CONSTRUCTING THE MOTHER-TONGUE:
Language in the Poetry of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese Philip

by

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Abstract

By one definition, a mother-tongue is simply the predominant language spoken; however, that mother-tongue can also be an oppressive father-tongue. For African-West Indian-Canadian poets like Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese Philip, English is both a mother- and a father-tongue. These poets must overcome the biases of conventional language. Through processes such as abrogation, appropriation, and feminization, they challenge both the racial and the gender biases of language. Through their poetry, they deconstruct and re-member the English language, showing that English is simply one of many englishes of which their newly-constructed mother-tongue is an equally valid and authoritative voice. This study draws upon various aspects of postcolonial, feminist, and language theories as they apply to these three poets. It carefully considers each poet's work with regards to the ways in which she challenges conventional English through both the themes and the structures of her poetry.

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Introduction

The language of poetry often differs from the standards of conventional English, but that deviation becomes even more extreme and more significant when English is both the father-tongue (that is the language of oppression) and the mother-tongue (that is the predominant language spoken) of the poet. Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese Philip all share this common bond. All three have emigrated to Canada from the West Indies, although their paths have been different, as have their particular occupations and interests.

Dionne Brand was born in 1953 in Guayguayare, Trinidad. She attended Naparima Girl's High School, them emigrated to Canada in 1970 to attend the University of Toronto and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Brand has taught in Canadian universities and, in addition to her writing, has founded and edited the Black women's newspaper *Our Lives* and produced film documentaries about Black women in Canada. Brand is very active politically, at one time being a member of the Communist Party of Canada, and she continues to be active in feminist politics. Her political activism is reflected in her writing, which Carol Morrell calls "direct political challenge" ("Introduction" 23). Brand's work *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun*, for example, shows her political stand against American interference in Caribbean affairs. This book of poetry also arises from personal interest, for Brand was in Grenada at the time of the American invasion in 1983 and experienced first-hand the results of Western military activities. Brand takes much of her literary inspiration and stylistic influence from other Caribbean writers, such as Jean Rhys, Paule Marshall, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and especially Derek Walcott. Her works include six books of poetry (*'Fore*

Day Morning, *Primitive Offensive*, *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*, *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, *No Language is Neutral*, and *Land to Light On*, which won the 1997 Governor General's Award), a book of children's poetry (*Earth Magic*), a novel (*In Another Place, Not Here*), a collection of short stories (*Sans Souci and Other Stories*), two works of non-fiction (*Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots* with Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta and *No Burden to Carry* with Lois DeShield), and three film documentaries (*Older Stronger Wiser* with Claire Prieto, *Sisters in the Struggle* with Ginny Stikeman, and *Long Time Comin'*).

Claire Harris was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad in 1937. Harris had an international education, attending both the University College in Dublin, Ireland and the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. She emigrated to Canada in 1966 and settled in Calgary to teach there in the Catholic school system. Harris quit teaching in 1974 to study mass media and communications at the University of Nigeria in Lagos. It was in Nigeria that Harris's writing career began with the composition of the poems for *Translation into Fiction*. Harris returned to Canada in 1975, but has since entirely given up teaching in order to travel. Harris writes both poetry and essays and serves as an editor. Her literary influences are as widespread as William Shakespeare and bell hooks. Included in Harris's works are six books of poetry (*Fables From the Women's Quarters*, *Translation into Fiction*, *Travelling to Find a Remedy*, *The Conception of Winter*, *Drawing Down a Daughter*, and *Dipped in Shadow*) and a collection of women's prose and poetry (*Kitchen Talk* with Edna Alford).

Marlene Nourbese Philip was born in 1947 in Moriah, Tobago but was raised in Trinidad. She began her education at the University of the West Indies but emigrated to

Canada in 1968 to complete it at the University of Western Ontario. From 1975 to 1982, Philip practiced immigration and family law. As a mother of three, family is very important to Philip, as is maintaining her West Indian heritage for her children. Philip balances her time between motherhood and her writing, which includes poetry, fiction, articles, and book reviews. Philip lists writers such as Audre Lorde, Olive Senior, and Toni Morrison as her literary influences. Philip's work includes three books of poetry (*Thorns*, *Salmon Courage*, and *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*), a book of poetry and prose fiction (*Looking for Livingstone*), a young adult novel (*Harriet's Daughter*), and several works of non-fiction (*Frontiers*, *Showing Grit*, and *A Genealogy of Resistance*).

As Black female immigrants to Canada, Brand, Harris, and Philip experience a triple colonization: they come from a colonized country in which their heritage is one of slavery, they have immigrated to another "colonial" territory in which the colour of their skin often places them in a denigrated position, and they are women in a society "colonized" and dominated by men. Brand, Harris, and Philip all write from the position of the Black woman in exile. Lynette Hunter, who, like Carol Morrell and myself, considers Brand, Harris, and Philip as a group, writes:

> each of these writers answers the alienation that results from modernism's inappropriate history with a particular poetics of her own . . . these writers offer a set of historically based alternatives that shift away from the heroism of alienation towards questions of authenticity that deal in engagement and social support, that generate questions about trust: trust in ideology, in history, and in language. (260)

All three writers question the Western presentation of history and fact, and each alters Western language to accommodate her new position. As Morrell writes: "they startle the reader by interrogating standard English and substituting new usages, often in the Caribbean demotic, for old ones" ("Introduction" 10). They make use of both their Caribbean and their Canadian experience to alter the English master-tongue into a nourishing and receptive mother-tongue that bears the burden of their unique experience. Donna Bennett writes of their poetry that "this is a literature that, in its accounts of immigrant experience and cultural otherness, may resonate with Canada's pre-existing postcolonial condition partly because the ethnic writers are often already postcolonial. These writers from other postcolonial countries now find themselves relocated within a new postcolonial society" (189).

Due to their double heritage, both Caribbean and Canadian history and culture influence the works of Brand, Harris, and Philip. The three poets are forced to deal with the history of slavery and blatant racism in the colonial period, and the subtle racism of post-colonial Canada. They also face the challenge of writing as women in a society in which the literary institution is traditionally governed by men. Brand, Harris, and Philip challenge the standards of conventional English and subvert the dominant white male privilege through processes such as abrogation (the refusal to adhere to standards of conventional language), appropriation (the process of conforming language to suit one's own personal experience), and feminization (the refusal to accept male biases in language). Thematically and technically, they deconstruct the English language to find the hidden meanings in words and to show that cultural differences in language cannot be evaluated and that there are thus not

one but many proper englishes. Though the general aim of the three poets is essentially the same, their approaches often differ.

Brand, though politically the most aggressive of the three, is poetically the most conventional and best exemplifies the ideal of working within the tradition to change the tradition. Brand follows the example of poets like Derek Walcott in embracing the European tradition, while at the same time rebelling against its restrictive and oppressive qualities. She uses conventional English to question its validity by providing contrasts, by offering various words in one context for which single words are inadequate, such as "north/cold" (*Winter Epigrams*7), and by using words in new ways to subtly alter their meanings. The geographies of the land and the sea play prominently in Brand's poetry as a reflection of the geography of the body, particularly the black body and the aging female body, and the geography of language.[1] Brand is concerned with gender issues but focuses more on racism.

Unlike Brand, who concentrates mainly on the issue of race, Harris focuses primarily on gender. Motherhood and other aspects of the woman's role figure prominently in Harris's poetry. She uses the space of the page to give her poems a geography of their own, at times shaping her poems to resemble the female body. The seeming lack of coherence in Harris's poetry, a feminist and post-modern technique, demonstrates how she opens up the English language to incorporate a language of the black woman that is fluid and accessible. She takes the language forced upon her by her oppressors and obliterates its boundaries so that it may be turned back upon them and become the language of her authority.

Philip strives to connect the word and the "i-mage," the "i" being stressed to indicate a personalization of the image and thus of the word. Of the three, she makes the greatest use

of the demotic and follows the matrilineal line back to her African heritage. Philip mounts significant challenges to all aspects of patriarchal ideology: myth, religion, culture, language. In *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, for example, Philip begins by rewriting the myth of Proserpine and Ceres from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the section titled *And Over Every Land and Sea*; she then challenges religious beliefs and practices in the section titled *Cyclamen Girl.* Various notions of white male culture are confronted throughout the work, such as the challenge to the notion of history in "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks" (97), as are the many facets of language and language use, particularly in the sections *Discourse on the Logic of Language, Universal Grammar,* and *The Question of Language is the Answer to Power.* Philip dramatically disrupts and erupts the conventions of the white male institution and asserts the voice of the black mother and the black daughter. Philip deals comprehensively with both racism and sexism and demonstrates the most striking metamorphosis of the English language.

The diversity of writing styles among these three poets and even within the works of each writer demands examination through various theories. Several theories of language apply to the poetry, including those of sociolinguistics, semiology, and second-language acquisition. Feminist theories also apply, particularly those of French feminists who deal with writing the female body. Brand, Harris, and Philip also make use of deconstruction as they deconstruct and reconstruct the English language to uncover old meanings and usages of words as well as to develop new ones.

The voices of Brand, Harris, and Philip emerge through their poetry as voices of authority. They show that there is not one standard English, but many standards, perhaps

many englishes, which are all proper. Their writing contributes to the demarginalization of oral literature, from which their poetry arises, and shows that although power determines meaning in language, challenging the imposed meaning is a way of gaining the power necessary to create and maintain one's own language, one's own mother-tongue, and to make it a language of authority.

Caribbean History and Culture

The beginnings of Caribbean history are virtually unknown. The original inhabitants, the Caribs and the Arawaks, were essentially killed off by the European colonists who migrated to the islands of the Caribbean following its "discovery" by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Spanish, Dutch, British, French, and Danish colonies were established on the various Caribbean islands and the 1763 Treaty of Paris divided the islands among the European nations. Sugar cane farming quickly became the major economic activity in the Caribbean. With the annihilation of the Caribbean natives, however, the colonists were forced to find new sources of labour. As Rogoziñsky writes: "Sugar made slavery necessary . . . By the 1750s, almost nine out of ten men and women were slaves on all islands where sugar was grown. Never before in human history had so high a proportion of the population been slaves" (122). The new slaves were brought in from West Africa, where many Blacks were already in slavery, and the mid-1600s saw an onslaught of African slaves brought to the Caribbean. The mass of Black slaves transformed the Caribbean into a predominantly black nation, but the Blacks were kept in the social position of a minority group (Brathwaite, *Contradictory* 43). The importation of African slaves also changed West Indian culture, as Brathwaite notes:

"there is an actual African presence in the Caribbean based on a continuous African tradition passing into the present through the period of slavery" (*Contradictory* 39). For the most part, African slaves were poorly cared for and the colonizers opted to replace rather than maintain their slaves, although urban slaves did receive better treatment and attained minimal freedom, while the field slaves suffered atrocious conditions in the plantation society. The slaves themselves often came to believe in white superiority, a belief that some Blacks still hold, as Brand acknowledges in several of her short stories from *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. A successful revolt against the whites was mounted in the 1790s in Haiti by Caribbean heroes Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Christophe, who are praised repeatedly in the poetry of Brand, Harris, and Philip. However, revolts such as this were often prevented through the annihilation of African and Caribbean ancestral languages. African languages were obliterated by dispersing slaves of the same linguistic group (Philip, *Frontiers* 56). Without a means of communication, the slaves were easily kept in their subordinate role and the colonizers maintained absolute power. In their challenge against lingering colonial domination, Brand, Harris, and Philip attempt to reawaken the remnants of the African and Caribbean ancestral languages through their poetry.

This absolute power of the plantation owners, however, was to be short-lived. By the mid-1800s, the slave trade was abolished and emancipation of slaves throughout the Caribbean gradually took place. The colonial mentality, however, remained deeply ingrained in West Indian consciousness. George Lamming writes:

> It is the brevity of the West Indian's history and the fragmentary nature of the different cultures which have fused to make some-

> thing new; it is the absolute dependence on the values implicit in the language of his colonizer which has given him a special relation to the word, colonialism. . . Colonialism is the very base and structure of the West Indian's cultural awareness. (35)

H. Nigel Thomas writes in one of his poems that "all emancipation ends in slavery / too subtle for the emancipated to see" ("Spirits" 109), and many freed slaves soon found themselves with no work and no income as indentured workers from India replaced them on the plantations. The influx of labourers from India, especially to Trinidad, created a tension between Blacks and Indians that has continued to characterize the West Indian experience, as Neil Bissoondath indicates through one of his fictional characters: "Yes, I'm racist. You have to be here. Indians hate Blacks and Blacks hate Indians. That's the way it is" ("An Arrangement" 131). This Black-Indian division also became the prominent political differential in Trinidad. With the end of slavery, European influence in the Caribbean waned, and by the end of the 1800s the United States became the major economic and political force in the Caribbean. The sugar cane industry also waned and the depression of the 1930s was hard on the Caribbean islands, which were poor to begin with. Trinidad, however, developed a new industry with the discovery of oil fields and became the site of an American military base during World War II, and thus fared relatively well. In 1962, Eric Williams led Trinidad and Tobago to independence (other Caribbean islands were also gradually gaining independence), and Trinidad adopted a political policy of democracy (Kurlansky 59).

Following the gaining of independence by the Caribbean nations, migration of West Indians from the Caribbean greatly increased. Mark Kurlansky writes: "The diaspora of the

second half of the twentieth century has made Caribbeans an international people . . . Although the migratory experience has been painful for many Caribbeans, it has become a recognized part of the Caribbean way of life" (220). Though Caribbeans in exile fear rejection by their own people, nostalgia for the West Indies is a vital part of their experience, as can be seen in the works of Brand, Harris, and Philip. Jan Rogoziñsky writes: "A strong sense of local particularism or even nationalism is especially characteristic of the Caribbean" (vii). Even for the West Indian outside the Caribbean, the Caribbean identity is valued and maintained.

The abundance of racial groups populating the Caribbean, combined with the influence of powerful foreign nations, resulted in a culturally and linguistically diverse society. The result of this mixing of cultures and languages was a phenomenon known as creolization. Edward Kamau Brathwaite writes that creolization is a part of acculturation--the absorption of one culture into another--and interculturation–intermixture between two cultures (*Contradictory* 11). This creolization affected culture and language. One method by which the colonizers attempted to control the slaves was to convert them to Christianity, which demanded submission and obedience. The result, however, was an Africanization of Christianity that maintained the African beliefs in voodoo and the medicine man or 'leaf doctor' (Kurlansky 81). Derek Walcott writes: "And the language used is, like the religion, that of the conqueror of God. But the slave had wrested God from his captor" ("Muse" 11). Likewise, the slave had wrested language away from his master. The linguistic influences in the Caribbean came from three major sources: the colonizers (English, French, Dutch, Spanish); imported slaves and labourers (Hindi, Chinese varieties, African languages);

ancestral languages (Amerindian). In order for people of such various linguistic systems to communicate and operate in society, a compromise had to be made among the users of these languages. This process resulted in the Creole continuum of language. Merle Hodge writes: "Caribbean Creole languages have been fashioned to fit our communication needs, and they have not only survived but developed--and they continue to develop as our communication needs become, perhaps, more complex" (204). The important linguistic development affecting the works of Brand, Harris, and Philip is the continuum of language between conventional English and the demotic English or "nation language" that resulted from the influence of African languages on English. Though African languages were suppressed, the interactions between masters and slaves invariably affected the masters' language as well (Philip, *Genealogy* 49), particularly in the many cases in which white children were mothered by Black female slaves. By the 1960s, even dictionaries of the Caribbean dialects were beginning to appear.

One of the most vital aspects of language for the African-Caribbean is naming. In West- African culture, a child is not even considered a living human until it has been named, as naming proves existence (Philip, *Showing* 81). During slavery, however, Black slaves lost the authority to name themselves, being given new names by their masters. Thus emancipation and the freedom from white control opened the way for Blacks to once again name themselves anew. Derek Walcott writes: "The slave converted himself, he changed weapons, spiritual weapons, and as he adapted his master's religion, he also adapted his language . . . Now began the new naming of things" ("Muse" 13). The former slave was no longer limited to expressing her experience in European language nor only in her African

language; a new language emerged that was unique to the Caribbean and the West Indian was able to name himself and his particular experience.

Literary work from the Caribbean appeared rather late compared to other countries, but early given how late most Blacks were granted the freedom to gain an education and to write. The first known poem by a Black West Indian is "Ode to Governor Haldane," which was published in 1759 by Francis Williams. Black poetry gradually increased in plentitude. Early Caribbean poetry was mainly pastoral, focusing on the landscape. This focus on the Caribbean landscape remains visible even in contemporary West Indian poetry. Lloyd Brown writes: "the peculiar seductiveness of the Caribbean landscape for the West Indian poet projects the poet's vision of a distinctive West Indian heritage and history" (68). George Lamming, however, notes that "this may be the dilemma of the West Indian writer abroad: that he hungers for nourishment from a soil which he could not at present endure" (50). The West Indian exile views the Caribbean landscape with both nostalgia and disdain. Between 1900 and 1940, however, there was a change from pastoral poetry to poetry of social protest and nationalism (Brown 25). Writers such as Claude McKay, who became known in America, began to combine West Indian idioms with European form and to subvert conventional English (Brown 29). This led to the emergence of dub poets, like Lillian Allen, who were and are influential in propounding local language. Other poets, like Edward Kamau Brathwaite, produced poetry that blurred the distinctions between oral and written language to write poetry for the people. Brathwaite claims that "folk poets are the spokesmen whose whole concern is to express the experience of the people rather than the experiences of the elite" (*History* 26). Derek Walcott, the most influential West Indian poet,

however, follows the European literary tradition more closely; like McKay, he combines Caribbean language with European forms. Walcott writes in *The Castaway*: "parroting our master's / style and voice, we make his language ours" (51). Walcott deftly combines his African-Caribbean and his European heritages to construct his own West Indian voice. As Lloyd Brown notes: "West Indian writers have preferred to define their work with reference to what they perceive as a distinct West Indian experience" (10). From this tradition emerges the next generation of West Indian writers, including poets such as Lorna Goodison, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese Philip.

Black Canadian History

Like the history of the West Indies, the history of Blacks in Canada also begins with slavery. Although Canada is not known for slave trading and is more often seen as a refuge for slaves, there were Black slaves in Nova Scotia as early as 1686 and the number greatly increased with the arrival of the Loyalists. The first recorded slave sale in Canada took place in Nova Scotia in 1752 (Walker 19). The 1700s saw, as well, an importation of Black slaves from Africa and from the West Indies to what was then known as New France. James Walker claims that "slaves in Canada generally received humane treatment" (21); yet, although the Canadian slaves may have been better treated than slaves in the Caribbean, no person can be genuinely happy in conditions of slavery. Following American independence, there was also a migration of free Black Loyalists to Canada. Despite their freedom and the promise of completely equal treatment with white Loyalists, the Blacks in the Maritimes were denied the free land that the white Loyalists received and were prevented from advancing

socially or economically (Walker 34). Thus in 1792, desiring a land of their own away from white control, there was a Black Loyalist exodus from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, Africa. A second exodus of the descendants of runaway slaves occurred in 1880. Because of the dependence on Black slave labour, free Blacks were hated and feared in Canada to the point that in 1815, the Nova Scotia assembly attempted to ban Black immigration. Their attempts failed, but their attitudes were made clear. As in the Caribbean, slavery continued late in Canada, not being banned in Ontario until 1833. In 1851, the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada was created and Canada became a refuge for Black slaves fleeing their masters in the United States.

Although Canada has moved beyond slavery and has officially adopted an anti-racist stance, racist attitudes against visible minorities remain a problem for some white Canadian individuals and organizations. Canada's colonial attitudes limited and limit the opportunities for Blacks and other racial minorities to advance themselves in Canadian society. Historically, Blacks in Canada have remained at the bottom of the economic scale. Immediately following the abolition of slavery, there was an attempt to segregate Blacks away from the white communities by establishing Black settlements, such as those established in Ontario in the 1850s. This segregation also forced a segregation of schools and churches. The Black schools lacked adequate funds to provide proper education and left Black children in a disadvantaged position. Black children who were able to attend white schools fared no better. James Walker writes:

> In the Anglo-dominated schools they have been taught that the heroes are white; the accomplishments have been attained by whites,

> the nation was built by whites, all of which leaves blacks as intruders or at best hangers-on in a flow of history that ignores them. Small wonder, then, that blacks often feel that they do not really belong here, or that they have derived an image of their own worth that has been defined by others. (5)

Though Blacks could no longer be slaves, they were still seen as cheap labour and served in menial positions. Black men worked chiefly as porters on the railroad and Black women were employed as domestic servants. World War II created new opportunities for Blacks. Black men joined the army, although they were given the worst jobs, such as burying the dead, and Black women were, for the first time, allowed to enter the industrial workforce. This, however, created a shortage of domestic labourers in Canada. Thus in the 1950s, Black women were brought in from the Caribbean to do domestic work in Canada. With the importation of Black female servants and an increase in Black immigration to Canada, the 1950s and 1960s saw a large increase in Canada's Black population. Increased numbers, however, did not result in a raise in economic status, and the complaints continued of racial discrimination, particularly in the workplace.

Despite their disadvantaged position, Blacks did make social and political advancements in Canada. In 1919, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded on the work of Marcus Garvey, was established in Toronto and Montreal. Black women were extremely active in UNIA, as they were in the Black churches which also flourished. In 1951, for example, Addie Aylestock became the first Black woman ordained in Canada. The Canadian League for the Advancement of Coloured People was founded by

James Jenkins in 1924 and the Black Porters' Union, established in 1942, became the first Black union in Canada. Blacks in Canada, many of whom, like Brand, Harris, and Philip, have chosen Canada as their home, came to see themselves as Canadians and worked to improve their status within Canada. James Walker notes: "One very noticeable feature of the black Canadian identity has been a fierce and almost exaggerated loyalty to Canada" (152). This loyalty is surprising, considering Canada's neglect of its Black people.

Walker writes that "Canadian historical writing almost completely ignores the fact that there is a black community here with a 350-year long history" (3). Even events such as Black History Month do not bring adequate attention to the history or presence of Blacks in Canada. George Elliott Clarke writes: "Thus *race*, per se, is not everything for African Canadians. No, it is the struggle against *erasure* that is everything" ("Introduction" xviii). Early Canadian history shows little acceptance of Blacks. Prior to 1967, Canadian immigration policy restricted non-white immigration. Minority groups were linked together into organizations, such as the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women, which denied the differences between the various groups (Carty and Brand 39). Trudeau's Multicultural Policy, introduced in 1971, however, has had the opposite effect. Section three, part one of the Multicultural Act states:

> It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage . . . (qtd. in Bissoondath, *Selling* 39)

Magdalene Redekop makes the argument that "the policy of multiculturalism perpetuates separateness and thus makes it more difficult for minorities to take their rightful place in Canadian society" (97). The colour line remains in Canada; however, it is enforced by convention rather than the law, making Canada's multicultural policy somewhat of a mirage (Philip *Showing* 69). As Brand claims, Canadian racism is not official, nor is it open (Brand and Bhaggiyadatta 4). Perhaps it is the subtlety of racism in Canada that makes it most dangerous.

One interesting effect of the Canadian Multicultural Act is that it promotes a duality of identity. Donna Bennett writes: "at no point in its history has there been only one Canada" (193). Canada is essentially a nation of immigrants. For white immigrants, the term Canadian is readily applied and accepted. Non-white immigrants, however, are often designated by a hyphenated identity, such as African-Canadian. This hyphenated identity has both positive and negative qualities. The retention of the name of the ancestral or racial identification shows a pride in and loyalty to the homeland, but it also prevents the bearer from being truly Canadian, even for second- and third-generation immigrants who have only known Canada as a home.

The Canadian literary institution also exhibits racist attitudes. Non-white writers have historically been excluded from the Canadian canon, particularly when their work lacks "Canadian content." But Blacks have been writing and publishing in Canada for almost as long as they have lived here. The earliest publication of a Black Canadian was in 1785 by Black preacher John Marrant (Clarke, "Introduction" xiv). The first Black Canadian woman published was Mary Ann Shadd Cary in 1849 (Clarke, "Introduction" xiv). Shadd Cary was

also the first Canadian female newspaper editor and publisher. Black writers have gradually become more noticed in Canada due to the work of groups such as the Multicultural Women Writers of Canada, established in 1989, and their work is very revealing. Walker writes: "Since black Canadians have so often existed in a 'colonial' relationship vis-à-vis mainstream society, their recent cultural expressions and reactions to restrictive practices can help us to understand the worldwide responses of oppressed peoples" (13). Clarke claims that Black Canadian literature is "a species of hybridity" ("Introduction" xii). Despite its negative aspects, the duality of identity, particularly for first generation immigrants such as Brand, Harris, and Philip, has allowed Black Canadians a rich literary tradition.

Language Theories

The theories existing about the acquisition, structure, and governance of language are many and varied. J. E. Chamberlin writes that "*all* language has codes that function both to facilitate communication within the given language circle and to frustrate communication beyond" (35). Frantz Fanon saw a racial "difference" in language in his studies on language during the 1950s and 1960s. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin write:

> Fanon's approach stressed the common political, social, and psychological terrain through which all colonized peoples had to pass. It recognized the potency of such racial characteristics as "Blackness" at the heart of the oppression and denigration endemic to the colonial enterprise. But it also recognized the essential fictionality of these characteristics, and the readiness with which the assimilated Black

> colonized could be persuaded to don a white mask of culture and privilege. In essence, Fanon's analysis denied the racist stereotyping at the heart of colonial practice and asserted the need to recognize the economic and political realities which underlay these assertions of racial 'difference,' and which were the material base for the common psychological and cultural features of colonized peoples. (124)

Fanon's ideas are supported by the sociolinguistic approach to language study that states that variations in language are determined and demanded by differences in societal circumstances (Cameron 23). Thus language is affected not only by race, but also by economics; as we have seen in the history of Blacks in Canada, however, often race also determines economic status, with Blacks occupying the lower economic classes. Sapir and Whorf invert this connection between language and culture. According to Sapir and Whorf, language determines culture. They state that:

> Human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society . . . The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on all the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are different worlds, not the same world with different labels attached. (qtd. in Cameron 97)

In this approach, "language functions not only to communicate cultural values but serves also to define and maintain social roles" (van den Bergh 131). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin

derive from this theory that in colonial and postcolonial writing, "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth,' 'order,' and 'reality' become established" (7).

Ferdinand Saussure takes a structural approach to language analysis. Saussure sees language as inseparable from thought. Thus language becomes a self-contained, arbitrary system of signs that are defined by the differences between them (Cameron 14). Saussure divides language into two distinct sections: *langue* (the system of language) and *parole* (the specific remark in that language). According to Saussure, the *langue* is necessary in order to understand the *parole* (Barry 41). The *langue* is comprised of three components: the signifier (the sound-image); the signified (the concept); and the sign (that which describes the relationship between the signifier and signified--i.e. the word) (Barthes 113). This method of language study was extended by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to include any signifying system in which the individual elements may only be understood through the system of organization governing them (Barry 46); thus the *langue* becomes the whole culture, with its system and general laws (Hawkes 39).

Roland Barthes also expands upon Saussure's explanation of the sign-system or semiology. Barthes views Saussure's semiology as a *first-order semiological system* and sees the myth as a *second-order semiological system* (Barthes 114). In *Mythologies*, Barthes claims that the myth is a type of *metalanguage* in which the conventional language becomes a *language-object* which the myth discusses; the sign in language becomes the signifier in myth (115).[2] According to Barthes, the signifier in language becomes a sign when it is infused with a specific meaning (Hawkes 131); the myth drains the sign of its specific meaning,

opening it up to all possible meanings and connotations, thus converting it back into a signifier (Hawkes 132). Therefore, the sign "tree," for example, becomes a signifier for "the tree of life," "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," "the family tree," and so on. Myth, then, may be defined as "speech *stolen and restored*" (Barthes 125), which is exactly what Brand, Harris, and Philip are writing in their poetry. They are stripping the signs of their specific, white male-defined meanings and converting them to signifiers of multiple possibilities.

The acquisition of a second language presents the possibility for extensions of these linguistic approaches and for new theories of language. This includes the creation of interlanguages, where a new language is created using elements of both the original and the acquired languages (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 66), and code-switching between the two languages, when fluency in both has been attained. In post-colonial situations, the second language is often acquired through abrogation, which Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin define as "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (38), and appropriation, which they define as "the process by which language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (38). These two processes result in the production of a hybrid mother-tongue (Bhabha 60), which allows other knowledges to influence the dominant discourse (Bhabha 114). Frequently, however, the second language is acquired with a loss of the first language or mother-tongue: "where English is the second language, learned with a perceived loss of the first, the acquisition is presented as a suppression of the 'mothertongue' by a colonizing mastertongue" (Neuman

"Importing" 402). Jim Cummins claims that if the mother-tongue is not used, it will be lost by the third generation (87).

Duality of language can be a group characteristic as well as an individual one. Chamberlin defines diglossia as the situation in which "two identifiably different varieties of a language (or even sometimes two quite different languages) coincide within a speech community, each with a distinct function" (110). When these two languages begin to mix, however, a multitude of variants begins to emerge. Initially these variants are in the form of pidgins, which Suzanne Romaine claims represent "a language which has been stripped of everything but the bare essentials necessary for communication" (24). However, as was the case in the West Indies, Chamberlin writes: "Creole languages develop from pidgins . . . when people are permanently in a multilingual situation and need to expand the pidgin to include a much wider range of human experience than the pidgin allows" (82). These Creole languages then become permanent languages and, as Homi K. Bhabha states of mixed cultures, "it is in the 'inter'--the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space--that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (38).

The analysis of diglossia and polyglossia also brings up the debate over the superiority of spoken versus written language. Typically, claims Peter Roberts, written language is privileged but spoken language is more powerful (17). The written language determines the standards for conventional English, despite the fact that this conventional English is rarely used in day-to-day conversation. The distinction between the language of the literary establishment and the common language of society thus creates a hierarchy of authority in which the written form is granted the premier position. The power that the oral language

possesses exists, therefore, on the level of emotional appeal rather than actual authority. The privileging of written language thus results in a disadvantaging and sometimes a loss of oral languages. It can also lead to an attempt to translate the oral into the written form. Chamberlin writes: "combining spoken and written languages and effects of naturalness and artifice is a technique poets often use" (135). For the West Indian poet, or any poet coming from a diglossic or polyglossic society, this need to incorporate a multiplicity of linguistic systems and structures is intensified. Thus West Indian poets, Brand, Harris, and Philip included, write from a diasporic position and their language forms a continuum of variants rather than a fixed set of conventions (Chamberlin 151). This use of language changes the very standards of literary language. Chamberlin writes: "literary standards--or more particularly standards of language in literature--are determined by the ways in which literature frames itself" (87). Thus any change in the intent of literature necessitates a change in the standards of language that govern its wording. According to Chamberlin: "that ambition *not* to be standard, that sense of the need to decenter oneself, is both a fundamentally poetic instinct and a venerable strategy for those who are determined to get out from under the shadow of imperial governments, linguistic or otherwise" (84). Post-colonial structures must progress away from the still-existing colonial mentality in order for change to effectively occur.

Feminist Theories

The struggle to gain a voice affects not only minority races and non-English Canadians, but women also. Women have traditionally been oppressed by gender-biased forces within their societies, although they do have a growing voice in fighting back against sexism. Feminist theories work to demarginalize the women in social, political, economic, and literary arenas. Not all women, however, are equally considered in feminist studies. Groups such as the National Committee on the Status of Women ignore minority women, privileging gender issues to the exclusion of racial and class concerns (Carty and Brand 41). Peggy Bristow writes that "white abolitionists held on to the beliefs of white supremacy" ("Whatever" 126). Historically, white feminists have maintained the patriarchal ideal of white supremacy, despite their rejection of all other patriarchal beliefs, and Black women are ignored (Brand, *No Burden* 29). This denial of the Black woman, which is often subtle, means that "Canadian women's history remains primarily that of white women" (Bristow, "Introduction" 7). In order for feminism to truly challenge patriarchy, it must come to include all women, which means, as with sociocultural linguistics, it must also take class and race into consideration. Feminism must be careful not to be exclusive or restrictive. Despite its biases, feminist theory has made advances in the struggle against patriarchal ideology, and Black women like Brand, Harris, and Philip are gradually gaining a voice.

In the male-dominated discourse, women are seen as "other," as "non-male." Dale Spender writes: "Males, in the patriarchal order, are accorded 'superiority' by virtue of their gender; they have this 'superiority' consistently confirmed in interactions with females who abdicate in favour of males by restricting their own opportunities for expression, by deferring

to male interests and definitions, and by concentrating on supporting male efforts" (49). By keeping silent, women perpetuate this myth of male superiority and support patriarchal thought. It is only by speaking out that women can gain authority and equality. In order to speak out, however, the woman must learn a new language. According to some stereotypes, women's speech lacks authority. Deborah Cameron writes that women's speech is characterized by disfluency, unfinished sentences, speech not ordered according to norms of logic, statements phrased as questions, speaking less than men in mixed groups, and using cooperative strategies in conversation (35). Speech is differentiated by gender and, according to French feminist Luce Irigaray, also determined by gender, resulting in language variants such as genderlects and motherese (Cameron 47). These gender differences in language, like the racial differences studied by Fanon, arise from an imbalance in power, in this case from the power of men and the powerlessness of women (Cameron 29). Women are encouraged to submit to this subordinate position, even by other women, who, as Margaret Atwood claims, "can domineer and infantilize women just as well as men can" (21). Betty Friedan calls this phenomenon the "feminine mystique," which she claims causes women to aspire only to be feminine in the traditional sense of the word (soft-spoken, obedient, etc.) (43). She writes: "The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity" (71). It encourages women to remain in the place men have created for them. But female writers, as Brand particularly shows, have refused to accept stereotypical female roles. By discovering one's identity and womanhood, the woman is able to escape male domination and find her identity, her place, and her language.

Linda Hutcheon calls the process of putting the woman back into the discourse or literary canon "gynesis" ("Shape" 219).[3] This on-going process has involved several steps: talking about the problem; redefining negative terms for women; challenging male authority by altering positive words to negative forms, such as non-woman instead of man; coining new words, such as "herstory" (Kramarae and Jenkins 138). The challenge to male authority has also involved challenging the masculine as the gender-neutral pronoun. In some cases, feminists have replaced the masculine with the feminine as gender-neutral, as with Harris's "wo/men" (*Drawing* 29), although care must be taken to avoid gynocentrism, which is as dangerous as phallocentrism. Elaine Showalter explains the steps in the development of the female writer as: feminine (imitation and internalization); feminist (protest and advocacy); female (self-discovery) ("Tradition" 274). Both Showalter's and Kramarae and Jenkins's methods result in the production of a female language and a female text. Thereclamation of place is also important for female writers. As Harris notes, the kitchen is a prime example of women's reclamation of place. This site, which has been designated by patriarchal society as "the woman's place," has now been reclaimed as a place of sisterhood and creativity. Inge Israel writes: "But in the kitchen, you were yourself and didn't have to conform to anybody else's standards or regulations" (22). Phyllis Webb also claims:

> The kitchen is a power-site where all the senses are called into action and that primary appetite hunger compels us into the communal, the feast, the drama of familial and sexual politics. It's also a place of transformations and creativity where work, like art, sometimes looks like play. (14)

In the kitchen, woman's creativity can flourish free from male interference and woman's

language can develop. The new female language is characterized not by weakness but by a multiplicity of voice that also gives it a multiplicity of meaning, noticeable in the works of all three poets, particularly Harris and Philip. This multiplicity of voice, Luce Irigaray claims, is due to the woman's multiple sexuality (354).[4]

Female sexuality is a vital part of female language and female writing. The French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray, teach that a woman must write herself, her body.[5] Hélène Cixous writes: "She writes in white ink" (339),[6] referring to a woman's milk, one fluid that a man cannot produce. In Freud's expression of patriarchal beliefs, a woman's sex is seen as an absence. The male penis is the visible sexual organ, whereas a woman's vagina is seen as a hole that the penis must fill. In colonial representation, the female body is viewed as a landscape under the male gaze, to be conquered, in colonial fashion, by the male; just as the landscape is often troped as a female body, to be penetrated and conquered. In both instances, the woman is in constant threat of rape and her perception of space is thus limited by gender (Philip, *Genealogy* 78). Toril Moi writes that feminism requires a deconstruction of this sexual identity so that the woman may reconstruct herself and her sexuality in a positive light (14). The reclamation of the body frees the woman from the male gaze and brings her within her own gaze, allowing her to recognize and re-member her own identity. Kamboureli writes: "Through the configuration of the body as audience and performance, the woman reclaims language" (35).

The woman writer has a unique position in relation to the literary institution. Though often ignored in the canon, which is comprised of written literature, women are very much present in the oral tradition (Cameron 157). Canadian feminist June Callwood writes that

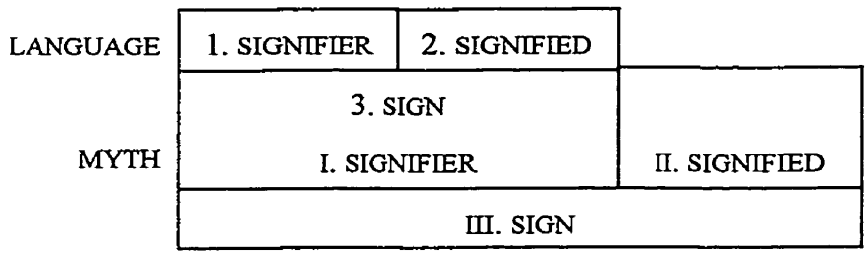
"women have been the tribal storytellers since the human race began" (62). Women, in other words, uphold the traditions of society and are the ones who maintain the mother-tongue for those who have acquired a second language. Thus for the female writers, and especially for those like Brand, Harris, and Philip who originally come from an oral society, writing involves translating the oral into the written. Women are still marginalized in the literary canon, particularly women of colour (Minh-ha 6), but they are gradually forming a new canon based upon the multiple, oral, and authoritative voice of the woman.

Notes

[1] The relationship between the human body and landscape is a very old concept. Simon Schama explores this relationship, including the relationship between the human body and water, in his book *Landscape and Memory*. Schama relates that Plato believed "nature and our bodies were constructed according to the same mysterious universal law of circulation" (247). The flow of water over the earth is likened to the circulation of blood through the human body, beginning in man and woman's first watery element, the womb. Schama details the various representations of this relationship as the river is presented as either male or female in art history. Of particular note with regards to the association of the female body with the aquatic landscape are the works of sculptor William Rush and painter Gustav Courbet. In 1809, Rush sculpted a statue of a maiden with a bittern (wading bird) on her shoulder for a fountain in the city of Philadelphia. The sculpture was entitled *Allegory of the Schuylkill River*, and was meant to represent the purity of the water which was being pumped into the city from the Schuylkill River via the new hydraulic system (368). Rush's statue may also have been based upon the Egyptian river-goddess Isis, whose flowing garment symbolized the "fertile copiousness of the Source" of the river rather than the force and horizontal flow of the river symbolized by male river-gods such as Osiris (370). Courbet's association of the geography of the female body with the landscape is represented

by his series of paintings of water-caves completed during the 1860s. These paintings, coupled with his 1866 painting of a woman's vaginal region entitled *The Origin of the World,* show a clear connection between the caves out of which the rivers issue and the woman's vaginal orifice out of which humankind issues (an extended metaphor of the "river of life"). It is also noteworthy that both of these nineteenth century male artists present the union of the female body with nature/landscape in a positive light.

[2] Barthes sees the myth as a *second-order semiological system* in which the language sign becomes the *metalanguage* signifier. The following chart, taken from Barthes's *Mythologies* (115), illustrates Barthes's semiology.



[3] Women have traditionally been ignored in the literary canon. Even when their numbers increase, their percentage in relation to the males does not. Joanna Russ writes: "It seems that when women are brought into a reading list, a curriculum, or an anthology, men arrive too–let the number of men drop and the women mysteriously disappear" (196). But women are fighting to change this imbalance.

Gynesis, or gynocriticism, as Elaine Showalter calls the process (taken from the French *la gynocritique*), is one of the ways women are attempting to overcome the imbalance. Gynocriticism involves studying the woman as writer. Gynocritics examine female creativity and female language, and attempt to "construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience" (Showalter, "Poetics" 131).

[4] Irigaray sees the woman as having a multiple sexuality. The woman's sexual organs are paired, including her vagina, which consists of two lips which are in constant contact except when penetrated by the male. Thus the woman's external sexual organs are able to touch and pleasure themselves (350). Irigaray see this as a multiplicity of individual sexuality that characterizes the identity and language of the woman.

Postmodernism is also characterized by incoherence and multiplicity, favouring fragmented forms and collages of disparate thoughts that blur the lines between genres (Barry 82). Postmodern writing also revisits the past with irony, as may be found in Brand's poetry, and blends high and low culture, as may be found in the works of all three poets.

[5] Writing the body is intensified in the work of Brand, Harris, and Philip. Due to their heritage of slavery, in which the body was chattel, site and cause of pain and punishment, and the means of erasing the first language through the physical separation of same language slaves, as noted in the discussion on slavery in the Caribbean, the body becomes even more prevalent.

[6] Cixous claims that the woman writes in "white ink," referring to a woman's milk; ironically, white ink does not show up on white paper.

"No Language Is Neutral"[1]: Dionne Brand

In her poem titled "No Language is Neutral," Dionne Brand writes:

> Each sentence realized 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.
> (*No Language* 34)

Every writer uses language to express his/her own personal perception of the world. The self cannot be negated in literature nor, thus, can it be neglected in language. And yet, as can be seen in the history of the Caribbean, a great majority of the world's English-speaking peoples have been forced to adopt a language that is not their own. The problem does not lie in the language itself, but in the specific meanings which Barthes claims convert the linguistic signifiers into signs, and which often discriminate against minority races and women. Betsy Warland claims: "contemporary *usage* of our words is what tongue-tied me. the repressed is the absent. women have been DISMEMBERED . . . in tracing words back, i have found that etymology nearly always re-members the feminine sensibility of our inner landscapes" (141). But the power of the white male establishment maintains a firm, though weakening grip on the meanings of words. The transformation of language is a slow process, but it is possible. In the mouths of the slaves, the language of the white colonizers of the Caribbean changed gradually, being mixed with the African languages of the slaves, for instance, to form a continuum of English variants: "Pronunciation and grammar and vocabulary changed, and forms developed that differed substantially from European dialects and gave West Indians a distinct linguistic identity and unique possibilities for literary expression" (Chamberlin 20).

Dionne Brand uses the richness of the West Indian continuum of language, even though she has emigrated to Canada, to express her particular experience as a female West Indian-Canadian in her poetry. Joyce Penfield writes: "women of color play two contradictory roles, that of enforcer of tradition and that of language innovator" (xii). Brand deftly employs both of these functions. In the footsteps of poets such as Derek Walcott, Brand embraces both her African and her European heritages. She makes use of conventional English, but she challenges its restrictive and oppressive qualities: by writing from her own experience of race and gender, by reawakening the spoken languages of West Indian and African peoples, and by subtly altering the meanings and usages of words. She shows that conventional English is inadequate to describe every experience and that language is malleable and may be shaped and changed to fit individual demands and desires. Brand exemplifies the ideal of working within the tradition to change the tradition.

The bulk of Brand's poetry is written in conventional European English and employs conventional poetic forms. Of the three poets, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and M. Nourbese Philip, Lynette Hunter writes: "Politically the most assertive . . . Brand is poetically the most traditional" (269). Brand has chosen Canada as her home and has chosen to assimilate the language of her poetry to the conventional English of Canada. In her poem "No Language is Neutral," Brand's speaker admits: "I listen good for what white people call it" (*No Language* 29). Ironically, this statement is made in unconventional English and goes against the very idea it expresses. Canadian practices do, however, affect Brand's writing. The intrusion of Canada into Brand's work and consciousness is clearly articulated in the untitled poem on pages 67 and 68 of *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun.* In this poem, the names of

Canadian provinces and cities interject at intervals into the text: for example, ". . . gin in the union hall in winnipeg you wonder if / anyone sault ste marie lost luggage . . ." (67). At times, the place names, like "winnipeg" in the preceding statement, are integrated into the text; at other times, as with "sault ste marie," they merely interrupt the text. These interruptions show how Canada has penetrated Brand's poetry and consciousness, and how Canada is inserting itself into Brand's language. The adoption of Canadian content, however, does not guarantee Brand access to the Canadian literary and cultural centre. As Arun Mukherjee points out, "being 'just Canadian' is a privilege only white people enjoy in Canada" (101); and for the ethnic minority individual, Joy Kogawa claims that "a Canadian is a hyphen" (qtd. in Redekop 96). As a West Indian-Canadian, Brand faces the dilemma of choosing either to be true to her West Indian heritage and remain on the margins, or to assimilate to the mainstream society of which she cannot be a part. Brand admits the difficulty of writing from the margins as an exile:

> . . . language
> seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other
> argued hotly for going home. (*No Language* 31)

Though writing in conventional English opens up Brand's poetry for a larger audience, it also requires her to write in a language that, due to its gender- and racially-biased structures, has the potential to restrict, oppress, and silence her.

Though English is Brand's only language, it is not hers by ancestral right. The appropriation of the language of the colonists by colonized peoples is common,[2] but that language never truly becomes their language. Trinh Minh-ha writes: "Stolen language will always remain that other's language" (20). This distance from the language in which they

write causes a tension in the writings of West Indian poets. In "A Far Cry From Africa," Derek Walcott asks:

> . . . how choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
> Betray them both, or give back what they give?
> How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
> How can I turn from Africa and live? (*Collected* 18)

Brand faces this same dilemma. The conventional English that Brand uses denies her African heritage, and yet this English is a part of who she is. Though the language oppresses her African experience and identity, it expresses her experience and her identity as a Canadian. By using and altering this language, Brand refuses to accept its oppressive qualities and shows that English includes her. She refuses to be restricted by the conventions of language. Sylvia Söderlind, invoking both literal and metaphorical "margins," notes that, in literary culture,

> the margin needing justification is the one that wants to efface all differences, make all pages nice and square, with no jagged edges. The margin needing *no* justification is the one that recognizes differences; some words are short, others long, and if we attempt to make them all fit in order to justify--that is, control-- the margin, then we do violence to these differences. (98)

Perhaps Brand is not writing from the margins towards the centre; perhaps she is writing within the margins to expand the margins to include herself and others who are not in the centre and to force the margins into the space occupied by the central text. Or perhaps by using conventional English, she is already writing in the centre and changing the centre so that the distinctions between the centre and the margins are blurred. The language that has been

used as a weapon against her she has grasped and in turn used as a weapon with which to defend and assert herself.

This weapon, however, does not always work. Because Brand has a dual cultural and linguistic heritage, of which one branch is African-Caribbean, conventional English is not always adequate to describe her experience. In poem "XV" of *Land to Light On*, Brand admits that English is still for her a "tongue of conquest, language of defeat" (95). Brand frequently makes use of non-English or unconventional English words in her poetry and prose (as will be examined later in the chapter) because conventional English words are either inappropriate or unavailable to describe her experience. In the untitled poem on page 22 of her autobiographical work *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, Brand's speaker states:

> I have discovered
> how much we are
> how many words I need.

Conventional English does not contain enough words to describe the West Indian exile's experience, nor does it contain words adequate to describe the female experience. Like the French feminists, Brand believes that speech may be differentiated by gender and that male control of language has resulted in the gendering of certain words; meanings have been sharpened and imprisoned, as Brand notes in "Epigram 30" of *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*:

> *Ars Hominis / the manly arts*
> Since you've left me no descriptions
> having used them all to describe me
> or someone else I hardly recognize
> I have no way of telling you
> how long and wonderful your legs were;
> since you've covetously hoarded all the words

such as 'slender' and 'sensuous' and 'like a
young gazelle'
I have no way of letting you know
that I loved how you stood and how you walked,
and forgive my indelicacy,
your copulatory symmetry, your pensile beauty;
since you've massacred every intimate phrase
in a bloodletting of paternal epithets
like 'fuck' and 'rape', 'cock' and 'cunt',
I cannot write you this epigram. (28)

In order for English to become her mother-tongue, Brand must alter it sufficiently to make it adequate and appropriate to express her whole self. The language must become personal, or the speaker will fall silent.

As Philip so deftly shows, silence can indicate either power or weakness. The refusal to use words that have oppressed shows power. Fred d'Aguiar, in "The Cow *Perseverance,*" claims: "*Silence is perseverance*" (67). Silent resistance can sometimes be more powerful than a multitude of words. But silence can also be weakness and loss. Deborah Cameron claims that "Silence is a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out, making contact" (5). While silence may resist, it does not assert; it does not say anything. People of colour and women need to gain a voice in order to assert their identity, their humanity. Through her poetry, Brand begins to overcome the silence, but shows that it still exists. In "No Language is Neutral," Brand uses ellipses to show how women have been silenced: "In / another place, not here, a woman might . . ."; "stilled . . . hush" (*No Language* 33). Again in "Canto VI" of *Primitive Offensive*, Brand uses ellipses to indicate how a Black man has lost the ability to speak in the face of the white gendarmes:

but I am a . . .
the man with whistle

but I am a . . .
but I have money . . .
what . . . you're touching me
look at my face
I am a . . .
corpse. (34)

In the face of the oppressors, the oppressed lose their voice. Words no longer have meaning when their power has been stripped away. And silence becomes a loss; not only the loss of language, but the loss of history and identity as well. The power of naming in particular is a vital aspect of language use. Naming one's self and one's world forms the basis for inserting oneself into culture and history (Philip, *Showing* 81), and the basis for creating and re-membering the self. Through her poetry, Brand has reclaimed language for herself, challenging its restrictive qualities, and has reclaimed the right to name her identity and her experience. Dale Spender claims that "once women begin to change these definitions upon which patriarchal order is based and by which it is made meaningful, they also begin to move outside their muted condition" (131). As patriarchal order is based upon a hierarchy of humans according to colour as well as gender, West Indians and other minorities also need to challenge the systems governing conventional English in order to gain a voice.

One of the ways in which Brand, Harris, and Philip have asserted their voices is by writing from the body. For Brand, the black, female body, though often denigrated and abused, is a site of beauty and celebration. As noted earlier, writing the body is a key aspect of French feminism. Hélène Cixous writes that "woman must write herself" (334), because, "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her" (337). Women are reclaiming words and transforming them to fit the female body.

The female body is no longer an object to be written about only by men; women can now write about their own bodies.[3] Though not as prolifically as Harris and Philip, Brand has embraced the female body in her poetry. She praises the sexuality of the woman, talking about her "vagina" and her "breasts" (*Primitive Offensive* 9), and of her sex-related fluids "blood and milk" (*No Language* 16). Brand also celebrates the aging female body that men devalue. In "Old I" and "Old II," she celebrates "stretch marked legs," "flabby breasts," and "limp dead skin" (*'Fore Day Morning* 15). These images, which men have made derogatory and abusive, Brand makes positive and complimentary.

Brand's embrace of the female body, however, does not indicate an acceptance of traditional female roles. Adrienne Shadd writes: "female slavery has as much to do with women's reproductive capacities as their labour" (62). Unfortunately, this is not only the case in conditions of slavery. The reproductive capacity of women is their most prized aspect in the eyes of patriarchal society, as Brand notes in her poem to revolutionary Grenadian Phyllis Coard:

> you should have known
> the first thing they would jump on
> was the skill of your womb. (*No Language* 9)

Once again, Brand upsets the conventional standards and praises the woman who refuses to reproduce:

> I never fell into the heaviness of babies. Thank god. Not
> me and no baby. Baby, in my bony lap? It can't hold no baby
> there. I is not nobody mother. (*Land to Light On* 53)

Brand also refuses to accept the role of the wife: "I want no husband" (*Chronicles* 26). She chooses instead to join the "women who love women" (*No Language* 46). Brand's

lesbianism, though moving her even farther into the margins of patriarchal society, enables her to move outside the demands that the traditional stereotypes of women impose. She claims:

> . . . I only know now that my
> longing for this old woman was longing to leave the
> prisoned gaze of men . . .
> . . . Old woman, that was the fragment that I caught in
> your eye, that was the look I fell in love with, the piece of you left, the lesbian
> the inviolable, sitting on a beach in a time that did not
> hear your name or else it would have thrown you into
> the sea, or you hear that name yourself and walked
> willingly into the muted blue. (*No Language* 48, 50)

By moving from the gaze of men, Brand is finally able to see and accept herself and to develop her voice.

Writing the body and altering physical stereotypes is not solely connected to gender identity. For the Black woman, skin-colour plays as vital a role in this process as gender. The heritage of slavery and racial oppression from which Brand emerges classifies her according to the colour of her skin. Even in Canada, with its policy of multiculturalism, Brand experiences racism. As John Ball writes: "for Brand, the fact of white power in an increasingly pluralistic city turns Toronto into a site of racism, suffering, and black subordination" (9). Though racism, like sexism, will always exist, Brand chooses to show through her writing that black skin is beautiful. She calls upon the "naked skin woman," the black-skinned woman to "run / legs to silence" (*Primitive Offensive* 57), to use up all the language in the expression and praise of her blackness and femaleness until there are no words left for the white male to use against her. Brand chooses to write consistently about being black.[4] Neither race nor gender is more important than the other to Brand's perception

of her own identity. In "Bread Out of Stone," Brand relates:

> I remember a white woman asking me how do you decide which to be--Black or a woman--and when. As if she didn't have to decide which to be, white or a woman, and when. As if there were a moment that I wasn't a woman and a moment that I wasn't Black, as if there were a moment that she wasn't white. She asks me this because she sees only my skin, my race and not my sex. She asks me this because she sees her sex and takes her race as normal (172).

As a Black woman, Brand, like Philip, embraces both her race and her gender, and it is from this doubly-marginalized position that she writes.[5]

Writing from the body of a Black woman, Brand writes the geographies of body and language through the form and content of her words and phrases. Certain aspects of conventional English must be restructured to fit the shape of her body. She describes female speech as "warm, watery syllables, a woman's tongue so like a culture / plunging toward stones not yet formed into flesh, language not yet made . . ." (*No Language* 36), also uniting the female body with the geographical seascape. Chamberlin notes that "certain ways of seeing are only possible through certain ways of saying" (264). There must also be some unity between what is said and how it is said. As Himani Bannerji writes: "Life . . . does not allow for a separation between form and content. It happens to us in and through the language in which it actually happens . . . In another language, I am another person, my life another life" (32). At times, Brand uses the form of her words or phrases to support their content. In "Dialectics VII i," for example, Brand's refusal to accept the stereotypical female

role of mother is given in unconventional English: "I is not nobody mother" (*Land to Light On* 53). By using unconventional English, Brand challenges the standards of society that control and are controlled by patriarchal English through both the form and the content of her statement. *Winter Epigrams*, however, serves as the best example of Brand's unifying of form and content. "Epigram II" states the reason for the choice of the epigram, an old form of poetry employing strict economy of language:

> winters should be answered
> in curt, no-nonsense phrases.
> don't encourage them to linger. (5)

The coldness of the Canadian winter and culture does not always allow the loquacious language of the Caribbean to flourish: "Language sounding like full kisses in warmer climes / tighten on the lips of this winter" (*Winter Epigrams* 12). The openness of the language of the Creole continuum in the West Indies is restricted to a more standardized language in Canada. Speech is frozen in the cold north, and this cold can only be described in these short, frozen statements, form and content working in unison.

Brand also brings the geographical landscape and seascape, like the Canadian winter, into union with the geography of the language and the geography of the body. The unity of the geographies of the landscape and the seascape with language can be seen, as explained above, in *Winter Epigrams*. Unifying the physical shapes of the landscape and the seascape with the body is another way of bringing form and content together in a political statement. Catherine Nash notes that there are "connections between landscape and the female body, between political control of landscape and territory and the control of female sexuality" (230). Brand also makes these connections. In "hard against the soul I," she writes: "this is

you girl, this cut of road" (*No Language* 6), and in "return II," she describes the sea "swelling like a big belly woman" (*No Language* 15). For the Black, West Indian woman, the colonial heritage is not merely one of stolen territory, but of stolen bodies and language as well. Just as Africa and the West Indies were dismembered, so too was the identity of the enslaved peoples and their languages.[6] By writing these three aspects into her poetry, Brand reclaims her land--both Caribbean and Canadian--, her body--both gender and race--, and her language--both mother- and father-tongue.

Brand's African and Black West Indian heritages require the use of a different dialect or dialects. Brand uses dialect sparingly in her poetry, but its use is effective. In *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, Brand uses dialect to condemn the white oppressors. An old man screams his defiance of the landowner in "La Souffriere:" "you thief poor people arrowroot money" (16). Using "you thief" instead of "you steal" names not only the deed but also the person; "poor people" instead of "poor people's" shows that it is not only the people's money that is being stolen, but also their lives. Brand's use of dialect is easily understandable as English and, though it is perceived by the establishment as a lower form of English, Brand shows that it is indeed an equally valid and much more versatile form. In fact, as Lloyd Brown points out, "in the large linguistic scheme of things English itself is another dialect" (109). English becomes english in West Indian poetry.

Not all of Brand's words are understandable to the reader lacking a background in African-Caribbean culture. Brand also reclaims her African heritage by reawakening various African images. Images such as the "juju" belt and "houngan" (*Primitive Offensive* 58, 59) are introduced without explanation, in the process of abrogation. These intrusions of

untranslated words into the English text show that the English have never entirely assimilated the African peoples. Mary di Michele writes that "the untranslated word from another language is like an outcrop of bedrock, more physical in its texture than the rest of the text, thick and indecipherable, it is the body of the poet asserting itself into the English mind" (105). The "knowledge of skin" in which Brand writes keeps the remnants of African language alive, even if they be few.

The language of the people for whom Brand, Harris, and Philip write, however, is an oral language that is not always easily converted into written form. Derek Walcott writes:

> Today, still in many islands, the West Indian poet is faced with a language he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language and because the closer he brings hand and work to the precise inflections of the inner language and to the subtlest accuracies of his ear, the more chaotic his symbols will appear on the page, the smaller the regional dialect, the more eccentric his representation of it will become, so his function remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols, or alphabet of the official one. ("Muse" 13)

Brand attempts to translate the common language into the official alphabet not only by using dialect and non-English words, but also by translating the very sounds of the language that, though perhaps having no meaning on their own, add to the meaning of the text.[7] In "Canto IV" of *Primitive Offensive*, Brand articulates the sounds of Caribbean music: "ta ta ta, dip, de de bop" and "rip de de bop" (24). Music plays an important role in the works of West

Indian poets, as it remains one of the few aspects of their African heritage that has been preserved. The articulation of the actual sounds of the music rather than a mere discussion of the dance in "Canto IV" provides the reader with an audible voice that completes the visual image. These sounds are the "Oshun song" (23) for which Brand's speaker prays. The sounds are the rhythms of her thoughts. Brand also articulates the sounds of spoken language in "Canto X" of *Primitive Offensive*: "Dya dya dya dya dya dya / ah h h hah!" (47). These words that are not words, repeated and interspersed in the text, are the woman's sounds made against the man. Male control of the official language has prevented its sounds from hurting him or standing against him, so Brand creates her own sounds that will rebel against the man because he does not know nor own them. "Orality has become a marker of female difference" (Godard 89). In the oral tradition, as June Callwood claims, the women were the primary voice. For Black women particularly, Brand claims, oral history is more authoritative than written history, because writing is "owned" by white males ("No Burden" 31). Laura Ngobo also claims that women are very present in the African oral tradition but ignored in the written (81). Thus, as Kirsten Holst-Petersen notes: "The immediate effect on women of the change from oral to written forms of literary expression was that they lost the role they had in traditional literature" (133). By translating the oral into the written, the role of the woman and of the Black man has been revitalized.

In post-modern form, Brand also employs irony as a means of turning conventional English against institutionalized oppression. Though irony is a common trope for many white writers as well, for non-whites, Arun Mukherjee writes, "irony is racialized speech, emerging from the social, economic, historical and cultural differences and disjunctions between whites

and non-whites" (70). Linda Hutcheon calls this *irony oppositional*, which she defines as "the subversive doubling within and against the dominant that can be seen especially in the work of those artists concerned with issues of class, race, gender, sexual preference, and post-colonial identity" (*Splitting* 8).[8] This post-modern type of irony contains signs that not only designate specific things, but that also create dual meanings (Hutcheon, *Splitting* 10). This irony is the irony of "otherness" that characterizes post-colonial and feminist writings and that is essential in the politicized writings of poets like Brand, Harris, and Philip. The complexity of post-modern irony enables it to serve various functions: for example, protest against oppression (as in Harris's "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case," which protests against racism in the Canadian police force); acknowledgement of "otherness" (as may be seen in Philip's *Salmon Courage*); use of a displaced target to comment on certain issues (such as Brand's commentary in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* on exploitation and colonization in Grenada that Hutcheon claims is also about Brand's experience in Canada (*Splitting* 143)). Irony, according to Hutcheon, can also be used to effectively alter conventional English: "Irony is thus one way of creatively modifying or even twisting the language so as to signal the 'foreignness' of both the user and his/her experience" (*Splitting* 81). Through irony, poets like Brand, Harris, and Philip are able to subvert the dominant white male discourse and to challenge the patriarchal structures that control language and culture. Brand, following Canada's example of subtle racism, uses subtle irony to question and rebel against the traditionally accepted innocence and superiority of the whites. In "on eavesdropping on a delegation of conventioners at Barbados airport," Brand writes:

you great virtues
nourished on third world slaughter
you clean hands gesturing up the price of gold. (*Chronicles* 20)

Brand ironically presents these "great virtues" and "clean hands" that the Americans pride themselves upon having, for the perception of these symbols is maintained through the oppression of people who oppose American politics, evidenced here by the American invasion of Grenada, about which Brand is writing. As well, in "Canto XI" of *Primitive Offensive*, Brand uses the term "innocent missionaries" (51); however, the missionaries who accompanied the colonizers to the Caribbean were anything but innocent. These missionaries, extolling the virtues of Christianity, were willing to kill to force the people to deny their African beliefs and accept the doctrines of Christianity. Earlier on in *Primitive Offensive*, Brand mentions De Las Casas, who "drained / a continent of blood / to write the Common Book of Prayer" (38). These phrases--"you great virtues," "you clean hands," "innocent missionaries"--become powerful weapons against institutionalized racism and beliefs of racial superiority. The words of the colonial master have been appropriated by the slave and used ironically against him.

Another method Brand employs to challenge the validity of conventional English, and at times the existence of any meaning in language, is repetition, often within slight variation. According to Hutcheon, this ironic repetition with difference is a form of parody that can function both as laughing ridicule and as serious criticism (*Parody* 6). Hutcheon claims that "parody is a weapon against marginalization: it literally works to incorporate that upon which it ironically comments" ("Shape" 226). One of Brand's best examples of parody is found in *Primitive Offensive*. In "Canto VII," Brand discusses the oppression and atrocities against

Blacks in the Caribbean by the European colonizers. Finally she states:

> describe 1492
> describe 1498
> describe 1502
> describe 1590
> describe 1650
> describe, describe, describe
> some one
> describe. (41)

This repetition with the changing dates negates the meaning of time and parodies conventional European and American views of history. These dates, so honoured in European history, have an entirely different significance for the descendants of enslaved peoples. Ironically, these times cannot be described by the slave who has "lost words" (41), and the descriptions given by the colonizers bear no truth. History is fiction and fact is meaningless. Brand also uses repetition powerfully in "October 19th, 1983" from *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*. The lines

> Maurice is dead
> Jackie is dead
> Uni is dead
> Vincent is dead
> dream is dead
> lesser and greater
> dream is dead in these antilles (40)

are repeated variously throughout the poem. Once again, this repetition makes time meaningless; the who and when do not matter, only death matters. Blacks have been needlessly killed throughout the history of the Caribbean. By repeating this news of death, Brand brings the tragedy of the Black West Indian into history. Placed against the poem "On american numeracy and literacy in the war against Grenada" (*Chronicles* 49), where

casualties in war are counted only by the number of Americans killed, naming the Black dead repeatedly inserts the history of the Black West Indian into world history in the language of the oppressor. Those whom the Americans believe have "no real need for life" because they have "no words for death" (*Chronicles* 49) have appropriated the words for death and shown the value of their lives. Brand artfully uses conventional English to suit her own needs of expression.

Brand's transformation of conventional English begins at the basis of language--the word. By changing the connotations of words, associating words of disparate meaning, and comparing and contrasting words in striking ways, Brand alters the very meanings of the words and the reader's understanding of the English language. Homi K. Bhabha writes: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (37). According to Cameron, this lack of fixity is inherent in the structure of sign systems: the signs are arbitrary, as they designate not things but concepts, and the images signified by the signs can each mean many things (19). Although the conventional meanings of the signs, in this case the words, are dominated by existing power structures, the words themselves are malleable, their meanings fluid, particularly for the poet writing from a dual cultural and linguistic heritage.

Brand alters the connotations of several words in her poetry. Words such as "sugarcane" take on dual meaning:

> my tears still flow
> through tracings of thick molasses fingers
> and pain as sweet as burnt sugarcane. (*'Fore Day* 13)

The sweetness of the sugarcane is not lost, but it becomes bittersweet in the pain of the history of slavery. The sea also takes on a dual connotation. John Ball states: "The sea as site of the middle passage--of death and survival in slave ships, and of death by drowning for those thrown overboard--has special associations with West Indian history and ancestry" (16). But the sea is also a part of the Caribbean landscape to which Brand feels such a close connection. It represents both prison and escape, as Brand shows in "return II" from *No Language Is Neutral*:

> From here envied tales of water swing out
> and back playing sometimeish historian
> covering hieroglyphs and naming fearsome artifacts,
> That is not footsteps, girl, is duenne!
> is not shell, is shackle. (12)

Walcott also addresses this dual nature of the image of the sea in comparing the African tribes to the tribes of Israel in "The Muse of History":

> And yet it is there that the epic poetry of the tribe originates, in its identification with Hebraic suffering, the migration, the hope of deliverance from bondage. There was this difference, that the passage over our Red Sea was not from bondage to freedom, but its opposite, so that the tribes arrived at their New Canaan chained. There is this residual feeling in much of our literature, the wailing by strange waters for a lost home. It survives in our politics, the subdued search for a Moses. (9)

The sea that brought the African to the prison of the New World also provides the only way of escape.

One of Brand's most common uses of changed connotation, which is also used by Harris and Philip, is of the word "yellow." Yellow is generally, for white people, associated with either brightness or cowardice. For Brand, however, yellow is a colour of oppression. In "Jackie," yellow is the colour associated with the death of Grenadian revolutionary Jacqueline Creft:

> yellow in your eyes . . .
> . . . you were in
> yellow too. (*No Language* 14)

Yellow is also associated with the demands for a girl to be feminine: "the / strophe of a yellow dress sat me crosslegged in my / sex" (*No Language* 49). For the Black, yellowing is a paling, and Brand uses yellow to indicate a loss--of life, of individual identity--and a prison. White also takes on a negative connotation in Brand's poetry. The white roads of the Canadian winter become "the heart of darkness" and Canada itself becomes a "white hell" (*Land* 73, 74).[9] White comes to symbolize the coldness both of the Canadian landscape and of the Canadian people. The white snow freezes the Blacks and the white people give an icy reception to foreigners of a darker race. Interestingly, white both freezes ("snow") and burns ("hell") in Brand's poetry, implying the severity of Canadian society and its refusal to compromise and accommodate difference.

Words are not only changed by altering or reversing their connotation, but also by associating them with words with which they are not normally associated. In "Canto VII" of *Primitive Offensive*, Brand associates an interesting list of words:

> De Las Casas, the viceregent
> drained
> a continent of blood
> to write the Common Book of Prayer . . .
> . . . De Las Casas
> ecclesiastic nostrils
> scent for gold
> scent for sweat
> scent delicate
> keen . . .
> . . . he counts me on his chaplet
> for Ferdinand and Isabella
> for Napoleon the little emperor
> for virgin mother, child, and canon. (38-39)

Politics, religion, and the literary establishment are combined in one firm condemnation of white European domination and conquest. Jesus Christ becomes no better than the ruthless Napoleon, each seeking to bring all people under his control. The literary canon is no less oppressive, including only the works of those who abide by the unstable standards governing it. This is not a canon into which Brand desires entrance: it denies her, so she denies it and the powers that control it.

Comparing and contrasting words can also suggest changes in meaning and value. Brand questions the power of words by comparing bullets to words:

> I wonder if
> the bullets
> will touch me
> as gently as words do
> I wonder if
> their rhythm
> will be
> as easy to come by. (*'Fore Day* 31)

Brand subtly points out that words, like bullets, have the power to kill: that just as the "rhythm" of bullets is painful and unnatural, the "rhythm" of a foreign language slides

awkwardly off the tongue and must be forced. In "Epigram 17" of *Winter Epigrams*, Brand compares snow to a rapist: "snow is raping the landscape" (6). Because Brand associates the Black female body with the landscape and snow with the cold, subtle racism of Canadian culture, this rape of the landscape by snow symbolizes the rape of the Black female identity by Canadian culture. Brand hints here at the forced assimilation of Canadian beliefs and behaviours by minorities and shows how painful and demoralizing this assimilation can be. Brand uses contrast instead of comparison to challenge standard associations in "Every Chapter of the World XV" from *Land to Light On*. The dichotomies Brand lists here are standard:

> . . . poor, rich
> black
> white
> female
> male, (103)

but the order and placement of the words negates their usual values. First of all, the three words generally given the lesser value and thus the second place, particularly in the male/female binary, are moved into the first place in the binary--poor, black, female--asserting their validity over rich, white, male. Secondly, the placement of the final two binaries separated into individual, free-standing components, deletes their opposition. Each becomes a word which stands on its own merit, each of equal value. Black, white, female, male--there is no difference. By this ingenious placement of contrasting images, Brand equalizes the binaries and asserts the humanity of people of all economic situations and races and of both sexes.

Brand not only transforms the meanings of words in her poetry, she also, like Harris and Philip, alters the ways in which words are used. In some cases she merely transposes noun and verb: for example, in "I have been losing roads Ii" of *Land to Light On,* Brand writes: "doorway cannot bell a sound" (3), where "bell" becomes a verb. But, as Lynette Hunter points out, "you can indeed transpose noun and verb, speak 'incorrectly'; but you are still wrapped up in verbs and nouns" (278). Brand does not attempt to escape language, however, but to use it as needed to suit her purposes. In "'Fore Day Morning," Brand does evoke the power of silence in the line: "you will hear my silence" (*'Fore Day* 7). Through this statement, Brand, like Philip gives voice to her silence. She shows that the refusal of language can be as powerful as its use, although she clearly believes in the power of words. She also uses words interestingly in "Soweto" from *'Fore Day Morning,* writing the dialect phrase: "youth man died" (28). Using the word "youth" instead of "young," aside from simply rendering the phrase in dialect, suggests that it is not merely this one man who has died, but that youth itself is dying--that the youth are being killed or forced to grow old before their time. Replacing this one word intensifies and expands the message. Meaning is enhanced by Brand's choice of a dialect phrase in "Canto III" of *Primitive Offensive* as well. In this poem, Brand writes: "I have a big stick for alone" (10). "Alone" takes on the semblance of a person, an enemy to be fought off. Use of the conventional "being alone" here would suggest rather the need for a defense against other beings during the state of being alone. Brand's wording indicates the need to stave off the possibility of being alone. Finally in "Return II," escape and return, the two conflicting ideals for the exile, are considered interestingly in the phrases "swimming to away" and "back to there" (*No Language* 15).

Both "away" and "there" become specific and yet indeterminate places. The escape of the exile may be to anywhere, as long as it is "away" from "there," as Brand also addresses through the central character in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, who, as the title indicates, is searching for that elusive "away" where she may find escape. And yet the unnamed "there" is a destination as well, to which some part of the exile will always want to return. Both "away" and "there" are no longer indicators of a leaving, but have now become indicators of a going to. Brand shows that often the line that strikes the reader as odd can be most effective.

Brand's final method of transforming language is through the reclamation of stolen words. Not only does Brand resurrect old African words and reawaken old meanings of words, but she also reclaims words that have been monopolized by the white male. She reclaims the words that describe the female body; even the word "cunt" (*Land to Light On* 4), though used to indicate a male attack against a Black woman, is a viable word in her poetry. She strips away the negative power of the derogatory names, such as "cunt," which have been used against her by simply saying them herself. Donna Bennett writes that "the need to name into existence should not be opposed to the need for unnaming; it is better to understand these as complementary sides of any postcolonial development" (171). Brand discusses conventionally white male topics such as war and politics, particularly in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*. Every word is available for her use and she does not hesitate to use them all. Most importantly, she names herself--Black, woman, lesbian, poet.

Brand's poetic voice is one of assimilation and defiance. "Doubleness," Linda Hutcheon writes, "is the essence of the immigrant experience. Caught between two worlds,

the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space" ("Introduction" 9). Brand's literary space lies between Africa and the Caribbean and Canada, and her language lies somewhere between the oral and the written. She has appropriated the English language and transformed it from a father-tongue to a mother-tongue. J. E. Chamberlin has written: "The English language no longer belongs to the English" (67). Through poets like Dionne Brand, English has begun to be opened up to include the experience of people from every culture. The tradition is being changed from within.

Notes

[1] The biases of language affect all oppressed people, whether it be gender or racial bias. Feminist Dale Spender writes: "Language is not neutral" (139). West Indian Derek Walcott also claims that "no language is neutral" ("Midsummer VII" in *Collected Poems* 490). And Brand reiterates this phrase: "No language is neutral" (*No Language* 22).

[2] The power balance in colonial societies privileges the language of the colonizer over that of the colonized; thus, as Mackey writes: "Many of the new nations have even found it expedient to adopt the language of their former colonial overlords as their national tongue, and a few have even adopted two such languages" (155).

[3] Writing the female body demands a cleansing of the words used to describe the female body. As Susan Crean writes: "In the beginning there were no words for women, only borrowed words; now we are making them over to suit our bodies and sensibilities; now we are writing in our own language" (90).

[4] Brand writes consistently about being black, but resents being confronted with her race. She reports, for example: "An interviewer on the CBC asks me: Isn't it a burden to have to write about being Black? What else would I write about? What would be more important? Since these things are inseparable, and since I do not wish to be separated from them, I own them and take on the responsibility of defending them. I have a choice in this" ("Bread" 173).

[5] Brand asserts her womanhood and blackness as vital aspects of her identity. Paradoxically, she does not want others to identify her by her race or gender. This strategic essentialism creates problems in dealing critically with Brand's works, which so strongly emphasize her race and gender.

[6] See Brand's comparison of the "dismembered woman" with the "dismembered continent" in "Canto III" of *Primitive Offensive*.

[7] Speech sounds are a vital part of writing in dialect. Brathwaite claims that in West Indian speech, "the noise that it makes is part of the meaning" (*History* 17).

[8] Linda Hutcheon divides post-modern irony into ten categories: *Irony Rhetorical* (for emphasis); *Irony Humorous* (poking fun); *Irony Self-deprecating* (self-aggrandizement); *Irony Self-protective* (saving face); *Irony Evasive* (hypocrisy, deception); *Irony Elitist* (exclusionary); *Irony Demystifying* (critical, judging); *Irony Oppositional* (writing against the dominant discourse); *Irony Corrective* (satire); *Irony Corrosive* (aggressive, cruel, disdainful) (*Splitting* 5-9).

[9] Brand uses the very phrases of the white man against him, for example, in turning Joseph Conrad's "heart of darkness" into a description of Canada rather than a description of Africa.

"I Dream of a New Naming": Claire Harris

In her review of Harris's *Translation Into Fiction* and *Fables From the Women's Quarters* Dionne Brand writes that "Harris is precise and has an envious command of language" (222). Harris exemplifies the role of women, especially in the Caribbean, in using language as a means of gaining independence[1] and of transforming conventional language. Harris claims that "our challenge as poets is to restore the sense, the ability to perceive, of the real self, to use language, image and form in original ways in service of this goal" ("Poets in Limbo" 118). For Harris, this involves taking conventional English and converting it to a form that tells the truth of her experience and identity. She believes that in order to convert language she must "take the word and cleanse it" ("I Dream" 122): cleanse it of its racist and sexist biases and restore the words to their pure form. While Harris does exhibit some degree of assimilation to conventional English, she does not adhere to the conventionality of Brand's and Walcott's writings. She consistently disrupts the English language, challenging its meaning and fixity; by her choice of words and the way in which she presents the words, both geographically on the page and syntactically, Harris shows that no one person or group of people owns a language, but that language is an ever-changing tool that readily adapts to the tongue of the user. J. E. Chamberlin notes that "West Indian poets make us acutely aware of the ways in which language resists the enticements of 'standard,' not to say universal, ways of seeing and saying" (137). Claire Harris certainly alters her reader's way of thinking. She attempts to free language from the control of white males and to transform English into one of many englishes, of which hers is an equally valid part.

Harris acknowledges, in her works, the difficulty a Black woman has writing in a language that has been so vehemently claimed by members of another race and gender. In "Gazing at" from *Drawing Down a Daughter*, Harris's speaker tells her unborn daughter:

> Daughter there is no language
> i can offer you no corner that is yours unsullied
> you inherit the intransitive
> case Anglo-Saxon noun
> she thinks of Africa
> she should have insisted on Yoruba. (24)

But, as the African languages have been essentially lost, English is the only language possible. It is the language Harris has both chosen and been forced to adopt. Not only does English deny her race, but it also sees her gender as other. As Cameron says, "Women are alienated in society because they have to learn a male language" (25). But when women attempt to use this language, males refuse even to accept this voice. In "Translation into Fiction," Harris vividly portrays the effect on the woman of the male refusing her a voice:

> . . . her father
> barring the doorway like Moses while the husband he chose
> weeps and returns the babies to her swelling belly one by
> one where she lies alone giving birth again and again. (*Translation* 16)

The woman's language, represented by the babies, is continually refused by the male. Her authority is still dependent upon acceptance by the white male establishment, though the rejection of the woman's words does not stop their continual flow. The woman will continue to speak, even if she is ignored.

White, male control extends beyond language to include society as well. Like the sociolinguists Whorf and Sapir, Gareth Griffiths believes that "language and system are mutually sustained; the one supports and perpetuates the other" (16). As long as males control

language, they will also control the standards of society. Harris acknowledges this aspect of the power of language in her poetry also. In "A Black Reading," she comments:

> those who owned
> the words
> shaped this . . .
> . . . the word making substance. (*Translation* 31)

The standards of conventional language are thus also able to affect the ways in which Blacks are portrayed. In "Choosing Control," Harris tells Monty Reid that "you never describe the African reality, only an English speaker's perception of that reality" (37). And again in "It is a matter," her speaker claims: "And I am sure the story was told as I have written it because that is how the books say African-Caribbean tales are told. Your books, I mean" (*Drawing* 58). The Black has not only been denied a voice, but has also been denied a history and the right to name his/her own experience. In order for Harris, as a Black woman in a society dominated by white males, to assert herself and make herself heard, she must develop a language that does not and cannot deny her, a language that is "black in its most secret self" (*Fables* 40).

To develop her own mother-tongue, Harris has had to begin with the father-tongue, to deconstruct and re-member it. Living in an English-speaking country necessitates using the English language. John Edwards notes that "assimilation *has* characterized much of past minority group behaviour" ("Language" 280). Some degree of assimilation is necessary in order to survive and thrive in a society. For the writer, especially, to have his/her work recognized, the work must be understandable to the majority of the population, even if this means using a language that interrupts the poet's own voice. Harris betrays the intrusion of conventional English into her consciousness in "The Witness," in which the capital "P's" of

pPeter p pPetrus begin to encroach upon the language of the witness: "His jacket flaPPed and wraPPed itself . . ." (*Travelling* 69). Harris does write, for the most part, in conventional English and she acknowledges the need for some centralization of language:

> but consciousness insists
> now the vaulting car
> moves
> from its corner
> of the world
> to hang full centre. (*Travelling* 51)

For Harris, writing from the margins to the centre requires employing the tools used at the centre. Harris's comment that "consciousness insists" also suggests that conventional English has become a part of her consciousness. Derek Walcott insists that West Indian consciousness is indeed English and that this aspect of the self cannot be ignored: "Our bodies think in one language and move in another, yet it should have become clear . . . that the manic absurdity would be to give up thought because it is white" ("Twilight" 31). The tension of writing in a language that is and is not her own enables Harris to embrace its positive qualities while being aware of its weaknesses and of the need for change.

Conventional English is not adequate at all times to describe the exile's experience. In "It is a matter," Harris writes: "I doubt the ability of anyone to relate a series of facts accurately" (*Drawing* 58). The culture and gender biases of language have disabled it from being a conveyor of truth.[2] The language that has denied her existence cannot, without change, now express it. Words fail to carry the weight of the burden that Harris requires them to bear. Assimilation to the English language does not erase the differences between races and sexes:

> test the frail bridge
> of words

> you will find it anchors us
> islands
> in our separateness. (Harris, *Travelling* 15)

Harris does not attempt to make language unite. She uses language to assert her difference. The language may be a poor conveyor of truth, but is her chosen means of expression. In "No God Waits on Incense," she writes:

> . . . this is not the poem i wanted
> it is the poem i could . . .
> . . . this poem
> leaves no wound. (*Conception* 52)

And yet, Harris does powerfully handle the English language and through her poetry effects change at the very core of white, male thought.

One of the first steps in changing the English language, as the consideration of Brand's work has shown, is reclaiming its words. This reclamation involves a deconstruction of conventional English to find the bases of words. To do this, the writer must find a language that expresses every aspect of his/her identity. In "A Grammar of the Heart," Harris writes:

> . . . and as if she had absorbed
> the word into her blood thus it began to flower
> in silence. (*Conception* 52)

The language, though socially constructed, must become a part of the self. Gareth Griffiths claims that "the writer must appropriate the discourse to his own use" (20). Once the language has been appropriated, then the writer can begin to change it until it is no longer an appropriated language but the writer's own. Harris uses English, but she also changes it and searches for better means of expression; she searches for "*the actual names of things*" (*Translation* 36) to replace the names given by the white, male establishment. Harris, as a poet, attempts to achieve the validity of the old storyteller in *Drawing Down a Daughter*: "She

has no truck with this simple form, with its order and its inherent possibility of justice. Though she speaks the language, she knows the real world where men wander is full of unseen presences, of interruptions, of rupture . . . Her tale is a celebration and a binding of community . . . There is something of the ancestral, of Africa in this" (52). Harris digs to the roots of speech and to her ancestral roots and emerges with a purified language suitable for the Black woman.

Womanhood is one of the most vital aspects of Harris's poetry. She does address racial issues as well, but it is her position as a Black *woman* that comes out most strongly in her writing. Motherhood and the matrilineal heritage play prominently in Harris's work. Harris addresses both the joys of motherhood and the restrictions this role places upon the female poet. Seaforth writes: "Traditionally, men writers have had only one job; women writers have had two . . . A woman with family commitments must steal time to write, feel guilty about neglecting duties, and have that guilt reinforced" (135). *Drawing Down a Daughter* provides a powerful example of the tensions of being a female writer. In this work, Harris's speaker, who is a poet and pregnant, speaks to her unborn daughter of the challenges facing a woman while at the same time trying to continue her writing. Although the pregnancy seems to inspire her writing, it also interrupts when, for example, she needs to stop writing for the "656th bathroom break" (34). She acknowledges that she fits one male stereotype of a woman-- "Daughter we are barefoot and pregnant / in the kitchen" (28)--but she is also willing to fight against her husband for what she believes to be best for her daughter. And the kitchen is no longer the site of oppression or confinement, but becomes a place for the woman to be free.[3] Her story to her daughter on the history of her female ancestors begins in the kitchen

with the words "Child this is the gospel on bakes" (44). The recipe for bakes is also a recipe for raising a daughter. The kitchen becomes not "the woman's place," but the woman's chosen place, a place where the woman may escape the control of the male.[4]

Harris, like Brand, also reclaims the female body. Betty Friedan writes that "the only way for a woman, as for a man, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own" (344). But for a woman writer to reveal her self, she must write her self. Harris not only incorporates pregnancy and motherhood into her poetry, but she also writes female sexuality. In "An Ancient Pain," Harris presents a man who shapes breasts from snow, while the woman lies inside "her breasts her own" (*Translation* 59). Harris does not allow man to control the female body; she reclaims it for the woman. She also embraces the aging woman as she considers old age and death in *The Conception of Winter*. As will be seen in the consideration of Harris's use and transformation of language, Harris's embrace of the female body and writin

claims: "A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor . . . will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language" (342). Harris's understanding of herself and thus the near-incoherence of her language progresses through her works to reach its most open point thus far with her latest work *Dipped in Shadow*, where the words scatter across the page and go through various metamorphoses to become entirely new words with new meanings.

Harris's transformation of language begins with her choice of words and images. Harris incorporates even strongly patriarchal ideas and alters them to suit her purposes. Biblical allusions, for example, are quite frequent in her work, especially in *Drawing Down*

a Daughter, despite the fact that conventional interpretations of the Bible are inherently sexist against women. Harris, however, chooses Biblical passages from *The Song of Solomon*, which praise the Black woman. In "Dreams swarm," she quotes: ". . . now I shine / black as the light before the dawn" (13), and in "Gazing at," she records: ""Yes you are black! and radiant / the eyes of many suns have pierced your skin'" (24). Instead of rebelling against patriarchal interpretations, Harris often chooses passages that do not oppress her.[5] She shows that even at the root of the most basic patriarchal text, there is a hidden meaning that celebrates the Black woman, exposing also the polyvocality of the Bible as a collection of many texts. It is this hidden meaning in texts and words that Harris presents.

Harris questions the accepted meanings and connotations of some words simply by the context in which they are presented. Images such as the knife and the whip become symbols not only of slavery but also of any type of racial oppression: "In our dealings with You the knife and the whip in one form / or another have been a constant" (*Translation* 25). In "One Must Talk About Everything" from *Translation Into Fiction*, Harris extends the symbolism of the knife to include male violence against women: "in his knife he begins, to prick her a necklace" (22). The colour yellow takes on a negative connotation for Harris as well, as it becomes the colour of exile: "I grow yellow in exile" (*Translation* 42) and suggests a fading of Black identity for the West Indian outside of the Caribbean. Harris also upsets the idea of white superiority in "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case" by presenting "pale hands soiling the black flesh" (*Fables* 40). Harris does not exhibit inverse racism, but she acknowledges the racist attitudes of white society and turns their ideals inside out to expose the beauty and humanity of Black-skinned people.

Not only does Harris subtly alter the connotations of words and images, she also challenges meanings through punning and wordplay. Harris's adept use of the English language allows her to have fun with it and challenge its severity both light-heartedly and seriously. In "She stands" from *Drawing Down a Daughter*, for example, she splits "cocktail dress" into "cock tail dress" (74). This simple change dramatically alters the implications of the image. The dress becomes not a symbol of sophistication, but now a symbol of sexuality meant to attract "cock" to "tail." Wordplay can also be more serious, as Harris evidences in "A Grammar of the Heart" from *The Conception of Winter*. In this poem, she writes: "I would abort but lack the courage of saline or / solutions" (65). The saline solutions would, of course, be necessary for an abortion but the insertion of the "or," which is separated by space from the rest of the text, suggests a greater issue. The issue is not an actual abortion in the usual sense of the term, but a consideration of ending the mother's life, a sort of reverse abortion, for which more than saline solutions is necessary. The speaker has neither the means nor the ability to perform this task for her suffering mother. The choice of words Harris employs here intensifies the emotional aspect of the poem. Her play on the words "saline solutions" and on the word "abort" suggest a reversal of roles--the daughter become the mother to her mother and the old mother reduced by age to a helpless child.

As with Philip, words take on dual meanings in Harris's hands. Lynette Hunter writes that words acquire "double meanings . . . in the mouths and hands of people from different societies" (275). Cultural and sexual differences affect the way life is perceived, and language is affected by the way in which things are seen. Harris uses capitalization and parentheses in *Dipped in Shadow* to give new meanings to old words. In "Nude in an Armchair," Harris

capitalizes the "O" in "yOurs" to show that although the father claims the two children on the first Saturday of every month, the children still also belong to the mother--always "yOurs" and both "yours" and "not yours." The bracketing of the "y" in "(Y)our" in "Sister (Y)our Manchild at the Close of the Twentieth Century" also suggests a shared interest in the boy who becomes both "yours" and "ours." The most abundant use of these methods to give dual meanings to words is found in "Woeman Womb Prisoned." Harris's new meanings in this poem challenge racist and sexist attitudes. Harris uses the word "*s(k)in*" (79) to address the white racist attitude that sees Black skin as a sin to be punished and hated. The sexist attitudes of the father in "Woeman Womb Prisoned" are expressed in his denunciation of his wife, the mother, as a "whore." Harris, however, writes "whore" as "WhOrE" (74), to show that the woman's position is one of "woe" and that her husband's hatred is undeserved. The power of language is also made apparent through Harris's rendering of the word "wor(l)ds" (73), which suggests that it is words which make worlds and vice versa. As the sociocultural approach to language states, language and culture act upon one another to create meaning; just as the form and content of the words in Harris's poetry work together to question and create the meanings.

Harris also incorporates dialect and oral speech sounds into her poetry. For the most part, Harris uses dialect when her speaker is addressing a child or children. For example, in "It is a matter" from *Drawing Down a Daughter*, the old storyteller uses dialect to tell the stories to the children. The use of dialect in this instance also coincides with the oral story-telling tradition. The mother in *Drawing Down a Daughter* addresses her unborn daughter in dialect: "eh! eh! Girl chile" (12). Her use of dialect is part of the legacy she passes on to her

daughter, giving her child a part of the language of her West Indian ancestors. As noted in the discussions on Brand and Philip, sounds are also an important part of West Indian speech. In "'I Dream of a New Naming . . .'" Harris writes that "most people writing Trinidadian dialect translate the sound of the language" (125). In *Drawing Down a Daughter*, the mother sings jazz songs to her daughter, a musical style that incorporates both words and oral sounds: for example, "oueeeeeee ouououououeeeeeee babey babey" (11). The sounds of the outside world are incorporated as well. The train, for example, is expressed with the sounds: "cheups! heave roll heave cheups! roll" (10) and the baby in the womb makes watery sounds:

> rush suck shu-a lap shua-shuashu
> a shu-a shua suck shua-rush shu-a ashuash
> shuash shu and ash. (11)

These sounds are not only translations of the oral aspects of the demotic; they also represent a form of language called motherese, which is the language used by mothers when speaking to their children.[6] Harris's poetry expresses the woman's words, songs, thoughts, and perceptions through a language that she adopts, deconstructs, and recreates.

Non-English words also make up part of Harris's vocabulary. Harris uses both abrogation and appropriation in her use of non-English words in her poetry. Harris's denial of conventional meanings has already been considered, but her use of untranslated non-English words also contributes to her abrogation of English. In "Burying the Hero" from *Translation Into Fiction*, Harris uses Spanish words such as "un hijo" (54) and "un desparecido" (55) that she does not define (although the similarity of these words with English words make their meanings fairly simple to guess at). Harris, however, also uses Spanish words--"*falta*" (54), "*de las madres locas*" (55), "*note preocupes*" (55)--for which she does

provide definitions, using the principle of appropriation. The extent of Harris's appropriation of English is even clearer in the definitions provided for seemingly conventional English words used in "Seen in Stormlight" from *Fables from the Women's Quarters*. Harris defines "papers" as "degrees, certificates, ladder to power and the western modern Nigeria" (56), and "scales" are defined as "incredible traffic jams bring movement to a standstill--very creative drivers--the death toll is unbelievable" (57). The common Western definitions for these words do not match the African meanings that Harris is invoking in her images of Nigeria, as the two cultures use different *langues*. These slight changes in language and the simple inclusion or exclusion of a definition show how closely the processes of abrogation and appropriation work together and how Harris deftly applies both to her poetry.

One of Harris's most interesting poetic achievements is her prolific use of the geography of the page. Harris uses the placement of the words on the page to enhance the message of her poems. One way in which she does this is by placing factual accounts of events alongside fictional poems. This method can be found in "Where the Sky is a Pitiful Tent," "Seen in Stormlight," and "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case" from *Fables from the Women's Quarters*. In "Where the Sky is a Pitiful Tent," Harris balances the testimony of the oppressions and murders of Guatemalan Indians as told by Rigoberta Manchu (translated by Patricia Goedicke) with a poem about oppression, death, and resistance. The factual account gives validity to Harris's poem, while the poem personalizes the events and emotions recounted in the history. The inclusion of both a part of the poem followed by part of Manchu's testimony on each page, rather than being disruptive of the reading of either part, allows the reader to see more clearly into the effects of the atrocities conducted and

perpetuated by the Guatemalan government and, as Harris does not specify place in her poem, to see that these atrocities are not isolated to Guatemala but may happen to any oppressed people. "Seen in Stormlight" has a poem followed by factual prose commentary of Harris's encounters with Africa on each page, showing how life impinges on and feeds creativity. "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case" is also personalized, for Harris reflects on the newspaper account, given on the opening page, by remembering a similar event from her childhood that, however, had a very different ending. Harris challenges the so-called facts of the newspaper account by following the report of the policeman's innocence in arresting the young black girl with the actual facts of the case that pronounce the policeman's guilt and racist attitudes. The inclusion of the factual events that inspire the poems testify to the truth of fiction.

The inclusion of different types and placements of poems attests to Harris's poetic skill, as well as her grasp of postmodern techniques. Harris alternates between prose paragraph poems, shorter lined poems, and prose stories. In *Travelling to Find a Remedy* and *Fables from the Women's Quarters*, she intersperses imagist haiku throughout her work as well, which are justified to the bottom right of the page. These haiku provide potent visual images to accompany her poetry. The length of the lines in *Fables from the Women's Quarters* also coincides with the place from which Harris writes: "In the women's quarters she uses fat lines, the mouth full and poetic, the woman spilling the full descriptions of that woman's place where women control the language of events . . . The corresponding response on the opposite page is delivered in the presence of a 'he' . . . The lines are thinner, as the woman does not own them and does not own the place" (Brand, "Review" 223). In "Towards

the Color of Summer" from *The Conception of Winter,* which presents the summer holiday of three aging Black women, Harris places several of her poems in boxes, positioned at various angles, to resemble postcards. These "postcard poems" give the poem the feel of a travelogue and translate the visual images of the holiday into words.

As Brand attempts to expand the margins from which she writes, Harris uses the margins of the page to refuse conventional poetic form, alternating between left-justified, right-justified, and centred poems. Playing with the justification, Harris is able to present more than one poem or strand of thought on the page. She uses multiple strands to comment upon one another and show the polyvocality of her voice, as well as the difficulty in determining absolute truth. In "Towards the Color of Summer," Harris counterposes two strands of a poem (*Conception* 34-36). The first strand is left-justified and describes the shopping escapades of the three women, buying everything because "it is cheaper here" (36). The second strand is right-justified and in italics and considers death and dying, as the women have just learned of the death of a friend. This second strand, however, also includes the statement "*we think everything / is cheaper here*" (36); this connection with the counter-imposed first strand suggests a devaluation of life, perhaps due to the nearness of a place of slavery that Harris notes:

> the blue rope sways on this bridge
> rough-hewn wood and darkness take
> her in rope grey sudden coils
> around her the boat rocking
> she rocks planks groan
> her stranded face opens on a ladder
> leading below deck waves slap against
> this slave ship rising. (31)

The slave body was no more than an object to be bought and sold, like the souvenirs these women buy. Counter-imposing the two strands intensifies the cheapening of life by slave traders and continued by racists who denigrate Black life. "Nude in an Armchair," from *Dipped in Shadow*, also incorporates multiple strands of thought (21-23). The central part runs down the centre of each page and takes the form of a courtroom interrogation of a woman whose husband has abused her and her children. On each side of this interrogation, in italics, Harris presents the woman's thoughts and her perceptions of the courtroom. Her thoughts reveal her despair and help explain her inability to articulate her position to the court. They show the silent voice of the woman that screams in her head but will not and cannot leave her mouth. These silent thoughts, this silencing, complete the husband's oppression of the woman by denying her a voice.

At times, Harris superimposes multiple strands of thought so that there are both one and two strands running simultaneously. In "Woeman Womb Prisoned," for example, Harris isolates certain words of the text that read with the rest of the text, but also read on their own. On page 89, the words isolated to the right of the text make their own statement:

wyman
a poem
fashioned
in
compliance
to
a world
a definition. (*Dipped* 89)

When read with the rest of the text, these words suggest female assimilation to male control and male language. Isolated, however, they suggest the possibility of a world, a definition, a poem fashioned by a woman, such as those Harris so successfully creates.

Harris's most adept use of the geography of the page, however, is in shaping the words and poems to fit the content. At times, she places the words or even the letters of the word in such a way that they exemplify the meaning. In "By Thy Senses Sent Forth," for example, the words--

flaring flaring flaring

(*Translation* 16)--flare across the page from margin to margin. Also, in "Coming to Terms," the words--

and blue
trails
across
black
skies

(*Travelling* 48)--trail across the page. In *Drawing Down a Daughter*, Harris uses the very letters of the words to enhance the meaning. The letters to "dance" and "sing" unite at the "n" and dance over the page:

d
a c
n e
s
i g

(25). Harris also has letters fall down the page into "anearthsolidcomforting" (*Drawing* 81),[7] this combined word itself exemplifying its solidity.

In *Drawing Down a Daughter*, Harris shapes entire poems to add to the meaning of the poem. On page 16, the poem about the child in her womb is shaped like a pregnant belly:

for
her
self
for
the
child
roped
in
her
womb
she
refuses.

The following page, which addresses the woman's naked body, is shaped in the form of two breasts:

She rises
going
out to
day that existed
in/ and
before
her body
her body
day's
memory
of it illusive
imprint
waiting for
her nakedness.

The positioning of "her body / her body" at the centre of this shaped poem is also significant, for it shows, as do these shaped poems themselves, that the female body is central to the poems in *Drawing Down a Daughter*.[8] Harris uses this is used to replace commas for lists--as in "cries/ commands/laughter" (*Travelling* 46)-- and to divide words-- "with/out" (*Drawing* 77) and "wo/men" (*Drawing* 85). The refusal to use the slash to consistently operate in the same function is exemplary of Harris's grammar. She refuses coherence, often by refusing to

complete sentences and by avoiding punctuation altogether. In several places, Harris ends her sentence with ellipses, even ending the poem "Nude in an Armchair" in this manner: "I have not practised my L . . ." (*Dipped* 31). The ellipses also indicate a silence, as do the empty parentheses in *Drawing Down a Daughter* (39). Open-ended brackets, as are found in *The Conception of Winter* (44) and *Dipped in Shadow* (60, 66, 67) also indicate unfinished thoughts. The lack of punctuation in some poems allows for multiple readings and sometimes blurs the meaning. In "Nude on a Pale Staircase," for example, the line "a memory of blue bottles encrust swollen lips" (*Fables* 12) is vague. It is form to further her reclamation of the female body. She shows that it may be both talked about and visually shown by women, without shame.

Word choice and the way in which the words are placed on the page are only two of the ways in which Harris transforms language. She also uses syntax to challenge and convey meaning. Harris does not employ conventional English punctuation in her poetry. One of her most common punctuation marks is the slash, which unclear whether the "encrust" refers back to "a memory," which in position it would seem to, or to "blue bottles," with which it agrees in number. This incoherence of thought, reinforced by the multiple strands of thought running through her poems, does not indicate a lack of poetic ability. This incoherence is a deliberate act, a refusing of white, male standards. It may also be a reflection of postmodern thought and of female sexual multireferentiality, as Luce Irigaray notes: "woman 'touches herself' all the time . . . for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two--but not divisible into one(s)--that caress each other" (350). The woman

is multiple within herself and this multireferentiality reflects itself in the openness of her language.

Word usage is another syntactical way in which Harris, like Brand and Philip, plays with language. Nouns and adjectives become free to operate as verbs; for example, "i gentle my fist" (*Translation* 57). The structure of the sentence is also upset by the omission of certain words: "a station from to leave / safely" (*Conception* 47). Harris even leaves the space in this line where the "which" should fit. She not only excludes words that would be normally necessary for clarity, but she includes words and phrases that intrude into the text. In "The Open Ones Carry," Harris writes:

> *to risk the eyes we*
> *kill over Winnipeg*
> *clouds of disease*
> *deliberately.* (*Translation* 67)

"*[O]ver Winnipeg / clouds of disease*" intrudes into the text, but it also expresses one way in which the killing is taking place, thus enhancing the text. Also, in "Dreams Swarm," the "&" intrudes and adds to the text:

> what she is doing here is / &
> important. (*Drawing* 15)

The "&" stresses both the existence and the importance of the woman's work.

Harris's final and most powerful transformation of language is to change the actual words themselves. She breaks words apart, fuses words together, invents new words, and puts words through a process of metamorphosis. In "The Testimony of pPeter p pPetrus" from *Travelling to Find a Remedy*, Harris uses the process of word-splitting to indicate the meaning of the word. The word "riP / Ped" (63) is actually ripped in two between the "p's" and the two

halves are placed on separate lines. Harris also splits the word "women" into "wo/men" (*Drawing* 29) to indicate both women and men. This splitting is very significant, for it shows how Harris has created a new mother-tongue that uses the female pronoun as the universal. This creation of the female universal can also be seen in her use of the invented word "herstory" (*Drawing* 75), which is commonly used by feminists, to replace "history." The words Harris combines, such as "anearthsolidcomforting" (*Drawing* 81), as has been shown, are also used to add to the meaning. In *Travelling to Find a Remedy*, Harris invents entirely new words to open three of her poems and provides definitions for each. The first is "A(ME)," which she defines as "of very limited or narrow outlook or scope" (34); the second, "V(O)FR" is defined as "to limit or bound in respect of space" (35); the third repeats the first word "A(ME)," but is given the definition "not subject or susceptible to change" (36). By these three definitions, Harris shows that the same word can have various meanings and that different words can have similar meanings.[9] P. A. Roberts states that in West Indian culture "language is maintained as a flexible human instrument" (132). This flexibility of language is evidenced very clearly in Harris's poetry.

Dipped in Shadow shows Harris's ultimate metamorphosis of words. In "Woeman Womb Prisoned," Harris takes various terms for the female through a series of metamorphoses that articulate the oppression of women. Her first transformation is of the word "woman"(65). "Woman" becomes "wyman," "uman"--showing woman as "not quite human" (79)--, "owman," "whoman"--indicating a lack of identity--, "wyfman"--showing the woman in the role of wife--, and finally "woeman""--the suffering woman. Harris also plays on the French word for mother "mère" by reaching it through a transformation of "mare"--a female horse--

and "mer"--the sea (67). Both of these words— "mare" and "mer"--associate the woman with nature, a common male connection, in which woman is seen as wild and uncontrollable. For Harris, however, these images are also positive, for she seeks to create a language and a society in which women are not controlled; one in which women are free to determine their own voices and words.

Harris has an extraordinary grasp on the English language and its potentiality. She uses English in its conventional form but gradually moves away from its conventions until she has developed a language of her own. Harris has said in an interview with Monty Reid: "I testify to the way things are for some people. For some without voice" (Reid 41). She speaks not only for herself, but for all oppressed peoples who find that conventional English binds their tongues. Gareth Griffiths claims that colonized people "need to make English into english, an appropriated and indigenized language which embraces variety as a positive and not a negative quality" (15). Claire Harris has certainly embraced variety and created an english that frees the tongues of those who have not had a voice.

Notes

[1] Women have always maintained a vital role in the oral tradition and in the language of oral societies. Selwyn Cudjoe writes: "The language and speech of Caribbean women had always played an important part in contesting slave and colonial domination and so was an important tool in the struggle for liberation" (25).

[2] The idea that language can convey truth has been strongly contested by feminists as well as other language and literary theorists. Aritha van Herk writes that "the real question of

power resides in language. Language has split the fictions of men and women . . . Language is inadequate in terms of truth/fact, and especially in terms of women's experience" (283).

[3] The kitchen, as noted in the discussion on feminist theories, has been reclaimed by women. Jennifer Blend claims: "In spite of, or perhaps because of the women's liberation movement, we have claimed the kitchen as our own once more . . . It has become our place to be free" (Blend 287).

[4] Harris's interest in the kitchen as a site of female independence, freedom, and creativity is evidenced in her co-editing the collection *Kitchen Talk: Contemporary Women's Prose and Poetry* with Edna Alford. This collection focuses on the kitchen as the centre of women's activity.

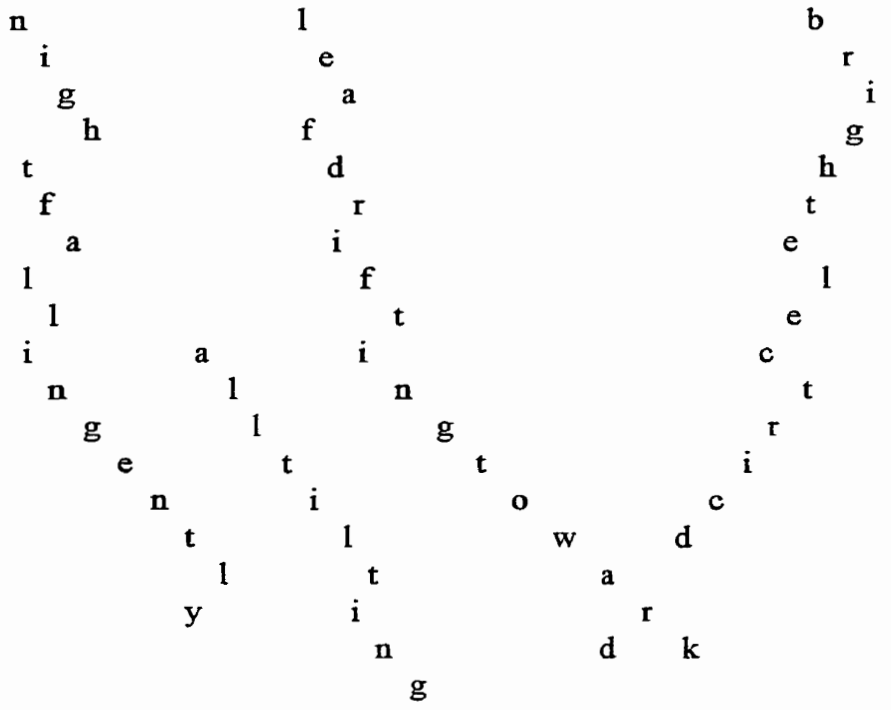
[5] Harris does acknowledge the negative aspects of the Bible as well. In "Woeman Womb Prisoned" from *Dipped in Shadow*, for instance, she addresses how a young woman is blamed for her father's sins using a passage from the Bible:

> ***. . . and***
> ***the younger arose went unto her father he perceived***
> ***not when she lay down nor when she arose.*** (76)

The father has the daughter repeat these words after he has raped her, using the Bible to excuse his sins in ultimate patriarchal illusion.

[6] Motherese also represents a unique conception of the mother-tongue, as it refers specifically to the language used by mothers in speaking to their children. Particularly in Harris's writing, but also in the speech sounds and songs of Brand's and Philip's poetry, the mother-tongue is characterized by this type of speech pattern. Even the songs which these poets transcribe are reminiscent of lullabies. Motherese is a very powerful form of language, as it is the first language which the child experiences; however, it is also, like the demotic variants of English, a type of underlanguage which the patriarchal culture either devalues or ignores.

[7]Harris often uses the geography of the page to physically shape her poems to fit their content. For example:



(*Drawing* 81).

[8] Note also that the black type makes these shaped poems take the form of a Black woman.

[9] Note also that the words are not written in conventional English form. The middle word "V(O)FR" is basically unpronounceable using the English sound system.

"The Many Voiced One of One Voice": Marlene Nourbese Philip

"English / is a foreign anguish" (Philip, *She Tries* 58). For the person who acquires conventional English as a second language, especially when the ancestral language is gradually lost, English becomes both a father- and a mother-tongue. It is the language of oppression but it is also the only language in which the speaker can operate. Using this language to articulate one's existence becomes the challenge facing those whose very existence is denied by that language. Marlene Nourbese Philip writes: "the challenge for me was to use that language, albeit the language of my oppression, but the only one I had, to subvert the inner and hidden discourse--the discourse of my non-being" ("Managing" 296). Philip not only uses English, but also changes it. She combines conventional English with the sounds and rhythms of Africa and the Caribbean to produce an english that is truly a mother-tongue. She seeks to find "the forget and remember of root words" (Philip, *She Tries* 86), to take language back to it roots and re-member it as the language of her people. Philip has even renamed herself, as Sanders notes: "A 'New World' writer, Nourbese Philip calls herself; Nourbese is Benin and means 'marvelous child,' a name she chose as an invocation of ancestry, passage and journey" (82). Philip renames her experience in the name of her fathers and her mothers. In "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue," she writes:

> in my mother's mouth
> shall I
> use
> the father's tongue
> cohabit in strange. (*She Tries* 82)

This union of father- and mother-tongue is indeed strange, but it is the only way in which Philip can express her being. She must use conventional English, while challenging,

deconstructing, dismembering, and re-membering it. As Thomas writes: "she must attack the word even as she uses it" ("Caliban's" 74). She must break the silence of her ancestors and give voice to the hidden inner self. Philip rebels against the racist and sexist biases of language through subtle changes and violent disruptions, to produce a new language that is comfortable and polyvocal. A forced tongue is painful; Philip compares it even to rape when she titles one piece: "**Mother's Recipes on How to Make a Language Yours or How Not to Get Raped**" (*She Tries* 67). Philip combats this pain by making English her language, by transforming this "foreign anguish" into a mother-tongue.

For Philip, one of the most vital steps in transforming English into a language of and for her people is to reunite the word and the i-mage.[1] H. Nigel Thomas writes: "One way of regaining or refashioning a mother tongue is to create a language vested with one's memories, one's history, one's own story" ("Caliban's" 73). The words must come to articulate the specific experiences they are being used to describe. Philip claims that "the challenge is to re-create the images behind these words so that the words are being used newly" (*She Tries* 21). Linguistic signs are not fixed.[2] Cultural differences create differences in the interpretation of the sign, i.e. the word. What the non-white, non-male must do is to wrest the control over language away from patriarchal culture and re-invest words with the meanings experienced by that "other." Philip writes: "What Black writers have wanted to voice is not the voice and experiences of the white person, but the reality of Black people, from the point of view of Black people" ("Disappearing" 212). Conventional English is inadequate to describe the experiences of the Black woman; word and i-mage, or, in Barthes's words, signifier and signified, have been separated. The images behind the words

have been controlled by lingering colonial hegemonies. The signs which define the relationship between signifier and signified in language must, as Barthes claims, be stripped of their specific meanings and reinvested with cultural and ideological meaning. This English must be appropriated and made to "bear the burden" of the Black woman's experience. "If language is to continue to do what language must do; if it is to name and give voice to the i-mage and the experience behind that i-mage--the thing we conceive in our hearts--and so house the being, then the experience must be incorporated in the language and the language must begin to serve the recreation of those i-mages" (Philip, *She Tries* 20). Philip uses various strategies to bring her experience to bear upon language and thus to reunite the word and the i-mage. It is only through this union that English can become Philip's own language.

Assimilation and rebellion are both necessary to transform a father-tongue into a mother-tongue. Philip's cultural heritage is both African-Caribbean and European-Canadian. Her European-Canadian heritage is dominant because it is the culture that possesses the power, while her African-Caribbean heritage has been buried by years of oppression and denial. This imbalance in power makes the reclamation and articulation of the African-Caribbean that much more important. There is no doubt that the European-Canadian background will be acknowledged, but this alone denies half of Philip's identity and experience. Philip writes that "it is *in the continuum of expression* from conventional to Caribbean English that the veracity of the experience lies" (*She Tries* 18). The tension between conventional English and the demotic, between European-Canadian and African-Caribbean culture, creates the meanings and the i-mages of the African-Caribbean living in western society. Philip must balance the "code of Victoria" with the "code of mama" (*She*

Tries 40). This involves choosing a language that is neither conventional nor demotic but somewhere in between. Philip articulates this as:

> a choosing--
> one breast
> neither black
> nor white. (*She Tries* 33)

The dual heritage creates a duality of language and thus, as Bhabha terms it, a hybrid mother-tongue, that cannot be repressed if Philip is to voice her whole identity.

The power that lies behind conventional English does make it oppressive for the non-white, non-male. Racial and gender divides have made English into a language that expresses the being and superiority of the white male and makes everyone else an "other," a "non-being." It is also the language that has been forced upon societies colonized by European/American cultures. Philip writes that "to speak another language is to enter another consciousness" (*She Tries* 15). Total assimilation to conventional English, either by choice or by force, results in the total assimilation to western consciousness and a complete loss of the African-Caribbean consciousness and identity, according to Philip. A forced language, such as conventional English is for colonized peoples, though it may become the only language, will always feel unnatural and painful. In *Looking for Livingstone*, Philip's speaker moves through various countries and is forced to assimilate to the language of each country she enters: "none of my earlier knowledge was of any use to me--all I had was the language of the CESLIENS" (38).[3] This acquired language, however, feels unnatural and dangerous to the speaker who desires to use her own language: "using my own language, I don't know why, but it felt safer than their language" (36). An acquired language can be

used, and used powerfully, as Philip demonstrates in her poetry and prose, but it must also be used carefully. Philip cautions:

> . . . love it, but if the word
> gags, does not nourish, bite it off--at its source--spit it out
> Start again. (*She Tries* 67)

Philip creates language thus, by starting again at the roots of words and the images underlying words and building from this a mother-tongue.

The dual heritage of European-Canadian and African-Caribbean ancestry also allows for a polyvocality of language. Philip, like Brand and Harris, is able to use both conventional English and dialect, as well as other non-English languages that are easily assimilated by the colonial/post-colonial writer. Derek Walcott notes that post-colonial writers "know that by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it . . . and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" ("Muse" 1). The key is to change the language from within, to embrace its positive qualities and reject and change its negative aspects. It involves a moving between languages: "The post-colonial text, by developing specific ways of both constituting cultural distance and at the same time bridging it, indicates that it is the 'gap' rather than the experience . . . which is created by language" (Ashcroft, et al 65). The "gap" is created by language, but it also must be bridged by language. For Philip, the only language that can bridge this cultural "gap" is one that moves between cultures, and this language requires more than one voice. In "The Habit of: Poetry, Rats and Cats," she writes: "And so poetry . . . must be completed by the multiplicity of voices" (*Genealogy* 118). The complexity of the West Indian exile's experience cannot be expressed in one voice but requires "the many

voiced one of one voice" (Philip, *She Tries* 36), a language that is equally multiple and complex.

Many of Philip's poems are written entirely in conventional English; others, such as "Nostalgia '64" and "Six Pickney" from *Thorns*, are completely in dialect; while still others, like "Blackman Dead" and "Oliver Twist" from *Thorns*, combine conventional English and dialect. In "Oliver Twist," for example, Philip writes:

> there's none that can compare
> with a tow row row row row row
> of the British grenadiers and
> little black children
> marching past stiffly white bloused
> skirted blue
> overalled and goin' to one big school
> feelin we self look so proper—
> a cut above our parents you know,
> man we was black
> an' we was proud
> an' massa day done,
> we goin' to wear dat uniform
> perch dat hat
> 'pon we hot comb head
> jus' like all dem school girls
> roun' de empire. (6)

Arun Mukherjee says of Philip's "Oliver Twist" that "Philip's use of children's rhymes along with the island dialect are part of her ironic strategy of ridicule and rejection of an arrogant, imperial culture" (76).[4] The use of dialect is a simple, yet very effective way of inserting the African-Caribbean body into the English text. Conventional English has become part of the African-Caribbean consciousness, but its power is not absolute. As noted in the discussion on creolization, the African and Caribbean languages also affected and altered the English

language. Philip writes: "In turn the Body African--dis place--place and s/place of exploitations inscribes itself permanently on the European text. *Not* on the margins. But within the very body of the text where the silence exists" (*Genealogy* 95). This silence is the historical silence of the African-Caribbean existence and it can only be overcome by re-awakening the lost languages and inserting them into the text. In "Ignoring Poetry," Philip notes:

> . . . One fashions a tongue
> split--two times two times two
> into
> poly &
> multi &
> semi
> vocalities. (*Genealogy* 121)

The very language has been split, divided, broken, so that it may be re-membered on a foundation of many and various voices.[5]

The many voices of the African-Caribbean are not always easily converted into written form. The West Indian poet faces the challenge of converting an oral language into a written one, as Philip notes: "The challenge is to find the written form of the demotic language" (*She Tries* 23). Philip achieves this by both writing in dialect and, like Harris, by articulating the sounds of the language, such as "arrrrrrrrgot" in *She Tries Her Tongue* (73). The orality of Philip's language is further accentuated by her prolific use of alliteration, especially in her earlier works. In *Thorns*, for example, "Poisson" is very alliterative--"laughter lolling loudly," "residue redolent" (3)--, as is "Unnamed"-- "squalid squares," "noose of nothing nudges," "sensuously swinging" (17). The use of alliteration is common in conventional English poetry as well, but for Philip its naturally rhythmic patterns also echo

the orality and musicality of African-Caribbean speech patterns. In "Black Fruit (II)," Philip writes:

> . . . forming you
> the word
> that has to be spoken
> to be understood. (*Salmon* 17)

Philip's translation of oral speech into written form does not detract from its orality. She sufficiently alters conventional English to make it not only look but also sound distinctively different.

Formulating this language of the African-Caribbean often necessitates, as well, the use of specific African-Caribbean phrases. In "African Roots," Philip notes that "some experiences demand a faithfulness to the language in which the experience happens" (*Genealogy* 202). Grace Nichols also notes this need: "Some Creole expressions are very vivid and concise and have no equivalent in English" (284). Philip's dialect poems are evidence of this necessity, as are the other West Indian words and phrases Philip intersperses throughout her poetry. Oftentimes, Philip abrogates English by incorporating undefined Caribbean terms, such as "poui," "bouganvilla," "croton," and "blackpudding breakfasts" (*Salmon* 10). These unexplained images provide the most potent memories for the African-Caribbean exile, for these are the images and words that the white male does not own. The process of abrogation seems to be one that Philip developed from appropriation of conventional English, for in her earlier work *Thorns* she provides a glossary of the Caribbean and African words used in her poems to make the poetry more accessible to the western reader.

The ability to appropriate a text or to translate an experience from one language into another does not belie the fact that altering the language detracts from the original meaning. In "Universal Grammar" from *She Tries Her Tongue*, Philip translates one specific phrase into six different languages:

> *O homem alto, louro de olhos azuis esta a disparar*
> *El blanco, rubio, alto de ojos azuls está disparndo*
> *De lange, blanke, blonde man, met der blauwe ogen, is aan het schieten*
> *Le grand homme blanc et blond aux yeux bleus tire sur*
> *Der grosser weisse mann, blonde mit bleuen augen hat geschossen*
> *The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is shooting.* (67)

Thomas writes that "it would appear that the translation into five other languages . . . of the shooting statement serves two chief functions: to demonstrate how a concept translates badly from one language to another, and to show that, linguistic difficulties aside, the end product is the same" ("Caliban's" 73). The language in which a statement is made may or may not affect the meaning of the statement. Oppression of Blacks and women may be exposed in any language, even in the language of the oppressor.

The oppressor, the white male, is a very powerful opponent. For Philip, patriarchal attitudes not only control language, but also control the standards of society and the contents of history. In *Looking for Livingstone*, Philip's speaker comments that "Power--that is the distinguishing mark of a fact" (67), and that "a fact is whatever anyone, having the power to enforce it, says is a fact" (67). Using their power, racist and sexist institutions create facts that perpetuate white, male superiority and virtually deny the existence of women and people of other races. The denial of Black existence may be seen in the news reports Philip recounts in "The News at Nine": "footnote one African also died / in ten thousand different ways"

(*Thorns* 30), which bears similarities to Brand's "October 19th, 1983" and "On american numeracy and literacy in the war against Grenada" from *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*. The refusal to acknowledge the deaths of these many Africans also denies the value of their lives. The actual numbers of the dead are counted only in terms of how many white males died. In "Blackman Dead," also from *Thorns*, Philip shows how this devaluation of Black life and the rejection of any variation from patriarchal standards is used to further deny the Black person the right to live and is used to make the death of a Black negligible:

> how he deserved to die
> because he didn't learn our ways
> the ways of death
> repeat
> after me
> blackman dead. (37)

In *Looking for Livingstone*, Philip uses the metaphor of silence to show how the patriarchy further devalues Black life by making it an object to be studied and owned: "They told me the silences were best kept there where they could be labelled, annotated, dated, catalogued" (57). For the Black woman, this objectification is even more complete, for this suggests that the woman's body has also become the property of the white male. Philip writes: "The space between the Black woman's legs becomes. *The place*. Site of oppression" (*Genealogy* 76). Male control of the outer space impinges on the inner space of the Black woman, as it does on all women and on all Blacks. The danger is in this impingement taking over the inner space. Philip wants her readers to "understand how difficult it is to resist becoming what the dominant culture defines you as" ("Conversations" 258). The risk is even greater in a society in which the language is so strictly controlled by one dominant group.

Patriarchal control of conventional English and its negative effects on women and racial minorities is undeniable. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin claim that women "share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of those oppressors" (174). Language is racialized and gendered. It is the most powerful means of oppression and, as Philip states, it is "the first casualty in war" (qtd. in Williamson 18). It is through language that white males control fact and perception. Cameron writes: "Language is a weapon, used by the powerful to oppress their subordinates. But why shouldn't the weapons of reaction be appropriated by the other side?" (1).

Because language, as Sapir and Whorf note, has the power to change the way a person sees the world, patriarchal control over culture is dependent upon its controlling language. Thus the assertion of the Black female voice is also dependent upon wresting linguistic power from the institutions that dominate language. Nowhere is this power more evident than in the literary community. Of Philip, Harris, and Brand, Lynette Hunter writes: "Acutely aware of how language, narrative, and poetics contain them as writers within the institutional structures that wield power, all are concerned to find a way to position themselves with regard to that power" ("After" 257). Acquiring this power and control is a difficult task, as Philip herself notes: "The unravelling of the stereotypical image is always discomforting for the mainstream, and so the dominant culture fight back" (*Showing Grit* 51). Philip's poem "You Can't Push Now" from *Salmon Courage* vividly shows the male's refusal to accept the woman's words--"You can't push now" (34)--and the woman's refusal and inability to stop pushing, supported by other women represented in the text by Isis and

Ta-urt: "For the Goddess' sake push / Now" (35). This push refers to the physical "push" of childbirth, the "push" of words out of the woman's mouth, and the "push" of radical politics against the status quo. The Black woman will speak, whether this patriarchal society is ready to hear her or not. And she will wrest words away from the dominant culture and reinvest them with her own meaning.

One method Philip uses to reclaim language is to appropriate white male texts and even white male images. Philip uses both secular and religious texts in her poetry. "And Over Every Land and Sea" from *She Tries Her Tongue* contains passages from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* regarding Ceres looking for her daughter Proserpine. Philip's poems accompanying these passages discuss a West Indian mother looking for her daughter in the North while the daughter also searches for her. The first passage spoken by the mother, for example, begins: "Where she, where she, where she / be, where she gone?" (28); while the daughter's first passage ends with the line: "She whom they call mother, I seek" (29). The passages by the mother and daughter are differentiated by dialect, which is used only in the passages spoken by the mother. The passages from Ovid have been made to represent the Black mother and daughter and the lost daughter comes to symbolize exile and the loss of culture and language, as she has moved to the North and assimilated to conventional English. Philip appropriates another western myth in "She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks." In this poem, Philip refers to Philomela, who was raped and then had her tongue cut out so that she could not tell anyone of the rape. Philomela's experience stands for the "rape" by the colonizers of African and Caribbean landscapes and cultures and the subsequent destruction of the languages so that the histories and stories of Africa and the Caribbean

could not be told by their own peoples. But Philomela was turned into a nightingale and so was able to sing of her pain. The West Indian has also found a voice, in a new language, with which he/she may sing and laugh and scream.

The religious references in Philip's work are in the form of biblical quotations and allusions. Again Philip appropriates these texts and makes them positive for the Black woman. Like Harris, she uses references from the Song of Solomon to praise the beauty of the Black woman-- "I am black but comely" (*Thorns* 9)--by associating herself with the "Queen from the South" (*Salmon* 20), the Queen of Sheba whom the wise King Solomon treated as an equal. The equality of the Black queen with the white king also stresses the equality of Blacks and whites and of women and men that ought to exist in a world governed by wisdom. Philip also refers to Ruth, with whom she identifies as an exile, referring to passages in which Ruth chooses to leave her people and land and to follow her mother-in-law to her husband's land and to assimilate to his culture (*Salmon* 30). For Philip, however, this choice to assimilate so completely is a negative choice that results in loss and sorrow; and for the African-Caribbean, it is also not often a choice, but a necessity. Finally, in "You Can't Push Now," Philip refers to two quite different biblical passages. The first is "*And in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children*" (*Salmon* 32), referring to the woman's punishment for sin. This passage also, however, indicates that the forced stereotypical roles for women may be a curse as well as a blessing, which motherhood can be, and that a woman's creativity is often a sorrow or a pain in a patriarchal society that refuses to accept it. The second passage reads: "*This is my body / This is my blood*" (*Salmon* 34). The use of this passage in a poem about a Black woman giving birth associates the woman with Christ, and also shows the sacrifice

of the woman in giving her body for the man, the child, and the world. It shows both weakness and power, for extending this metaphor suggests that the Black woman will "rise again" and be taken to a place of comfort, safety, and authority.

Philip also appropriates various male images in "You Can't Push Now." The count between contractions is given in the form of a boxing ten-count, and the pain is likened to "a quick jab / right between the eyes" (*Salmon* 32). The pain progresses to the intensity of "an eighteen wheeler, / a mack truck of power" (*Salmon* 33), another image generally associated with males. War and politics are also incorporated: "the guns birth / hungry bullets" (*Salmon* 34), just as the mother births a hungry child, suggesting that the woman's creation has the power to destroy male culture, male control, male language. The mother is also compared to various political revolutionaries. The men referred to are not generally considered "good" men (except Jesus), but they represent, again, a disruption of the system and a refusal to assimilate to western standards. Trinh Minh-ha states that "the Powerless have learned to parrot the words of the Powerful" (58). Although Philip may parrot the words of the powerful patriarchal culture, she does not parrot their meaning. Her appropriation of white male texts and images transforms their intent and brings their power to bear upon her own voice.

The appropriation of white male texts and images is not sufficient to express the identity of the Black woman. A vital part of writing as a woman is to write from the position of a woman that once again involves writing from the female body. Sharon Thesen writes: "To move the body into the space of the signifier is, theoretically, to free her into a writing that is re-engendered as female" (380). Philip says of her own poem "Universal Grammar,"

from *She Tries Her Tongue*, that "*Mother's Recipes* was an attempt to place woman's body centre stage again as actor and not as the acted upon" ("Managing" 209). By writing the body, Philip is able to reclaim it from male control and bring it back under her own control. In "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks," Philip writes: "That body should speak / when silence is" (*She Tries* 98). The female body becomes the woman's voice, that which will bring to light the hidden and silent voices of the woman's experience. Morrell states that "Philip's emphatic insistence on the suffering, bleeding, yet triumphant female body as the focal point of experience and meaning is unique to her work" ("Introduction" 19). Nowhere is this more clear than in her poem "E. Pulcherrima." This poem focuses on the woman's bleeding and sees her bleeding as her power. The woman's body is associated with the bleeding body of Christ that has the power of salvation. It is also a power the woman can control, for "she refuses– / refuses to bleed" (*Thorns* 47) in exile until she is able to find her own voice. The blood is related to the woman's creativity in the form of "birth-blood" (*Thorns* 48). This use of the childbirth metaphor for female creativity is common in Philip's work. The woman becomes the creator, even to the point of making her the God in "A Habit of Angels": "this God / Or Woman presence" (*Salmon* 12). Philip recreates the woman in her own image.

Motherhood, as we have seen, is a vital part of Philip's poetry as well. The woman's creative ability is linked to her procreative ability. But Philip does not unquestioningly accept this stereotypical role. She also, like Brand, briefly addresses the love between two women. In *Looking for Livingstone*, Philip's speaker experiences a lesbian affair with a woman of the NEECLIS: "I grew comfortable in my love of Arwhal" (49). The women of the CLEENIS

also have a sort of lesbian relationship to one another, as both the CLEENIS and the NEECLIS seem to be all-female communities. Not only do these female communities deny male power and even male presence, but they also upset patriarchal heterosexual ideals. Bonnie Zimmerman writes: "Heterosexism is the set of values and structures that assumes heterosexuality to be the only natural form of sexual and emotional expression" ("What Has" 118). Philip shows that homosexual love is also natural and that, for the woman, the emotional bond with other women is necessary to develop a female language.

Female language is very much tied up in the body and it is tied to the mother. In *Looking for Livingstone*, the bodies of the CLEENIS women speak to the sojourner: "These hands spoke a language to my body--every cell within me released its ancient and collective wisdom" (42). The importance of the matrilineal heritage can be seen in "Discourse on the Logic of Language":

> . . . --THE MOTHER TURNING
> IT THIS WAY AND THAT UNDER HER TONGUE, UNTIL SHE HAD
> TONGUED IT CLEAN OF
> THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE COVERING ITS BODY . . .
> . . . SHE WAS BLOWING WORDS--HER WORDS, HER MOTHER'S WORDS
> THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHER'S
> BEFORE--INTO HER DAUGHTER'S MOUTH. (*She Tries* 58)

The mother must first clean off the child, cleanse the language, before she can give the child a new language, a Black female language, a mother-tongue. The Black female language can only be discovered and developed when new, uncontaminated words can be found or existing words can be purified. In *Looking for Livingstone*, Philip writes: "I wanted . . . words that didn't possess me--didn't own me--words free, untouched, untarnished by any previous activity. Virgin words! Clean like a new-born baby" (43). In the absence of new words,

Philip must deconstruct, erupt, sometimes even destroy existing words, cleanse them of their biases, and reinvest them with new meaning.

Philip uses various techniques to reconstruct language. Even her own voice is constantly upset: "And so I mess with the lyric--subverting my own authority--what authority? Speaking over my own voice, interrupting and disrupting it, refusing to allow the voice, the solo voice, pride of place, centre page, centre stage" (Philip, *Genealogy* 124). Philip disrupts poetic language and poetic form in order to bring word and i-mage back into balance. This is not to say that she does not strive for unity of form and content. In "Universal Grammar," for example, the poem about the man shooting is shaped like a knife blade, another weapon of death and one that is perhaps most potent for peoples with a heritage of slavery. The poem itself is pierced by a block of words regarding the structure of a sentence.[6] The inclusion of a discussion of language within the 'knife' also hints at the potentially destructive power of language. Thomas writes that "the fracturing of the first stanza with a list of impediments that impact on meaning in language quite clearly drives a wedge into the notion of language as a unifying force" ("Caliban's" 73).

One common method Philip uses to disrupt conventional English is to alter the meanings of words by changing the connotation and context. Morrell writes: "Philip . . . writes 'language poetry,' poetry that focuses on the construction and connotations of words and phrases themselves" ("Introduction" 20). Certain images take on the burden of oppression. Words such as "whips" and "guns" (*Salmon* 19) and the image of the knife (*She Tries* 63), as with Brand and Harris, are symbolic of racial oppression. Once again "yellow" also becomes a word associated with oppression and loss-- "yellowed yearnings" (*Thorns* 9)--

but for Philip it also becomes the colour of anger and revolution-- "yellowing with vengeance" (*Thorns* 7)--a potentially positive connotation unique to Philip's work. The words and images Philip associates also add new meanings to words. In "Discourse on the Logic of Language," Philip equates the "tongue" and the "penis" through a multiple choice definition (*She Tries* 59). In "Black Fruit (II)" from *Salmon Courage*, sex and power are united: "wielding their batons like surrogate penises" (16). From these two images emerges the basis of male control. Because males have the power to dominate females sexually, this extends to include the power to dominate women linguistically. The reclamation of the female body then becomes also a reclamation of female language and an escape from male control. The words normally used to perpetuate male control become the words that rebel against and deny it.

Philip also disrupts the construction of words by using words in different usages and by splitting and joining words to create new ones. The unusual usages of words and phrases often contribute to a duality of meaning. In "To My Sister Sheba, Queen of Joy" from *Thorns*, for instance, Philip uses the phrases: "I am and black / I am and one" (9). By adding the "and" into each of these phrases, not only the blackness and wholeness, of the speaker are stressed, but also her very identity and existence: "I am." These phrases as such suggest a struggle against erasure, a need to be seen and acknowledged. Sometimes, as has been seen in the discussions on Brand and Harris, the usage change is as simple as transposing noun and verb, as in "to message my soul" from "All That Remains of Kush Returns to the Desert" (*Thorns* 52). At other times, Philip changes common phrases by substituting words to create a new phrase. In "Planned Obsolescence" from *Salmon Courage*, for example, Philip uses

the phrase: "One and for all" (36), combining two common phrases: "One for all" and "Once and for all." Philip's phrase thus suggests both a finality and a unity; the voice is the one that speaks for a group of others of which it is a part. Also in *Looking for Livingstone*, the common phrase "the year of our Lord" is changed to "year of our word" (7). This change indicates an assertion of the existence of the Black female and her experience and a denial of the historical time and thus the history determined by the white male. Rejecting white male history and rewriting her-story is important in Philip's poetry. She cleanses both the word and "the written word."

Philip physically constructs her words in new ways by breaking the sounds and bridging the silences. Often the words that are split are done so as to indicate a split in the language and to portray the meaning of the word. In "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks," for example, the word "dis / memberment" (*She Tries* 94) is itself dismembered as the language and identity of the African-Caribbean has been. Splitting words can also create new meaning, as with Philip's rendering of "re / cognize" in *Looking for Livingstone* (9). This rendering of the word changes its meaning from recognize (know, remember) to re-cognize (rethink, perceive in a new way). The words Philip joins together perform a different purpose. These words are used to indicate that the true meanings in language often exist between the sounds. Philip's most effective use of combined words is found in *Looking for Livingstone*, in which the speaker searches for her silence, her meaning. When the silence, or hidden meaning, is removed, the language loses its comprehensibility: "tomakemywordsunderstandunderstood" (44), for instance. The silence, that is the space between the words, is necessary in order for the speaker to make her words understood.

Another way in which Philip challenges language is by interrupting the text. In "The Habit of: Poetry, Rats and Cats," Philip writes of *She Tries Her Tongue*: "I set out to destroy the lyric voice, the singularity of the lyric voice, and found that poetry had split" (*Genealogy* 115). Part of Philip's method of destroying the lyric voice is to interrupt her own poetic voice and disrupt the text. The intrusions, however, are meaningful. In "Oliver Twist," for example, Philip writes:

> a king that forgot
> Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth
> and burnt his cakes. (*Thorns* 6)

The intrusion of these two black heroines into the western tale in an account of the education of black children shows how black culture and history are ignored and how black children are only taught white tales. Literature and history themselves seem to have forgotten black people. In "You Can't Push Now," again, Philip incorporates interrupting names into her text, this time in the form of political revolutionaries--Lenin, Mao, Fidel, Mugabe, Jesus (*Salmon* 35). By including Jesus in this list, Philip shows how the ruling class resists any challenge to its authority, even when it comes from the very son of its own God. She associates herself with these rebels who choose to challenge the system rather than assimilate to its demands.

The disruption of the singular lyric voice also results in a multiplicity of meaning, as addressed by French feminists. This multiplicity is especially clear in the poems in *A Genealogy of Resistance*. Philip changes the construction of words in order to deny them singularity of meaning. The words "space" and "place," for instance, are combined into the word "s/place," that Philip defines as the site "where the inner space is defined into passivity

by, and harnessed to, the needs and functions of the outerspace–the place of oppression" (77). "S/place" becomes the term that defines the space of the Black woman and that defines her as a site of oppression. "S/place" then becomes "dis place" (77), which also has duality of meaning. "Dis place" is dialect for "this place" and thus refers to a specific site; "dis place," however, is also "displace," which exemplifies the position of the Black woman in a white, male society--displaced, marginalized, excluded. Philip's construction of the word "c(o)unt/ours" allows for even further multiplicity of meaning. "C(o)unt/ours" may be a rendering of "contours," referring to the geography of space and place. It may also be read as "count ours," as in count our history, count our identity, count our humanity; see, recognize, and validate the Black woman. The word could also be interpreted as "counters," for Philip's text definitely counters the conventions of the English language. Finally, the word could be taken as "cunt ours," indicating a reclamation of the woman's inner space and the figurative opening to it.

Philip's reclamation of the female inner space necessitates a reclamation of language and of the right to name. In "Cyclamen Girl," Philip commands: "Name her" (*She Tries* 42). Naming is one of the most important steps in the reclamation of language, demanding the right to name one's self and one's experience. Another vital step is finding a voice. Philip examines this quest very specifically in *Looking for Livingstone*. Her speaker states, in the end: "I break *my* silence--the sentence of my silence" (71). She acknowledges that silence is the voice of the inner space and now makes that space infringe upon the outer space, makes "the desert of words bloom--with Silence!" (*Looking* 72). Like Brand, she extends the margins of her identity into the conventional centre.

Philip's silence, which is also her voice, is multiple, and this multiplicity extends beyond the multiple meanings of words. It also involves the inclusion of many voices speaking simultaneously. Similar to Harris, Philip exhibits this phenomenon in her poetry by including several strands of thought on one page. "Jongwe" (*Thorns* 34-35), for example, is comprised of two strands that are interwoven. Half of the poem is left-justified and the other half is right-justified, but the two voices move back and forth between these positions, further entwining them. The first voice is a cry for truth and freedom; the second is a sort of African chant. The interweaving of these two strands suggests that the African descendant has known freedom and still knows the truth; the customs of Africa have not been entirely lost, in spite of slavery. Philip's most powerful presentation of multiple strands occurs in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" (*She Tries* 56-59). In this poem, the left-hand pages are composed of three separate strands of thought--one printed vertically down the left side of the page, entirely in capital letters, telling of the mother licking her infant clean and blowing words into her mouth; the second is printed horizontally in the centre of the page and considers the implications of English being both a mother- and a father-tongue; the third is printed horizontally to the right of the page, in italics, and is in the form of two edicts used by slave-owners to prevent slaves from speaking their own language. Thomas comments: "when one has read all three columns, one is confronted with concepts and functions of tongues that vary from one culture to another and that diverge still further along the lines of intent even within the same culture. The reader has also listened to several voices, each with a separate agenda" ("Caliban's" 66). Philip calls this voice: "the many voiced one of one voice" (*She Tries* 36). Her purposes and needs require more than one voice, but each voice

is equally important and thus all are presented simultaneously, each fighting for central stage but none attaining it. The truth is only possible when all the voices have been considered together.

The greatest challenge presented to Philip is to change language, to make English her language, to discover the true meanings of words. To do this, Philip plays with words in various ways. We have seen how Philip combines and splits words and alters their usages, as well as how her reconstruction of words and poems produces multiplicity of voice and meaning. Philip also uses simple wordplay. In "Salmon Courage," for example, the father's "milestone" of his daughter's achievement becomes her "millstone," tying her down (*Salmon* 15). But Philip's greatest success in wordplay is in her metamorphoses of words in *She Tries Her Tongue*, and specifically in "Discourse on the Logic of Language." In this poem, Philip considers the anguish that English is for the African-Caribbean:

> English
> is my mother tongue.
> A mother tongue is not
> not a foreign lan lan lang
> language
> l/anguish
> anguish
> --a foreign anguish.
>
> English is
> my father tongue.
> A father tongue is
> a foreign language,
> therefore English is
> a foreign language
> not a mother tongue. (56)

The transformation of language to anguish is simple and yet powerful. It attests to the difficulty the West Indian has in writing in the English language. This difficulty is further evidenced by Philip's faltering over the word language. Philip states in her interview with Janice Williamson: "The faltering underlines just how oppressive and disabling that language is, and that one ought to falter over it--to falter over it is, in fact, the most truthful response to it, given its historical relationships to us and our peoples as natives and Africans" (Williamson 19). Philip stumbles over English, but at the same time overturns the obstacles that are tripping up her tongue and exposes conventional English for what it really is--a tool used by the patriarchy to oppress any and all "others."

One unique way in which Philip recreates language is in her consideration of silence and the word. Though Brand and Harris address the potential meanings of silence, neither explores this aspect in the depth to which Philip does. Philip sees silence as the voice of the African descendant and the lost languages of the peoples "conquered" by English-speaking colonists. The word, contrarily, is the symbol of conventional English. Walcott also addresses the silence of African descendants, which he calls "amnesia": "In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World" ("Muse" 4). Both silence and the word indicate strengths and weaknesses and both are necessary in order for a language to express the truth of all of its peoples. The word can be both a positive and a negative force. The word provides authority to the speaker, although, as Trinh Minh-ha points out, in themselves, "words have no power, truly" (53). In English-speaking societies, however, words often imply power, even if that power is not self-possessed within the word. But words can also be a stumbling block, as we have already seen. Conventional meanings

of words can indicate assimilation and an acceptance of the subordinate role that conventional English perpetuates. These meanings alone are not adequate, for they exclude the identity and experience of the colonized peoples. George Lamming, in associating the African-Caribbean with Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, writes: "For Caliban is Man and other than Man . . . Caliban is [Prospero's] convert, colonized by language, and excluded by language" (15). The word, without the silence, loses its meaning in the mouth of the West Indian speaker. In *Looking for Livingstone*, Dr. Livingstone cries: "MY WORD IS IMPOTENT" (25). The African continent has stripped away the power of his word, just as he has stolen the silence of the Africans. The word without the silence is useless.

Silence also indicates strengths and weaknesses. Adrienne Rich writes that "all silence has a meaning" (qtd. in Bauer 680). Keeping silence can be a resistance, but it can also be a loss. Feminists Cherise Kramarae and Mercilee M. Jenkins write that "our silence does not say what is happening to us" (149). Philip, however, turns silence into yet another voice, and this silence is the only thing that the colonized person truly owns. Philip writes in *Looking for Livingstone*: "It is the only thing I have that is not contaminated. My Silence--my very own Silence" (65); she also writes that "to use your silence, you have to use the word" (52). Both the word and the silence are necessary. The silence fills in the spaces between the words, as Philip so clearly displays in the final chapter of *Looking for Livingstone*.[7] It also brings to light the hidden meanings in words. Each requires the other:

> Word
> and Silence
> balance in contradiction
> Silence and Word
> harmony of opposites

double planets
condemned
to together. (Philip, *Looking* 34)

By combining silence and word, Philip constructs a new language, an english that is unquestionably a mother-tongue.

In "There Will Be No Peace," Philip writes: "To be silent in the face of torture is to do good *and* to accept pain. After release, breaking the silence is also to do good; to be silent then is to collude with one's silencers. We have been silenced, but we must not accept this silence. How do we resist the silencing? By witnessing" (*Frontiers* 256). Philip breaks her silence as she breaks the standards of conventional English. She constructs a language and a voice that "says it all and more" (*Salmon* 38). Her voice combines the word of western society with the silence of the West Indian. Her new language, though it falters at points and diverges into a multiplicity of voices and meanings, captures the unique linguistic experience of the West Indian exile. Philip acquires that voice which Chamberlin claims all West Indian poets aspire to gain: "a voice uniquely their own and courting the language of their people" (151).

Notes

[1] Philip's explanation of the i-mage can be found in "The Absence of Writing or How I Became a Spy" from *A Genealogy of Resistance* (41-56). Essentially, she defines the i-mage as "the irreducible essence . . . of creative writing" (43), of which the word is the tangible presentation (45). The word derives not from deconstruction, but from the Rastafarian practice of privileging the "i" in words (43). According to Philip, the success of the i-mage depends upon the tension between the word and the i-mage and upon the reader's

familiarity with both word and i-mage. For the African in the colonial society of the West Indies, the equation between the word and the i-mage as been destroyed and revived in the New World in a new European language (46). Thus the African requires a new i-mage to arise out of his/her experience: one that Philip calls "the mirror *i-mage* of experience" (49).

[2] "CESLIENS" is one example of the various anagrams of the word "SILENCE" that Philip uses to name the tribes her narrator encounters in *Looking for Livingstone*.

[3] As semiologists such as Barthes note, meaning lies in the interplay of signifier and signified. Similarly, Bhabha claims of culture that, "in the restless drive for cultural translation, hybrid sites of meaning open up a cleavage in the language of culture which suggests that the similitude of the *symbol* as it plays across cultural sites must not obscure the fact that repetition of the *sign* is, in each specific social practice, both different and differential" (163).

[4] Nursery rhymes, which often ridicule the imperial culture, also represent a strategy used by children, who are another oppressed and marginalized community.

[5] Philip's best example of polyvocality and multiplicity of language is *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Of this work, Philip says: "I had so disrupted the lyric voice by interruptions, eruptions, digressions, and a variety of other techniques, that the text had now become a polyvocular text, requiring more than one voice to give voice to it" (*Genealogy* 126).

[6] The blade-shaped poem, itself pierced by the block of words about language, in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, shows the potentially destructive power of language:

Man
Man is
The tall man is
The tall, blond man is
The tall, blond, blue-eyed man is
The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is

MANY FACTORS AFFECT AND DETERMINE THE ORDER OF WORDS IN A SPOKEN SENTENCE: THE STATE OF MIND OF THE SPEAKER; THE GENDER OF THE SPEAKER; HIS OR HER INTENTIONS; THE CONTEXT OF THE SPEECH; THE IMPRESSION THE SPEAKER WISHES TO MAKE; THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN SPEAKER AND LISTENER AND, NOT LEAST OF ALL, THE CONSTRAINTS OF UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR.

The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is shooting. (Philip 63)

[7] The silence between the words are necessary to produce meaning, as Philip clearly portrays in the final chapter of *Looking for Livingstone*: "Finally (silence) Dr. Livingstone, I presume? (silence) we meet (silence) he and I (silence) in a clearing (silence) in a forest (silence) somewhere (silence) in time (silence) it doesn't matter (silence) This man of God (silence) and medicine--an unbeatable combination (silence) "foe of darkness" (silence) Shaman (silence) witch-doctor (silence) Holy Man (silence) Prophet (silence) Charlatan (silence) He (silence) and I (silence) and my Silence (silence)--his discovery (silence)" (60).

Conclusion

The mother-tongue, though in one sense referring to the birth or ancestral language, can also be any language which is comfortable for the speaker. For post-colonial writers such as Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese Philip, this new mother-tongue is comprised of both the original mother-tongue or ancestral language and the father-tongue which, though it has oppressed them, is in many cases their only language. Both the intrinsic "self," the ancestral identity, and that "other," the imposed colonial or new world identity which has become part of the self, are necessary to the identity of the post-colonial writer and thus of his/her linguistic expression. Homi K. Bhabha writes: "the desire for the Other is doubled by the desire in language, which *splits the difference* between Self and Other so that both positions are partial, neither is sufficient unto itself" (50). Brand, Harris, and Philip must use conventional English, that "other" dominated by white males, but they must also challenge and change it to include the non-English and non-standard parts of their identities which make up the "self," the Black woman.

In order to create their own language and literature, Brand, Harris, and Philip question the standards which control conventional English. They open up the English language, not by creating new standards, but by refusing any standards, through the combination of both conventional and unconventional poetic forms and linguistic meanings. Each of these three writers creates a unique mother-tongue dictated by the peculiarities of her particular personal experience. Brand, though primarily conventional in form, challenges the politics of race-biased language use and its role in maintaining racist attitudes in Canadian culture. Harris focuses rather on the gender-biases of language use and challenges patriarchal control of

language and culture and the stereotypes of women which result from this control. She deviates from conventional form, using the geography of the page to map out the female body and experience. Philip addresses both racial and feminist concerns equally. Her poetic form is unconventional and her language is characterized by a multiplicity of voices which combine to form her distinct mother-tongue. All three writers bring to the forefront the voice of the Black woman, and they give this voice the validation and authority to stand as a viable Canadian voice.

For Brand, Harris, and Philip, Canada is the home of their choosing. But the Canada they have chosen to embrace and reflect in their writing is not the Canada governed by white, male standards; it is rather the Canada which, despite its biases, is not a land of absolutes but a land of diversity, in which the people are as variant as the landscape and climate. Brand, Harris, and Philip represent the true post-colonial Canada and, in fact, the true post-colonial new world, which is diasporic and international. Their exile from the Caribbean does not erase their Caribbean identity nor does their absence from Africa negate their African heritage. The diversity of their cultural heritage adds a richness to their unique mother-tongues and allows them to free the English language from any standards of control. Neil Bissoondath writes:

> Pretending to continue being simply what one has been in the past, or what one's parents have been, inevitably entails a betrayal of the self--just as pretending . . . that one has completely remade oneself, is also a betrayal of the self. The human personality is not static; it is altered fundamentally, but not wholly, by circumstances and experience. ("I Am" 20)

Brand, Harris, and Philip embrace the various aspects of their identities--Black, female, African-Caribbean, Canadian, colonial, post-colonial--in their life and their literature. Through various processes and to varying degrees, each poet fundamentally changes the English language to "bear the burden" of her personal experience and to become her particular mother-tongue.

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