The city has functioned throughout modernity as the imagined space where strangers meet – and is thus both threatening and exciting. This urban conflux has acquired new significance in the revival of cosmopolitanism as a mode of political critique, ethics, and belonging appropriate to the complex inequities and interrelations of global societies. The stranger is the litmus test for cosmopolitanisms because of the desire for ethical standpoints and political institutions that can navigate between an appropriative universalism (which reduces all the same) and cultural essentialism (where each is locked within a distinct moral system). Liberal humanists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum place ethical regard for human strangers as the central hope and challenge of a cosmopolitanism envisioned as a form of multiculturalism extended past the boundaries of the urban center and nation-state. In this Kantian view, cosmopolitanism is an ethics or virtue (see Benhabib) that supersedes nationalist exclusions and enmities. Postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai are hesitant about such universalist visions, which neglect the power relations involved in granting authority to a particular global stance or naturalized identity. Instead, they foreground how political space and resistance can be found in difference, fragmentation, and hybridization, exemplified by the transnational identities that take form among diasporic communities, in urban spaces, and via electronic media.

The figure of the stranger is a useful metaphor for both perspectives because the stranger is not so much one who is clearly (and essentially) different but rather one who is unknown to the subject, who does not yet fit into existing social categories. The stranger is an outsider, but not necessarily an enemy (nor yet a friend). The politics of space are crucial to the significance of the stranger because the threat he – or she – or they – pose, or economic and cultural opportunity they bring, is related to the delineation and control of territory. Aestheticized as an exotic, the stranger may appear to pose no threat to existing power formations (see Bauman). But when standing on the threshold of one’s house or nation or consciousness, and demanding entry, hospitality, even permanent residence, the stranger unsettles (see Derrida; Kristeva). To speak of the stranger is to point to liminal encounters that take place on the cusp of knowledge, ethics, and sociality. The stranger is thus a
pivotal site for imagining and negotiating the uncanny intersections of local and global.

In environmental thought, the stranger has commonly appeared as a threat that disrupts the bucolic and secure home environment. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* infamously opens with an allegory of DDT as the “enemy within the gates,” the toxic poison unleashed by the people themselves, a theme also apparent in the discourse of “invasive species.” Ursula Heise describes how densely crowded Third World cities figured prominently in environmental ethics and popular culture of the 1960s and 70s, symbolically depicting poor masses clamoring for a share of scarce global resources as a threat to global survival. Heise suggests that in the United States these dystopian global visions contributed to an embrace of localism based on “the attachment to or ‘reinhabitation’ of the local through a prolonged residence, intimate familiarity, affective ties, and ethical commitment” (50). Heise argues that the ethical equation of intimacy, familiarity, and staying in one place lends itself to a sharp divide between naturalized categories of “locals” and “outsiders,” and underwrites the xenophobia and anti-immigrant discourse found in some forms of contemporary US environmentalism. As Giovanna Di Chiro and other environmental justice critics have shown, it tends to be anti-urban for similar reasons, despite the ecological efficiencies and cultural vibrancy of urban forms. Localism, when fetishized as a realm of authenticity, represents a retreat from the complex global flows of finance, resource, media, technology, and discourse that characterize modernity (see Appadurai), rather than a search for socially and ecologically just means of negotiating them.

Despite the ubiquitous imagery of global unity that courses through environmental thought – from NASA’s “blue planet” photographs from space to the 1992 Earth Summit or the common-sensical slogan “think global, act local” – globalism, no less than localism, also poses challenges for pursuing environmental justice. As Heise acknowledges, the local can provide a space for resistance to the ecological destruction enabled by distant, unaffected decision-makers. The “view from nowhere,” as Donna Haraway aptly describes it, that an apparently global perspective enables is characteristic of the exploitative reach of colonialism and capitalism, subsuming the resources, lands, labour, and lifeworlds of others into an unequal global economy. Several scholars have critiqued the popular environmental discourse of the global adopted in the North for obfuscating the postcolonial political economy and neglecting significant differences of power and culture (Sachs; Shiva). The right to remain a stranger, to live in what may seem “strange” ways, should not be occluded under the guise of planetary survival. At the same time, as Bruno Latour has noted (“Whose Cosmos?”), cosmopolitan thinkers who envision a global multiculturalism, where diversity amicably flourishes, appear to neglect the ecological stakes and territorial exigencies involved in pursuing particular ways of life.
Post-Marxist thinkers such as Bruce Robbins, Pheng Cheah, and Saskia Sassen therefore place their emphasis on political economy rather than difference. Concerned with the shifting structures of capitalism that rely on financial and labour mobility without the welfare and democratic protections of the nation-state, they are more equivocal about privileging the local, urban, national, or international. They suggest that nationalist sentiment can provide both the common identity that gives the political functions of the state legitimacy and the grounds for exploitation and disenfranchisement of minorities within or others outside the polis. We must be cautious, then, about fetishizing the stranger, and neglecting the bonds that tie the polis together. Moreover, the rarely questioned assumption that the figure of the stranger is a human person from a distant place or different culture does not engage with the full range of ethical and political challenges posed by environmental thought. Environmental justice raises for ethical consideration a wide range of figures not accommodated by Kantian premises of moral reasoning nor Habermasian communicative politics, including children, animals, future generations, places, and the biosphere, as well as non-citizens at risk due to environmental hazards we produce and economic inequalities that benefit us. It is in resistance to the general assumption that non-humans hold no value other than as resources, and that places are mere background and pose in themselves no ethical demands, that ecocriticism and environmental thought have tended to promote and examine intimacy with place, animals, and nature.

To engage with the position of the stranger nevertheless has some parallels within environmental ethics. Neil Evernden argues that the moral disregard for non-humans is due to the objectivist paradigm of modern science, which has created a de-sacralized world of objects. As Carolyn Merchant describes, the “death of nature” by modern epistemology enables unchecked ecological degradation – the actual deadening of the living world. Drawing on Martin Buber’s distinction between the I-Thou and the I-It relationship, Evernden advocates instead an ethical stance toward non-humans based on dialogue with a Thou – an other rather than an object. He urges an appreciation for the difference of other species in the face of a homogenizing and appropriating planetary view that collapses all life-worlds into a single space of human habitation. Evernden offers not so much a cosmopolitan view as a pluralizing of the cosmos that maintains the importance of place as the location from which one engages with the world. Although Evernden does not equate locality with human authenticity (calling humans “natural aliens”), he promotes a phenomenological cultivation of intimate and sensory knowledge associated with the local sphere as an antidote to the objectification of living beings.

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Jacques Derrida’s work on the question of the animal and notions of hospitality is a notable exception to this assumption that pervades the cosmopolitanism debates.
The conceptual challenges of theorizing nature and difference are similar to those faced by postcolonial and cosmopolitan theorists. Emphasizing the difference of non-humans presents the twin specters of objectification (treated as if having no intrinsic value) and exoticism (set aside for special treatment). William Cronon’s critique of wilderness discourse points to the dangers of exoticism. Taking nature to be a pure, untouched space far from where we live functions to erase the presence of local inhabitants and to legitimize disregard for the livability of the areas where most people do live. But bringing animals or nature into ethics via humanist models of identification, or into politics through a chain of equivalent oppressions also have shortcomings, tending to deny and suppress the specificities on all sides of the equation. Differences of voice, agency, capability, history, and desire do matter (see Sandilands). Haraway’s postulation of the hybrid identity of the cyborg shifts the debate from ontological differences to material connections situated within global political economies, but the metaphor has proved difficult to extract from its techno-triumphalist connotations. Latour attempts a similar strategy by analyzing the material networks that connect particular sites to other sites across time and space to produce entanglements of humans and non-humans. A commitment similar to Evernden’s to potentially treat all entities as ends, not merely means, provides his moral framework. The political challenge, he suggests in Politics of Nature, is to engage in diplomatic relations between these strangers, building alliances (and naming enemies) in order to craft a just common world.

Diasporic Poetics

A rapprochement between cosmopolitanism and environmentalism is offered in the recent poetry of Dionne Brand. Brand is one of the most significant Canadian poets and black poets writing today. Also a novelist, essayist and filmmaker, Brand first earned international acclaim with her poetry collection No Language is Neutral, published in 1990. The title poem presents a diasporic subject split between two places, “home” and “here,” her sense of self and voice fractured by her painful memories yet desire for the lush green island of Trinidad, and the racialized abjection the immigrant finds in the concrete city of Toronto. Brand’s long poem Land to Light On, published in 1997, mourns the failure of collective and national politics in the postcolonial world. Symbolically located outside the Canadian nation yet residing within it, the speaker in Land to Light On is apprehensive about the territorialized violence and exclusions of the nation-state and nationalisms, avowing (in the most commonly quoted line from the poem), “I don’t want no fucking country, here / or there and all the way back” (48). Forgoing the nation, however, is no simple matter, as diasporic subjects, whose claims to territory and citizenship are precarious, know better than most. Land to Light On shows how identity, place, and politics are closely intertwined: that one is always posi-
tioned somewhere, that who we are is articulated in relation to place, and
that places have histories and politics, however much a vast snowy land-
scape may appear a blank and empty whiteness. Place is not taken for grant-
ed in Brand’s poetry but interrogated as a contested site embedded in local,
national, and transnational relations.

Brand’s latest long poems, *Thirsty* (2002) and *Inventory* (2006), show a shift
in focus from political recognition of the self who has been positioned as
other, to an ethical relationship with the stranger. *Thirsty* is an elegy to a
black man murdered by police in Toronto, a stranger who lived, walked, and
died in the spaces of the same city as the poet. *Inventory* is not set in a single
city, but foregrounds the material flows and communication technologies
that violently connect strangers located in different places across the planet.
The figure of the stranger that appears in *Thirsty* and *Inventory* can be read as
the culmination of Brand’s ambivalence toward territorialized identities. The
stranger is not an outsider, but rather, along the lines of cosmopolitan theo-
rists who take global cities to be landing points for multiple diasporas (Con-
ley; Breckenridge et al.), an unknown other with whom one shares common
ground. The post-national, “diasporic city” makes everyone at some time a
stranger (Burman). The appearance of the stranger is a reminder that the city
– or the planet – is not totally known or claimed by oneself or one’s own.
These poems make a unique contribution to theorizing cosmopolitanism and
environmentalism because they envision transcultural spaces not only as a
physical ground where strangers meet, but also as living realms, intimately
experienced but nevertheless full of strangers, human and non-human.

*Thirsty: Cosmopolitan City*

The speaker in *Thirsty* finds the city moribund and lifeless on first impres-
sion, full of “broken things” like “the shrinking lake” and the “smashed night
birds” who fly into skyscraper lights (1). Alan, dying on his doorstep, is an-
other of these “broken things,” and likely a reference to Albert Johnson,
killed by police in the entrance to his home in August 1979, witnessed by his
wife and daughter – a murder which mobilized the black community to po-

tlitical action against the long and continuing history of police shootings of
black men in Toronto (see Jackson). The poem compares Alan’s crumpled
body to the cultivars of his garden: “clematis cirrhosa and a budding grape
vine he was still / to plant when he could, saying when he had fallen,
‘...thirsty...’” (4). The word “thirsty,” which gives the poem its title, is pre-
ceded and followed by ellipses. The word indicates desire and anticipation, a
life wanting and planning to live, to grow, to bloom; the ellipses keep this
desire incomplete and indecipherable, even as Alan turns into a symbol for a
beleaguered black community when “his chest flowered stigma of scarlet
bergamot” (21). *Thirsty* mourns the many lives cut short and stifled, includ-
The poem intertwines diasporic experience and the plight of nature, and places the narrative of Alan’s death within an ecological context. The ever-present smog suggests the poem is also an elegy to the memory of nature; the loss of a black man is related to these other losses in the city. The city is an “urban barracoon” (11) where lives are stifled because the very air is toxic—with racism and exhaust fumes: “breathing, you can breathe if you find air” (11). The land, air, and water that support the life of the city is backgrounded, out of sight and out of mind: “Every night the waste of the city is put out and taken away / to suburban landfills and recycling plants, / and that is the rhythm everyone would prefer in their life” (62). Black men, too, appear to be treated like detritus to be cleared away. A landscape of death prevails in the “strip malls of ambitious immigrants” (11), part of a normalized acceptance that the immigrant is not really permitted to live in this place: “We live here / but don’t think that we’re going to live like people here!” (37).

The people are thus strangers to the place. The poem echoes with what it terms “conditional sentences about conditional places” (37): “‘If we were home. / I would . . . ’ as strong a romance with the past tense as with what is / to come” (37). If racial exclusion means living in Canada feels like a “conditional sentence,” only provisionally accepted, then giving in to that sense of not-belonging leaves the immigrant living a deferred life in a city only seen as a temporary stop, a “conditional place” that does not matter. Oscillating between nostalgia for “what they choose to remember” and ambition for a better life, these immigrants are “buried in...suburbs undifferentiated, prefabricated from no great / narrative, except cash” (36). With no affective attachments to the place, the land holds value only as property and capital. As a result, much like Alan’s thirst for life is shot dead, the living earth is smothered in the scramble for development: “unflagging dreariness dries the landscape, meagre oases of woodland / fight gas stations and donut shops for any thing named beauty/[…]. This suburban parching would dry bog” (36). Alan’s thirst mirrors the thirst of the drained and denuded land—both strive for life and beauty.

Brand’s combination of the aesthetic and ecological is no pastoral gaze upon an idealized landscape but rather an environmental politics based on what urban theorists term “livability” and ecofeminists discuss in terms of “flourishing.” For feminist and environmental justice thinkers, advocating for the intrinsic value of nature must be intertwined (though not equated) with arguing for the intrinsic value of the lives of women, people of colour, and the poor. Val Plumwood and Chris Cuomo argue for the promotion of the “mutual flourishing” of human and nonhuman life (Plumwood 30), an ethico-political stance that recognizes the right to pursue one’s own well-being and the justice of enabling the well-being of others, human and nonhuman, individually and ecosystemically. Environmental justice similarly brings together social and ecological concerns, such as toxic hazards, ade-
quate housing, employment, and parks, under the banner of an equal right to quality of life. Against the exoticism associated with wilderness-focused environmentalism or sustainability’s focus on bare survival, “environmental justice activists define the environment as ‘the place you work, the place you live, the place you play’” (Di Chiro 301). As Chaia Heller explains, “When activists focus solely on questions of ecological need and survival, they fail to recognize the qualitative concerns of poor peoples who also share desires for a meaningful and pleasurable quality of life” (2).

*Thirsty* suggests that flourishing is undermined by the “conditional sentences” that devalue both people and places, but the poem nevertheless embraces the cosmopolitan possibilities of the diasporic city. The title phrase is reinterpreted with a page break to suggest the bustling promise of life in the city: “Alan fell down whispering, ‘…thirsty…’ // which is to say, human. I did hear the city’s susurrus, / loud, wide, promising, like wine, obscurity and rapture, / the bright veiled Somali women hyphenating Scarlett Road” (39-40). Murmurs of life, hyphenated identities bring the streets to life with conversations in new, hybrid languages: “At the Sea King Fish Market, / the Portuguese men have learned another language. ‘Yes sweetie, yes dahling, and for you only this good good price.’ This to the old Jamaican women” (40). The lines act like streets that bridge multiple diasporas, the cacophony a spontaneous emergence of new formations. Toronto’s famed cultural and linguistic diversity is directly linked to its urban infrastructure and density: “The tunnel breathes in the coming train exhaling / as minerals the grammar of Calcutta, Colombo, / Jakarta, Mogila and Senhor do Bonfim, Robeira Grande / and Hong Kong, Mogadishu and the alias St. Petersburg” (20). The subway provides a constantly moving yet common ground for this multicultural conflux; the plurality of grammars the precious ore that makes the city work.

For all the joy the multicultural crowds suggest, there is no seamless intersection of diversity and justice, nor immigrant opportunity and ecological sustainability. The poem resists the rhythm of death by enacting its own form of urban inhabitation, breaking the conditional sentence by committing to the here and now. The poet moves into the city by “writing the biographies / of streets” (40) and mapping its mundane crossroads: “the bank to one corner, / the milk store and the church” (3). Following Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges” and Katherine McKittrick’s description of black women’s geography as “cartographies of struggle,” I would describe *Thirsty* as presenting a ‘situated cartography’ – a cartography

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2 Commonly referred to as the most multicultural city in the world, Toronto is largely populated by recent immigrants, who come from a wide range of places of origin. According to recent Statistics Canada reports, “Almost three-quarters of Torontonians aged 15 or older have direct ties to immigration. About one-half (52%) are themselves immigrants while another 22% are second generation immigrants with at least one parent born outside of Canada” (“Diversity”). Close to half have a mother tongue other than English (“Diversity”).
of the everyday; it resists re-enacting the exclusionary claims of territory by tracing movement through the public spaces that bring one together with strangers. Each character is associated with transit: waiting for trolleys, riding buses, moving with the multicultural crowds on the subway, or the joyful freedom of cycling: “a bicycle, / a sparrow of light, and meter, velocity itself” (18). Physical movement in the city brings an openness to possibility and engagement with life in its various, unexpected forms: “you feel someone brush against you, / on the street, you smell leather, the lake, / the coming leaves, the rain’s immortality” (57). Much like Evernden’s phenomenologically based environmental ethics, a sensory openness to the others around is here postulated as a form of resistance to their objectification or dismissal.

The speaker herself is a stranger to Alan, his wife Julia, and his daughter Chloe, the figures who haunt the poem. She is someone who merely brushes against them in the street: “I don’t remember that frail morning, how / could I? No one wakes up thinking of a stranger” (22). Against the “feral amnesia” (24) that allows us to forget the garbage carried away in the night, or the unknown lives ended in snap flashes of racist violence, the poem takes the diverse encounters of the here and now as the basis for a “cosmopolitanism from below” (Cheah 21), that can bring to life a new city, where many might cultivate “some thing of beauty,” allowing ourselves and the land to flourish.

**Inventory: Planetary Ethics**

The grief for the stranger that the speaker feels in *Thirsty* is extended beyond both city and nation in Brand’s long poem *Inventory* as a form of ethical and political response to the violence and destruction occurring across the planet. But the immediacy and joy of the urban encounter (with rain, with other people) is reversed in *Inventory*, which focuses on violent connections to the distant stranger. The poem presents an unnamed subject who is compelled to respond to the 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). The television makes the speaker “the wars’ last and late night witness” (21); she becomes a witness to the deaths of unknown and unnamed victims of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without leaving her living room. By focusing on the impersonal position of being a witness without being present (in which the mediation of communication technologies removes the possibility of one-on-one contact in the street), the poem resists incorporating the stranger into one’s known world, and, instead, attends to the ethical dimensions of usually invisible ecological and commodity networks. Where *Thirsty* develops a cosmopolitan openness to others, *Inventory* locates this cosmopolitan ethics within a global political economy and ecology.
The ecological desolation of the city in *Thirsty* – its smoggy air, desiccated wetlands, meagre woods, and garbage piles – is extended to a planetary scale in *Inventory*: “the forests we destroyed, / as far as / the Amazonas’ forehead, the Congo’s gut” (7). This destruction is “everywhere” (7); it stretches across the continents, across the mythic maps of pristine origins and jungle interiors. Re-appropriating the cartographic imposition of the human figure upon the landscape, the poem imagines the planet itself as a fleshy, human-like body; it is “this shorn planet,” a body clipped bare and naked through deforestation (85). Alive and breathing, it is the personified Gaia, the mythological Greek goddess of the Earth, given an ecological aura in climate scientist James Lovelock’s “Gaia hypothesis,” which posits the planet as a self-regulating system that maintains the conditions for life. *Inventory* evokes the planetary to suggest both the ecological relations that sustain living creatures and a cosmopolitan vision of citizenship that recognizes obligations to others unlike ourselves.

The poem traces injustices and ecological degradation through global relations of consumption and production with the example of the cell phone. Instead of enabling communication between distant places, the cell phone materially links strangers who yet remain strangers to one another:

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there are cellphones calling no one, 
no messages burn on the planet’s withered lungs 
all that coltan from Kahuzi-Biega, the landslides, 
to carry nothing (41)
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The Gaian imagery of a living, breathing planet whose lungs “wither” as tropical forests are lost is localized and historicized with the reference to coltan mining in Kahuzi-Biega, a Democratic Republic of Congo national park. Used in light-weight electronics like cell phones, coltan has fetched high prices on the world market since the late 1990s, helping to fuel civil war in the Congo and involving thousands of people working in the illegal mining operations and mining trade under violent and dangerous conditions (“Report”). The image of the cell phone “calling no one” and “carry[ing] nothing” is a bitter indictment of the willful ignorance induced by commodity fetishism. The labour, land, and materials that produce the cell phone, and the forests lost in consequence, are so easily rendered invisible. Consumers in the global north are linked materially to the global south, but no message is passed between them. The poem does not attempt to recuperate the unheard voices from the Congo, but rather traces the cell phone and its material networks to the bodies of anonymous consumers, adding it to “the mollient burdens carried in knapsacks, / all the footwear and headgear and SUVs, / the anodyne poets of jingles” (41). Rather than a heroic “cosmopolitanism from below,” the poem confronts the middle-class “banal cosmopolitanism” (Beck 28), the everyday routines through which identities become based on global processes. The poem resists personalizing either side of the consumer exchange, mimicking how consumer goods and jingles act as signs of per-
sonal identity while things taken as commodities are detached from the lives of those who produce them.

Throughout the poem, those who suffer from poverty, dangerous work, and military and state violence are and remain strangers; unlike Alan in *Thirsty*, they are not even named. Brand mimics and exposes the depersonalizing strategies of violence and commodification by using the form of an inventory, a list or catalogue of things, to detail global suffering. Nameless, not identified by nation or race, only rarely by gender or age, victims are reduced to their victim status: “let us all deny our useless names in solidarity” (78). Only the method and place of their death is named and particular:

- by malaria, by hemorrhagic fevers, by hungers,
- by fingerprint, by dogs and vigilantes
- by arrests near the tunnel,
- in arrest by La Migra in Brewster County,
- Hidalgo County, Dona Ana County, and Zapata County (39)

Method replaces narrative: there are no persons, only agents and acts. Nations, too, are absent, though their borders policed. Instead, places are localized as cities, parks, neighborhoods, and rural counties.

Without names, nations, or narratives, the poem seems to evacuate politics. Like the television news, the poem leaves the perpetrators of destruction absent and invisible; violence can appear as the inevitable social norm of people living elsewhere: “the Arab faces were Arab faces after all” (22). Strangers can remain other, dismissed from ethical purview. However, it is in resisting names that *Inventory* foregrounds the ethical responsibility of witnesses and beneficiaries, the anonymous spectators at their television screens.

The poem turns the gaze back onto the spectator, concomitantly shifting the site of political engagement and ethical relationship from abstract entities like the nation-state or global humanity to “here,” the place where one lives and watches the events of the world: “in documentaries, in liquid surfaces, / in oceanic blue screens, in disappearances in / the secret seas of living rooms here” (39). *Inventory* metaphorically materializes what is usually taken to be television’s symbolic collapse of the distance between near and far. The poem interpellates anonymous spectators and consumers, laborers and refugees into a planetary ethical community based on the flow of materials and images from place to place (from there to “here”; “here” to there). *Inventory* thus gives an ethical imperative and ecological emphasis to Appadurai’s argument that globalization can be understood as a series of overlapping yet disjoint flows of capital, resource, image, and discourse. The poem places “here” within entangled networks that crisscross the planet.

By insisting on an ethical response to strangers who remain strangers, Brand, like those who embrace a diasporic cosmopolitanism, appears skeptical about closing the distance between “here” and “there” by denying difference, but similarly finds a planetary rather than national framework necessary for adequately accounting for our responsibilities. However, unlike most
approaches to cosmopolitanism, her poem traces social, economic, and ecological relations across the planet while resisting portraying the Earth merely as a space of human habitation. Not only does the poem repeatedly picture the planet as a living, vulnerable body, it also describes it as bursting with life of many different forms. In sharp contrast with the absence of human names and voices in the body count, “the birds of the world” are given exuberant name in the poem (85):

the banded pitta, the mangrove pitta, the bulbul,
the iora, the red-naped and scarlet-rumped
trogon, the fire-tufted barbet, flame back, philentoma,
the rufous-throated wren babbler… (85)

The speaker admonishes the reader to “listen to all the laughing thrushes, / striated, white throated, orange headed, all” (86), simultaneously insisting on the diversity and the presence of these strangers, that each is to be addressed as Thou, not It. The planet in Inventory is what David Abram has usefully termed a “more-than-human world.” The phrase situates human societies within a larger collective without lumping together other lives and ecological processes into a passive and monolithic category like “nature.”

Sensuous connection to the more-than-human world is the subject of the final inventory in Brand’s poem, in which the speaker celebrates the bodily joy of being alive in a living world. These lists risk establishing nature yet again as a “standing reserve,” as Martin Heidegger observes: a storehouse of goods ready and available for use (or aesthetic pleasure). But the attention to embodied singularity undermines the totalizing gesture of the end-of-season inventory, when the storekeeper tallies up all his possessions: “armadillos, morrocoys and one-inch pandas, / all different, don’t be mistaken, they’re not simple, / not as simple as the ways to kill them” (96). In echoes of the urban cosmopolitanism of Thirsty, the speaker lyrically recalls the sensory memories of singular encounters:

[...] the one that blue morning in Les Coteaux,
the one on the way to Firenze with the baby on the train,
and the flight and dive of pelicans, the scent of sandalwood and the scent of mangoes
when they grow black (90)

Her list is specific, textured, and wide reaching. Unlike an ethics oriented to a shared humanity, which risks reducing singularity to a common bare existence and ignoring ethical consideration of other-than-humans, the poem highlights the ethical dimensions of all the embodied, material encounters among strangers.
Here and Now

Brand’s diasporic engagement with ecology is important because environmental considerations rarely figure in accounts of globalization, cosmopolitanism, and urbanity. Nature is often scorned in contemporary critical thought as the emblem and ideological tool of essentialism, whereby historical specific practices and identities are rendered immutable or universal. But, as Kate Soper argues, the social constructionist denunciation of “nature” as a discursive obfuscation of history “can very readily act evasive of ecological realities” (23), including the ways in which environmental hazards, risks, and benefits are differentially distributed within and across nations and world regions. Any struggle for global justice or cosmopolitan ethics will be incomplete without engaging with nature and ecology both materially and conceptually. Concomitantly, global ecological struggles that neglect justice can deepen social inequalities and undermine democracy.

Brand’s poems present what Bruce Robbins terms “actually existing cosmopolitanisms” – daily, often banal, experiences that position individual subjects within transnational spatial flows of people, goods, finance, pollution, images, animals, weapons, and natural materials. The singular actions of the elegiac poet in Thirsty and the late-night witness in Inventory underline how cosmopolitan ethics are not given by the circumstances of globalization. Rather, the poems offer the hopeful prospect that, despite widespread complicity in ecological loss and hazard, a stance of resistance is possible: when “everyone grows perversely accustomed, / she refuses” (Brand, Inventory 29). The basis for this refusal is the cosmopolitan subject’s commitment to the here and now, remaining emotionally open to the stranger “who comes,” to take Derrida’s phrase, whether via the television screen, in the brief and incomplete encounter on a bustling city street, or through the memory of one’s own foreign origins.

“Here” is not a territory – a land claimed by the nation – nor is it a stagnant and parochial local. “Here” is one’s embodied, specific location, which is embedded in material, communicative networks of humans and nonhumans. Like the anonymous position of the television witness, “here” might be anywhere; nevertheless, it is always, ecologically, somewhere. The task for an ecologically just cosmopolitanism is to make “here” – the places we live in – actually livable for all. By defining the city and the planet as gathering points for strangers, Brand extends the diasporic and racialized subject’s sense of not belonging “here” to everyone, which becomes the tentative basis for a limited identification. When each is at some time and in some places a stranger, then an essentialist rejection or objectification of the other becomes impossible. But Brand’s poems also speak passionately for the importance of relations of intimacy, and mark the dangers of giving no value to communities or relationships that develop over time in particular places. The yearning for a sense of home or belonging the emigrant expresses in No Language is Neutral is mirrored in the deadened cityscape in Thirsty, which remains but a
temporary stopping point for those immigrants who can never feel they belong. Brand’s poems invoke the figure of the stranger not to celebrate nomadism but rather to more fully acknowledge the ethical responsibilities of global subjects.³

Works Cited


