



Imagining Bodies in the Work of Dionne Brand

by Simona Bertacco

Speaking to young women in Cambridge in 1928, Virginia Woolf raised, besides the well-known arguments for a room of one's own and a 500 pound-a-year pension, the issue of the forms of writing that were available to women at that time. She was well aware that "[a] thousand pens are ready to suggest what you should do and what effect you will have" (113), and chose not to add to those voices. Instead she decided to give an example, using Mary Carmichael's *Life's Adventure*, of what innovative writing may sound like:

"Chloe liked Olivia", I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. [...] For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been (82-84).

Despite the obvious differences, Virginia Woolf's reflection on women and fiction provides a perfect introduction to the work of the Caribbean-Canadian writer Dionne Brand as the following lines aptly show:

Then it is this simple. I felt the unordinary romance of women who love women for the first time. It burst in my mouth. Someone said, this is your first lover, you will never want to leave her. (Brand 1990: 45)

These lines, taken from a collection of poems entitled *No Language Is Neutral*, published in 1990, mark an important moment in the writing career of Dionne Brand. *No Language Is Neutral* is the work that officially sealed Brand's international literary recognition. Born in Trinidad in 1953, Dionne Brand emigrated to Canada in 1970.



Together with Austin Clarke and Marlene NourbeSe Philip, she represents one of the most complex and uncompromising voices that have emerged from the Caribbean literary community in Canada. Approaching her work, one has no choice but take in also Brand's political engagement: over the years, Dionne Brand has been active within the Black and feminist communities, both in Canada and the Caribbean, working for the Black Education Project in Toronto, as a counselor for the black-West Indian community at the Immigrant Women's Centre in Toronto, but she also worked as an Information Officer for the Agency for Rural Transformation in Grenada, which represented a crucial experience both in terms of political commitment and disillusionment, and in terms of how it affected her writing.

It goes without saying that Brand's literary output has – at least to a certain extent – to be read against the backdrop of her political commitment. Poetry and politics are seen by Brand as a single whole in her effort to struggle against any form of belittlement and stereotyping of the Black experience in the society she lives in. Although her writing has always been politically radical, poetically, Dionne Brand has had a very traditional start. So far, she has published eight books of poetry, using an ambivalent poetic form such as the Poundian cantos in *Primitive Offensive* (1982), before opening up the space of the poem to conversational rhythm, dialect, and personal accounts in *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*, published in 1983, or experimenting with a narrative and a realistic vocabulary in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (1984) which was written during the author's ten-month sojourn in Free Grenada. All these books of poetry have one thing in common, as the poet herself remarks in an interview:

I'm not talking simplistically about asserting myself as a female. I'm talking about distancing myself as a human being from concepts or constructs of womanhood that are laid down largely through the rule of men. [...] When I look back at some of the work I've written I can see myself wanting to get away from that radically, so radically as to not ever allow those constructs to determine even how I wrote a love poem. (Silvera 1994: 358, 359)

It may therefore be interesting to follow, in the arc drawn by Brand's writing, how sex and sexuality have moved in gradually to become one of the crucial themes explored by this writer, especially in her works of fiction. The most obvious point of departure is represented by the love poems contained in *No Language Is Neutral* that later led, almost in a generative way, to a more complex engagement with the issue of women's sexuality in the following novels.

No Language Is Neutral is divided into four sections leading the poet along an exploration of her linguistic heritage and of the history that she, as a Caribbean woman and a poet, embodies. "Hard against the soul" is the title of the section that opens and closes the book, a series of short numbered poems punctuated by the refrain: "Someone said, this is your first lover, you will never/want to leave her."



This makes up the most lyrical section of the book: the recollection of the poet's beloved woman, of the pleasure of this 'finding', sets completely apart the sharp barbs of the poems in which the 'social' has a more immediate entry. In the economy of the whole book, the choice of lesbian love as the theme opening and closing this book – a book recounting the struggle of Black women, its failures, its pains – provides a soothing atmosphere of rootedness. What I intend to do in this essay is discuss how Dionne Brand has moved on from here, how she has turned the issue of sexuality in her following works as part of her politics of writing – and a crucial one, I would say – and not as a detour from it. In *No Language Is Neutral*, in fact, the poetic voice seems torn between the need to give expression to her most intimate story and the mission she has given herself to witness history through her own poetry, as we can read in the following lines:

History will only hear you if you give birth to a
woman who smoothes starched linen in the wardrobe
drawer, trembles when she walks and who gives birth
to another woman who cries near a river
and vanishes and who gives birth to a woman who is a
poet, and, even then. (Brand 1990: 30)

The Caribbean landscape that is portrayed in Brand's writing is heavily gendered, almost crowded with women: there are grandmothers, aunts, daughters, activists and lovers. Men are hardly presences, redundant silhouettes that seem to have no place – or to be out of place – in the imagined geography of the Caribbean that is being explored:

in another place not here, a woman might touch
something between beauty and nowhere (*Ibid.*: 31)

Through these lines the Caribbean landscape, which is repeatedly associated with the coupling of beauty and nowhere, is also reconstructed as a space of possibility, the space of the "unordinary romance of women who love women" (*Ibid.*: 45), where the personal gives way and merges into a collective experience.

The novel *In Another Place, Not Here* grows out of this poetry as it, literally, grows out of these lines. *In Another Place, Not Here* brings forward Brand's understanding of the political import of her lesbian writing in that the project of re-writing history that she puts into practice cannot but imply, by default, also a revision of the history of sexuality that – as Michel Foucault has shown – is engrained in all the aspects of a culture (see Foucault 1972, 1980). What is worth noticing here is the political engagement that the novel offers: by creating a fictional world in which sexuality is posited as a mode of personal expression, by exploring the experiences of characters, inhabiting their virtual bodies, Dionne Brand finds a way out of the intimate poetry she both perceived as a necessity and a danger in her earlier works.



The novel form offers the writer a new area of inquiry: after language, it is the history of the body and its attempts at rebellion that are explored in this book.

The novel was published in 1996 and struck the audience for the unusual blending of a luscious poetic vocabulary and a fiery revolutionary rhetoric. *In Another Place, Not Here* is set in the sugar plantations in Grenada; it tells of the meeting of two women, Elizete and Verlia, in the years immediately preceding the American invasion of the island in 1983. As Franca Bernabei has observed, Elizete is organic to the land where she lives: her body is native, earthly and sound, marked by the scars inflicted upon it by patriarchy and by the new forms of colonial exploitation (Bernabei 2007: 98):

She doesn't think of the scars on her legs, she doesn't hide them, she doesn't think of Verlia touching them, pressing the soft hollows of her feet, she doesn't hide them as she had from Verlia. [...] All over from one thing and another, one time or another, is how Isaiah whip them for running, is how he wanted to keep me from bad habit. Whip. "Don't move." Whip. "Don't move." Whip. "Run you want to run! Don't move." Is how the cane cut them from working. Same rhythm." (Brand 1997: 54)

Verlia is a political activist, she has come to Grenada from Toronto where she had emigrated thirteen years earlier, and goes among the workers to speak about the revolution. She does not know the swing to cut the cane right and not break her back. But she is quick, she leaps "in the air without moving." (*Ibid.*: 7) Verlia brings a state of grace into Elizete's life:

When Verl come along I see my chance out of what ordinary, out of the plenty day when all it have for a woman to do is lie down and let a man beat against she body, and work cane and chop up she foot and make children and choke on the dryness in she chest and have only one road in and the same road out and know that she tied to the ground and can never lift up. (*Ibid.*: 4)

With a body that seems to defy gravity, unfit for work in the field, a back not used to bending, Verlia's body speaks to Elizete of change, of freedom, out of the ordinary fate for women in that place at that time. Verlia knows the ability not to feel bound to the ground and the past that is inscribed in the very fields of the Caribbean islands, she can leap into the present, leaving behind the burden of the past, a present that speaks of possibilities. Through the character of Verlia, the reader can follow the development of the theory of decolonization that will lead to the revolution in Grenada. Verlia arrives in Grenada with a body not used to sleeping anymore, thin and nervous, and finds comfort in Elizete. She feels safe after a long time lying "with a woman who knew how to look for rain, what to listen for in birds in the morning. [...] She needed a woman so earthbound that she would rename every plant she came upon." (*Ibid.*: 202) Verlia has come to a point where her life dedicated to a political project has struck a dead end.



She cannot be a true revolutionary, because she has been living everything for too long in her mind, weighing the pros and cons of each and every choice, doubting everything and everyone. Elizete, instead, believes in the possibility that the world "could be made over as simply as that" (*Ibid.*: 202) by doing it. And Verlia finds her own redemption by falling in love with Elizete and with her body, that same body that she has tried to erase from her own, with the "arc of a woman's arm" (*Ibid.*: 203) that has become one with the cutlass slicing the cane stalks.

On the other hand, by willfully opening her body to Verlia, Elizete – standing for the black body forced open by centuries of slavery and sexual exploitation – finds a way out of the history of the body that she has inherited. She suddenly realizes that she loves and respects Elizete for what she stands for: if she can touch her, if she can touch this woman who won't talk to her, it means that she can touch the people, her own people, and that the change she has been reading about in her theory books can be planted here too. But just when the people are ready to show their support to the revolution, the foreign attack strikes the revolutionaries, and Verlia and her comrades kill themselves falling down from a cliff into the Caribbean Sea.

As Elizete's material, earthbound body has shown, the body as flesh, as embodied experience, has the ability to point to a way out of its own imprisonment: by choosing Verlia as her lover and her future, Elizete is making her objectified body into its own subject. Similarly, in Brand's next novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), the body expresses its refusal to remaining in chains, and points to a creative potential for transmutation that finds in sexuality one of its crucial tools of expression. In other words, on the level of its own artistic and cultural representation, the female body seems to enjoy a freedom of movement across a variety of *signifieds* and conceptualizations that history has denied and stifled. This too is re-writing history. The fixity of the meaning of the black female body is, therefore, superseded in a new vision of its possibilities of signification.

I am reading the representation of the racialized and sexed body in Brand's novels in the light of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body. In particular, the notion of the imagined body developed by Merleau-Ponty is useful to approach how the body, the female body in particular, is being used and represented in contemporary fiction from postcolonial countries. A proper understanding of the body for Merleau-Ponty requires a discussion of the body as "lived", that is to say as it is experienced as both subject and object of knowledge, and this, in turn, implies acknowledging that the body operates on two levels at the same time: that of the body at this moment (the level of volition), and that of the customary body (the level of the inherited body schema, that is the global perception of one's body and of its motility). At the other pole of the body schema that, according to Fanon, imprisons the black body in the cage of non-being and objectification (see Fanon 1952, 1967), Merleau-Ponty posits the "virtual" or "imagined" body, a body that a person can imagine assuming and from which she can view the world and herself from a different perspective.



The virtual body allows “for a new style of seeing, a new use of one’s body; it is to enrich and recast the body schema.” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 2002: 153) It allows a person to consider new possibilities for action and to establish a plan of action to acquire those skills. This plan does not need to be deliberate. A toddler can learn how to walk while attempting to do something else, and Elizete, in fact, learns her own way to freedom almost by chance, when Verlia comes around and, for the first time, she feels a sting of pleasure in her own body and she is startled by it. In other words, the virtual body described by Merleau-Ponty allows us to extend our habitual behaviour beyond what is given to us in the actual situation, acquiring for the individual a sense of freedom and of idiosyncratic expression.

The possibility to develop and change one’s body schema through the imagination of the body illuminates the way in which the body is represented both in *In Another Place, Not Here*, but also and in a more radical way in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, a novel that re-tells a portion of the history of Trinidad in the years preceding the abolition of slavery and that makes the sexuality of the characters the *objective correlative* of whatever potential for change they have in themselves. The novel opens with the recounting of the mass suicide planned by Marie Ursule and the slaves of the secret society *Convois Sans Peur* in 1824. Marie Ursule spares her only daughter – Bola – from the mass suicide, and it is from Bola that we get the complex genealogy of this book, following the sons and daughters of Bola’s children across the years and across the continents. Like in the previous novel, we get quite a neat separation between the political and the sentimental drives in the figures of the two women that open the story. Marie Ursule, whose ear has been cut, whose walk has been damaged by an iron ring she had to carry around for two years, whose back, and legs and hands are streaked by the lashes of whips and of cane stalks, embodies the reified, dehumanized body described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Marie Ursule and her fellow comrades have come to hate this body and they refuse to let their bodies guide their lives, as we can read in the following passage:

They knew that the body was a terrible thing that wanted to live no matter what. It never gave up, it lived for the sake of itself. It was selfish and full of greed. The body could pitifully recover from lashes, from weight and stroke. Only in the head could you kill yourself, never in the body (Brand 2000: 17).

Marie Ursule has learned to violate her body again and again in order to resist the social normativity imposed on her as a slave and a woman: she voluntarily aborts the children that would be born in slavery, and she only gives birth to one daughter, Bola, for she had dreamt of a safe place for Bola. The day of the mass suicide, Marie Ursule sends Bola away with the help of Kamena, Bola’s father, in search for a community of free slaves in Terre Bouillante. Bola will never find that community, but she will find her home in Culebra Bay, a place from where she can look at the Main of Venezuela and where she spends hours and days sitting on the rocks looking at the whales.



If Marie Ursule represented the dehumanized body of the slave, Bola who has been spared from slavery and from whatever form of social organization, embodies the possibility of the black body when it is experienced as bare life and apart from its historical and cultural symbolism. Bola does not know about men's power in patriarchy, she does not really know about white supremacy: the language she understands is the language of whales and the language of her own body, her libido, her lust.

Bola has fourteen children with the men that, along the years, come to Culebra Bay. No one, however, will reclaim Bola as his – wife or woman. Bola can be said to stand for the hyper-sexuality often ascribed to the black body; in this sense she can be seen as all body, in the most traditional understanding of the opposition between Western subject and non-Western colonized. However, exactly by being all body and by obeying to the “sting of her body” “in the midst of dust and inhumanity” (*Ibid.*: 62), she accomplishes an important transgression by loving – and not loathing – that body that has been ostracized by whites and blacks alike. Bola lets herself go the lust of the flesh, its tastes and its smells. She finds the company she needs not in other human beings but in the whales in the ocean, as if she were inadvertently pointing to the Atlantic diaspora of her own progeny. Her transgression of the established social order is not as carefully planned as Marie Ursule's had been: it is done, as simply as that, by touching her thighs: “She would knead her soft thighs and smooth them in her fingers for hours.” (*Ibid.*: 67)

Like Marie Ursule, Bola dissolves the body as that surface upon which the practices and regimes of colonialism and of patriarchy have been written, and re-instates the possibility of change. By responding only to her physical and sexual instincts, Bola is subtracting herself from any form of social categorization; in other words, she is her own woman, just as her mother had wanted her to be.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, the novel begins in the years preceding the emancipation of slaves and wants to record the new beginning for the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands. How is the notion of gender affected by this re-telling of Caribbean history? If the black body is (externally at least) devalued by slavery (as property or as labour in the plantations), here the new beginning for Caribbean history seems to coincide with the recognition of the body as all-important. Most importantly, whenever the body is given central stage in the novel, it is always sexed, signifying the extent to which Bola's sensuous transgression is to be taken as the material counterpoint and necessary completion of Marie Ursule's act of will. By following the destinies of Cordelia, a 50-year-old woman living in the same Culebra Bay where Bola had blossomed into her own womanhood, and of Maya, living in the 1980s, in Amsterdam, we see how all-important the body remains, how the subject's expression is carried out, again and again, by and through the body imagining its own redemption.

After raising three children with the man she has married, Cordelia suddenly:

burst from her own seams [...] She was greedy for everything she had not had. What she had not had was the enjoyment of her body clear and free. Her father had terrified it. Her mother had found in it the enemy. The boy from up the river



way had put a baby in it and dressed it in a kind of passion that had felt hurtful, burning and unfinished. The woman in Socorro had loosened the baby from it. She had gone since done opening her body to Emmanuel Greaves [her husband], she had only done that long enough to make Hannah, Gabriel and Alicia. She has done it in that purposeful way of hers. (*Ibid.*: 121)

By being able to recognize in her image reflected in the mirror “a woman who wasn’t finished with the taste of her body” (*Ibid.*: 99), and having the courage to investigate its meaning, Cordelia brings Bola’s legacy into the new century: her bi-sexual affairs, received with scorn and disapproval by her family and community, add a new plenitude to her life.

But transgression can also go the opposite way: Maya who moves from Trinidad to Amsterdam is the exotic body put on show, framed in a window, the object of the white man’s lust and desire:

She had arrived at the window oddly thinking that it was the most ordinary place in the world. A place to look in and look out. A simple transparent place, a place to see and to be seen and therefore a place where complications were clear and strangely plain (*Ibid.*: 208).

In the gilded frame of her window, Maya discovers that “sex is lethal” and wards herself from its violence. Yet she sees in her body, in its phases, her space for action. She oils and suns it, she sculpts her ankles, her thighs, her biceps, she makes her body “strong and liquid” (*Ibid.*: 221) and, in so doing, she reclaims it for herself, for her own gaze, for the pleasures she can get from it.

“The work of art provides us with new organs with which to see the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 52), wrote Merleau-Ponty. Indeed when reading Brand’s works, one is forced to enter embodied modes of perception: we are made to feel the physical exhaustion of Marie Ursule, Bola’s wet body, Verlia’s electric energy, and this is an important aspect of our aesthetic experience. The interpretation of the fictional world is carried through mostly through the characters’ reactions to, and perceptions of, their own bodies. These reactions and perceptions are creative, personal and plural and constitute, in my view, an important step towards a renewed understanding and theorizing of the sexed and racialized body for our time.

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