DC: They're successful. They illustrate, most definitely, the enduring power and necessity of Black narrative.

DB: But it's a great trouble. I like working out this business about what might happen. What is the person who might appear? Who is the person who might appear if I cut away that presumption or that demand for the Black spectacular?

DC: Um, so this seems to me a risky question. But what about the work today of that specific word "love"—as in Dionne's recent book *Love Enough*? Is it fair to say there is a certain kind of critical perspective on love, even as you remain open to its power?

DB: In *Love Enough*, there's a character, June, who goes through a number of lovers of various types and genders. But she talks them to death, you know? Especially the last one who has no relation to her usual political affinities, etc. But June, that figure, June, her notion is: is there an ethical love? Is there a love that isn't sentimentalized, that isn't commoditized, that can peel itself away from commodity and the commoditization of romantic love that exists in the modern? So, she's still thinking through that, and she is discomfited each time it tries to hang on to that kind of commoditized, romanticized love. She's incredibly uncomfortable with it. In this way, June is similar to myself.

CS: I also think about...is it in "Ossuary I"?

DB: III. Yeah, "Ossuary III."

CS: "I lived and loved in momentous times"?

DB: Yes, yes.

CS: I don't have an answer to that question. I'm just thinking with Dionne's work and, again, thinking about June. Because one of my favourite moments

in that book is when—I hope I’m not spoiling anything—but when Sydney is about to leave and she tells June, “You’re a collector of sadness.” And even in the moment of her imminent departure, that’s an act of love because it gives June something to settle into. She names June’s orientation to the world and her melancholic condition. And that’s a gesture of love, an ethics of “Okay, I’m leaving, but this is something that you can...”—it seems like something that you can think with and feel with, and it gives her some peace in that moment.

I’ll go back to another question about the ethics. I felt like—you also create what you want to read in the world. I thought, coming from my working-poor family background, that I needed to write that. So that’s my ethic of care as well? That because I know that there are many other Black people in the academy who have experiences similar to mine, and we’re not supposed to be where we are. We’re not supposed to speak that experience. So that’s a sideways answer to your question.

DB: No, I think it’s a good one.

DC: Yeah, I think it’s a great response, and it reminds me of how, in speaking about your mother in the first chapter of *In the Wake*, Christina, you describe how she “tried to make a small path through the wake. She brought beauty into that house in every way that she could; she worked at joy, and she made liveable moments, spaces, and places in the midst of all that was unliveable there.” I think this is the feeling, the ethical relation, I’m grasping to affirm and name...

DB: We mean *care*. We mean an ethical positioning to another human being, all those things, right? It just suddenly gets complicated—very, very complicated—much more so than the broad, flat notion that’s out there, which has adhered itself so much to the word “love.”

Fern Ramoutar: Hi. I want to return to a quote that you made, Dr. Sharpe, about how the weather is the total climate and it is anti-Black. That just struck me because I think to be born Black is to know that weather intimately, and in some cases to know it exclusively. But the effect, whether intentional or not, of the work of your words, of all of your words, is to change the weather and to expand my capacity and, I think, the capacity of many black women—I can't even speak for all of us, but I can speak for myself—to expand our capacity for survival. So, my question is what is the weather that you're working towards?

DC: Whoa.

CS: Beautiful.

FR: What is the world you're working towards and what does freedom look like to each of you?