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## BOOKS

# Dionne Brand: On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying

By **Dionne Brand** Special to the Star

Sat., July 4, 2020 | ⌚ 5 min. read

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I have spent my days thinking about calculus and narrative and reckoning. I have spent them tuned to the stilled and heightened frequencies of everyday life. I've spent my days shadowboxing the radio and mainstream print media. I've spent them marveling at the courage, the foresight, and the astonishing brilliance of people, so many of them young, who are taking to the streets. All my life I have lived with the chronic fever of antiblack racism. So many of us have, and for so many years: generations. I know this as I go through my daily acrimonious back and forth with the commentators, experts, and politicians as they attempt to manage the pandemic as narrative, as calculus, but not yet as reckoning. I know, as many do, that I've been living a pandemic all my life; it is structural rather than viral; it is the global state of emergency of antiblackness. What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is expose even further the endoskeleton of the world. I have felt tremendous irritation at the innocence of those people (mostly, but not only, white) finally up against their historic and present culpability in a set of dreadful politics and dreadful economics — ecocidal and genocidal. Their innocence is politically, economically and psychically lucrative. In "Silencing the Past," Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote, "We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence. Naiveté is often an excuse for those who exercise power. For those upon whom that power is exercised, naiveté is always a mistake."

Those in power keep invoking "the normal" as in "when we get back to normal." I've developed an aversion to that word normal. Of course, I understand the more benign meanings of normal; having dinner with friends, going to the movies, going back to work (not so benign). However, I have never used it with any confidence in the first place; now, I find it noxious. The repetition of "when things return to normal" as if that normal, was not in contention. Was the violence against women normal? Was the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism normal? Was white supremacy normal? Was the homelessness growing on the streets normal? Were homophobia and transphobia normal? Were pervasive surveillance and policing of Black and Indigenous and people of colour normal? Yes, I suppose all of that was normal. But, I and many other people hate that normal. Who would one have to be to sit in that normal restfully, to mourn it, or to desire its continuance? We are, in fact, still in that awful normal that is narrativized as minor injustices, or social ills that would get better if some of us waited, if we had the patience to bear it, if we had noticed and were grateful for the miniscule "progress" etc ... Well, yes, this normal, this usual, this ease was predicated on dis-ease. The dis-ease was always presented as something to be solved in the future, but for certain exigences of budget, but for planning, but for the faults of "those" people, their lack of responsibility, but for all that, there were plans to remedy it, in some future time. We were to hold onto that hope and the suspension of disbelief it required to maintain "normal."

I've spent many days thinking about the current political situation. And I noticed with shock and a certain bitter laughter, that the people who espoused cutbacks, belt tightening, austerity, privatization, the people who made up the atrocious clause, "running the country like a business," have been spun around 180 degrees. Where they advocated, over the last 30 or 40 years, shrinking the state they have now swiftly expanded it. Though they have not admitted to the failure of their ideas and austerity policies, they have virtually, though temporarily, overturned 40 years of shrinking the state's responsibilities to people. You wonder what additional things might have been done that they previously said could not be done. For we have seen how quickly these hitherto impossible changes were ramped up. And, so, why did they drag us through thirty years of dispossessing,

dismantling, and disenfranchising? Well. Capital. I guess. Each day when the government trots out what it will do next is an opportunity to witness its intrinsic crisis and failure, its quotidian failures and its hypocrisies.

I don't think that capital is in crisis, the neo-liberal state it created is in crisis.

Time in the city is usually taken up running around positioning oneself around this narrative of the normal. But the pandemic situates you in waiting. So much waiting, you gain clarity. You listen more attentively, more anxiously. "We must get the economy moving," they say. And, "we must get people back to work," they say. These hymns we've heard, these enticements to something called the normal, gesture us toward complicity. Most of my friends and family never stopped working anyway — they work in health and community services. The quarantine has alerted us all as to how much we've ceded to those (we put) in power. The state is in angst, too, about our political demands. It offers some the seduction but others the violence of the normative narrative. Because seriously, what is it to get people 'back to work' if there is no remedy or vaccine? If some people have never stopped working. If the only thing that has changed is the rate of infection not the presence of the virus? What is the calculation by which one arrives at this cruel expendability.

So, I have been thinking of the calculus of living and dying.

And it is no surprise that police and policing come into the frame. And it is no surprise that they must demonstrate state power, and it is no surprise on whom. The x-ray that is the novel coronavirus exposes once again the bare bones of the social structure in which for Black and Indigenous people governance equals policing. Governance as violence.

This we fear — this we know — that all of our thoughts will be rushed into editorial pages, used up in committee meetings; all the rich imaginings of activists and thinkers who urge us to live otherwise may be disappeared, modified into reform and inclusion, equity, diversity and palliation.

But I hear what they say and many others do as well, "Look we should never live the way we lived before; our lives need not be framed by the purely extractive, based on nothing but capital." Everything is up in the air, all narratives for the moment have been blown open — the statues are falling — all the metrics are off, if only briefly. To paraphrase Trouillot, we want "a life that no narrative could provide, even the best fiction." The reckoning might be now.

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*Dionne Brand is a poet, novelist and essayist. Her latest books are "The Blue Clerk" (poetry), "Theory" (a novel) and "An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading" (essay).*

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