

## Language to Light On: Dionne Brand and the Rebellious Word

Kaya Fraser

Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2005

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc130\\_1art15](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc130_1art15)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fraser, K. (2005). Language to Light On:: Dionne Brand and the Rebellious Word. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 30(1), 291–308.

Article abstract

In *No Language is Neutral* and *Land to Light On*, Dionne Brand suggests that language can be used as a willful act of resistance against a hegemonic, seemingly monolithic "standard English." In the tradition of what Deleuze and Guattari call "minor literature," Brand's literature effects a subtle, yet crucial, internal alteration of the dominant language by means of deterritorialization. The result is a new, at once subversive and creative way of inhabiting language. In *No Language is Neutral*, lived experience and the words to convey it are integrated; the book celebrates empowerment and agency rooted in language. However, Brand's tone shifts from determined to ambivalent in *Land to Light On*. The speaker feels disempowered and harmed by language, recognizing not only its inadequacy and probable failure to effect lasting political change but also its power to gloss over subversive truth-telling, to which even the poet is susceptible.

# Language to Light On: Dionne Brand and the Rebellious Word

KAYA FRASER

It always takes long to come to what you have to say, you have to sweep this stretch of land up around your feet and point to the signs, pleat whole histories with pins in your mouth and guess at the fall of words. (Brand, *Land to Light On* 43)

**I**N AN INTERVIEW with Makeda Silvera, Dionne Brand coyly avoids the question of “process” — how she, as a writer, engages in her craft. At Silvera’s insistent prodding, however, Brand gives one significant clue: “and then I was thinking,” she says, “how do I do this. Thinking from the end of the last book, that’s how I work: I work from the end of my last book because by the end of the last book there’s the beginning of another book” (“Company” 374). Seeking elucidation of Brand’s 1997 collection of poems, *Land to Light On*, one can hardly resist taking this hint and looking at the final lines of her previous book, *In Another Place, Not Here*, where one of her main characters leaps to her death: “Her body is cool, cool in the air. Her body has fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sign of lightning left after lightning, a faultless arc to the deep turquoise deep. She doesn’t need air. She’s in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy” (247). Elsewhere, Brand describes poetry as her “first language,” wherein “The line is physical. It’s fleshy” (“Dionne’s” 19); the end of *In Another Place* could be read, then, as the symbolic death of one sort of poetics and the imagining of another, “just a line” that is “the sign of lightning left after lightning” without the tortuousness, the fleshiness. This is not in any way the case in the poetry of *Land to Light On*, though; if anything, this poetry is more agonized and embodied than any of Brand’s previous work. These concluding lines, however, do contain the seed of a major struggle in her subsequent book: the struggle of Brand’s language against itself. The conflict is rehearsed in

her earlier work, notably in her 1990 collection, *No Language is Neutral*. Discussing this earlier writing, Brand's critics have mostly argued that the kind of language she uses — whether it is deemed hybrid, dialectical, postcolonial, or anything else — allows her to voice the previously unvoiced, to speak multivocally from a divided subject position (that of a black lesbian Caribbean Canadian). In other words, the assumption is that while Brand's language may sometimes function in ambivalent ways, ultimately it serves her. But as it is used in *Land to Light On* and as it is discussed in the book's metapoetic moments, language is much more problematic than this. Beyond being non-neutral, it is weighted with such political and aesthetic freight that it seems to be at the point of collapse, or perhaps at the point of evading her. Language functions as a metaphorical "land" for her weary-voiced persona to light on, but it is a very shaky ground indeed, and as the darkly ambiguous end of the book suggests, it may imprison her as much as it frees her.

Although *In Another Place, Not Here* is the book that immediately precedes *Land to Light On*, *No Language is Neutral* is perhaps more illuminating, with respect to Brand's use of and attitude toward language, to set alongside the 1997 collection. In this serial-style long poem, the heaviness of language — its political weightedness, and its personal associations for Brand — is declared with an almost ironic confidence. The poem is in part an intertextual negotiation of Derek Walcott's poetry, which originally stated that

No language is neutral;  
the green oak of English is a murmurous cathedral  
where some took umbrage, some peace, but every shade, all,  
helped widen its shadow. (LII)

Brand borrows the phrase, using it to anchor her point in the midst of a torrent of images:

No language is neutral. I used to haunt the beach at Guaya, two rivers sentinel the country sand, not backra white but nigger brown sand, one river dead and teeming from waste and alligators, the other rumbling to the ocean in a tumult, the swift undertow blocking the crossing of little girls except on the tied up dress hips of big women, then, the taste of leaving was already on my tongue and cut deep into my skinny pigeon toed way, language here was strict description and teeth edging truth. . . . No language is neutral seared into the spine's unravelling. Here is history too. (22-23)

The thrust of this passage is undeniably autobiographical. Some critics worry about reading Brand's work as confessional; Jason Wiens, for example, warns against Teresa Zackodnik's "tend[ency] to equate the speaking voice almost unproblematically with the authorial voice" (88) in Brand's work, while Susan Gingell, reviewing *Land to Light On*, writes that she "was constantly working not to read the work as autobiographical" (182). Yet, as Brand's reading of the poem and her accompanying commentaries in *Listening For Something* demonstrate, this is a personal testimonial that strives to find a personal language for its experience and contends — despite the difficulty of the task — that this is possible.

The language it finds is obviously not one of "standard" English diction, as the continuation of the poem illustrates:

Silence done curse god and beauty here, people does hear things in  
this heliconia peace a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong  
now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air rudiment this gram-  
mar. Take what I tell you. When these barracks held slaves between  
their stone halters, talking was left for night and hush was idiom and  
hot core. (23)

The text draws attention, metapoetically, to its means of "telling," its particular "idiom," which is not "hush" but unfettered, fluid and volatile. Kamau Brathwaite explains the nature of Caribbean poetics in terms of experienced, localized reality. He notes that in English poetry, despite some modernist attempts to subvert it,

basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameter. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience. We have been trying to break out of the entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system that more closely and intimately approaches our own experience. (265)

Indeed, Brand's language does appear to slip many of the restrictions of "correct" or traditional English writing in order to convey the urgency of this articulation of a personal experience and of a previously "hush"-ed history. She sets aside, or twists, what George Elliott Clarke calls "the imposed canons and grammars of Europe"; he explains that black writers may "feel pressured to prove, practically continuously, their adeptness, their facility" with this institutionalized language, but that "they also feel

a kind of radical joy in subverting these strictures and structures" ("No Language" 275). Despite the horror of its subject matter, *No Language is Neutral* subtly exhibits this "radical joy" as it finds, and even revels in, the language to express its subject. It is a language along the lines of what Marlene Nourbese Philip describes in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989): "the formal standard language was subverted, turned upside down, inside out, and even sometimes erased. Nouns became strangers to verbs and vice-versa; tonal accentuation took the place of several words at a time; rhythms held sway" (17). Rinaldo Walcott would see this as an example of the performativity of "black language"; Brand and Philip, he argues, "remake, or rather *alter*, language to make it perform the acts of their politics" (87) — an alteration that can only be made, arguably, through a renegotiation of traditional, grammatically "correct" English.

It may seem like an obvious categorization, but there are some problems with reading and terming this language simply as "non-standard" English. This is an issue that some of Brand's critics have left unacknowledged. Teresa Zackodnik, for example, argues that the poet constructs a type of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, which incorporates "nation language" of the Caribbean and "standard English," since the latter tongue alone "is unnavigable for Brand" (194-95). Wiens appreciates Zackodnik's overall argument — that Brand's work does not fall between two languages, but rather that it constructs a third, hybrid language, using elements of both — but he has one major caveat: "Zackodnik's approach seems to rest on the assumption that 'standard English' and 'nation language' are givens. ... But are such value-laden criteria necessary to a process of discernment?" (88). Wiens elaborates that "A 'standard' tends to posit a hypostatized, homogeneous, rigid language around which heterogeneous tongues circulate — an illusion that might serve some purpose in language textbooks or for national broadcasters but that in practice cannot ultimately be realized" (90). This is an important point, a reminder that if critics label Brand's poetics as subverting conventional English linguistic codes, and nothing else, this only reifies a false assumption that there *is* in fact a pre-existing "standard English" to begin with, and that poets such as Brand use it as a palimpsest for their own expression. Moreover, this attitude further reinforces the Otherness of black or otherwise non-white literatures, opening up the risk of a patronizing (white) critical attitude that

fetishizes the formal elements of this writing, and subjects to (white) critical gaze what “they” are doing with “our” language.

Nevertheless, though this potential critical pitfall must be borne in mind, it is clear that in texts such as *No Language is Neutral*, the creation of a different poetic approach in the face of a hegemonic, *seemingly* monolithic “standard English,” is a crucial act of resistance. Clarke celebrates this radical gesture when he writes, “Since Standard English was thrust upon African diasporic peoples against their wills, it is marvellous justice that, in every exilic African culture, from New Brunswick to New Orleans, from Jamaica to California, that tongue now meets a different standard” (“No Language” 276). Language is depicted as having at least this much political agency in *No Language Is Neutral*, if not more. Identifying with the ancestors depicted in the poem, Brand places herself within the “us” in the line, “The malicious horizon made us the essential thinkers of technology” (*No Language* 23). This “us” has a common task: that is, to learn “How to fly gravity, how to balance basket and prose reaching for murder” (23). Language is not only construed dynamically, employing an “outward veering” poetics (to borrow Clarke’s term from *Eyeing the North Star* [xv]), but it is also a tool of real change, “reaching for murder,” nothing less. There is, at this point, “something that drives this verse into the future”: the possibility of words inciting action (*No Language* 43).

At this point of intersection between language and political agency in Brand’s writing (which will become much more troubled in *Land to Light On*), a useful theory to apply is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of “minor literature,” and its concomitant theory of “deterritorialized” language. Deleuze and Guattari base the two concepts on the writings, both fictional and personal, of Franz Kafka. Ronald Bogue, in his excellent and accessible guide to the major theories of Deleuze and Guattari, summarizes minor literatures as being

invigorated by lively conflict, unconstrained by great masters and intimately involved with the life of the people. . . . Minor literature for Kafka, finally, is literature as it should function in the world, and this is the sense in which Deleuze and Guattari take the term. What they stress in Kafka’s remarks is that minor literature is thoroughly political, “less a concern of history than of the people”; that it subsumes the personal within the political, making individual conflicts a communal “matter of life and death.” (94)

These are the major characteristics of minor literatures, at least as Kafka envisioned them, but what literatures, specifically, fit these criteria? Would Brand's writing, as that of a "hyphenated" subject (e.g., Caribbean-Canadian), belong to a minor literature *de facto*? Not necessarily. Bogue explains that

a literature is minor ... not because it is the literature of a restricted group (though the political dimension of literature is often most evident in 'small literatures'), nor because it is the literature of a minority (though the effects of linguistic deformation are often striking in the speech and writing of minorities), but because it is the literature of minor usage, of a 'minorization' of the dominant power structures inherent in language. (97)

Thus, it is not primarily the national or transnational affiliation(s) of a body of writing that determines its status as a minor literature; the determining factor is, rather, its use of language.

The language of minor literatures is one "affected by a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari *qtd.* in Bogue 95). To illustrate this concept, the case in point that Deleuze and Guattari use is the language spoken in Kafka's Prague, which combined elements of "standard" German, local Czech dialects and, among Jewish communities, Yiddish. These influences all served to "deterritorialize" German:

Not only was this paper language ungrounded in an established community, but it also was affected in pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary by its constant contact with the Czech language. ... Separated from a naturalizing, integrating ethnic German speech community, it had undergone numerous deformations through its proximity to Czech, and its impoverishment had forced a limited vocabulary to assume multiple functions, each term taking on an intensive and shifting polyvocality. (95-96)

Although some of the terms used here are troublingly evaluative ("deformations"; "impoverishment"), it is necessary to read beyond them and understand that deterritorialization is not degenerative, but politically subversive and creative. Bogue is aware that "we must be cautious in assuming that a minor usage of language is simply incorrect usage"; he contends that "The object of minor writing is to make language vibrate, to induce disequilibrium, to activate from within the language itself the lines of continuous variation immanent within its grammatical, syntac-

tic and semantic patterns" (102). In this way, "each great writer invents his or her own foreign language within a language, his or her own means of making language strange" (102). Hence, the deterritorialization of language is the means by which minor literature comes into being, involving not the invention of a new language altogether, but rather a new "way of *inhabiting* language" (97; emphasis added).

Again, as with the designation "standard English," terminology offers both benefits and hazards. Applying Deleuze and Guattari's theory to Brand's writing by reading her work as an example of minor literature, one runs the risk of reinscribing a loaded binaristic model — "major" versus "minor" — on a poetry that clearly seeks to escape such limiting paradigms. Indeed, the language that Deleuze and Guattari use (perhaps warped in translation, to some extent) is problematic, seeming to contradict or at least to undercut the subversive political agenda of their work. But cannot the word "minor," with its connotations of inferiority and insignificance, be recast, reread in the context of the political agency that this theory grants to "minor" literatures? Perhaps the signifiers "major" and "minor" can function as they do, for example, in musical theory: simply two different, unhierarchical qualities (in music, of a tonality), the difference between them lying in a subtle, but crucial, internal alteration. The metaphor accentuates the way in which minor literatures arise when a writer works *within* an established linguistic system and alters it, changing an element that subsequently transforms the whole. In that alteration, a political act of opposition is effected. This is, in a sense, a variation on bell hooks's concept of "the oppositional gaze." In *Black Looks*, hooks writes, "Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (116). Substitute the word "utterance" for "gaze" and hooks's statement would describe precisely the political subversion enacted in the "minorization" of language. If hooks addresses the oppositional gaze, Deleuze and Guattari address the oppositional speech act.

In *No Language Is Neutral*, the speaker (again, I think it is hard to argue that the voice is not that of Dionne Brand the poet) seems to celebrate this oppositional potential in language:

I have come to know something simple. Each sentence realised or dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a side. What I say in any language is told in faultless knowledge of skin, in drunkenness and weeping, told as a woman without matches and tinder, not in



words and in words and in words learned by heart, told in secret, and listen, does not burn out or waste and is plenty and pitiless and loves.  
(34)

Far from being evacuated of signification and politically defused, here language is alive with meaning and consequence. Lived experience and the words to convey it are integrated, exemplifying what Himani Bannerji describes when she writes, “Life, I am convinced, does not allow for the separation between form and content. It happens to us in and through the language in which it actually happens. The words, their meanings — shared and personal — their nuances are a substantial and *material* part of our reality” (32). What Brand experiences is what she tells, and she tells it “not in words and in words and in words learned by heart,” working effectively inside “any language.” Because experience and utterance have cohesion, this telling is *able*. It is sufficient, with agency enough to keep it from “burn[ing] out or wast[ing],” and it is derived from the speaker’s “knowledge” of what language can do.

In *Land to Light On*, however, this “knowledge” of a deterritorialized, “plenty and pitiless” language seems far less certain, and in fact is deeply attenuated. From the first poem in the collection, the contrast to *No Language Is Neutral*, both in tone and in message, is stark:

Out here I am like someone without a sheet  
without a branch but not even safe as the sea,  
without the relief of the sky or good graces of a door.  
If I am peaceful in this discomfort, is not peace,  
is getting used to harm. (3)

The enigmatic images of “sheet,” “branch” and “door” soon give way to more specifically linguistic/textual images, suggesting that the “discomfort” has to do with language:

If you come out and you see nothing recognisable,  
if the stars stark and brazen like glass,  
already done decide you cannot read them.  
If the trees don’t flower and colour refuse to limn  
when a white man in a red truck on a rural road  
jumps out at you, screaming his exact hatred  
of the world, his faith extravagant and earnest  
and he threatens, something about your cunt,  
you do not recover. (4)

The unreadability of the speaker's environment is foregrounded, as is her powerlessness, since the stars themselves "already done decide [she] cannot read them." Her disempowerment is then transformed into outright victimization when the man in the red truck assaults the speaker verbally, an attack in which the primary weapon is a word, "cunt." Not only, then, is the world an unreadable text to her, but it is, moreover, a text whose language is one of "exact hatred," violence, and "harm" (a word that appears frequently in the collection).

"You do not recover" from this kind of verbal alienation, the speaker ominously declares. She continues in the next section:

I lift my head in the cold and I get confuse.  
It quiet here when is night, and is only me  
and the quiet. I try to say a word but it fall. Fall  
like the stony air.

...

I did not  
know which way to turn except to try again, to find  
some word that could be heard by the something  
waiting. My mouth could not find a language.  
I find myself instead, useless as that. I sorry.  
I stop by the mailbox and I give up. (5)

The determined faith in the fullness and power of language, suggested in *No Language is Neutral*, is nowhere in evidence here; while the speaker in that book could cast her experience in "any language," now the mouth cannot find any language at all. All the speaker says she finds is "herself, useless as that," bereft in a northern landscape without a sufficient language of her own — only that of the master, that of the man in the red truck:

All I have are these hoarse words that still owe  
this life and all I'll be is tied to this century and waiting  
without a knife or courage and still these same words  
strapped to my back. (9)

It seems, from the tone of these passages, that the speaker/Brand has come to Audre Lorde's conclusion that one cannot use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. "Look, let me be specific," she says in the culmination of the collection's bleak first section,

I have been losing roads  
and tracks and air and rivers and little thoughts

and smells and incidents and a sense of myself  
and fights I used to be passionate about  
and don't remember.

...

The body bleeds only water and fear when you survive  
the death of your politics. (15)

As Susan Gingell puts it, this is an “exploration of what it means to live beyond the disintegration of everything on which someone has built a life” (183); the disintegration includes not only “the death of your politics” but also, in this case, the failure of language to enact and effect that politics. After “the whole enterprise come[s] to zero,” the speaker acknowledges, “No tender archaeologist will mend our furious writings” (*Land* 17, 16). Instead, the speaker has learned a lesson, much different from the resounding conclusion of linguistic agency in *No Language*: here, the lesson is that “no amount of will can change it”; that is, no wilful act, not even an oppositional speech act, can undo the mendacious rhetoric of nation and history (*Land* 17).

The unchangeable “lie” is manifest in the kind of obfuscatory language that Brand also addresses in her essay from *Bread out of Stone*, “Notes for Writing thru Race”:

Access, representation, inclusion, exclusion, equity. All are other ways of saying race in this country without saying that we live in a deeply racialised and racist culture which represses the life possibilities of people of colour. We have to be careful of way those words have become bureaucratic glosses for human suffering. We have to notice how those words deceptively explain away the vulgar, privileging, power relations that whites in the country don't want to admit to or give up. It is possibly a very Canadian strategy to create these glosses ... to delay and put a distance between the problem and the answer. (176-77)

Brand writes this before 1994; by 1997, when *Land to Light On* is published, it seems that this danger she sees in language has expanded. Not only does the problem of “delay” and “distance” reside in bureaucratic or governmental party lines; it is also a characteristic of the language in general, and cannot be safely relegated to a certain, limited discourse. The narrator says, in the first part of *Land to Light On*,

I read the terrifying poetry of newspapers. I  
notice vowels have suddenly stopped their

routine, their alarming rooms are shut,  
 their burning light collapsed

*the waves of takeovers, mergers and restructuring*  
 ... *swept the world's ... blue chips rally in New York*  
 ... *Bundesbank looms ... Imperial Oil increases dividends*  
 ... *tough cutbacks build confidence.* (13; original emphasis and ellipses)

This kind of language that “Your mouth never opens to say” is not just the language of politicians, but also that of mass communications (13). Brand parodies this empty mediaspeak in the second part, “All That Has Happened Since”: “what exactly is the difference between these groups, perplexed / the host, well nothing ideological, says the expert” (33). This is a dangerous kind of everyday “poetry,” which is all the more insidious because it is all around us. But the ultimate point is that the poet herself is not immune to this distancing rhetoric, a fact she confesses in darkly ironic terms:

I'm taking in conferences on pomo-multiplicity,  
 the everyday world, the signifying monkey, the post-colonial  
 moment, the Michigan militia, cyberspace, come to think of it  
 give each fleeing Hutu/Tutsi a home page, subalterns of their  
 own, I'm going to Bukavu with Windows (32)

All these are manifestations of the ridiculousness and falsity of language, which seems in this text to outweigh its potential for subversive truth-telling. Moreover, it does so because we let it. The language comes to us as “stories we all love like sleep, poured in our mouths like / milk”; no matter “How far we've travelled now, still ... / we return to the misology in heat and loneliness” (35). There is certainly a sense of despair at the way in which language diverts and conceals real suffering; at the same time, the speaker evokes the complicity that we all share in accepting and owning this language.

Brand recognizes her complicity, since her very craft forces her to use the same raw materials, as it were, and makes her desire that which she knows to be oppressive. “Fanon had it,” she says, “native envy ... / envy to the participle and / adverb, the way they own being” (38). The reference here is to Frantz Fanon's famous passage in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession — all manners of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with

his wife if possible” (32). The poet’s “dream of possession” is to claim language and its power to “own being”; yet this is a conflicted desire, since the poet knows that this is only to invert the same power axis, not to destroy it. Words are her medium and she realizes that they are all she has “strapped to [her] back” (*Land* 9). It is this desire to own the alien language that Brand describes when she writes, “I was always for succumbing to something bigger, / I wanted something unindividual like distance or chaff” (39). In desiring this appropriated expression, she confesses that she had desired a lie:

I had hoped that some billowy humid  
 night swooning to its knees, the smell of coconut smoke  
 or some cold night cracking silence into its middle  
 with the smell of wood smoke ... it would occur to me,  
 that nothing was wrong. (39; original ellipsis)

Although in the first section the speaker “still need[s] the revolution,” at this point the deepest scars of colonization are laid bare: the secretly harboured desire for acquiescence, for assimilation into a foreign language-identity and for the erasure of difference (7). The sense that “nothing was wrong” could come either from “coconut smoke” or “wood smoke” — to the desire for false consciousness, it makes no difference.

These self-indicting lines close the second section of the book and prepare for the crucial third part, whose title the collection also bears. Here, Brand draws together the language that she struggles with, particularly its implication in the discourse of nordicity and other Canadianisms, and the idea of belonging to “land,” which she reveals as another false verbal construct. Gingell interprets the imagery used here — “ice invad[ing] / your nostrils in chunks, land fill[ing] your throat,” for example (43) — as constructing “the image of the land as indifferent torturer that Brand enters into the national archive alongside the images of LePan, Birney, Frank Scott, MacEwen and Atwood. Brand’s Canada indeed seems to revive the Frygian eco-monster” (183). This, I would argue, is a misreading; rather than falling into chorus with this group of canonized, white poetic voices, Brand is in fact critiquing the CanLit clichés of vast, menacing landscapes and garrison mentalities, and a literature that is

so busy  
 with collecting the north, scrambling to the Arctic so wilfully, so

busy getting a handle to steady you to this place you get blown  
into bays and lakes and fissures you have yet to see. (43)

The language of Canadian literature and culture has tried very hard to define identity in terms of landscape, but this is a construction that relies on uncertain significations and convenient ahistoricism. If you want, in Gingell's words, to "enter into the national archive,"

you have to  
sweep this stretch of land up around your feet and point to the  
signs, pleat whole histories with pins in your mouth and guess  
at the fall of words. (*Land* 43)

Having identified this language game, Brand announces that she wants no part of it. "I am giving up on land to light on," she states and repeats in this section, "it's only true, it is only / something that someone tells you, someone you should not trust / anyway" (45). She elaborates:

I'm giving up on land to light on, slowly, it isn't land,  
it is the same as fog and mist and figures and lines

...

it's paper,  
paper, maps. Maps that get wet and rinse out, in my hand  
anyway. I'm giving up what was always shifting, mutable. (47)

The same "figures and lines" that comprise "land" are the ones that the poet writes as well, and they, too, are bled of meaning and agency:

the paper shifting papery in the sweat of your  
fingers you come to be convinced that these lines will  
not matter, your land is a forced march on the bottom  
of the Sargasso, your way tangled in life. (44)

These lines are too "tangled in life" to create a convincing myth of land and belonging; this is the project that Brand abandons when she gets to "the marrow of it" at the end of the "Land to Light On" section:

not  
moving, not standing, it's too much to hold up, what I  
really want to say is, I don't want no fucking country, here  
or there and all the way back, I don't like it, none of it,  
easy as that. I'm giving up on land to light on, and why not,

I can't perfect my own shadow, my violent sorrow, my  
individual wrists. (48)

Although there may be a hint of hope in the fact that the poet is “trying to put [her] tongue on dawns / ... busy licking dusk away,” the section closes with such a flat statement of futility that it is difficult to read any redemption here (48). Trying to make a new space through language — which is nothing more than a writer’s “own shadow,” unperfectable — simply cannot happen. To believe that it can is to swallow another myth, created in and by language, which effectively forgets “the history of harm,” the truth of suffering (45).

So where does Brand go from here? Is the answer to be found in “Dialectics,” as the title of the next section suggests? The text indicates that it is not. Portraying a series of powerful vignettes based on her family history and her early experiences in Trinidad, Brand engages in a dialogue with her past, but the conclusion that she reaches is once again marked with a sense of failure:

god I watched you all, watched and watched and in the end  
could not say a word to you that was not awkward and insulting,  
there was really no way to describe you and what I wanted  
to say came out stiff and old as if I could not trust you  
to understand my new language. (63)

The autobiographical interrogation that Brand tries as a solution to the deadening of language is, ironically, at odds with her “new language,” which she forged in a previous attempt to overcome the same problem. A dialectic approach to history may sound like an answer, but it cannot happen in two incompatible languages: “how I was so far away / from you by then and these conversations scared me,” she says (64).

Switching to the present tense, then, Brand finally gives up on dialectics:

I am not  
good at anything except standing still like a wall, my only  
instinct is to do nothing, avoid notice, and even when I believe so  
soundly in dialectics I look over my shoulder for wicked spirits (64)

The poet cannot wholly believe, knowing “how the circumference / of this world grips us to this place, how its science works, how / it will take a change of oceans shaking the other way” (64). The incident with a racist

police officer in the next section, “Islands Vanish,” serves as a case in point. “In a motel room later,” she says,

we laugh, lie that we are not harmed,

...

How can we say that when we sign our names in letters  
home no one can read them (77)

Trapped in “this white hell,” an irrevocable linguistic displacement has taken place, rendering impossible a true dialectic with history, whether personal or communal (74).

The collection saves itself from being a total renunciation of poetry in the penultimate section, “Through my Imperfect Life and Mouth and Way.” The poet recognizes that she lives

some  
inner life that thinks it’s living outside but  
isn’t and only wakes up when something knocks  
too hard. (81)

This sleeping consciousness, however, is aware of a world outside itself, and tries, if somewhat ineffectually, to acknowledge it through poetic expression:

and when something is gone as if gazing  
up the road I miss the bus and wave a poem at  
its shadow. But bus and shadow exist all the same  
and I’ll send you more poems even if they arrive  
late. (81)

Brand’s determination to write, in spite of the possible futility of the gesture, comes as something of a relief at the end of this text that is so suspicious of language. Still, it is important to note that she refrains from explicitly positioning herself on the question of the utility of poetry, or the capability of language:

if I ever thought  
that I could never recover the thought struggling  
to live through my imperfect mouth and life and way,  
if I thought that I could do nothing about the world  
then ... well, and we’ve hung on to old hurts as if  
that was all there was and as if no amount of sadness  
would be enough for our old, insistent,



not becoming selves; and as if that sadness should not end,  
so for this I'll send you more poems. (81; original ellipsis)

The sentiment is resolutely ambivalent, affirming her commitment to an act and to a language that, even if it attempts to subvert from within as a deterritorialized, oppositional tongue, may not in fact change anything, for better or for worse.

*Land to Light On* ends on a fittingly ambiguous note, refusing to posit any facile solutions to the problems of language explored throughout the text. Speaking in a third-person apostrophe that seems to address her own poetic persona, Brand finally calls for “surrender then if it means powdered milk, if it means / rice, semolina, surrender for airflights out of barren // ice, barren water, barren villages” (102). But what is to be surrendered? The answer is, once again, linguistic and poetic. She demands that her persona “surrender the parentheses”:

what are those  
but tongues slipping in and out of a mouth, pages  
  
sounding like wings beating in air, what but the sound  
of someone washing their hands quickly. (102)

And so she does: “She surrenders her thoughts and circumnavigations” (102). These statements are most telling when read through a previous line that points to “the not just simple business of return and turning,” which is “for scholars and indecisive frigates, circling and circling” (46). Brand, a scholar herself with some deep reservations about the state and utility of academia, seems to want to surrender her “circumnavigations,” but in the end cannot be certain that she has:

She may not leave here anything but a prisoner  
circling a cell,  
  
cutting the square smaller and smaller and walking into herself  
finally. (103)

The “may” is crucial; it is not finally determined whether the poet is trapped in a kind of solipsism at the end of this exploration of the political capacities and limitations of language. But the final couplet sounds a discord: “Even if she goes outside the cracks in her throat will break / as slate, her legs still cutting the cell in circles” (103). The image is unarguably violent, but who or what is the recipient of the violence? Is it the cell

— implying a degree of resistance on the part of the speaker whose legs are “cutting” it? Or is it the speaker, whose throat “will break” in the process? Perhaps it is both. If so, *Land to Light On* can be read as an unyielding interrogation of what all this talk is good for. Having elsewhere shown how no language is neutral, here Brand adds that no resistance in language is possible without sacrifice.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Dr. Christopher Gittings for his feedback on this paper, and Sean Henry for his editorial assistance.

## WORKS CITED

- Bannerji, Himani. “The Sound Barrier: Translating Ourselves in Language and Experience.” *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English*. Ed. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel. Toronto: Coach House, 1990. 26-40.
- Bogue, Ronald. *Deleuze on Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Brand, Dionne. “Dionne’s Brand of Writing.” Interview with Nuzhat Abbas. *HERizons: Women’s News & Feminist Views* 13.3 (1999): 18-22.
- . *In Another Place, Not Here*. Toronto: Vintage, 1997.
- . “In the Company of My Work: an Interview with Dionne Brand.” Interview with Makeda Silvera. *The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature*. Ed. Makeda Silvera. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1995. 356-80.
- . *Land to Light On*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.
- . *No Language Is Neutral*. Toronto: Coach House, 1990.
- , dir. *Listening for Something: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation*. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1996.
- . “Notes for Writing thru Race.” *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics*. Toronto: Coach House, 1994. 173-80.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. “History of the Voice: 1979 / 1981.” *Roots*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. 259-304.
- Clarke, George Elliott. Introduction. *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature*. Ed. Clarke. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997. xi-xxviii.
- . “No Language is Neutral: Seizing English for Ourselves.” *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. By Clarke. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002. 275-76.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1963.
- Gingell, Susan. “Still Need the Revolution.” Rev. of *Land to Light On*, by Dionne Brand. *Canadian Literature* 161-62 (1999): 182-84.
- hooks, bell. “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992. 115-31.

- Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1989.
- Walcott, Derek. *Midsummer*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. "No Language is Neutral': The Politics of Performativity in M. Nourbese Philip's and Dionne Brand's Poetry." *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. Toronto: Insomniac, 2003. 73-88.
- Wiens, Jason. "Language Seemed to Split in Two': National Ambivalence(s) and Dionne Brand's 'No Language is Neutral.'" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 70 (2000): 81-102.
- Zackodnik, Teresa. "I am Blackening in My Way': Identity and Place in Dionne Brand's *No Language Is Neutral*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 57 (1995): 194-211.