

Making a Difference

**Canadian Multicultural
Literatures in English**

Second Edition

Edited by Smaro Kamboureli

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Dionne Brand b. 1953

GUAYGUAYARE, TRINIDAD

'Every word turns on itself, every word falls after it is said,' writes Dionne Brand. 'None of the answers that I've given over the years is the truth. Those answers have all been given like a guerrilla with her face in a handkerchief, her eyes still. She is still, poised for quick movement, but still. . . . And I've answered like the captive giving answers in an interrogation, telling just enough to appease the interrogator and just enough to trace the story so she could repeat it without giving anything away and without contradiction the next time she has to tell it.' Brand's self-portrait as writer reveals the energy and tensions in her writing, but also the cultural and political conditions informing her work as a black lesbian writer.

Born in Guayguayare, Trinidad, Brand moved to Toronto in 1970, after graduating from a private school. 'I really didn't think of myself as an immigrant *per se*,' she says. 'I could escape being an immigrant, but along with the black people who have lived in this country for three centuries, I would not escape my race at any point.' She studied at the University of Toronto, where she received a BA in English and Philosophy (1975), and at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, where she received an MA in History and Philosophy (1989). In the 1970s and 80s, she worked with such community organizations as the Black Education Project, the Immigrant Women's Centre, the Caribbean Peoples' Development Agency, and the Agency for Rural Transformation in Grenada. Her collaborative books, *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism* (1986), which records people's experiences with racism, and *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (1991), which contains the life narratives of 16 black women, demonstrate Brand's ongoing commitment to combatting racism: 'I don't see Marxism and feminism as theories I need to graft onto people. I see them as living things.' This kind of 'living', rigorous creative analysis, characterizes *Bread Out of Stone:*

recollections sex recognitions race dreaming politics (1994), her impassioned and eloquent essays about her life as an artist, intellectual, and activist, and *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), her unyielding look at the lingering effects of the Middle Passage as they survive in the memory and bodies of her family and black community at large. 'We're now battered by multicultural bureaucracy,' she says, 'co-opted by mainstream party politics, morassed in everyday boring racism.' Only by addressing '[r]eal power—which is economic power and political power'—can we begin to deal with racism. What multiculturalism 'does essentially is to compartmentalize us into little cultural groups who have dances and different foods and Caribana. But it doesn't address real power.'

A contributing editor of such journals as *Spear* and *Fuse Magazine*, Brand has also produced documentaries. She worked with the National Film Board, Studio D, to produce *Older, Stronger, Wiser* (1989), *Sisters in the Struggle* (1991), and *Long Time Comin'* (1993), documenting the art and politics of various black women in Canada, as well as *Listening for Something: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation* (1996). Brand's writing, beginning with her first books of poetry, *Fore Day Morning* (1978), *Earth Magic* (1979), for children, *Primitive Offensive* (1982), and *Winter Epigrams: Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* (1983), is directly engaged in questioning power and the traditional constructs of femininity. The elegiac and militant *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (1984) that documents her ten-month sojourn in Grenada after the US invasion, the lyrical and documentary *No Language Is Neutral* (1990), nominated for the Governor General's Award, as well as *Land to Light On* (1997) that won that Award, and *thirsty* (2003), a finalist for the Griffin Prize—all reflect the elegance and tenacity of her poetic language, the 'language that I grew up in', and her unwavering attention to 'social' issues. Poetry, as she says, can 'offer an alternative to the

unrelenting idiocy of corporate culture'. Her fiction, too—*Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1994) and her novels, *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), winner of the Trillium Book Award, and *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999)—is written in a language that 'creates its own sensory space', that tells stories through 'poetic gestures'. Whether she writes about Elizete and Verlia's intense contemporary relationship in the former or the descendants of the defiant slave, Marie Ursule, being haunted by the spectres of the 1824 mass suicide she plotted in the latter, Brand's politics, be it about gender issues or about racialization and racism, is never moraliz-

ing, but a 'lived thing' often endowed with 'grace'. 'I never begin from what might be universal,' she says. 'Wary of appeals to universality', her 'writing is directed against stereotypes'. Her most recent novel, *What We All Long For* (2005), set in Toronto in early 2000 and in a Thai refugee camp, offers an undaunted view of global politics, interracial relationships, and misplaced longings. *Inventory* (2006) is her most recent poetry book.

Brand, who has taught in a number of universities, is University Research Chair in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. She lives in Toronto.

from No Language Is Neutral

No language is neutral. I used to haunt the beach at Guaya, two rivers sentinel the country sand, not backra white but nigger brown sand, one river dead and teeming from waste and alligators, the other rumbling to the ocean in a tumult, the swift undertow blocking the crossing of little girls except on the tied up dress hips of big women, then, the taste of leaving was already on my tongue and cut deep into my skinny pigeon toed way, language here was strict description and teeth edging truth. Here was beauty and here was nowhere. The smell of hurrying passed my nostrils with the smell of sea water and fresh fish wind, there was history which had taught my eyes to look for escape even beneath the almond leaves fat as women, the conch shell tiny as sand, the rock stone old like water. I learned to read this from a woman whose hand trembled at the past, then even being born to her was temporary, wet and thrown half dressed among the dozens of brown legs itching to run. It was as if a signal burning like a fer de lance's sting turned my eyes against the water even as love for this nigger beach became resolute.

There it was anyway, some damn memory half-eaten and half hungry. To hate this, they must have been dragged through the Manzanilla spitting out the last spun syllables for cruelty, new sound forming,

pushing toward lips made to bubble blood. This road
 could match that. Hard-bitten on mangrove and wild
 bush, the sea wind heaving any remnants of
 consonant curses into choking aspirate. No
 language is neutral seared in the spine's unravelling.
 Here is history too. A backbone bending and
 unbending without a word, heat, bellowing these
 lungs spongy, exhaled in humming, the ocean, a
 way out and not anything of beauty, tipping turquoise
 and scandalous. The malicious horizon made us the
 essential thinkers of technology. How to fly gravity,
 how to balance basket and prose reaching for
 murder. Silence done curse god and beauty here,
 people does hear things in this heliconia peace
 a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong
 now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air
 rudiment this grammar. Take what I tell you. When
 these barracks held slaves between their stone
 halters, talking was left for night and hush was idiom
 and hot core.

* * *

Leaving this standing, heart and eyes fixed to a
 skyscraper and a concrete eternity not knowing then
 only running away from something that breaks the
 heart open and nowhere to live. Five hundred dollars
 and a passport full of sand and winking water, is how
 I reach here, a girl's face shimmering from a little
 photograph, her hair between hot comb and afro, feet
 posing in high heel shoes, never to pass her eyes on
 the red-green threads of a humming bird's twitching
 back, the blood warm quickened water colours of a
 sea bed, not the rain forest tangled in smoke-wet,
 well there it was. I did read a book once about a
 prairie in Alberta since my waving canefield wasn't
 enough, too much cutlass and too much cut foot, but
 romance only happen in romance novel, the concrete
 building just overpower me, block my eyesight and
 send the sky back, back where it more redolent.

Is steady trembling I trembling when they ask me my
 name and say I too black for it. Is steady hurt I feeling
 when old talk bleed, the sea don't have branch you

30

35

40

45

50

55

60

65

know darling. Nothing is a joke no more and I right
 there with them, running for the train until I get to find
 out my big sister just like to run and nobody wouldn't
 vex if you miss the train, calling Spadina *Spadeena*
 until I listen good for what white people call it, saying I
 coming just to holiday to the immigration officer when
 me and the son-of-a-bitch know I have labourer mark
 all over my face. It don't have nothing call beauty
 here but this is a place, a gasp of water from a
 hundred lakes, fierce bright windows screaming with
 goods, a constant drizzle of brown brick cutting
 dolorous prisons into every green uprising of bush.
 No wilderness self, is shards, shards, shards,
 shards of raw glass, a debris of people you pick your way
 through returning to your worse self, you the thin
 mixture of just come and don't exist.

* * *

from Land to Light On

IV i

Arani, I meet my old friend at Arani. Arani is a piece of what
 someone carried all the way here from Kerala and set down on
 Spadina, all he might cull of where he came from is commerce
 now, is laid out in trays hurriedly set on fire. So Arani, I sit with
 my old friend at Arani, my old friend. Between us there's a boy,
 his son he hasn't seen, a friendship I'm holding for ransom until
 he does. Who loves a Black boy? I ask him. It's not hard to
 abandon him, whole cities have. So this between us, I meet my
 old friend at Arani, his whole head soaked in that teardrop off
 the chin of India, or is this the way we've learned to look at it,
 the teardrop, the pearl dangling on the imperial necklace. We sit
 at Arani, I know about necklaces, archipelagos, and in some
 lurching talk he jumps over the Indian Ocean, back and forth,
 the north full of armed Tigers, tea workers, the south, treachery,
 prime ministers and generals, and here the telephone calls of
 more fracture and more of the same, wife beatings in St James
 Town, men I'm certain cook with too much pepper because at
 home they never cooked and now only remember pepper.
 I could be wrong I admit but still, and yes the boy who could do

70

75

80

5

10

15

with or without him, his head boiled in all we should have
been on those islands failing us because who ever had a chance
to say how it might be and our own particular vanity and
smallness, hatreds thinning our mouths and yellowing our
fingers. This we suspect. On any given day, he says,

there are seven hundred Asian maids in their embassies in
Kuwait, right now there are three hundred Sri Lankan maids
hiding in the Sri Lankan embassy in Kuwait, that bulwark of
American democracy, he says, a British ornithologist pursued a
rare owl for years following it to a village in the south of India,
there the ornithologist wept, distraught as villagers captured the
bird, cooked and ate it, there were lots of these birds around they
said, lots, the ornithologist wept, look, he says, I know you say
they're all in it but Chandrika is caught between the generals,
and the boy, I say, what about him adding my own disagreements,
he gets local prices in Tobago, he goes to bars at night there and
dances, they think he is a local, you know it doesn't matter this
Chandrika, the generals, her mother, Bandaranaike before,
they're all in the same class, they have tea together, all you can
count on is their benevolence, how they got up this morning,
and that's no revolution, anyway we will never win now. I
hardly know why I'm fighting any more, 'we', my we, taking
most of the world in my mouth, we, between my lips, the
mouth of the world is open, the boy's mother told me her
mother called menstruation. The mouth of the world is open
she'd say. Anyway I was driving here and you can't believe this
city, man, it is filthy and look at you, year in year out hoping
about someplace else, you ever wonder why don't we live here
ay, why don't we live here; by the way the Sri Lankans cannot
hope to beat the West Indies at cricket, don't make yourself
think about it you'll only be disappointed;

they're all the same, why are you hoping, I say, all the same class
and the Americans have them, you think anything will pass
now, peaceful solution, negotiating, look someone whispered
something to the Tigers and they got up from the table, a mistake,
a mistake, he wags, man, they want them dead, this class has only
disdain, man, you should read Balzac, he skips, Balzac was
saying these things, it's incredible, riffing conspiratorially at
Arani as if he's talking about arms caches, Balzac is incredible,
there is going to be another massive offensive, they're going to
kill everyone. The pope wants to beatify Queen Isabella, I tell
him, and has made thirty-three saints and seven hundred

blesseds, do you realise just how absurd we are here sitting at
Arani, and the boy, JFK's rocking chair sold for 450,000 dollars
and European neo-fascists are glamour boys in the *New York
Times*, do we realise they are more afraid of communists
than fascists, that is not good news for us. I sit here and listen
to radios, I hear their plots, and stagger, and the boy, well all
there is is the boy, just like any ordinary person, we are not
revolutionaries, we were never drawn into wars, we never
slept on our dirty fingers and pissed in our clothes, why, why
didn't we do that, but here, here we grind our teeth on our stone
hearts and foretell and mistake, and jump around the world in
our brains. Whether we are right is unimportant now, Leningrad
is St Petersburg and God is back in vogue, this is the future. I've
forgotten how to dance with him, something heavy is all in my
mouth, I get exhausted at Arani, my eyes reach for something
domestic, the mop in the Kerala man's hand, well, the boy is still
between us, and all the wars we've pried open and run our
tongues over like dangerous tin cans.

IV x

here is the history of the body;
water perhaps darkness perhaps stars
bone then scales then wings then legs then arms
then belly then bone then nerves then feathers then scales,
then wings then liquid then pores then bone
then blood pouring, then eyes, then distance, only this,
all that has happened since is too painful,
too unimaginable

'I never saw Managua when miniskirts were in,' Ortega
wrote in prison and newsprint bleeds with weeping
the walls of this room weep, a Saturday weeps,
what do we make of it, a miniskirt measuring
time, senses missed, dates, a life and people walking
in streets and thoughts as you walk along that are taken
for granted and forgotten at the end of a journey,
Ortega sitting in his cell could not have these
but had we given another shape to bodies
as well as theory and poems and speeches
what would we have missed and wept for and forgotten

Remembering Miranda's campaigns as if he were there
and Bolivar as if fighting for his own life and Jose Marti

like a son grown from a pebble tossed in the Caribbean basin
 a comrade in his last speech and his last hope
 ignites the hall in Montreal,
 he is the one left alive and left here
 he is a stranger in another millennium, in another room
 with his passion and his shimmering ancestry,
 a question from the back of the hall about armed struggle,
 he has been waiting,
 he sticks his grapple in its rock face and there's
 a ruthlessness in him, a touch of the old sexy revolutionary,
 and he stumbles on now, then his hand touches a greying chin
 and it is as if he is startled and ashamed
 and unable to land in now, all left undone.
 There is a sign that he must make us,
 the shape of the one thing that he has never written, ever

we stumble on the romance of origins,
 some stories we all love like sleep, poured in our mouths like
 milk. How far we've travelled now, still we stoop at a welcome
 fire and hum, to a stick strung with hair, our miscalculations,
 we return to the misology in heat and loneliness, the smell of
 meat and hunger

here again the history of the body
 men romance the shape they're in
 the mythologies they attach to it
 their misunderstandings
 and this is what James should have said to Trotsky
 as they drank in Mexico City,
 what might have happened if one had said to the other,
 comrade, this is the time you betray the body

nearly late, we are in a hall waiting for a gesture,
 Ortega out of prison if his prison is not the whole
 of South America now, Jose Martí's son if the hall in Montreal
 is not his coffin,
 we are waiting for some language to walk into
 like a large house
 with no rooms and no quarter
 all waiting for his signal
 we happen on what was wrong in the first place,
 how the intangible took over,
 the things left in a language with carelessness or purpose,

men's arms and legs and belly, their discreet assignments
 and regulations
 the things kept secret with a hand pressed to the mouth
 by priests, judges, mullahs
 this way they resist what they must become
 full knowing that we must throw our life away
 and all impressions of ourselves.
 Comrades, perhaps this is what you might whisper
 on the telephone to the young men who adore you still,
 'Goodbye, then. And well . . . betray your body.'

Antonio D'Alfonso b. 1953

MONTREAL, QUEBEC

'1977 was an important year for me,' says Antonio D'Alfonso. 'It was the year I became an Italian. One is not born an Italian; one becomes an Italian. Especially when you come from the *campagna*, the country; especially when you are not born in Italy.' D'Alfonso was born in Montreal, three years after his parents' emigration from Italy to Quebec. He grew up trilingual, and studied at Loyola College where he received his BA in Communication Arts (1975), and at the Université de Montréal, where he received his MSc in Communication Studies, specializing in semiology. The year he 'became' an Italian was also the year he discovered the poetry of Pier Giorgio di Cicco and other Italian Canadian writers. It was at this point that he began not only questioning what it means being Italian in Canada—'To be a Wop, a worker without a permit, a poet without a language of his own, without a tradition to work in, or to fight against?'—but also constructing his own identity as writer and becoming a major force in creating the very tradition he felt he lacked as an Italian poet in Canada. A prolific author, he writes in both English and French.

In 1978 he founded Guernica Editions and has since published numerous books of literature and criticism by authors from Canada and around the world, many of them focusing on

issues of hyphenated identities. D'Alfonso moved his press to Toronto in 1991, where he continues to be an active publisher, editor, translator, and writer. He is also the co-founder of the Montreal magazine *Vice Versa* (1982). Some of his essays on writing, publishing, and cultural politics have appeared in *In Italics: In Defense of Ethnicity* (1996), *Gambling with Failure* (2005)—'failure as the only way to cultural survival'—and *Duologue: On Culture and Identity* (1998), with Pasquale Verdiccio.

'Being an Italian,' writes D'Alfonso, 'is nothing to be frightened of or arrogant about. It is a fact of life, and one must live with it, like one's gender . . . In many ways, coming to terms with one's *Italianity* is very much like coming out of the closet. Nevertheless you cannot shed overnight the layers of skin you have wrapped yourself in . . . The transformation is slow and often painful. You have to *become* yourself. And this is what interests me most: the process of becoming. Struggle is the force behind the process of identity which manifests itself in different ways. Not all struggle, however, need be expressed in stammers or with violence.' D'Alfonso's poetics and politics, the transformation and struggle he talks about, are clearly reflected in his writing. Beginning with his early books of poetry, *La chanson du shaman*