

Witness to the Body Count: Planetary Ethics in Dionne Brand's *Inventory*

by Cheryl Lousley

“Some of us have dreamed... the perhaps impossible vision of an ecologically just world.”¹

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 382

In her familiar deconstructive move, Gayatri Spivak simultaneously embraces the dream of global ecological justice and marks it as impossible. Spivak inhabits an impossible position to avoid repeating the epistemic violence of totalization, whether in the guise of the universal subject of modern humanism, the spectre of global capitalism, or the global rhetoric of environmentalism. Dionne Brand's long poem *Inventory* similarly constructs an impossible position from which to dream global ecological justice. The poem presents an unnamed subject who is compelled to respond to the globalized violence of her time, much of which passes daily before her eyes through the screens of television and cinema:

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

and the next, and the next

(21)

Ethical responsibility is impossible but necessary for this witness to relentless suffering, depicted at a pace she cannot keep up with, on a geographical scale that spans the globe, and that includes the planet itself as a fragile, fleshy body decimated by violence.

The poem is an exercise in taking an account or inventory of the accumulating losses of the twenty-first century. Undertaking such a task at the beginning of the century, when the complete perspective implied by inventory is impossible, makes it open-ended and contingent rather than totalizing. The gesture towards making a comprehensive recording of fact, while simultaneously marking its impossibility, is characteristic of the postcolo-