

"there are atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded"

Intimacy, the Body and Transnational Solidarity in Dionne Brand's *Inventory*

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Dionne Brand est à la fois une célébrité dans le canon littéraire du Canada multiculturel et une critique très écoutée de ce canon ainsi que des politiques multiculturelles canadiennes en général. Son plus récent poème « Inventory » tente de cerner les catégories du soi, du citoyen et de la nation à notre époque de paranoïa galopante, d'angoisse malade et de transnationalité. La narratrice de ce long poème identifie les signes et l'histoire du colonialisme et de la mondialisation pour apprendre comment elle est construite comme sujet, comment on structure ses désirs et comment ces histoires sont liées aux conceptions contemporaines de la citoyenneté multiculturelle du Canada.

Dionne Brand is at once a celebrated member of the multicultural Canadian literary canon as well as a vocal critic of both that canon and of Canadian multicultural politics in general. Positioned in such an ambivalent relationship to Canada, it is no surprise that Brand's work fits so well with Rinaldo Walcott's description of Black Canadian artists who are never "merely national products, but ... occupy the space of the in-between, vacillating between national borders and diasporic desires, ambitions and disappointments" (xii).¹ Brand's most recent long poem, *Inventory*, operates in these in-between spaces as it attempts to take account of categories of the self, the citizen, and the nation in our contemporary era of increased militarization, border anxiety and transnationality. It is at once a literal inventory, tallying the numbers of the killed and wounded in battlefields, cities, detainment camps, schools, markets, airports and factories across the world, as well as a poetic inventory, tracking the modes of affect, desire and memory that constitute the speaker's subjectivity. Brand's speaker reads the signs and history of colonialism and globalization to investigate how they construct her as a subject, how they structure her modes of desire and how these histories are linked to contemporary Canadian multicultural conceptions of citizenship. Throughout *Inventory*, the speaker is concerned with

the formation of the subaltern subject, with challenging dominant modes of representing suffering, history and citizenship and with developing modes of poetic representation that might offer new ways of imagining solidarity and citizenship across national borders. Where the discourse of multiculturalism is seen as a national forgetting of these histories in the interests of fabricating some "exact and toxic genealogy" (Brand 17), *Inventory* attempts to recover and assert history and memory, linking multicultural Canada to its seemingly forgotten colonial legacy. Similarly, where contemporary ideas of citizenship are localized and geographically and culturally closed, Brand posits a mode of global citizenship organized around affect, desire, and the body.

As Diana Brydon argues, *Inventory* proposes a "full, rather than provisional, human citizenship" (1000), which, I suggest, extends beyond the borders of inclusion offered by the multicultural Canadian state. Brydon also points out that Brand's title comes from Edward Said's rearticulation of Gramsci's statement on inventory: "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory ... therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile an inventory" (Said 25). Brand's speaker attempts to develop such an inventory, reading the discourses that have constituted her as a subject and have shaped her modes of desire, and her relationship to her own body. This compiling of an inventory works directly against the necessary forgetting that Ernest Renan sees at the core of the nation. Renan famously asserts that

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, ... historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been

altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality. (Renan 11)

This national forgetting of difference and brutality that Renan sees at “the origin of all political formations” must be modified slightly to account for Canadian multicultural tolerance wherein difference is deemed to be acceptable so long as it does not exceed certain thresholds of liberal acceptability. Eva Mackey argues that

the project of Canadian nation-building has not

travels through Europe and the Middle East, continuing her inventory. The final section of the poem marks a turn in the inventory where the speaker attempts to articulate some kind of hope and possibility despite all of the suffering that she has traced. The poem begins with the speaker’s description of how “the black-and-white american movies / buried themselves in our chests, / glacial, liquid, acidic as love” (Brand 2006: 3). The description of the movies being “acidic as love” and lodging themselves in the chest stresses the way in which these films co-opt pleasure, as they lead the colonized subject to desire their own subordina-

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been based on the erasure of difference but on controlling and managing it. Difference is allowed—in defined and carefully limited ways—as long as the *project* of Canadian nation-building comes *first*. In this structure of difference and Canadianness, those defined as the ‘real’ and ‘true’ Canadians are the ones who define the appropriate *limits* of difference. (148 italics in original)

According to Mackey, Canadian multiculturalism allows for difference so long as that difference is manageable. In her inventory of hope, despair, suffering and possibility, the speaker works against the required forgetting of the nation, and the hollowed out definitions of difference offered by the Canadian multicultural state. Instead, she suggests a mode of embodied affectivity where intimacy, the body and the shared vulnerability of people are central to a mode of human and global citizenship.

Inventory is broken up into seven sections, the first of which might be described as a tracing of the coming into being of a colonial subject as she contends with the narratives that have informed her being. Homi Bhabha’s claim that “Globalization ... must always begin at home” (vx) could read as an epigraph to this section, as this first portion of the poem investigates the way that colonization and later globalization undermine the stability of home as both place and sign. The second section of the poem describes the increased policing of the borders of the nation and links these borders with the colonial order, indicating the Manichean continuity between colonialism and globalization. The third and most substantial part of the poem follows the speaker as she develops her inventory of suffering, marking down the names, places and dates of those killed in contemporary wars. The fourth, fifth and sixth sections of the poem follow the speaker as she

tion. The narratives of the colonizer and of the West take on a pleasurable affective quality, and love itself becomes acidic. The speaker goes on to describe the scenes of the white heroes in cowboy movies: “the Way to Wyoming, the sunset in Cheyenne, / the surreptitious cook fires, the uneasy / sleep of cowboys” (3). These familiar Hollywood images then give way to images of colonization and slaughter in the next lines where she describes “the blankets, / the homicides of Indians, / lit, dimmed, lit, dimmed” (3). The image of the blankets, which invokes at once the cowboys sleeping around the fire as well as the smallpox blankets intentionally given to Aboriginal People during colonization, sets off the dialectical form of the poem, where the discourses of western hegemony turn on a phrase to articulate subaltern resistance. The speaker goes on to explain,

but this was their manifesto
and we took it like fun,
the burnt kernels, the chemical sugars,
their love stories never contained us,
their war epics left us bloody
we poor, we weak, we dying (4-5)

This first section of the poem focuses on the coming into being of the subaltern subject and community, with the speaker interrogating the modes of pleasure and desire that have constituted that subjectivity. Taking “their manifesto ... like fun” indicates the way in which the speaker is attempting to unravel the modes of pleasure and affect that lead to an affinity for “their love stories” and “their war epics.” The description of the “burnt kernels, the chemical sugars” suggests the artificiality and the underside to the pleasure of the cinema and implies that the cinema audience has been burnt and cultivated like

the corn and sugar. Also, this image connects the sugar of the cinema to the sugar of the plantation, stressing that pleasure and exploitation are components of the same economy of domination and indeed that there is a historical continuity between the slavery-era sugar plantation and the colonial-era cinema. This criticism is part of a strong distrust, throughout the poem, of the visual imagery, the signs and the gaze of western capitalism and culture. The newscaster, the television program and the cinema are all viewed suspiciously as the productive sites of western hegemony and as the sites of a particular interpellation of the colonial subject. In an earlier essay Brand argues that "The eye has citizenship and possessions" (Brand 1994: 169), and in this context the citizenship of the eye and the screen is decidedly western. Indeed, the speaker's statement that "the screens lacerate our intimacies" (Brand 2006: 5) suggests the ways in which the signs of the west structure modes of desire and affect, particularly in the way that culture aids in the division of humans into categories of dominant and subordinate and the way in which dominant culture both represses and rewrites history.

This process of reading and mapping out structures of desire and power continues throughout the poem as the speaker moves from a history of subjugation to an inventory of contemporary suffering and loss, tallying the deaths that occur in a year through her reading of newscasts, radio programs and websites. At the beginning of the third section the speaker explains that

One year she sat at the television weeping,
no reason,
the whole time

and the next, and the next

the wars' last and late night witness (21)

This major section of the poem is concerned with recording, remembering and accounting for the loss that the speaker experiences in tallying her inventory. She describes this part of the inventory as "this vigil for broken things," (42) for the pain and suffering in the lives that go unnoticed and unremarked upon. Her concern here, and throughout the rest of the poem, is with the compiling of this inventory: how can she develop a mode of representation which can read these deaths and statistics in a way which "unforgets" (to use Brand's phrase) the history of slavery and colonialism (Johnson 1) and which cuts through the television imagery and actually humanizes the sufferers? The speaker's observation that this onslaught of numbers and atrocities has "no reason" indicates her deep scepticism towards this type of representation of human suffering. Also, the repetition of "next" and her description of "the whole time" indicates the empty, homogeneous and ahistorical time in which this representation operates. She underscores her scepticism towards this media in her

description of the images from the newscasts:

burnt clothing, bloody rags, bomb-filled shoes

the pitiful domestic blankets
in the hospitals,
in the bundles of plump
corpses waiting or embraced by screams,
the leaking chests and ridiculous legs

the abrupt density of life gone out, the
manifold substances of stillness (21)

There is a sense of absurdity in her description of these grotesque images as well as incommensurability between these images of leaking chests and bundles of plump corpses and the true loss that she is trying to account for. The reference to the blankets returns us to the smallpox blankets of the cowboy movies, suggesting again that both sets of images are part of an historical continuum that obfuscates and decontextualizes the actual suffering that is occurring, reducing it to sheer aesthetic. Indeed the bodies represented here are hollowed out of the "density of life" and are reduced to screaming, leaking physical objects. She confirms her distrust of these images when she explains that "the news was advertisement for movies, / the movies were the real killings" (22) and that "the lives of movie stars were more lamentable, / and the wreckage of streets was unimportant" (22). The narrative mode of the newscasts render these deaths unmournable as the sufferers are not portrayed as suffering humans but as part of an endless stream of mangled, broken and disfigured bodies. She describes "the numbers so random / so shapeless, apart from their shape, their seduction of infinity" (26). Again, describing the broadcast as a kind of seduction suggests the way in which desire and affect are mobilized by this mode of representation. Similarly, the language of infinity stresses the ahistorical quality of the narrative, the way in which this violence appears to be disconnected from any history of colonialism or slavery.

Against this simplified account of suffering, the speaker suggests a new mode of representation which can account for history, which can humanize the excluded and which might form the basis for a deeper sense of transnational solidarity. Central to this mode of representation is the process of inventory as both a strategy for reading and critical intervention where one can trace one's own coming into being. Brand's hope is that in reading the narratives of power, she can rework them to reclaim desire in the interest of transnational agency and solidarity. She insists that she must "keep watch at the window / of the television, she hears what is never shown, / the details are triumphant," (28). Refiguring the television as a window suggests the way in which she can gaze back at these images to read against the grain of the narrative and challenge this mode of representation. Furthermore, her

capacity to “hear what is never shown” suggests an oral quality to the aspects of the narrative that she is trying to extricate from the television images. Orality, I want to suggest, becomes a means of resistance for the speaker, particularly in the way that it can represent the difference and sensuality of human speech. This is somewhat in the spirit of Édouard Glissant’s argument that while “the written is the universalizing influence of Sameness ... the oral would be the organized manifestation of Diversity” (Glissant 100). I want to suggest that the speaker of *Inventory* sets the oral as difference and intimate against

rupt intentions, / it persuades no one” (43). Yet, the oral quality of the world, expressed in the sensual and intimate tone of the poem, acts as an alternative to these corrupted languages. This sensuality of language coupled with the intimate quality of the SH sounds suggests that the oral quality of the poem is integral to imagining a type of desire that might form the basis for a type of affective solidarity between humans that expands well beyond multicultural concepts of citizenship and indeed the form of the poem includes this critical intimacy in its acoustic structure.

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the visual as homogenizing. Where the visual inscribes a simple logic of stereotypes and binaries of inclusion and exclusion, the oral introduces a mode of sensuality and affective knowing that challenges these power structures of belonging. Consider for instance the repeated use of sibilant sounds throughout the entire poem (for example, “the sunset in Cheyenne, / the surreptitious cook fires, the uneasy / sleep of cowboys, the cactus”). In a sense, this interplay between the visual and the oral, where the sibilance of the poem exists just below the surface of the visual power of the cowboy film, expresses the power of orality to insist on difference and agency and to subvert the panoptic gaze and imagery of western power.² This use of sibilance runs throughout Brand’s work and it tends to evoke the sounds of the ocean and the middle passage, the pleasures of lesbian sexuality and the body as well as a liquidity that suggests movement, transfiguration, and the possibility of change. This repeated sibilance within the description of the imagery of the West suggests that beneath the surface of the master narrative of modernity and global capital lies the possibility of resistance and agency that we can draw on if only we can attune ourselves to hearing it. We get this sense of the subtle, intimate power of sound in the speaker’s description of the “river with its irregular susurru” (49), a line that connects these sounds with a sense of movement and liquidity.

Throughout *Inventory*, S sounds are also coupled with SH sounds as in “the sunset in Cheyenne” and in the repetition of words like “sugars” (4, 30, 33), “glacial” (4) and “surreptitious” (3). The presence of the SH sounds asserts an intimacy between the speaker and the reader in the sense that the tone of the poem is like a whispered confession.³ In her critique of the grand narratives of Marxist liberation the speaker explains that “whatever language we might have spoken / is so thick with cor-

I want to suggest that the intimacy of the poem connects with the struggle between universalizing sameness and problematic and enabling difference that Glissant sees in the difference between the written and the oral and that Brand locates in contemporary Canadian multiculturalism. One example of this is explored when the speaker describes how,

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

now, same as anywhere, still, a baby crying here
may not be about hunger, not that kind of hunger
(47)

The colloquial language of the speaker and her direct address to the reader (“you know”) stresses the intimate tone of the speaker here. The description of “laughter on some street” and the crying of the baby which is “crying same as any street” connects these human noises of pleasure and suffering with the repetition of the word “same” to suggest that it is in the oral quality of the human voice and its capacity for vulnerability and intimacy that one can begin to articulate some concept of human sameness. Yet, my sense is that this play on the word ‘same’ attempts to trouble the category of sameness, to articulate a universal humanness while also leaving space for the difference that recognizes that “a baby crying here / may not be about hunger, not that kind of hunger” (47). The speaker repeats the word ‘same’ in order to show how it operates differently and to show how the language of ‘sameness’ is inadequate for imagining the transnational desires, intimacies, connections and responsibilities that the speaker is describing.

This is a mode of global citizenship that moves beyond liberal models of multicultural 'sameness' to integrate class and race analysis, to remind readers that the multicultural moment is not born out of a historic vacuum. The speaker criticizes this liberal universality in her description of "the eagerness / to be all the same, to mince biographies / to some exact phrases, some / exact and toxic genealogy" (17). This criticism is echoed by Arun Mukherjee, who describes, "Western narcissism, this fake universalism which is really Euro American ethnocentrism talking about itself in the vocabulary of 'the human condition' at

and human. After detailing the historical representations and brutalizations of Black bodies during slavery and colonization, she links that historical and visual archive to the contemporary politics of the body in regulating categories of citizen, illegal immigrant and human. She describes how,

lines of visitors are fingerprinted
eye-scanned, grow murderous
...
the guards, blued and leathered, multiply

In place of multicultural models of citizenship, difference and history, a politics that accounts for the body and for desire, and that understands our shared vulnerability as a basis of solidarity, can offer a richer sense of transnational citizenship as well as global humanism.

the same time that it denies the humanity of others" (14). I suggest that there is an ethical quality that the speaker finds in the poetic and the oral that she does not find in the visual and that orality, music, cries, the audible act of mourning and the barely audible noises of the world all express intimacy as a mode of political solidarity which doesn't attempt to erase or negate difference, but instead splits open the space between universality and difference to suggest a new space of politics and agency.

Another critical way in which the speaker challenges the concept of universal humanism and develops her poetic inventory is in the bodies that are present throughout the poem. The body is a central concern for Brand throughout her work and indeed the body becomes one of the primary means by which the speaker attempts to develop this inventory of the self. We have already partially seen this importance of bodies in the grotesque display of mangled corpses from the newscast, which I take as a misrepresentation of bodies, totally decontextualized and dehistoricized. In the first section of the poem, after describing the American movies that "buried themselves in our chests," the speaker explains that "we arrived spectacular, tendering / our own bodies into dreamery, / as meat, as mask, as burden" (3). Arriving "spectacular" recalls the spectacle of cinema and television and the way in which their modes of affect shape the way in which the Black body is performed and framed. This arrival recalls both the arrival of Africans as slaves and the spectacle and tendering of the auction block as well as the arrival of migrants and the spectacle of acceptable citizenship that is expected at the borders of the West. Brand connects this historical legacy of racialized bodies to the contemporary politics of the racialized body in the second section of the poem where the speaker describes transnational migration and the way in which the body informs definitions of citizen

to stop them
palimpsests of old borders, the sea's graph on the skin,
the dead giveaway of tongues,
soon, soon, the implants to discern lies

from the way a body moves (16)

The racialized body becomes one of the central ways in which the migrant is regulated, and in this sense the body itself is part of a lived history of colonialism and exploitation. The description of the "palimpsests of old borders" insists that the contemporary borders of nation and culture are re-writings of older borders of race, serving the same functions of management and exclusion. Yet these palimpsests also refer to "the sea's graph on the skin" suggesting the way in which the Black body connects the Black migrant to the history of slavery, and the way in which that history informs concepts of citizenship and subjectivity.⁴ While multiculturalism engages in a forgetting of origins and a forgetting of the legacy of slavery and colonization, it also engages in a form of managed remembering in the sense that the bodies of racialized citizens mark them as particular types of citizens (ie: black, immigrant, visible minority, illegal) within Canada. Despite the intentional forgetting of multiculturalism, the palimpsests of old borders written onto the body remain visible and remembered.

Against this mode of embodiment where the Black body is strictly a site of regulation and discipline by White supremacy and global capitalism, the speaker suggests another mode of embodiment which is critical to any politics of affect and solidarity. Rather than countering the racist regulation of the Black body by evacuating the body as a site of subjectivity and agency, the speaker suggests that the intimate, desiring body is critical to her mode of

politics. Addressing perhaps a lover but also the reader of the poem, she explains that

all I can offer you now though is my brooding hand,
my sodden eyelashes and the like,
these humble and particular things I know,
my eyes pinned to your face

understand, I will keep you alive like this. (37)

The intimacy between the speaker and her lover and between the poet and her audience is critical to this inventory. And this is an intimacy that is physical, where the brooding hand and the sodden eyelashes evoke the embodied qualities of mourning and closeness. The importance of the body here suggests that, for Brand, the body must be included in this critical inventory, as a space where the discourses of colonialism and globalization lodge themselves and cultivate modes of desire and affect. I agree with Diana Brydon's argument that "Brand's *Inventory* rearticulates, local, national, and global citizenship through [a] kind of dissonant, non-identitarian, 'comprehensive and planetary humanism'" (Brydon 999), yet I want to indicate the importance of the body as the site where Brand locates this global citizenship. The importance of this intimate body is stressed again when the speaker explains that she is "not willing another empire but history's pulse / measured with another hand" (11). This image suggests the importance of bodies to Brand's concept of critical intimacy as well as the possibility to reimagine history as an intimate encounter between history and the subjects it constitutes. Also this re-articulation of history as an embodied, pulsing rhythm evokes what Edward Said describes as the "constant pressure" of subaltern agency against the "synchronic essentialism" of western hegemony, an essentialism that he associates with the visual because it presumes to see both history and the other panoptically (Said 240). This synchronic essentialism is the historical mode of multiculturalism which engages in an intentional forgetting of its own origins. It is against such a forgetting that the speaker's measurement of "history's pulse / ... with another hand" (11) insists on the importance of history as a lived presence of the body as well as the desire to reassert history that runs throughout *Inventory*. This image (which suggests a doctor-patient relationship where sick modernity is diagnosed by the subaltern subject) evokes embodiedness, intimacy and subaltern history in order to challenge the panoptic gaze of multiculturalism and to suggest an alternate mode of transnational citizenship and solidarity.

At the end of the poem when the speaker describes the "atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded" (100) she reasserts that the body is the central site for her articulation of a new politics of intimate solidarity and humanness. The body is critical in that it asks us to examine our modes of pleasure and desire and examine how they

structure concepts of citizenship, politics and humanity. If the discourses of capitalism and globalization cultivate a particular mode of desiring as part of their interpellation of subjects, Brand attempts to read these structures of desire and affect and see how they have lodged themselves in her body and formed her subjectivity. Where, at the start of the poem, "the black-and-white american movies / buried themselves in our chests," (3) at the end of the poem the speaker describes the "atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded." I read this shift in these bodily openings as a reclamation of the damaged and wounded body where the body that was cut by colonial discourse and violence becomes an "opening" to hold the wounded. This closing image of the speaker's body, as the place where the wounded can seek refuge, stresses the interconnectedness of this mode of being human as even the body of the speaker is implicated in the lives of other people. Brand's poetic inventory is an attempt to reclaim desire and to suggest that in place of multicultural models of citizenship, difference and history, a politics that accounts for the body and for desire, and that understands our shared vulnerability as a basis of solidarity, can offer a richer sense of transnational citizenship as well as global humanism. Furthermore, the structure of the poem as an intimate address between speaker and reader suggests that poetry is one critical site where desire and intimacy can be employed to develop these new political possibilities. In this sense, *Inventory* enacts the type of solidarity that it prescribes, suggesting a critical reading which performs the intimacy between speaker, poet and audience in order to suggest a type of transnational human solidarity in seemingly desperate and uncertain times.

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¹This is a statement which George Eliot Clarke, revealing his own alignment with multiculturalism, criticizes. He argues that when Walcott places Brand in the "in-between spaces he is actually recognizing [her] at-home Canadian-ness" (173). See Soderlind (2006) for the "preposterous" problems of positing Canadianness as in-betweenness and the historical erasure that such a move entails.

²We also see this in the description of the "burnt clothing, bloody rags, bomb-filled shoes" (21) where the alliteration of B sounds undercuts the array of images of the newscast and attempts to reinscribe "the density of life" (21) by insisting on the fleshiness of the bodies. In both examples, the sounds of the lines act as a challenge to the power of western imagery.

³I offer this passage both in order to advance my argument and also to address George Eliot Clarke's criticism

of scholarship on Dionne Brand, Claire Harris and M. Nourbese Philip. He argues that critics “either reduce the writers to the status of sociologists or they bleach their work of aesthetic value. The resultant criticism is tedious, inadequate, and—perhaps—insidious” (164). While I don’t agree that we can neatly address the aesthetics of a writer like Brand without also discussing her politics, I also take his point that to address only politics with no attention to aesthetics would be just as misguided. I also agree that, when reading this work, critics “must engage their poetics, their structures, styles, influences; the histories of their textual productions, receptions and circulations” (179).

⁴For more on the relationship between history, memory and the body in Brand’s work, see Michael Bucknor and Jody Mason. Mason’s reading of the ambivalence of the history of the body and of the importance of the “felt presence of history” (787) is particularly appropriate to my reading of *Inventory*.

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SHEILA STEWART

Remembrance

In the middle of yoga the teacher interrupts *downward dog* for a few minutes of seated silence: the whole library on hold.

We’re in the basement. I prefer yoga’s own stillness. My friend leaving a lifetime teaching to write poetry – her last Remembrance Day

assembly. Final time leading a row of children into the auditorium. The principal talks peace but makes them stand still enough to be filled

with Flanders Fields. (I was good at standing still, readying myself for something.)

My friend tells me of Nathan who screams in class as if a bayonet pierces his side.

She says to the children, *Have you ever been hurt? I have*. She lets them see her cry. The statue in the park tell us courage is a man on horseback.

Grandfather, returned from the war, beat Gran. (My uncle told my brother told me.) For the woman in the far corner, coming to yoga class is an act of courage.

Leaving her room, combat. Stillness on any ordinary day, an act of remembering and not. Letting your spine fall into the ground.

Sheila Stewart’s first poetry collection, A Hat to Stop a Train, was published by Wolsak and Wynn in 2003. She won the Dan Sullivan Poetry Contest in 2006, the Scarborough Art Council’s Windows on Words Annual Poetry Contest in 2003 and the Potterfield Portfolio Short Poem Competition in 2000. Her poetry has appeared in such journals as The Antigoni Review, Canadian Woman Studies, Descant, Fireweed, The Malahat Review and Tessera.