

After Modernism: Alternative Voices in the Writings of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Philip

As Lorris Elliott notes in the introduction to *Literary Writing by Blacks in Canada*, there has been an 'outburst of literary activity by Blacks in Canada' since the 1970s, and the three writers discussed here are part of that 'outburst'. Some of this recent activity² comes from Canadian-born writers such as Maxine Tynes and George Elliott Clarke, part comes from immigrants from the United States, England, South America, and Africa, and part comes from the community arriving from the Caribbean.³ Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Philip, whose work I approach in this essay, all come from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and each develops a writing that raises three tightly associated issues: race, access, and the appropriateness of the verbal tradition, literary or linguistic, to their writing.

Race and racism are among the most important issues for the Black writing community in Canada, and any of its readers including myself. They underpin the questions of access which I have defined elsewhere for my study as the field of 'marginalized' writings: access to education, to writing, to creative tuition in verbal craft, to publication, marketing, and distribution, to reviews and audiences, and to rewards – the grants, tours, readings, and all the publicity paraphernalia that make the next book possible.⁴ It also defines many of the specific grounds on which these writers discuss questions of literary voice, authenticity, and community.

The complex process of learning about race and racism is intended explicitly to structure this essay as it engages with the skill and specific invitation or generosity of each writer, and it should be said here that no answers can be offered. It also needs to be said here at the start that the issue of access to literacy and print is of utmost importance,⁵ particularly in the context of Canadian education, which provides extensive literacy programs,⁶ and the possibility of training in creative writing and composition from primary, through secondary, to tertiary education.⁷ However, what this discussion will focus on is how Black women writers, who have gained that access, use it to develop a specific response to the problems of writing within a culture that is experienced as alien because of colour, gender, and class; and how they balance the need clearly and immediately to tell and retell a history more appropriate to their memories than the one on offer from the culture in power, with the

pressing demand to extend the processes of self-definition and authentic voice within current literary conventions.

Brand, Harris, and Philip are each faced with the question of how to write within a verbal tradition that has never encouraged expression of their experience and indeed has often actively repressed it. Furthermore, these writers also know that to get published it is necessary to stay broadly within that tradition,⁸ and that unless they do so, their potential audience will be restricted, their traditionally educated readers will not know how to read their work. But once access has been gained, there is an opportunity for trying out a new voice, making a new way of reading. Brand, Harris, and Philip address this possibility in different ways. 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. In various ways, the works also make it possible for different readers to position themselves, and some of those positions will be enabled and others alienated. Both are necessary to begin to extend friendship.⁹

This essay is concerned with the way that each of the three writers can be read as starting with modernism's potential for generating 'other' communities and alternative histories, and with the ways that each responds with a variety of literary strategies to the recognition of the problems implicit in modernism's universalism and claims to fixity and essential identity. In doing so each writer attempts a different stance from that called for by modernism. Modernism, and its outgrowths of postmodernism and neo-romantic surrealism, which other Canadian writers have pursued, all depend upon writing towards the conventional expectations of an extant audience. In contrast, the stance taken up by these writers acts towards the possibility of writing by interacting with an audience, constructing a stance out of its social immediacy and historical need. The stance outlines a different kind of community, not working from conventionally accepted grounds, but a community anchored as such by actual social problems, and hence a community that will necessarily change.

Each of these writers directly participates in particular social issues to do with race, the position of women, teaching, community relations, cultural power. Each is at least partly concerned with writing for a broad audience, what Brand calls writing for a 'crowd.' So each is also concerned with an audience for whom conventional representation is, complicatedly, both profoundly habitual, universalizing, and essentialist, as well as the recognized strategy for making 'reality claims,' particularly about history. This problematic raises a central issue in the study of any text or discourse: The 'reality' texts address is certainly there. Its representation is initially crafted out of an engagement between writer

and reader based on an understanding that the conventional strategies that tend to habituate and make comfortable need to be disrupted in order to address the social immediacy of reality. But that engagement can initiate strategies that may be carried on past the point of action and necessity, into a corporate agreement for dealing with issues that we do not want to, or have not the time to, address directly – in other words they become the new conventions. This is an important sequence because becoming corporate is a helpful way of coping with our lives. Recognizing the limitations of the corporate is more difficult.

Disruption is the key term. The disruptions of modernism encourage a relocation into alternative histories which become corporate agreements difficult to dislodge. Postmodernism has attempted to encourage a continual dislocation, which can offer a rejection of history and make action on immediate issues impossible. Romanticized surrealism encourages a dislocation into the private, which invalidates discussion and rejects the social.

Texts, in that they can make claims for history, may authenticate voices of unproblematic identity if their history is universalist and underwrites fixed communities and essentialist versions of self. But just as history and texts are also social realities, anchored in material needs if also constricted by ideology, so 'authentic voice' is a way of describing the necessarily different self that emerges from the discussions, decisions, and actions instigated by addressing social realities and the communities that form in response to those realities. I use the terms authentic voice and community in the latter sense, with an acute awareness of how that responsive stance has the potential for increasingly corporate habituation precisely because it is historical and social, but with an equal awareness that the evasions of the corporate in postmodernism and the surreal lead to a rejection of historical and social reality.

I am also aware that this literary historical outline evades the primary social immediacy of questions of race. It is to speak as though the racial divide between Black and White critical positions did not exist, as though a White critical position with respect to text, history, and social support and trust could be drawn unproblematically from these writings by Afro-Caribbean Canadian women overtly concerned with a specific history and the social reality of race and racism. There will be necessary differences between any position I could take as a White critic and those of these Afro-Caribbean women writers. Yet there are points of contact, critical readings made possible by these writings and by the way that the texts interact with some common historical grounds that bring the possibility of a socially immediate and radically engaging stance to feminism, at the same time as they open the door on the reality of racial difference and the history of problems that it carries. The stance could address these problems and make possible another discussion within feminism about race.

To be open about what I here intend: these writers write about issues I recognize intimately when they write about their position as women, as lovers, wives, mothers, daughters, women at work. I read these differently depending upon the availability of common ground offered by the texts. That common ground can be radically displaced by the difficulty of my own understanding of race, yet where the grounds that bring women together can be articulated, it can provide a place for talking about precisely those difficulties with race that separate us. When a familiar common ground like mothers and daughters, which women might expect to remain stable or at least recognizable, is suddenly refracted through racial difference, the effect is often a radical impetus to extend discussion. In a practical way the points of contact, like Philip's floor for her 'sisters to dance on,' constructs a community out of the needs of the problematic. It brings together people to discuss the grounds for action within the current constraints.

Claire Harris provides some context for understanding the historical specificity of these writings in her essay 'Poets in Limbo,'¹⁰ where she talks about the educational background of Caribbean, here specifically Trinidadian, writing in English. She talks about the educational indoctrination that students in Trinidad experience, an indoctrination into Western European language, culture, and tradition: 'We learnt English folk songs, put on Gilbert and Sullivan. British gym mistresses taught us Morris dancing among other survival skills' (117). The pupils were also forced to learn huge quantities of English literature by rote – Chaucer, Wordsworth, Arnold – an experience that Harris says can be 'terminal' for a potential writer. Yet the oral folklore 'saved our imaginations.' 'We remain,' she suggests, '... poets whose sense of the art is essentially rooted in the English tradition. When we turn away, that is what we turn away from. What we turn to we have essentially to make ourselves' (118).

Harris goes on to suggest that what the tradition most comfortably gives writers like herself is a way to 'seek wholeness in the landscape,' which is an activity that her own earlier poetry does attempt. Turning to what they have to make for themselves, she offers a number of different approaches that present responses to the stylistic and topical conventions of European literature. She speaks of development of dialect representation and of the poetic fracturing of the traditional equation between word and image, but points out that both stylistic devices risk not only alienating but permanently estranging the audience. In contrast, responses to topical convention are possibly more immediately enabling. She notes here that there is a pressing need to sort out the relationship with Africa, by implication with retellings of origin, history, and the present culture that are highly problematic. It is important to counter the ideological presentation particularly of the physical self, and hence a need to challenge

and reject 'names.' To do so writers typically ransack their colonial childhood for different images. Writers should also make use of all the available materials about Black experience – 'Journal entries, newspaper clippings, pictures of horrors, reports of Amnesty International' that yield 'material for collages' so that, at the least, partial, pasted-together realities can be constructed – and Harris experiments with precisely such a structure in the short story 'A Matter of Fact.'¹¹ For herself, she says, 'Personally I am content to try to write well and to trust to the authenticity of image, content and perception to see me true' (121).

The potentially essentialist vocabulary of 'natural landscape' and 'authentic image' belies Harris's own poetic practice. What Harris, a linguist and teacher of literature and language, doesn't tell us is that the literary tradition that she, Dionne Brand, and Marlene Philip appear at first to be most deeply rooted within is the modernist poetic, whose purpose is already to fracture the conventional discourses and to construct different connections and communications. In other words, these writers are already part of a profoundly dislocating stylistic, albeit one with a firm historical backing that poses specific problems for their writing. Like the reworking of modernist poetics typical of the work of many contemporary Canadian writers, each of these writers answers the alienation that results from modernism's inappropriate history with a particular poetics of her own. Rather than pursuing an ahistorical post-modernism or the romanticist individualism/heroics of the surreal, 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.

The pursuit of authentic voice and image has become a contemporary attempt to speak of experience that is denied, oppressed, subtly dis-tracted, and disembodied by modes of representation coming from politically and economically dominant cultures. The attempts have engaged with many of the elements of representation that Harris lists, such as storytelling structures, dialect, media, verbal and technical strategies. But above all the attempts have engaged with the overwhelming conventions of realism with its currently broad claims to adequate representation. However, the engagement is ambiguous: if your reading community accepts the realistic convention as the appropriate medium for recording history, for conveying event and experience, for persuading, then as a writer you take a chance that any transgression of those conventions will invalidate your account. At the same time an uncritical use of them may simply valorize some nostalgic desire for an essential and different past world. Yet the writer can also overwrite realism as if it were a palimpsest, can conflict with it, or connect glancingly with it. What you cannot do in the contemporary context is completely reject it,

or the literary community breaks down; communication becomes impossible and the audience cannot hear. Harris's trust in the 'authenticity of image, content and perception' indicates a trust that somewhere in the craft of writing a different, more appropriate and understandable representation can be made for her community.

Harris also offers a trust in 'natural landscape' which is as ambiguous as a trust in writing. Yet the physical world, even more than writing, is resistant to conventions of representation. Perceptions of the natural landscape do change, but landscape also constantly engages with those perceptions by way of a physical actuality. The writer's engaging with this resistance, like that with the elements of representation, can work in a number of different ways. There can again be a simple valorization of some pre-colonial native/natural land which attempts a naïve recuperation of a lost origin. But the historical resistance of the landscape to representation can provide a useful place from which to write about the resistance of a community to representation. As Marlene Philip suggests in *She Tries Her Tongue*, no history is possible without memory, and physical reality is akin to the body both in its resistance to remembering and in its ability to re-member. The body, the physical world, and the community can each resist and remember representation of authentic voice, landscape, and history, not just as identity but as commodity, or reflection, or difference from, or difference within, or deferral or différance.

Modernist poetics, with its initial engagement with and resistance to realism, and with its attempt to articulate the subject and speak of private individual experience, is thoroughly bound up with the later pursuit of authentic voice. But modernism looks inward for self and position. Its attempts to lasso the significant moments, the isolated epiphanies of experience where we seem to find ourselves, can overwrite many of the limiting qualities of fixity and inviolate essence that the word 'identity' calls up. On rare and enduring occasions, modernist writing looks inward and sees nothing. This is the moment of existentialism which can direct the private nothingness of identity to loss, representations of which may be found in both postmodernism and the surreal, or back towards social being and authentic voice.

The modernist poetics of identity are concerned with 'difference from,' with the intertextual ride against fixed representations of the individual, and with dislocations of those representations. The poetic requires an agreement about literary, cultural, and historical conventions – linguistic, stylistic, logical, and topical – towards which the activities of allusion, fragmentation, and so on move. However, the problem with this agreement is that it may enclose the writer within tradition and convention, isolating the writer from the social and communal which continually re-work and renegotiate reality. This may end in the continual deferrals of

postmodernism, found for example in the writing of George Bowering in the late 1970s, which render the construction of self as necessarily inauthentic, always hegemonic and compromised, never conflictually resistant or potentially changing. Many Canadian writers in the post-Second World War period have been dissatisfied with the apparent agreements of modernism. While some have evaded it in the ahistorical postmodern, others have attempted to collapse it into the surreal. Surrealism constructs the self as heroic individual, treading dangerously along the rim of chaos, in order to convey significance onto self. Constructing and meeting that terror can be therapeutic, but the satisfaction of private need for terror is a privileged activity that has little effect on poverty or racism.

The romantic transposition of modernist poetics into surrealism is a quite different activity from that of the postmodern. The romantic symbol engulfs an event or person within a representation, so that the necessary inadequacy evident between symbol and actuality becomes the ground for communication: a negative capability.¹² The romanticization of modernist poetics consists of making a metaphor of its dislocation of tradition, extending the symbol of dislocation surrealistically to its limits so that it breaks down. The importance of the surrealist extension of symbol is that just before it breaks down it is at its most disturbing. The clash is no longer the point; the representation of a necessarily inadequate ground for communication is no longer the activity. Instead, it is the perception of chaos lying beyond the symbolic that becomes the central concern; alternating a deep trust in the control exercised by representation and a deep fear in the chaos lying beyond it. Here we walk along the edge between dream and nightmare of Ondaatje, or the boundaries and white places of the early Atwood's page.

What is significant for the purposes of this discussion is that Harris, Brand, and Philip, in common with a few other Canadian writers, move to alternative strategies for writing which are neither surreal nor postmodern. This search, which embraces the positive gifts of so-called chaos, otherwise called the world outside dominant cultural representation, and also embraces the social resistance of authentic voice, is of immediate importance to the broad literary community working with the English language. It raises wide-ranging questions about the limits of ideology, about the possibility of regathering history, and for writers, about the extent to which their written medium and its language can be trusted to re-present the people and communities who have been written out.

Aware that the modernist tradition is inadequate because it falsely assumes too much common ground and initiates complicity into structures people may wish to oppose, change, or refuse, what do you do? Do you give people fables because in practice you cannot give them another completely different language, but you can provide the incidents and events to remind them that literature and its language only speak for a

few? Do you arrest language so that the reader may release its significance, as with many recent reconstructions of modernist imagery or the phonetic deconstructions of bp Nichol? Do you hold the ideological structures and metaphors so tightly by the throat that they speak with a strange voice, as do the attempts to strangle and twist cultural icons like the 'cowboy as hero' in Kroetsch's writing, or the drifting landscapes and maps in Bowering's later work? Do you turn to your own myths/ghosts/memories but make sure that their complicity in the ideological is foregrounded, for example in the potentially sentimental return to personal folklore in the work of Laurence or Munro that is consciously artificialized in order to clarify a present, contradictory, position towards it? Do you turn to the most elusive words, the ones that you use to friends and do not think about, not the cliché but the earth of your language: no longer only playing with the fictive in the powerful/powerless dichotomies of convention but with the syntax and structure of these few words that reach out into the needs of your community of friends, finding in their bodies spaces and openings that they had not realized were there? The literary developments of each of these three writers are enabled by a growing awareness of the possibilities for communication generated by talk with and to their own community, particularly other women.

Claire Harris is one of the most elegantly precise writers emerging from the modernist tradition. Her work indicates an immensely skilful and rigorous practitioner who also has something to say: an unusual combination for modernism that makes her a particularly significant link in the wider development of the tradition. But the published work indicates from the start the tensions of working within that poetic. Of the many women's experiences recounted throughout the poems in *Fables from the Women's Quarters* (1984),¹³ perhaps the phrases 'flesh is not civilised flesh is not haiku' (30) from 'Blood Feud' remind the reader most of the intensely intellectual and language-centred tradition of the writing. However, in these poems, curiously it is the brain and the intellect recalling 'the bittersweet pervasive ache of the women's quarters' (16) that fail to 'inoculate' her against the demands of men. Through *Translation into Fiction* (1984) to *Travelling to Find a Remedy* (1986),¹⁴ the demands of men remain uppermost, but the intellectual poetic tradition gradually becomes itself one of those masculine demands.

The poems of *Translation into Fiction* present fiction both as a mask bereft of power and as the language of those in power. This double-edged activity of all ideological constructions becomes the informing movement of many different verbal translations into fiction: White/Black, man/woman, youth/age. People use words to bring reality within their control. Here the control is that of romantic symbol, explosive with the tension of inadequacy, presented as the fertile control of the gardener –

her father – who is at the same time terrified by the anarchy of imagination. But for Harris 'translations' are also specific to the printed medium of language that she uses. In 'By the senses sent forth ...' the writer chooses to present a three-strand narrative emerging in typographic form as fragmented prose on the left opening, and two strips of poetry on the right. The right opening is composed of modernist verse, often mythically allusive, in italics and ranged to the left margin; it is opposed by shorter, metaphorical, more intense rhythms of verse, in roman type and ranged right. The three strands could each stand alone, but as presented they comment upon each other as if the writer were admitting that she cannot speak adequately and is giving us three stylistically different versions.

The typographically fragmented technique is common to much of Harris's work: from verse with footnotes, to haiku with narrative, images with description, and, more recently in *The Conception of Winter* (1988),¹⁵ postcard fragment with commentary. It is as if the modernist and the romantic landscape describer are standing off and commenting upon one another, not meeting yet self-validating. The fragment, acknowledgedly partial, presents those things we cannot make sense of and/or cannot articulate because they are either too alien or, perhaps, too familiar. In contrast, the story, given whole, represents the things we can make sense of. It provides simultaneously the ground that makes the fragmentary bearable and the ground to be fragmented. As the poetry develops, this technique becomes both less discursive and less sparse, as the poet increasingly integrates the images and trusts the audience.

Harris moves from a highly individualistic concept of the writer/fiction-alizer as especially gifted to be 'stricken by and seeking' reality in *Translation into Fiction*, to a redrawing of the romantic poet in terms of moral responsibility in *Travelling to Find a Remedy*, to a rather less heroic and far more thought-provoking set of questions about the helpfulness of the writer in expressing experience as against the articulations of those who do not use words, in *The Conception of Winter*. *Travelling to Find a Remedy* is a key work whose opening and closing poems examine the process of writing, and enclose more fables/reports from Black history. 'Every Moment a Window,' which opens the collection, asks how we, or the poet for us, can open the window on reality. Both the images working within smaller parts of the poem and the overarching allegory critically rework the cruel and persistent romantic metaphor of woman as source of poetry and man as articulator or poet. Here the speaker/poet is presented as two people mediated by the shifting gender of pronouns. At first significantly male, the speaker enters and places her dried heart in the sink of her life/memory from which she surfaces as youth and poet, foreign to and stumbling among words that acquire coherence from the web of our response. A poem is an accident, a seeding, a machine: it is 'bits and pieces / never the whole story' (11), memories, ghosts of what

the writer earlier, in *Translation into Fiction*, called the 'aborted / dreams' (71) which 'I slipped / casually into not being,' and myths. Myths become the 'small control' in the ordered chaos of a world where we have no 'natural claim / to anything save / death' (14). The speaker is a Prometheus, stealing words like fire from the gods both for the survival of human beings and as an anchor in our separateness from each other. At seven she is horrified by the immediacy of the real that myth permits her to feel; but by eight the horror has failed, the myths have passed into recognizable order, the window is closed. And at the end, there sits the initial speaker, dressed in white and waiting for her, reading *God and Physics*. It is as if the White, intellectual, male tradition of verse and poetics gives her a window on reality at the cost of desiccating her ability, her capacity, to experience.

The concluding long poem, 'Peter Petrus,' is a mystery story where things are both revealed and hidden, while the writer plays phonetically and syntactically around the dual petrifying images of horror and stone. Peter Petrus is the Poet, the Peculator of other people's myths, the pathetic tourist (postcards) who is petrified from his perilous/parlous/period into stone. His language is signified by the typographically capitalized or doubled 'P' or 'Pp' as in 'escaPes'; it is a visual Protrusion or eruption alerting the reader to the arbitrary structure of words that is yet responsible for signification. It alerts us to the difficulty of meaning as we read these bizarre eruptions of the arbitrary/chaotic letter into the conventional structures of our language. In contrast to Peter Petrus, the language of the Witness is standard.

The immediate mystery of the poem is why Petrus throws himself out of the window, but the effective mystery is what lured the Witness into his room to witness his jump and what effect it has on her. Terrorized by the immediacy of the real, Peter Poet has gradually hardened into Peter Petrus. The dried onion skins of his petrified flesh rasp, 'thin and insidious' reminders of Coleridge's imaginative '1 AM.' As if the stone had consumed nearly all the flesh and he needs an heir, Petrus 'oPens door to the corridor' to seduce in the Witness for 'she has Possibilities pPetrus has / heard the sand shifting in her the layers forming / being stone sober pPeter pPetrus wills that this / be given to her' (67). And as he leaps from the window, a window on reality is opened for her, and she then tentatively engages with the poetic discourse of Petrus, the double 'Pp' intruding into her language from the moment she sees him jump.

The poem presents a deeply ambiguous image of the poet indicating reality only at the cost of consuming her/himself, at the same time as making a necessary self-sacrifice into stone. The ambiguity is redoubled by the conflation of an overtly Christian metaphor of self-sacrifice onto a version of the Medusa myth which warns the powerful about the dan-

gers of ignoring the disempowered: as if human beings turn to stone because the emulation of godlike activity necessarily destroys them. Further, the entire allegory is called into question by the vocabulary of violence and the implicit entrapment of the Witness: as if the Witness were being coerced into the position of victim to perpetrate systems of poetic power. And that is where the poem, on the penultimate leaf of the book, ends. The Witness is the next Petrus, caught in the traditions of poetic structure and language technique that will only permit her to engage with reality through channels that will destroy her. The book itself ends with a haiku.

Despite the continual reference to women and to women's experience, the touchstones for event in the early books are often male. In the poems of cultural inquiry enfolded by the studies of the poetic at the start and the end of *Travelling to Find a Remedy*, two of the more immediately demanding focus on men as husbands and fathers. The title poem presents Africa as a man who wants the speaker to have his children. But there is too much of the Middle Passage to slavery and out, in the history of the (presumably Caribbean-Canadian) woman, to allow such an easy 'grip on my hand.' She says that she dreams 'in another tongue' (26). Further on, in 'Black Sisyphus,' the writer reaches out to her childhood and her father. It is a poem concerned with postcolonial contradictions, framed between the Church institutions and her father's own beliefs. Within that tension he too grasps her hand and wants to 'refashion' it, with all the complicated duality of caring and power that parents exercise. But in *The Conception of Winter* Harris turns more and more to the community of women. At the same time she increasingly turns away from the concept of the poet as mask, as hero, as sacrificial victim, to the poet as sharer: In a sense she speaks less of her own hand being taken and how she rejects that 'ownership' or possession, instead offering her hands to the reader, still very tentatively and with enormous caution, for she has every right to fear us.

The open invitation into *The Conception of Winter* offers the reader a different kind of poetry where the writer speaks less of the significance of words and trusts more to their activity. The long opening poem, 'Towards the color of summer,' begins with a study of three women as tourists, one of whom is the speaker, going to Barcelona. Tourism, as we all know, is at its best in the Travel Agent's Office where the wish-fulfillments still seem entirely possible. Harris describes the moment of escape in the airplane, saying 'I become blue meaning by this a measure / of release what I imagine the soul feels // as it escapes drained bone or pained / medieval angels suspect who long to escape // strictures' (3), and later 'too far above ground for traps in such blue / I float suspended / disguised in my favorite self' (3). Tourism is the world of licensed anarchy which allows us to permit ourselves to be other people, to trans-

gress our personal codes. We travel to places which have different social codes of behaviour, both frightening and passionate, a world of liminality, of adolescence, where the strategies for maintaining survival can be self-enclosing or self-destructive, curiously mimicking the activity of colonial power. The tourist may feel threatened but also knows that in the normal run of events money, passports, and embassies can intervene – which is why we feel so acutely shocked when diplomatic protection for the tourist fails. At the same time the tourist is profoundly involved in exploitation.

These shadowy social implications permeate the personal transgressions of the three women who refract and disperse their images of self through this alien culture, stumbling upon the more deeply embedded structures of identity that resist new angles of vision. The poetic begins by setting off the descriptive verse against the 'postcards.' The latter seem at first to yield the flat banality and enervation of reality that the tourist postcard imposes; but against the description, which redoes or repeats the images and lends a verbal density to their sparseness, the postcard verse becomes compressed haiku that sever their content from causality. The haiku provide the image yet the response/significance becomes the reader's; they provide an arrested reality that flowers only if the reader cradles the seed, the bits, relates the fables. Just so, the women can at first detach themselves from the visited world, watching its severed surrealist concepts or abstractions from behind their foreignness, but they gradually become implicated into it. The speaker says 'But this is not why we came here / three week exiles we have chosen to lose // our place in the world / three women searching / a ledge for freedom excitement for self // (and I am here where the rivers grief / and blood rose ... think of it //)' (19). The speaker opens up for herself, image by image, the connections of Spain with Africa and with slavery; she establishes the substratum of fear and pain and rape that this city, which first sent out Columbus to the New World thereby initiating the slave trade, has for her underlying the sun and flowers and people.

Then, as with much of Harris's work, death intervenes. Death walks relatively lightfootedly but pervasively throughout her writing and is one helpful guide to the direction of her poetic. The early poetry gives us accounts of war, of private and public cruelty, that are particularly atrocious in the controlled violations that the verse permits. Much of this transmutes into a more private and intellectual study about a sudden visibility of death in 'Coming to Terms ...' from *Travelling to Find a Remedy*. The verse is phrased in a tense counterpoint between just-voiced questions answered by jagged, almost cacophonous essays into articulation.

The Conception of Winter moves into far more personal response. But whereas the earlier writer might have been left vulnerable and the reader

embarrassed, this poetry trusts to the community of the writer's audience. When, in 'Towards the Color of Summer,' the three women on holiday are arrested by news of the death of a friend back home, the speaker places herself both in the first person singular and in the plural. Echoing her earlier release into the sky at the start of her trip, she now asks in presence of death 'how to save ourselves who no longer believe // in winged souls caged in flesh nor yet // believe in shared rounds in organic growth / and becoming' (25). Together, the three women 'Dis-sipate Grief' by buying things, by consuming their emptiness in acts of monetary expenditure that only reinforce that emptiness. Here (26) the writer allows the emptiness to grow in between a ranged-left, clipped, fast-paced, short-line narrative poem, and a ranged-right, end-stopped, series of images of death, which begins:

We hustle in and out of shops
 bustling to buy
 everything
 we say 'it
 is cheaper here'
 we point at things

*and this is what happens
 when you die
 first you uncoil
 the guts of pain
 where it leads
 you gather yourself*

After this story about the impossibility of articulation comes the title poem, 'Conception of Winter,' during which the three women, again together, 'become sad' for 'here in this place in our determined joy / we find ourselves fearing the birth of winter' (28).

What the poet has been keeping at arms' length is of course her own death, and in the concluding long poem 'Against the Blade,' an elegy for her mother, she seems to find again in the community of women, expressed this time in the difficult identity with and difference from her mother, words that can be shared with her reader. At one moment in this careful but moving study of a parent's death, the speaker says, 'now sometimes / i came upon her suddenly / and in shadow / now perhaps my grave's clarity / resolving itself / i understand / what passion forged the cool smile' (51). The shadow of the mother, at the same time, in life, obscures the speaker's grave yet clarifies it in death; it also obscures both the mother and child in life and helps to resolve, to find resolution and focus for, each in death. Within the context of this poetry, whose cool smile is also forged by passion, the reader can watch the poet describe her mother, who 'lived language' (44), and watch her faced with the 'victorian silence' of the mother. The poet brings words back from abstraction and isolation into lists of events, descriptions of the mundane, accounts of personal history, trivial actions weighted with too much significance like flowers brought to the hospital that are 'stricken like this verse / extinguishing what is left of her / that is wild and full of grace' (58).

The movement of the earlier long poem about the three women travellers is rather more generous in its search for common grounds – but then it can afford to be. With this concluding long poem, the risks the poet takes with the death of a mother are far greater. But overall, in *The Conception of Winter* the poet offers with immense control not the attack of precisely transgressed tradition but a tentative movement into a common language for articulation that arises from the women's community about which she is writing.

Harris talks in a 1986 *Fireweed* issue of 'the way language is used to shelter the deformed morality of power.'¹⁶ She is constantly aware both of the large and sometimes deadly structures of that power, and the immediate and powerful realities of everyday life. Given that for Harris the problems of marginalization are the defining conditions and content of any poetry or any writing, her assertion that one cannot solve the deformations of power with a poetry of revenge, not even revenge upon the traditions of language and the poet, becomes a statement of her political position. Recently it is as if the immediate realities have become pressing, and her poetry must look toward community and authentic voice rather than the opposing dualities of tradition and an essential individual.

A parallel but different response emerges from the work of Dionne Brand, as she too works away from a tensely executed modernist poetic towards an alternative voice. Politically the most assertive of the three writers discussed here, Brand is poetically the most traditional. The poet-ics of *Primitive Offensive* (1982),¹⁷ a history of racism in violently ambivalent Poundian cantos, torsions modernist verse in on itself. The fragment-ed modernist image or allusion works by being able to refer to an under-stood continuum, a shared history or literary tradition. Unlike Harris, who initially deals with this structural and epistemological need by continually providing parallel discourses, Brand's early poetry¹⁸ chooses not to address the problem that much of her potential audience, defined by the use of a modernist poetic, will be unaware of the particular history of oppression, slavery, and colonialization to which she refers. By this, I do not mean simply to suggest that readers do not know the facts about these events, but that the average White, Western-educated, middle-class reader does not have a literary or linguistic or cultural or folkloric tradition that could foreground their repressive elements/referents. For example, the speaker of Harris's 'Towards the Color of Summer' finds, protruding into her Barcelona holiday, rivers of grief and blood. When the associated image of 'men with net and chain // and coffle' who then 'slaved and died' emerges into the high tourist bureau landscape, it provides a startling and disruptive link with the slave trade and European neocolonialization. Columbus for many is long the explorer and discoverer of school history, and only on prompted conscious awareness an

exploiter. However, having read Harris's poem, one finds it just that bit more difficult to eradicate the history of slavery, specifically the vocabulary of 'net and chain and cofle,' from the repository of allusions clustering around Spain. The history of slavery offered by Western education is not the history offered here. One of the distinguishing features of the reworking of modernist poetics by these writers is that they have to both rewrite the history and the shared literary convention, and simultaneously allude to that rewriting as if it were traditionally received.

The sparse imagery of Brand's early poetics lacks such an allusive repository, although the writer is aware of precisely this problem. Her use of modernist dislocation moves with a trust that such activity will find another more appropriate history. In the attempts to redress the undercoding of the reader with respect to this history, the writing occasionally overcodes, labouring the detail into necessary overemphasis. But the series 'Winter Epigrams' (1985)¹⁹ and 'Chronicles of the Hostile Sun' (1984),²⁰ on the Grenada invasion, both respond to the semiotic demands by opening up the poetry to conversational rhythm, dialect, and more personal accounts of everyday event. 'Winter Epigrams' is a long series that constructs its own narrative background as it proceeds. An early epigram reads simply 'they think it's pretty, / this falling of leaves. / something is dying!' The sequence of familiar urban experiences that follows allows the reader to contextualize 'they' as white (wintry) Toronto and to recognize the dry humour of the observation, while at the same time retain the initial, rather sinister, ambiguity of the isolated stanza.

Chronicles of the Hostile Sun goes much further. Separated into 'Languages,' 'Sieges,' and 'Military Occupations,' the sequence first establishes a narrative and realistic vocabulary, then explicitly problematizes the apparent directness of its description before it proceeds to recount the events of the invasion of Grenada. 'Languages' leaves the reader in no doubt about the skill with which this writer can employ the conventional literary devices; the voice is familiar with racist ideology, with the colloquial and the cocktail party, with song and with newspaper code. Yet, in 'Sieges,' under siege by this language as if it were a man demanding sex, the writer tries to negotiate a voice that is, if still bound up in convention, at least direct. In 'Anti-poetry' the speaker says that this poetry is for a 'crowd' and unlike other poets who 'don't feel the crowd eating their faces / I have to hustle poems between the dancers and the drummers' (30).

The first two sections, 'Languages' and 'Sieges,' attempt the double activity of establishing a ground for communication and a distrust of that ground, while not dislocating the voice into incomprehension. In other words they attempt to establish a voice that can be trusted to tell this newly gathered history, on a linguistic and literary ground that must be kept at arm's length. 'Military Occupations' can then offer a series of

commentaries on the effects that the invasion has on the speaker and the local community that elide from the recounting of immediate events to the necessity for speaking of those events to the 'waiting crowd.' The fragmentation of convention increases as the writer moves away from recounting the events and toward recounting the recounting, for example in the section 'four hours on a bus ...' which is a relentless unpunctuated prose monologue. But the voice never lets go of its commitment to telling this history in a manner that questions literary conventions while using them to reach as wide an audience as possible. The first stanza of the penultimate poem reads:

The varnished table
beside it, the shortwave radio
the foreign news ricochets off the white wall
behind. Spotted at dead mosquito intervals
I listen for what europe is doing. Voice of america is insipid
The BBC tells me when they will attack
disinformation about more killed / under the curfew.
We know that they are coming. (73)

There is a stasis achieved by the isolation of table, radio, and wall at the end of the first lines, by the odd qualifying phrase 'Spotted ...' that precedes 'I listen,' by the grammatical precision of 'The BBC ...' Yet within this stasis there is the loud 'ricochet' of news, the implicitly violent killing of mosquitoes, and a vocabulary of war: 'attack,' 'disinformation,' 'killed,' 'curfew.' All of this detail of impending destruction is set against the stasis of 'We': the 'we' 'know that they are coming,' the 'we' tensely waits. And the rest of the poem follows the sudden imbalance of action and counteraction that happens when the invasion brings the promised destruction and breaks the stasis.

The poetics of this stanza and those that follow inscribes the unusual detail remembered from moments of intense stress, through the immediacy of physical images and precisely controlled disruptions of grammar and syntax. At the same time, the memories are given an unmistakable broad referential backdrop of political and military event. The ambiguity of the final three lines of the opening stanza underlines the distrust we need to bring to language as it reconstructs history. Do they 'know' the Americans are coming as a fact separate from the radio report? Or do they know it because the BBC gives a time for attack? or is that time 'disinformation'? or is it the recognition of something as 'disinformation,' for example false figures about those killed, that provides the knowledge that the Americans are coming? The multiple ambiguities from these three lines alone, as personal memory narrates chronological event, are there to warn any attentive reader about the inadequacy of representa-

tion. However, the fact that invasion happens, the fear of Europe, America, and the BBC as a 'they' ranged against an isolated 'we,' and the presence of the personal in all this are clear and immediate.

The collection of short stories *San Souci*, written between 1984 and 1988,²¹ pursues the narrative impulse to conventional communication, and the early poetics begin to breathe more freely as the writer relaxes, albeit slightly, into prose. The stories present a mixture of voices or histories of the experiences of Black women in the Caribbean, and of those who have chosen to leave and go to Canada. The histories examine why they leave, looking at the structures and pressures of both societies, and why sometimes (rarely) the women return. These fables also look closely at the inhuman expectations of the people who employ the Black women, at the families they leave behind, the *other* children they care for instead, the abuse they receive, the fear they feel, their pride and the necessity/obstinacy of that pride. The writer makes her salient commentary on the cultures by taking epigrammatic density and extending a descriptive ground for it to build upon. The narrative structures are simple but the prose allows for an expansion of and anchoring in context. For example, 'Photograph' is a narrative excursion occasioned by looking at a faded photograph of her grandmother, which tersely put is saying that her grandmother acted as her mother for many years while her mother was 'away' earning money, and that on her mother's return her grandmother soon died. Phrased epigrammatically it is a story about the complications of familial love and power. The epigrammatic here is extended by a sequence of recountings, remembered incidents that emerge through analogical links. These inner stories or memories are not cumulative in the narrative sense; they do not lead to a conclusion about guilt or blame. Rather their procession accretes a verbal and literary density, in the initial descriptions of the speaker's relationship with her grandmother, that is disturbed and contorted upon the return of the mother. The resulting responses of both speaker and reader are complicated, intentionally and purposively difficult to analyse.

Similar expansive remedies of epigrammatic density are made possible throughout *San Souci*. The story 'I used to like the Dallas Cowboys' has a terse structure that runs like this: The speaker as a young girl used to like the Dallas Cowboys American football team, partly because football was *not* the local sport of cricket and partly because her in-depth knowledge of football proved her worth in a man's world. But she is later in Grenada at the time of the invasion and she recognizes in the American war machine many of the elements of the American football team. The concentration, the end-game direction, the ruthless beauty of their occupation with the game, all are transferred onto the precision of the military operation. The story then becomes a study in sport and war; it foregrounds the brief epigrammatic structure and contextualizes it,

thereby regrounding the potential for cliché in the contingencies of an immediate rereading. The reader is encouraged to invert the parallels back onto the questions raised by cricket, which is the slave-master's game, played always at the ready for a riot, as well as onto the young girl's attempts to compete within a man's world. What happens is that the image begins to carry the larger ideological allusions along with it and the reader learns the social references.

These stories are skillfully executed essays in history, written to present the problems of marginalization as social and political, and as something that one must act on from the ground up. Their activity is underwritten by Brand's experience of grassroots community work,²² her writing on racism,²³ and her studies at OISE.²⁴ Her work is firmly assertive with an anger that readers either immediately recognize or need to make a place for: the necessity of voicing the fears, reactions, rejections that are tied up in the Black experience of Canada's racism. Brand's militant assertiveness, if not her formality of style, is echoed in Marlene Philip's work on racism and access. But in apparent contrast to Brand, Philip is an institutional fighter recognizing that the social and political roots of marginalization are something that in Canada may also be changed within the institutions of power themselves: witness her recent fights about racism with PEN²⁵ or with the Writer's Union, or with the ROM exhibition 'Into the Heart of Africa'²⁶ – or indeed her apparent despair over the controversy at the Women's Press (Toronto) that split the Press collective.²⁷ Philip says that she writes 'To witness; to bear testimony and build a tradition: "So that you may dance (my sister) / I will build a floor for you."²⁸

Philip's published literary writing begins not with the fragmentations of a rigorous modernist poetics but with the Canadian reworking of that poetic into romantic metaphor and with the resultant surrealist stress on the imagery of estranged dream. An early work such as 'Salmon Courage' depends thoroughly upon the full metaphor of the returning salmon: to leave and to return and to return only to die, but here somehow to be reborn. The image is not dislocated; the reading here needs to know and understand the reference to the salmon's life cycle. Yet the biological metaphor is both stretched against the tension of bureaucratic millstones that drag one to the ocean and the physical magnetism of the lodestar pulling one back to the river source, and is also extended within the strange terrain of the 'huddled hunchbacked hills' 'humping the horizon.' The image of the salmon becomes surreal as it is extended past conventional literary comprehension: the place to which one returns is never the same, it will always have moved on; and so the person that one returns to be is not/cannot be there. There can be no whole recuperation of the natural landscape; and yet a trust in it offers the place for salmon courage, which is to swim against the tide, to die to be born into a possibility of change. Increasingly since the mid-1980s Philip has combined

this metaphorical stress with experimentation in syntax, phonetics, and sound, moving swiftly towards representations of dialect versions of Caribbean English, and with manipulation of generic conventions in both poetry and prose. Both developments, within language and literature, can be read as attempts to build bridges to new audiences.

In *Harriet's Daughter* (1988),²⁹ Philip is brave enough to attempt to address the experience of that most difficult of audiences, the adolescent reader, within the context of the Black community in Toronto. The book was apparently rejected by Canadian publishers because it did not have enough interest for general readers, or as Philip herself states elsewhere, because it had 'black children' in it.³⁰ Only published in Canada after Heinemann in Britain picked it up, it is an example of the 'access' bias besetting the Black writing community, about which Philip has written much.³¹ It is also an unconventional piece of writing. The narrating prose from the adolescent character Margaret/Harriet is curiously flat and holds no hostages to fortune, as if the writer is afraid to patronize or unconsciously reinforce through stereotypical representations the structures of power being criticized. In contrast, direct speech is rendered in a representation of dialects which is vibrant and active with conversational rhythm. The contrast has a profound effect on how the text is reconstructed in reading: the rather distanced, withholding position of the main narrative is interrupted by islands of stories, conversational duets, that place a firm emphasis on the primacy of spoken communication.

Within the observed adult community the experience of the adolescent girl is rendered as hesitant and externalized; yet the moment she speaks, or is involved into direct communication with her friends or other adults, the character flourishes as obstinate, clever, and thoughtful. The technique is strategically very sensible, but it does have disadvantages: the long sequence of description concerning the 'underground railway' game played by the children, which is presumably given so much narrative space partly in order to focus on the personal worlds necessary to young people particularly so they can build a personal history, is distanced with coolness; and accounts of other events also suffer. Yet the technique comes into its own when it gives a tense and half-understanding pursuit to the problems of gender and family in the adult community that accumulate towards the end of the novel. The writing stalks a difficult line, always in danger of falling out of kilter with convention, and some of the questions raised by the book are very much to do with the need for genre experimentation and the danger of providing something too different that the audience rejects. However, the book is an attempt to build a bridge to a new audience in a manner quite different from modernist and postmodernist strategies. As Philip addresses a Black, female readership, specifically dealing with adolescence arguably to set a new lens on the adult community, she is also addressing the problems of another

generation. While it is necessary to remember the history of Black slavery, of Black immigration from the United States, and of the civil rights movement, for the daughters of those events the questions are also those of race and culture, class and gender.

Philip's attempts at bridge-building are immensely generous. The sequence '... And over Every Land and Sea'³² proffers an arching image of a parent(mother)-child connection, how to find without binding, how to leave, how to cope with the adoption of other families and not lose one's own or oneself. More broadly the image narrates a story of displacement from one culture, here the Caribbean, to another: 'Stateside, England, Canada' (107); and the poems move from a dialect representation into modern standard English represented through a more Latinate, multisyllabic vocabulary as the displacement proceeds. The early sections of the sequence use dialect to play with cultural ambiguity, with the double meanings that words acquire in the mouths and hands of people from different societies. For example, the word 'with' is rendered as 'wit,' allowing for extensive interplay along syntactical and semantic lines: the conclusion to the first poem, 'grief gone mad wit crazy,' can be read at least as 'grief / gone mad wit crazy,' 'grief gone / mad wit crazy,' 'grief gone mad / wit crazy,' and 'grief gone / mad wit / crazy.' Much similar subtle doubling and folding of language occurs in these opening dialect sections.

The central metamorphosing poem is 'Dream-skins,' which the writer specifically subtitles 'in two languages' as she leads her reader from one culture to another. The poetry is opening a door onto White, Western language and tradition for culturally displaced readers, but at the same time it opens that door for White Western-educated readers as well. 'Dream-skins' alternates between dialect and oral Englishes, at first focusing the dialect stanzas on 'she' and standard stanzas on the connection between the speaker and 'she,' until the final duet within the poem of 'Blood-cloth' and 'Blood-cloths' which is the only dream for which the writer provides expression in both languages. The poem raises profound questions of the structuring and acquisition of cultural identity. At first 'she' rises from the sea with emerald skin, akin to the lime-green skin Philip gives her Black women elsewhere, yet simultaneously both 'she' and the speaker are 'white' and swollen with womanhood, 'with child.' After birth, after the recognition of both traditions, the speaker is locked into a struggle between the white breast and the black, but when a hybrid plant seems to sprout from her throat it is taken out by 'she,' released into 'split of throat / silence.'

The speaker is left with, first, the dialect 'Blood-cloth' in which her woman's 'blood-rush' at least can be called upon; yet even here 'wit some clean white rag / she band up mi mouth / nice nice' (109). Then, 'Blood-cloths' in the different language sends the reader out into harshly distinct

images of 'sand / silence / desert / sun.' Here the 'blood of rush' writes hieroglyphs, in allusive reference to the Egyptian sources for Judaean-Christian culture and for written language and poetics as it has become in the Western world. Here the inscriptions again are bound up, this time as wounds, and carried by a 'broad back / hers.' This binding, like that of the dialect 'blood-cloth,' is not just to constrain and keep in but to provide some security: it is about baby binding, finding voice as the mother's voice teaches the child, but here there are two voices. The painful transition into White language is not, however, simply loss. Philip is trying to build bridges, trusting in an understanding of the ideologies. The speaker in the sequence goes on to attempt 'sightings' of other cultures, other mothers, with a feeling that there was once an image that gave 'she' a name, perhaps a smell. She is left at the end in 'Adoption Bureau Revisited' with the constant revisiting of the possibilities of birth, and of living.

The study of displaced culture and social construction which '... And over Every Land and Sea' presents in terms of a search for the mother has a companion-piece in 'Cyclamen Girl,'³³ which foregrounds not language, which carries the doubled tradition, but ideology, which tries to shape and possess. 'Cyclamen Girl' presents a far more formal and traditionally accessible poetic about conversion, communion, and the onset of puberty: being reborn into the institution of the Christian church, at the same time as into a man's world, into a White world, and often also into womanhood. The poem offers a study of the way that womanhood can work against the institutions of a White world, how it can be both a preservation from and an opening up into differences from the White world. Here the bridge the writer builds for her sisters crosses all races.

Philip's emphasis on metaphor, her evident trust in the broad back of language, goes hand in hand with her generous invitation to a wide range of readers. For all the immense gifts in such writing, there is a potential drawback in the apparent wholeness it presents. This poetry trusts to broad cultural and social references of parenthood, authority, childhood, gender, and other metaphors, but in this openness the issue of race and Philip's Black heritage may be passed over. For all the abrupt elisions and under/over codings in Brand's poetry, through their embarrassment the reader is made aware of her own ignorance, of incomprehensible space. Philip's poems extend in significance even further when reread against the experience of reading the more socially and politically explicit groundings of metaphor and allusion, for example in that of split and displaced families, in work by other Black women writers such as Brand.

Philip's more recent work makes a significant shift in both poetics and narrative prose. It engages with quite different aspects of extending the bridge between languages and between language and the world. An

extraordinary piece of prose, 'Burn Sugar' (1988),³⁴ which extends her bridge even further, is concerned again with metamorphosis and transformation but is here explicitly located in particular experience. The voice of the narrator is an immensely sophisticated textual weave that interlaces present, past, historical present, dialect present, oral performance present, and narrative present. The movement of child to woman, woman to mother, mother to daughter, black to white to black, is set against the metaphor of following or reconstructing a recipe from memory. The woman speaker in Toronto, displaced from her Caribbean home, is trying to make a cake traditionally made each year by her mother and, since she emigrated, sent to her by post. The cake invariably arrives slightly mouldy, and this story is about her attempt to make it for herself. At the pragmatic level there is the range of transformation as sugar amalgamates with butter, eggs reluctantly mix in, sugar – that ambivalent commodity emerging from slave ownership – delicately and precisely burns from white to black to provide the essential bitterness of this cake. And all is beaten, beaten, laboriously, back-breakingly, into one.

In another mode, the narrative is about a central cultural experience: the transformation from oral culture to written through memory, in the focusing image of recipe recreation. Recipes are traditions, cultures, historically grounded in food pathways and economics. They are also often familial, handed-down patterns for performance that are never uniquely repeated but central to survival: as so often, the culinary is a discretely exact analogy for social and cultural construction. The child's voice moves from the 'Mother' of her memory to 'Mammy' as the mother we make for ourselves as we learn the necessities in our history as well as the changes, as we learn to live with and speak to a community. The process of recipe reconstruction provides a sense of how the child learns both language and survival from the mother: by example, by wanting to do so, by being included, by training, by being able to repeat, by being able to produce and construct for itself in another world, with different contingencies. Each of the transformations is unpredictable, each carries its own resistance and describes the difficulty of bringing different cultures, with different meanings, up against one another. One of the differences is that between the work of the Mother and the work of the speaker/daughter: the speaker's work is to render into language, even into written language, to find significance, not to avoid but to take risks with communication and culture. This particular work is necessary because, for the displaced, gaining access to the primary means of communication is one of the most important ways of making a community. Philip, from her years of hard-won access, here extends both the literary and linguistic features of traditional prose out into techniques, strategies, and genres drawn from the topic of a women's audience and community.

Even less trusting of ideologies and intimately part of Philip's approach is the poetry in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Here the writer faces head on the problem of speaking/writing in a language 'not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African',³⁵ and the problem of making a language to express the personal memory and authentic experience that build history. In 'Universal Grammar' Philip takes on the entire linguistic debate about natural language and turns it into an anguish about speaking within pre-defined language. The operative irony here, as the writing presents dictionary definition setting itself against practical language eliding into poetry, is that the 'natural' ease of language arising from its potentially 'innate' quality is simultaneous with the ambiguous 'incorrectness' of the necessary transposition of these 'innate' grammars into another language. You can indeed transpose noun and verb, speak 'incorrectly'; but you are still wrapped up in verbs and nouns. The writer transforms the acres of dry disputation surrounding this debate into the tensions of the body that initiates a series of tense repetitions that attempt to dismember language while 'the smallest cell remembers' (67). The sense of 'always already' being defined has led many into the sliding signifiers of postmodernism. Philip is led to 'Mother's Recipes on How to Make a Language Yours or How Not to Get Raped': that if the word 'does not nourish,' 'Spit it out / Start again' (67).

The way that words and topics accrete historical meaning through body memory is pursued in 'The Question of Language is the Answer to Power' as a direct proposal of a stance different from the modernist directive to 'Make it New' that is left 'floundering in the old' (71). In a rhetorical debate that verges on the epideictic, Philip fits the question around the history of Black slavery and how an understanding of that slavery can be remade as a history relevant to contemporary race relations. The underlying logic is that when the empire colonized it lost the language of the 'other,' and the 'other' were deprived of their language. This of course is the starting point of much postcolonial theory of discourse. But rather than become lost in multiplicitous images of self, Philip structures the next steps in terms of the physicality of language. Answers are not provided, but questions (helpful and not) and commentary are offered: 'Facts' may claim that 'words collect emotional and physical responses' (72), yet you may also ask 'Do words collect historical responses' (74) and 'how.' If 'Anxiety to convey meaning often results in over emphasis and emphasis as a way of conveying meaning means that you are unconsciously holding on to meaning and limiting it' (72) (sin for the postmodern), then 'By holding on to the meaning of life, did the slaves unconsciously limit it — or merely the word?' (74). These are tough and necessary social and political questions that do not often get asked

speaking to a crowd described by Brand: how to trust language while keeping it at arm's length.

The final, title poem, 'She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks' fuses questions of language, ideology, and history by taking up the comments Philip makes in her introductory essay, 'The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy,' that 'The only way the African artist could be in this world, that is the New World, was to give voice to this split i-image of voice silence. Ways to transcend that contradiction had to and still have to be developed, for that silence continues to shroud the experience, the image and so the word' (16). The writer suggests that 'each word creates a centre / circumscribed by memory ... and history / waits at rest always // still at the centre' (96). Language and the body of each individual are the place where words and memory meet and can re-member the verbal. 'That body should speak / when silence is ...' (98) is of utmost importance to those people whose memory/history, whose control through language, has been effaced or obscured not only because of the resulting disempowerment within the dominant society but also because the ability to build an immediate community is taken away.

If there is an attempt to break the silence, to write another self, where is that self found? This is, of course, one of the central questions of recent discussions on race, literature, and language, not the least because self-definitions can so often hold the beginnings of further racism. Self can be the contradictory self-identifying modernist identity that ends in existential nothingness. It can be the continually compromised image that emerges from self as 'difference': difference from, difference within, difference deferred, difference as chaos. For the disempowered, the effaced/defaced, an important place to build self is in community and specific social movement. Sometimes the definitions can move out and act more broadly in social policy, begin to affect the larger social and political structures. At the moment, within the literature and language of English, one of the most effective strategies for this building of story and movement out into social recognition is conventional realism. However, just because of its social acceptability, realism easily becomes reductive; just so, social policy can swiftly become anachronistic and authentic voice quickly turn into stereotype. In order to understand and control these casual slippages, the detailed procedures of language need to be scrutinized and thrown forward to the reader. What each of these writers does is both locate and build a common ground on which to write and read, and simultaneously encourage the words and the reader to make commentaries on those grounds.

As Claire Harris states, 'The problem is one of audience. We all know for whom we write; the ambivalence, and it is a dangerous one, lies in to

community that needs their words. Having access, their work can be seen as a series of attempts to locate and learn from that community, which in turn learns by responding and constructing itself as a community in that shared response. Perhaps that recognition will allow, or encourage, both the community and the society within which it operates to proceed with coping with the fact of racism.

NOTES

- 1 Lorris Elliott, *Literary Writing by Blacks in Canada*, ed M.S. Bates (Multiculturalism /and Citizenship Canada 1988), 4. See also Elliott, ed *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada* (Toronto:Williams-Wallace 1985), which is a literary companion piece to the bio-bibliographic listing.
- 2 There is a considerable tradition of writing from the Afro-Canadian community; see for example 'Voices Out of the Whirlwind: The Genesis of Afro-Nova Scotian Literature,' by George Elliott Clarke, in *The Atlantic Provinces Book Review* (May 1990). The better-known post-war voices have included writers such as Austin Clarke and Lillian Allen.
- 3 See Silvera Makeda, 'Immigrant Domestic Workers,' *Fireworks: The Best of Fireweed* (Toronto: Women's Press 1986), 38.
- 4 Lynette Hunter, 'Writing, Literature and Ideology: Institutions and the Making of a Canadian Canon,' in *Probing Canadian Culture*, ed P. Easingwood, K. Gross, and W. Kloss (Augsburg: AV-Verlag 1991), 52-64.
- 5 Marlene Philip is particularly eloquent on this issue. See the 'Where they're At' section of 'Gut Issues in Babylon: Racism and Anti-Racism in the Arts,' *Fuse*, 125 (April-May 1989).
- 6 *Canadian Woman Studies: Women and Literacy* 9:3-4 (Fall/Winter 1988).
- 7 Hunter, 'Critical Embarrassment with the Bios of Writing,' paper given at the conference on Autobiography, held at the University of York, January 1991 (forthcoming publication).
- 8 Elliott, *Literary Writing*, 5.
- 9 I am particularly grateful for the help I received from Marlene Nourbese Philip and the comments offered by Claire Harris on an earlier version of this essay; and I regret that there has been no discussion between myself and Dionne Brand. The need for friendship among commentators has been put eloquently in M. Lugones and E. Spelman, 'Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for "The Woman's Voice,"' *Women's Studies International* 6:6 (1983), 573-81.
- 10 *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, ed S. Neuman and S. Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/Newest 1986).
- 11 Harris, 'A Matter of Fact,' *Imagining Women* (Toronto: Women's Press 1988); also published as part of *Drawing Down a Daughter* (Fredericton: Goose Lane 1992).
- 12 This understanding of 'symbol' is taken from George Whalley, *Poetic Process* (Greenwood 1952); Whalley taught at Queen's University in Kingston from

the 1950s to the 1980s. His influence on generations of Canadian writers is testified to by the very large number of poems and prose pieces written about and for him.

- 13 Harris, *Fables From the Women's Quarters* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace 1984).
- 14 Harris, *Translating into Fiction* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead and Goose Lane 1986), and *Travelling to Find a Remedy* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead and Goose Lane 1986).
- 15 Harris, *The Conception of Winter* (Stratford: Williams-Wallace 1988).
- 16 Harris, 'Against the Poetry of Revenge,' *Fireweed* 23 (Summer 1986), 16.
- 17 Brand, *Primitive Offensive* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace 1982).
- 18 Early poetry also includes *Fore Day Morning* (1976) and a book of children's poetry, *Earth Magic* (1980).
- 19 Brand, *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defence of Claudia* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace 1983).
- 20 Brand, *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace 1984).
- 21 Brand, *Sans Souci* (Stratford: Williams-Wallace 1988).
- 22 As described in 'Organising exclusion,' *Fireworks*, 184.
- 23 Brand and Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta, *Rivers Have Sources Trees Have Roots - Speaking of Racism* (Toronto: Cross Cultural Communications Centre 1986).
- 24 Brand has been carrying out a doctoral thesis on Women's History.
- 25 See the *Globe and Mail*, 26 September 1989, A19, or P.E.N. Canada Locks Out Writers of Colour,' *Vision* 21 - Canadian Culture in the 21st Century, Multicultural Women Writers of Canada.
- 26 Philip, 'The White Soul of Canada,' *Spectacular Failures* (Spring 1991), 63-77.
- 27 See Philip, 'Gut Issues.'
- 28 In *Fireweed* 23 (Summer 1986), 105.
- 29 Philip, *Harriet's Daughter* (London: Heinemann 1988).
- 30 See Philip, 'Gut Issues,' 13.
- 31 See Philip, 'Gut Issues,' and 'The Disappearing Debate,' *This Magazine* 23:2 (July-August 1989).
- 32 In *Fireweed* 23 (Summer 1986), 106-11, and *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press 1989).
- 33 In *Fireweed* 23 (Summer 1986), 112-13.
- 34 Philip, 'Burn Sugar,' *Imagining Women*.
- 35 Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, 15.
- 36 Harris, 'Poets in Limbo,' 121.