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Inhabitable Spaces in Claire Harris's *She*

VERONICA J. AUSTEN

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF HER first two collections in 1984, Claire Harris's poetry has proven remarkable not only for its eloquence and its challenging, often heartbreaking subject matter, but also for its use of a visually experimental form. Admitting that "when [she] begin[s] a poem/piece there is a very clear image of what the poem will look like on the page" (qtd. in Dawes 62), Harris suggests that the visual qualities of her poetry are inseparable from what the poems seek to express through language. In creating meaning both through words and through their appearance on the page, Harris takes part in a recent tendency toward visual experimentation in Caribbean poetry. Including, perhaps most notably, the work of Kamau Brathwaite, this trend is rather idiosyncratic in nature with little sense of a static or unified group of Caribbean visual poets. Instead, various Caribbean poets tend to use visual experimentation for divergent purposes and to varying extremes, often vacillating between visually experimental forms and work that is more traditional in appearance.

At first look, visual experimentation in Caribbean poetry may seem to be linked primarily to orthography, functioning as an attempt to represent on paper the intricacies of a performance. However, there is an equally common (and in fact growing) tendency to use visual experimentation to create meaning separate from the poem's possible soundings. Valuing the oral/performative nature of Caribbean poetry, of course, proved foundational in defining a tradition of poetry distinct from its colonial heritage. As Brathwaite's groundbreaking *History of the Voice* argues, in the early development of a distinctly Caribbean poetry, there was a great need to find "the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience" (8). The key means of developing that distinct voice was to value Nation Language and its distinct sounds. Nevertheless, as Nathaniel Mackey observes, the "rush to canonize orality" (122) can obscure other aesthetic achievements, namely the "graphicity" (122) of many poets' work.¹ The dichotomy between oral and written forms — so authoritatively elab-

orated upon by Walter Ong — has frequently resulted in an assumption that if Caribbean poetry is primarily an oral form, then its visual form is of little consequence except as a score for its intended performance. However, an equation of visual experimentation with the poem's oral/aural nature alone not only disregards the many other effects this style of poetry can achieve but also perpetuates the limiting view that Caribbean poetry must necessarily be based in orality. Such visual features as columns of text placed side by side or lines, even just words, scattered across the page are not necessarily meant as a score. Rather, they become the means of visually enacting such themes as struggle, chaos, or fragmentation.

In Harris's most recent publication, *She* (2000), the visually experimental form is used to perform the protagonist's pursuit of welcoming spaces, both geographical and textual, where she can function as a productive adult. As earlier articles by Emily Allen Williams and Anna S. Blumenthal have demonstrated, Penelope's mental illness is significant in readings of this text. However, multiple personality disorder does not alone account for what is described as "her maimed relationship with the world" (*She*, back cover). Her difficulty functioning within the spaces available to her is instead predominantly a result of both her colonial childhood in Trinidad and her current experience as an immigrant in Calgary. While Williams and Blumenthal both importantly connect Penelope's illness to her experience of immigration, neither article addresses the visually expressive nature of the page. Consequently, neither discusses the role Penelope's act of writing plays in her attempt to find a space of belonging.

This article thus moves the critical focus onto the use of the page itself, showing that the visually expressive page conveys the protagonist's troubled experience of home spaces. Finding that her position within the Caribbean diaspora renders her experience of geographical homes unfulfilling and, in fact, traumatic, Penelope seeks to use textual space as the one space that welcomes and nurtures her. Much as the recurrent postcolonial trope of "writing back" values textual space as a site of self-advocacy and self-definition, Penelope figures textual space as an inhabitable space in which her self — in all its conflict and multiplicity — can reside, at least metaphorically. However, as her fear of blank spaces and the simultaneous realization that her "edges" are "spill[ing] beyond thick black lines" (70) into "negative space" (71) reveal, textual

space is similarly treacherous. Just as her geographical spaces become corrosive, Penelope discovers that textual space is equally debilitating because it, too, is a site affected by her colonial heritage and the power dynamics that have rendered her ability to claim a space for herself problematic.

Penelope's depiction of herself as marks on a page and the page itself as a space she may inhabit is rooted in her early childhood coping strategies. Having lifted her baby sister Thena up to see down a well, seven-year-old Penelope is held responsible when, Thena falls and dies from her injuries. Penelope isolates herself more and more through reading as she recognizes her family's rejection — nobody "want[ing] to say anything to [her]" or "to touch [her]" (120). Penelope learns to retreat into books when she is excluded from other spaces. Her grandmother encourages her isolation with commands like "go in your room, child, and read something" (120) and "'don't you be playing outside the house' . . . 'go inside'; 'read a book'" (121). By the time Penelope is an adult writing the letters that form this novel-in-verse, this lesson has developed into an equation of herself with the marks on the page. Instead of using reading as a means of escape, Penelope eventually seeks to use her own writing as a means to carve out a space for herself. The space of the page may not be physically inhabitable in the way a house, a city sidewalk, or a park might be, but as the holder of words of self-expression, it can become the space inhabited by the psyche. The physical act of making the marks of writing can become an assertion of self that in fact claims space. As Ed Roberson elaborates, writing is "also making a stroke, a gesture, a mark in space — a place. It's not just marking on paper. It's marking a space that you live in, that you force yourself to be 'read in'" (qtd. in Crown 198).

This making of a space is critical for Penelope, whose experience of physical spaces is often characterized in terms of both exclusion and imprisonment. She characterizes herself as an "exile" (13) from her birth country, Trinidad; she misses its "essential warmth" and "tropical womb" (14). This homelessness is compounded by her experience of confinement in Calgary, where her mental illness requires frequent hospitalization. The hospital is a space she finds herself "stuck in," crying "Lemme OOOOUT . . ." (15); however, release from the hospital offers no clear achievement of freedom or power. In fact, she subsequently finds herself barred from her own home — "The doors were locked

against her” (25) — and must rely on another to grant her access. This difficulty in claiming and maintaining a space of her own culminates in Penelope’s need to trespass on the spaces of others, as is demonstrated by her breaking, first, into the hospital to destroy her doctor’s patient records and, second, into the house of the family whose baby she seemingly steals.

Since her position within physical spaces remains contentious, Penelope’s use of the page seems to offer her a more welcoming environment, at least at first. It can, for instance, be a space that embodies her unique experience of self as a multiple, and multiplying, entity. For Penelope, the textual space becomes the space that preserves a record of the existence of her multiple personalities. While the letters Penelope creates may be primarily intended for her sister Jasmine back in Trinidad, the letters also allow for a dialogue among her many personalities. For example, in a letter titled “Ms Lancet Performs,” two of her personalities, Ms. Lancet and mAri, discuss the possible presence of another personality and try to draw her out:

. . . ms lancet wha wid de rockin’ horse?
 mAri, i ain’t know we hear her before.
 yuh still don’ tink it could be She?
 but is not those two others? sound like them to me, the
 last little chile, and the first one don’t sound like She either.
 allyou dere? hey, is how yuh doin’? i’m mAri. hellooo? (84)

This use of the page for conversations among her personalities constructs the page as the one space where all of her personalities can come together. Her body cannot comfortably hold all of them; they are “*trapped* in one body in this conflict of memories / and truths” (114; emphasis added). Aware that they “only have one [body] between [them]” (112), they must often vie for control; this conflict results in her public breakdown toward the end of the narrative as the separate personalities take charge of her body, making it into a spectacle as Penelope rides up and down the escalator holding a screaming baby.

This struggle for control of the body is simultaneously a struggle for control of the mind. Just as the body does not allow for an easy co-existence of Penelope’s multiple personalities, neither does her mind allow for their simultaneous presence. Since her core personality most often remains unconscious of the others’ emergence, and her own frequent

disappearances, the mind proves unable to accommodate the presence of all the personalities at once. Rather, it becomes the domain of one to three at a time, each personality vacillates between being excluded from and admitted to the mind's space. The pages of Penelope's letters, however, hold representations of all the personalities simultaneously, providing an un-erasable, or at least un-erased, record of each personality's existence and voice. Thereby, the pages and the book they form metaphorically become the container that holds She together; the physical book unifies her without requiring the elimination or integration of the alternate personalities.

Through the freedom to position words on the page without a recognizable pattern, Penelope finds a medium that represents her multiplicity when other modes of self-representation fail. For example, the experience of her mirror image is one of alienation since her mirror image cannot reflect her multiple identities. The mirror demands that one face at a time stands for Penelope-Marie Lancet. Although she describes "other / eyes / smiles / rippl[ing] out" (126), she also knows that her true face — one that would bear traces of all of her personalities at once — must remain "always on the verges" (126). Depicting the mirror as an ocean that "swallow[s]" (126) and herself as drowning, Penelope experiences her reflection as something that is impossible to grasp or hold onto. Figuring her attempt to find her true reflection in the mirror as an attempt to find survivors in the sea after a hurricane, Penelope writes,

. . . jassy She stares into the mirror
 as one from the rocky coves
 at blanchiseusse
 hurricaned into welter
 might gaze out at the atlantic
 searching for survivors
 just so she seeks in her reflection
 other vague irregular faces
 as if with grave
 exhausted strokes they
 might rise from unfathomed
 depths to greet her (127)

In this passage, "strokes" resonates with double meaning; the strokes are both the action of a swimmer resurfacing and the action of making marks on the page, either through the brushstroke of a pencil or pen or

the keystroke of typing. In this way, while Penelope is unable to grasp her mirror image because the faces of her other personalities continually sink back into the depths, the page itself allows the personalities to remain afloat because it preserves the traces of their existence. The permanence of the marks on the page provides a clearer representation of Penelope's self-image, and the frequently scattered appearance of the marks offers no illusions of the existence of a singular self.

Even though the page may be a space where all her personalities can coexist, the page is not a peaceful space of unity or a space free from struggle. In fact, it is a key site where Penelope's struggles, particularly with her diasporic experience, are performed. The positioning of words on the page becomes a key means through which Penelope can express the liminality and displacement she feels as a woman negotiating two home spaces, her birth country, Trinidad, and her adopted country, Canada. As many narratives of migrancy attest, the experience of immigration is frequently an experience of displacement. While migrancy may broaden the term "home" to apply to multiple spaces, it simultaneously complicates one's ability to claim a space of belonging. As Dionne Brand outlines it, immigration can lead one to the "Door of No Return," a threshold which bars both entry and exit. Accordingly, people of the diaspora become "dwellers of the door" (Brand n. pag.); they are caught in an interstitial space and unable to settle "home" into a satisfying or stable meaning.

Penelope, as a member of the African-Caribbean diaspora, experiences home space as a site of volatility, uncertainty, and conflict. In *She*, a slippage in the boundaries between the seemingly oppositional terms "here" and "there" is to a large extent responsible for Penelope Marie Lancet's inability to firmly situate herself within a home space. To be in between two places is also to be outside two places and, hence, to be excluded from both communities, to some extent. As deictic terms, "here" and "there" are meant to point to concrete locations at a distance from one another. Normative assumptions would demand that "there" cannot be found within "here," and "here" cannot be found within "there"; they are separate locations. However, as portrayed in *She*, "here" and "there" bleed together for those negotiating multiple homes — in terms of both memory function and the cultural heritages brought to new locations. Mary Gallagher's assessment of the use of "l'ici-là" as a French-Caribbean colloquialism is instructive in highlighting the diffi-

culties in distinguishing between “here” and “there” in diasporic experiences. Discussing Glissant’s use of “l’ici-là” in *Poétique de la Relation* and its possible translation as “Here-There” (xiv), Gallagher notes that “this slightly paradoxical, hyphenated deictic . . . seems to signal an orientational instability” (xiv). As she notes, this instability is made “all the more striking” because “ici-là” is used in creolized French “as a reinforced synonym for the simple deictic *ici* or ‘here’” (xiv). In other words, when “here” is signified by “ici-là,” “here” is shown to encompass *both* “here” and “there.” Gallagher writes, “The hesitation and distancing at work in this extremely common Caribbean modulation of the usually immediate and unquestioned relation to the enunciative ‘here and now’ testifies to the complex, unsettled, and dislocated relation to place that characterizes much Caribbean writing” (xiv).

In *She*, blank space is put to use as a material marker of this volatile liminal space. Blank space becomes the borderland that signifies movement and transition between Penelope’s geographical home spaces, Trinidad and Canada. Representing an unfixed passage between the multiple sections of text on the page, the blank space in this text demands that the reader observe the *interaction* of the various discourses that show the “here” of Calgary and “there” of Trinidad. These discourses vibrate off one another, sometimes gently and sometimes in harsh collision.

Early in the text, readers witness Penelope’s infusion of significance into blank space in her use of side-by-side columns of text. These columns seem, at first, to involve an attempt to separate her experiences of Trinidad and Canada — one column depicting her present in Calgary and the other representing her past in Trinidad. (As I will address shortly, this differentiation proves to be less simple on further examination.) Despite the visual separation, the performance is an entwining of the two experiences:

in net of bird cries	
	hatched wind
under my lids	i curve i bend
the blue rinsed Bow	i shimmy
the circling gulls	in branching richness of cedars
small boys hoot	among mango leaves and sibilance
the blue crowned motmot	i roll to the bamboo bamboo
even so	i am that woman clenched around deep darkness

my soles cling to crabgrass my toes treading
 dark water i heel into worm casts
 the fruitful invisible life's faint signals
 squashed (13)

The motion signified by the blank space between the columns results from the reader encountering the challenge of multiple reading paths. Does one read each column separately? If so, should the right-hand column be read first because of the path created by the proximity of “cries” and “hatched”? Does the reader proceed to the left-hand column only when the “i am that woman . . .” line bridges the gap between columns and pushes the reader’s attention back towards the left-hand side of the page? Or does the reader read left to right from the beginning, crossing the gap between the columns? The syntax often supports either a path that reads down the columns one by one or a path that reads across the columns. Syntactically, “under my lids / i curve i bend” works just as well as “under my lids / the blue rinsed Bow.” As well, “small boys” can “hoot / among mango leaves and sibilance” just as well as “among mango leaves and sibilance,” “i” can “roll to the tamboo bamboo.”

The instability of the reading path functions, in part, to highlight the constant pull that occurs between the two columns. Even if one chooses the relatively conservative path, reading each column separately, starting with the left column and progressing to the right one, the pull between the columns is still manifested. The columns appear in close enough proximity to one another that while reading one column, the reader is ever aware of the other column’s presence; whichever column is not being read continues to call for the reader’s attention.

The significance of the tension and pull that occurs in the space between the columns is realized when it is recognized that, at least at first, these columns delineate experiences of two separate geographical spaces. The column on the left begins by offering images that can be associated with Calgary — Bow River, the gulls — while the column on the right offers images more clearly centred in Trinidad — the cedars, the mango leaves, the tamboo bamboo. The pull between the columns enacted by their placement, side by side, performs an uncertainty regarding Penelope’s ability to separate her experience of Trinidad from her experience of Canada. Although Trinidad is a part of her past, Penelope cannot place her past and present in a linear and chronological relation to one another by distinguishing which experience occurred

first. Instead, in the positioning of the columns beside one another, Penelope is shown to occupy, at least psychically, both spaces at once. The unresolvable simultaneity of her presence in Calgary and her presence in Trinidad is thus portrayed.

Her experiences of Trinidad and Calgary are shown to be even further enmeshed by the fact that although the columns are at first set up to distinguish between the two places, in the end their differentiation is rendered questionable. The inclusion of “blue crowned motmot” — a bird native to Trinidad but not native to Canada — in the column that had seemed to represent Calgary further demonstrates the entwining of the two spaces in Penelope’s psyche. Her memories of Trinidad, in fact, cross the divide and blur into her experience of Calgary.

Even if the columns fluctuate between the geographical spaces they represent, the blank space between the columns continues to manifest a space of liminality. The gap between the columns is a space of transition and metamorphosis since it is within this space that Penelope moves from occupying one space to occupying the other. This gap is, therefore, not simply a divisive space; rather, it is a space that brings Trinidad and Calgary into a pulsing and shifting relationship. Blank space between columns of poetry has been described by Kathleen Fraser as representing “energy flung across synapses” (196). In Harris’s text, too, this space between the columns is a site of energy and movement but also of conflict. As Penelope reveals, her expression of her experience of multiple homes is an expression of “painful whirling falls momentary / absence blankness” (13). In this way, the gap between the columns also visually comes to signify a painful well down which she falls, much as Lewis Carroll’s Alice falls down the rabbit hole into a surreal and often treacherous world.

Penelope’s fall comes to an abrupt end with a line that bridges the distance between the columns. Significantly, this line expresses Penelope’s liminality. For her, the liminal space between Trinidad and Canada is a space of deep darkness, and she is “that woman clenched around” it, much as the line itself embraces the two columns that represent her experiences of Canada and Trinidad. This ground upon which Penelope lands, formed out of this line and its followers, is a ground that confirms her troubled occupation of a liminal space. Although the columns may suggest an uncomfortable pull between two places, the end of the columns confirms that without allowing for that pull, Penelope

cannot survive her present life in Canada. When the columns end, “the fruitful” becomes “invisible” and “life’s faint signals” are “squashed.” Without her mental experience of Trinidad, Penelope’s present is rather unlivable. The columns of text allow Penelope the freedom to move and to contemplate Trinidad through an imaginative return. While the columns allow Penelope motion — “i curve i bend / i shimmy / . . . / i roll to the tamboo bamboo” — the ground upon which she lands, where her images of Trinidad conclude, is a space of stasis. She can “clench[] around deep darkness” and her feet can “cling,” “tread[] / dark water,” or “heel into” the ground, but all of these actions freeze her in one space; she barely moves. Consequently, what this passage reveals is that the space between two homes may be somewhat uncomfortable, a space where one is pulled in two opposing directions at once. But for Penelope, the alternative of situating herself solely in her adopted country would prove restrictive, if not destructive.

At once a marker of conflict and a space of necessary and desired transition between Trinidad and Canada, the blank space in this text reveals itself as a complex and multifaceted element. While the conflict that Penelope feels in being caught between two home spaces is partly expressed verbally, it is through the encounter with the visual qualities of the page that readers can most clearly witness the conflict involved in her struggle. The blank space of this text performs the continually unsettled nature of Penelope’s position between Trinidadian and Canadian cultural experiences. Harris’s visually experimental page performs unresolvable flux between spaces, what Stuart Hall calls “the shock of the ‘doubleness’” of diasporic experience (396).

The blank space between columns may represent Penelope’s passage between cultures, but it also comes to signal the loss she feels for her Trinidadian culture. Throughout Harris’s text, the visual presence of Penelope’s words range from fully justified, single-spaced, solid blocks of text to words sprinkled across the page with little apparent pattern to the margins or line lengths. This movement between solid blocks of text and more sparsely populated pages frequently functions as a performance of Penelope’s mental state, particularly with regard to her geographical home spaces. For example, in the following passage, her memories of Trinidad visually fill the page while her description of Calgary allows the surrounding blank space to penetrate her expression:

jahmin quicksand and i old pals

but i remember bruised mangoes in rough-tongued grass pale gecko's
tloc tloc the lamp's leap and flare as river wind searched our hair blessed
our skin all this even then gathered held hand while words like steps
to night's veranda invited and charmed one ancient aunt or another
drunk on the tale its telling wove rooms cupboards forest trails alleys
where yellow red blue possibilities glowed shifted greyed while
mosquitoes sawed their mocking music despite coils cilron and we
clapped slapped punctuation beneath brilliant stars in such deep
nights in such dense country fusion

here no aunts no stars
not a one
as if hubris had put out a million
million eyes with blade and spoon
i smell a lear here but
the gods are just and of our virtues make
the spear that shakes us (70)

The fully justified block of text used to describe her memories of Trinidad enacts the fusion, hence togetherness, that her idealized Trinidad offers. The subsequent description of Calgary as a space of isolation and persecution is performed by the abrupt growth of blank space. Lines are fractured into shards jumping across the page. Not only does the blank space mark Penelope's feelings of loss but it also creates the motion that characterizes the felt chaos of her diasporic experience. The visual presence of her text comes to mimetically embody "the spear that shakes us," it signifies the unsteadiness she experiences in Calgary. Furthermore, the shakiness caused by the lines' positions performs a physical struggle against the growing blankness; the lines batter against the surrounding blank space, assaulting it and the growing memory blanks it represents. In many of her letters, Penelope seeks words to fill this growing blankness; she begs her sister for stories so that she can "chink the worl' / with callaloo fried plantain barefoot rice an' foo- / foo to make a rope wit' succoyant whine papa / bois bamboo tamboo use tenor pan riff & caiso to / twine the whole we mould" (81).

The blank space becomes something Penelope fears as a marker of absence and loss. Since she equates the marks on the page with her self, their disappearance signifies her own threatened annihilation:

in truth it's worse that my edges
 spill beyond thick black lines
 blur into dream
 whirl
 that like a green girl
 or an amoeba
 i slow
 to indifferent directions
 i don't know
 whose child or why but I fear first my face like lace
 then a fading
 to negative space (70-71)

Her description of herself as “spill[ing] beyond thick black lines” refers, in part, to her embodiment in the black poetic lines on the page. The passage itself emerges from a solid block of text and represents this spilling — visually performing the “slow[ing] / to indifferent directions” that is characteristic of the psychological haze she experiences in Calgary. At the same time, the “thick black lines” she refers to are also the lines of a drawing in which she describes herself as “outlined in thick black paints at / the moment” (71); her spilling outside these lines implies an emptying out of self. The lines of the drawing are those that contain or hold together her self-representation; they delineate her boundaries. Her spill outside the lines shows her continual movement toward a dissolution of self. Rie, one of Penelope’s personalities, figures the emergence of personalities in a similar fashion; she sees their appearance as a leaking out: “She skin thin / we slide out She pore / is de inside wha leakin out / it ent ha nutten sneakin in” (66). This emptying of self with nothing coming to fill the void leaves Penelope with the face she fears — one that has become like lace.

However, beyond the threat of an emptying of self, Penelope also fears that the lines themselves are “fading / to negative space.” Impermanence is hinted at by Penelope’s acknowledgement that she is outlined only “at / the moment” (71). Similarly, every time the blank space grows — overwhelming black poetic lines — the eventual and complete disappearance of the text (Penelope’s voice) is suggested. As the conclusion of the narrative demonstrates, Penelope’s own disappearance is realized in the disappearance of text. During the concluding scene, both Jasmine’s and Penelope’s cries for “Penny” are greeted with an absence of text, the silence of a blank page.

Although the page may have promised Penelope a space of self-representation where her personalities could coexist, the page ultimately proves just as inhospitable as her physical surroundings. In the end, the marks of language are not an empowering expression for Penelope since textual space can be interpreted as a site and sign of inherent colonial domination. Textual space may seem like a space more distanced and abstract than the actual physical sites of colonial struggle — the slave auction blocks, the plantations, and later the schools and other such institutions. However, there is nothing abstract about text as a material event. It is, as Jerome McGann argues, “a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (21). In the particular terms of the history of colonialism, language “not only describes, but actually participates in the physical acts of colonization” (Noyes 12). As Marlene Nourbese Philip observes, “so much of our despair has come about through writing, I mean the laws and regulations about us and our life” (qtd. in Mahlis 690). As I suggested at the beginning of this article, Penelope’s depiction of textual spaces as a site of self is rooted in her use of books in order to cope with her sister’s death. Yet, her retreat into textual space does not bring the power she seeks because the material she reads makes her less critical of the colonialist system in which she grows. Her escape into literature — *British* literature — results in an inability to question what she reads. Penelope is thought to “read far too much,” and that, the family concludes, “account[s] for her sometimes very English turns of speech” (9). The literature she reads immerses her in the discourse of the colonizer and disrupts her sense of her own heritage and its value. By burrowing into the colonizer’s textual space, Penelope’s core personality is blinded to the effects of colonialism, even though we, as readers who are aware of the pun, see that it is still the “*spear that shakes*” her (70; emphasis added). While some of Penelope’s personalities mistrust Standard English and the domination of British literary standards, her core personality is commonly characterized as “read[ing] too / much understanding nothing” (39). As Marlene Nourbese Philip discusses, the privileging of England’s literature in colonialist education systems often results in a loss of “power to create, control and even understand [one’s] own i-mages” (13). Thus, the mAri personality can argue “who say mi english ent decent? dem so wha say i born to be a slave?” (103) while Penelope, the core personality, remains uncritical, “believ[ing]

anything she read in buk" (102); she wants to read "'bout slave even if is a white man wha write de book" (128).

The literature that Penelope covets and absorbs either excludes representations of her cultural experience or portrays such experience from a strictly European point of view. Therefore, her reliance on literature can quite literally be seen as an agent in the hollowing out and ultimate disappearance of her core personality. After Penelope slashes her thighs, she becomes both King Duncan bleeding and Lady Macbeth describing his death. While bleeding, she recites, "'Who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in / him . . .' Her school girl voice rising to a shriek, sparking. She waited / for the response. For the North Sea 'Overdramatizing as usual' to clip / across the giggling colonial silence" (27). In a later letter, Penelope becomes Iago: "i am not what i am / says iago / who am i / when i am not i? / says penny-marie lancet" (80). In assuming these literary identities, Penelope demonstrates how closely her experience of self is tied to what she reads. These European literary influences have left her questioning, "who am i / when i am not i?" (80). The consequence of these influences is an absence where her own (hi)stories should appear. As one of her personalities reveals, "is wha all dat euro schoolin' do she. pen-e-lope ent / got no way to tink bout she own bein'" (107).

The challenge Penelope encounters in seeking her own textual space to inhabit is that she can exert little control over that space. Despite all the writing Penelope does to create a space for herself, she does not feel in control of her medium. Instead of feeling like the creator of the marks of language, she is left wondering, "i am fiction / so who writes me?" (21). The hegemony of the imperial control of language renders it impossible for Penelope to write herself on a clean slate. Rather than a space where she can freely construct a representation of herself and her experiences of colonialism and immigration, the blankness of the page is infused with her sense of lost history and loss of self. She is left to merely "drift before blank pages / before the unremembered un-lived" (124); she cannot truly inhabit the space of the page after all.

Early in the narrative, Penelope writes, "particular life needs particular space" (47). This essay supports her pursuit of that non-constrictive space. Although her quest ultimately fails, the visually experimental page design reflects the contradictions and conflict and allows the instability and ambiguity of her experience to be fully realized. Constructing

herself as the marks on the page rather than the creator of those marks — the written instead of the writer — Penelope reveals that the page does not ultimately offer her the welcoming space she seeks. In the end, the page bears traces of colonialism and is understood as an exclusive site to which she gains only tenuous and fleeting admission. In it, too, she achieves little freedom or power.

NOTES

¹ Nathaniel Mackey's assertions concern both African-Caribbean and African-American writing.

² Fraser's description comes from her interpretation of Mary Margaret Sloane's use of two columns in "Infiltration." Sloane's columns do, however, have a slightly different visual presence than Harris's. While Sloane's left column is left-justified, her right column is right-justified. The space between her columns, consequently, has jagged edges; this is unlike Harris's straight-edged gap between her columns.

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