

**“THIS THOSE SLAVES MUST HAVE KNOWN WHO WERE MY
MOTHERS”: WOMEN WHO LIVE BY THEIR OWN RULES IN
DIONNE BRAND’S *LAND TO LIGHT ON***

SHOSHANNAH GANZ AND STEPHANIE MCKENZIE¹

Kaya Fraser titles her 2005 article on Dionne Brand’s *Land to Light On* “Language to Light On: Dionne Brand and the Rebellious Word”.² The title of this article maps the primary concern of most Brand critics and, likewise, alights on two of the primary concerns this essay will attempt to address: the “rebellious[ness]” that marks Brand’s language and the resistance she celebrates with her life and the lives of other women. Certainly, rebelliousness and resistance are no new topics in the criticism of Caribbean women’s writing, or writing that is shaped by a Caribbean influence. Meredith M. Gadsby, in her article “‘I Suck Coarse Salt’: Caribbean Women Writers in Canada and the Politics of Transcendence” notes that “the literature of Caribbean women in

¹ This essay is the collaborative work of Shoshannah Ganz and Stephanie McKenzie, and its source of inspiration was the 1996 National Film Board of Canada’s video recording *Listening for Something: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation*, dir. Dionne Brand, 1996. This is a powerful portrait of two great feminists, poets, activists and thinkers discussing ideas about nationalism, feminism, lesbianism and much more. We do not pretend to have the insights and knowledge which Brand and Rich demonstrate here, but we draw on their example of women exchanging ideas. Our work began in conversation and records the mechanics of a writing process that underscores a collaborative process. The following essay is a miscellany and incorporates two different genres which, mixed together, attempt to make sense of Brand’s complicated and important feminist vision in *Land to Light On*: critical comments (written by Shoshannah Ganz), and poetry and critical conclusion (written by Stephanie McKenzie). Therefore, one will find criticism interspersed with poems which are inspired by both Brand’s text overall and, most often, framed by specific epigraphs taken from Brand’s poems.

² Kaya Fraser, “Language to light on: Dionne Brand and the rebellious word”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, XXX/1 (Winter 2005), 291-309.

Canada is preoccupied with a struggle with language”³ and makes the further, following claim: “Caribbean women writers must confront the challenge to use language to rewrite and to re-create history, to touch their tongues to those of subsequent generations of women and writers, enabling them to recognize their ancestors.”⁴ However, in Brand criticism, much attention has been given not to the resolute sisterhood that drives its sensibility to the fore of pages but, rather, to what Sophia Forster, in her article “‘inventory is useless now but just to say’: The Politics of Ambivalence in Dionne Brand’s *Land to Light On*”, claims is “The distrust of nationalism [which] extends a distrust of Black and feminist politics”.⁵ As a preface to this claim, Forster more specifically notes that “Brand’s most explicit of identity politics in *Land* comes ... in its title sequence. There she overtly rejects nation(alism), both colonial and postcolonial, connecting it to a destructive universalism.”

Following, too, in the footsteps of post-colonial inflected criticism, Marlene Goldman has also previously noted of Brand’s poetry and life, discussing in particular her 2001 memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, that Brand adopts the metaphor of “drifting” in opposition to the “mapping” of the colonizer, and Maia Joseph further contends that the “drifting” articulated by Goldman is also punctured by moments of landing – these landings include places in Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, Australia, and places of the imagination.⁶ While the language of drifting and landing are important to Brand’s poetics of resistance to the patriarchy, and the colonizer who is enabled by the patriarchy, we will argue that it is not primarily by her movements or landings around the globe, or her articulation of these in what Kamau Braithwaite would call her “nation language”⁷ that she explores resistance but, rather, through her portraits of the strength of women

³ Meredith M. Gadsby, “‘I Suck Coarse Salt’: Caribbean Women Writers in Canada and the Politics of Transcendence”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, XLIV/1 (1988), 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵ Sophia Forster, “‘Inventory is useless now but just to say’: The Politics of Ambivalence in Dionne Brand’s *Land to Light On*”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, XXVII/2 (Summer 2002), 171.

⁶ Marlene Goldman, “Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand”, *Canadian Literature*, 182 (Autumn 2004), 13-28; Maia Joseph, “Wondering Into Country: Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*”, *Canadian Literature*, 193 (Summer 2007), 75-92.

⁷ Edward Kamau Braithwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, London: New Beacon, 1984.

in the face of hatred and hardship, and her self-portraits of resistance to tyranny, that Brand portrays the enduring face and self of womanhood:

Here and there I land, one airplane, one tarmac
from the wards of weathered panes and stains
and all that mark those faces. Some stern,
the jowls of pride inherited, impossible to place
but stiff and there despite it all. I land.
Some claim runways, the scream of jetplane
wheels beneath the seat's true freedom, its guilty
pleasures. I buy tickets for the taking off and landings,
drift further into countries of past regret.
One brief moment and the relief comes
when planes are bound into clouds.
For only a moment and aphasia borne out of
rising, I can think fuck you.⁸

Importantly, the critics to date have focused their attention on the movement, landing, and place of *Land to Light On*, but, inadvertently, have blotted out the poetic personae or the women portrayed in this work. We argue that the feminist strength is found not only in the place or language of the poetry but also in the women who inhabit the place or are painted through the language.

The title of *Land to Light On* immediately draws attention to place – in this case, an unnamed but specific place. The subject of the title is the “Land” but the action is emphasized in “to Light On” suggesting the possibility of a place to “land”. The title, then, at once suggests place and the possibility of alighting on place. However, while the obvious examinations in this work of poetry have included landing and place, drifting, and Brand’s deployment of a place specific, or, as Braithwaite might call it, “nation language” poetry, this essay intends to look beyond the changeability of land and voice to what gives the poet and the people of the Diaspora strength. *A Map to the Door of No Return* includes the subtitle “Notes to Belonging” but Brand’s discussion in this text begins with the failure to find an origin or a place to return even imaginatively.⁹ In *A Map to the Door of No*

⁸ Stephanie McKenzie.

⁹ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001.

Return, and, more importantly for our discussion here, *Land to Light On*, the poetic personae repeatedly returns and poetically alights on the strong women of her childhood on the island, her youth, and, now, in the present, in Toronto.

*Look, let me be specific. I have been losing roads*¹⁰

The back country and the map disappear. All the tributaries
to comfort and peace vanish like unwanted symbols
of cartography. You are scared and scarred like sepia
uncertain of where to go on paper amongst the ponds
and inlets that promise some escape. There is none.
These roads stretch out like fingers suddenly
displaced, rings never there. If we lose roads
it's the mapmaker to blame. Somewhere far lies
a way out. We could crawl there on knees, pilgrims
amongst pines, lost souls of all women
looking for asphalt of minds.¹¹

The memory of not belonging and a continued problematizing of the idea of belonging to a particular place belie the easy answers the young Brand desires:

My grandfather said he knew what people we came from. I reeled off all the names I knew. Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandigo? He said no to all of them, saying that he would know it if he heard it.¹²

The poet describes having “no name to call on”¹³ as resulting in “a small space open[ing] in [her]”.¹⁴

The question, then, is what can fill this “small space”? We choose to suggest through a variety of portraits of strong and determined women that Brand fills this space with the strength and nurture she receives from a community of women who model the power of what could be considered a feminist “FUCK YOU” ethic. That we choose to call this feminist ethic the “FUCK YOU” ethic is important. It is important that the description of her feminist choices be offensive,

¹⁰ Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997, 15.

¹¹ Stephanie McKenzie.

¹² Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

that they describe activities that do not bow to decorum, and that they do not try to describe the experience in Canada as being one of multicultural belonging. Rather, such choices lead to descriptions of women who do not stand in classrooms or in positions of power giving statements of feminist positioning but to women who live and die by the right they take to live the way they want. These are women who find happiness and strength on their own terms and who become models of womanhood to Brand.

*let me say that all the classrooms should be burned*¹⁵

Let me write love poems in honor of burning of classrooms.
The front row and their brows could sing hymns, give
blessings to first struck matches, their romance aflame
with this will. The back sitters, snuggled into ambivalence
of seats outside of teachers' views might stop and wipe
their brows. Such heat and promise of love. A love
that will stop all bad wills, question the answers
heaped like unloved lovers in the browning and yellowed
notes cradled on lecterns. The middle, stuffed in administration's
average, might find their squeeze gentled, hot flames bursting
between and beyond lovers' hope. Let me say
that love will find us when scholars' heels are shot through
and no ego's left, save paper, its ashes circling to unbelieved
gods above.¹⁶

We think it is important in attempting to articulate, or at least illustrate, a feminism that we are attributing to Brand to problematize the very word "feminism". The women from whom Brand chooses to find companionship and strength are not in the first place women who would describe themselves as feminists, and not because they do not agree with the tenets of feminist discourse. These women would not identify as feminists simply because they have never heard of the term and are simply living their lives the way they want to within the demands of the situations into which they were born.

Brand herself seems to throw out some of the discourse of classrooms, academia and the politics of protest when she states the

¹⁵ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 15.

¹⁶ Stephanie McKenzie.

following in poem III iii of *Land to Light On*, in a section appropriately named “Rough Road Ahead”:

let me say that all the classrooms should be burned
and all this paper abandoned like dancing and the gas
stations heading north, and all the independents
who wasted time arguing and being superior, pulling out
dictionaries and refereed journals, new Marxists, neo-marxists.

But why would Brand be giving up on the politics of, among other isms, feminism(s)? The answer lies in this same poem, section III iii:

Look, let me be specific. I have been losing roads
and tracks and air and rivers and little thoughts
and smells and incidents and a sense of myself
and fights I used to be passionate about.¹⁷

We argue that one of the “fights” Brand “used to be passionate about” is articulated in the theoretical and political terms of feminism. Brand, at this point in the section of the long poem entitled “I Have Been Losing Roads”, seems lost in the barren and unpeopled, cold, white landscape of northern Ontario, unsure of what direction to take even within her poetry.

*If I am peaceful in this discomfort, is not peace,
is getting used to harm.*¹⁸

The edge of it all, sharpened like a paper cut from too much
dilly dallying. We have not learned our lessons. There is a place
for women and no good cures. Get used to it, the second
guessings of the wombliness, the ovarian cancers reaching
like a fog past out-worn doctors prodding with their second
sex, the hand utensils like a second-rate bar prying
our secrets to the governing crowd, drunk on prattle,
our records gone missing in the bartender’s office.
So, yes, I will get used to harm, the night opening
like an orifice ready to capture our breasts like stars.
Is not so easy looking at that night and wondering
whose soul has been transported above the clouds

¹⁷ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

to wait, wait, wait for comfort that will not burst
for all of women's charms.¹⁹

The next section of the poem, "All that Has Happened Since", takes the poet and reader into downtown Toronto where the poet/narrator tells the story of women broken mentally and physically by patriarchy, prejudice, and the demands of wifehood and motherhood. In poem IV vi,

a Baptist priestess preaches to a sidewalk in this city
and if this city could take it she would look into its eyes
but everyone, [the narrator] too, glides by.

The poet here forces the reader to look at the woman on the street whom most, if not all of us, would prefer to avoid seeing. And "she is mad, thinking god could find her here".²⁰ Throughout her writing, Brand develops a particular relationship to madness.

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, varying degrees of madness run through the lives of the characters and chart their paths through history.²¹ The madness of Bola the first and her granddaughter (also Bola) eight generations later, proudly and imaginatively defies the expectations of the patriarchal society they live in and the people who abide by the rules of this culture of oppression. The world they inhabit makes others look away and allows them a freedom to exist and create in an alternate way to the rules, demands, and ways of being dictated by the society they are no longer members of. The "Baptist priestess" is one of these women. She is a woman who has responded to the beatings of life by departing the world where "her husband left her, took all her money / after she worked to bring him here". The poet honors and laments the madness and lives of women who were broken by the harshness of life and who find alternate realities – in the example just mentioned, this woman finds hope in prophesy and conversations with a god who sees and hears her, in spite of the narrator's belief that "she is mad, thinking god could find her here".²² Such a claim runs counter to Forster's suggestion that "In the end, the priestess 'is mad' ... not because she's psychologically

¹⁹ Stephanie McKenzie.

²⁰ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 30.

²¹ Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1999.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

unstable, but because a world so unjust implies the withdrawal of ‘god’”.²³

In the poem that follows, IV vii, the story that unfolds is that of a woman who worked “11 p.m. to 7 a.m.” to bring her children “one at a time” from where she left them. However, the children do not remain as she left them, and it appears that she gave everything of “what a woman was supposed to be” for them. The ungratefulness and even hatefulfulness that ends the poem – “bitch, black bitch, I want my own daughter”²⁴ – is the only reward she gets for her years of backbreaking labor. There is no escape offered to this woman; rather, there is simply the portrait of what happens to women who sacrifice themselves completely for their children. And absolute sacrifice for one’s progeny is what society demands. However, the poet claims that the rewards are less than nothing – they are hatred, brokenness, and misery.

*...where I am not this woman
fastened to this ugly and disappointing world.*²⁵

A couple of screws in the ankles, leather wraps
against the wrists pin you like a butterfly
on the world’s scarred light. This is not the terra
firma of dancing; it is a hold that bars your voice
rising with poetry in spite of the world’s
dark crimes. You dance, you live, you breathe
and none of this will be remembered.
But do stay dancing, sweet girl. Though bolts
have lodged you like bullets against the walls of time,
dance. Your feet kick off ground, music
swells like melons in just the right part
of the brain. For a minute you will forget
your lot, woman who needs that shrink,
reminds her she’s crazy and the world just right.²⁶

“DIALECTICS” takes the poet out of the cold and punishing workhouses and streets of Toronto and back to the warmth, sunshine and smells of the Caribbean. The women in these poems are not broken by circumstances but, rather, celebrate the choices they make

²³ Forster, “Inventory is useless now but just to say”, 173.

²⁴ Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 31.

²⁵ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 9.

²⁶ Stephanie McKenzie.

for themselves to live life fully. Although the aunt of poem VI i is “hunkered to a foot that wouldn’t / cure”, she is described as having a mouth that is “sweet on laughter and paradise plums”, and the narrator continues to speak of this aunt’s strengths. While “her one good leg / slender and tapered to the ankle she braceleted against” might seem to prevent her from rejoicing, she teaches “jive spinning and dipping / between the Morris chairs to Count Basie”. She also celebrates her own body, “dressed in tight skirts and low / backer bodies”. Poem VI ii recognizes not only the pain in this Aunt’s life but also her fortitude:

... The way she dismissed her leg in
daring dresses, the way she hung and fingered the fine gold
chain around her good ankle, the idea that she refused to give up
any of her senses as tragic, as they were ...²⁷

As Brand writes, “she wanted a sweet / life to balance out”, The aunt is described in “guipure lace” and “gold rings” loving “sweet men / named Casimir on motorcycles”, and, in the final lines, we see how even the strictures laid by “possessive and selfish”²⁸ men, the man she married at fifty, is something that the aunt loved. This celebration of the pain, the hurt, the “fiery ankle” and the “possessive and selfish” husband, along with the cheap perfume, spices, and aromas of the nurturing food she cooked for her nieces and the jives she taught them to dance, all, in the end, do give a balanced portrait, as the aunt hoped, of a life lived fully and a life that, in spite of the hardships, celebrated a love of life itself. Indeed, Anne Szumigalski, in her review of *Land to Light On*, notices, too, the strength and promise of women: “there are the glorious women, the mothers, the aunts, the daughter who purposely misses the boat to Britain. In them we can see a far country, a very different community, as well as our own mothers, and aunts, and daughter.”²⁹

But we wish to go one step further here. The aunt of “DIALECTICS” becomes an example of a woman who says “fuck you” to the “envy that soaked other women’s Sundays” and the “whispers of bad

²⁷ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹ Anne Szumigalski, “*Land to Light On*, by Dionne Brand, and *Apparatus*, by Don McKay”, review, *Quill and Quire*, LXIII/3 (March 1997), 76.

woman”; she cooks with spices, dances the jive, wears tight clothes and marries bad men, all to her own rhythm of pain and joy.

*that night we wanted to fly into our aunts' skins*³⁰

A can of wildflower seeds in hand, my aunt
stands in her garden, whispers she'll grow
the grass long, spread Monet and his memories
high up in her lawn. She has kept this secret
from uncle, he jiggling the mower with gas,
ready to shear neighbours. I love this woman,
her whispers of strength pure cheekbones,
head held up like a vase offering irises, declaring
the beauty of bruises and a will to go on.
Let aunts be remembered. Crown children
with memories of women, call them by all aunts'
last names.³¹

The poet creates another woman in poem VII i who has “[a child] at her dress tail, one on her hip, one in her arm” waiting at the electric company for the man and the paycheck that have already evaded her, and the narrator says:

I never fell into the heaviness of babies. Thank god. Not
me and no baby. Baby, in my bony lap? It can't hold no baby
there. I is not nobody mother.³²

The poet, in fact, celebrates her childless state, here and elsewhere, undoing what women poets commonly celebrate. Women poets often use childbirth as a metaphor for creativity, but Brand here links motherhood and childrearing to a rather hopeless state. But the unhappiness here seems to be connected to the man who has disappeared and the men who are laughing at her predicament, for in the next poems the poet sees a woman who goes out seeking men to father her children. This woman “told [her] once she loved babies, hated / to see them grow up”. She missed “their babyhood, / that's why she had so many” and concludes that she sees

³⁰ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 62.

³¹ Stephanie McKenzie.

³² Brand, *Land to Light On*, 53.

her heading up a road into a hill
 with her vanity and her lust
 not for any man in an electric company truck
 but for her own face.³³

In this case, she is following her own destiny and desire and not waiting for any man to fulfill her or provide for the children that she mothers.

*some sang for no reason...*³⁴

Hymns, the bardic, she the streetcorner singing.
 No purpose but to stretch chords in the throat, open
 up like the sparrow thrown from its trough on a Sunday
 Daddy has off from the mill. Amongst the crowds
 one might catch crescendos clotted, bursting
 the streets of the city. The pavement must play
 tunes, we feel, for how else would music arrive
 through shoulders that smack like wings of evasion.
 Like a deaf man singing poems, these voices
 are solid and wipe all defeat from the memory.
 And for no reason, she shackled to pasts torn,
 twisted and trying, lifts up her songs
 heedless of laws.³⁵

The aunts of the poet are pictured again and again as protectors, nurturers and women who live their lives together and with a force that defies the limits of their position and society. The poet from far away in another land and at another time remembers all of these women, but talking to them on the phone she is not able to tell them about her life in Canada and can only say in poem XI “no I do not long, long, slowly for the past. / I am happy it is gone.”³⁶ In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, the poet says, “I cannot go back to where I came from. It no longer exists. It should not exist.”³⁷ But “in spite of claiming that she has erased the past”, the poet returns again and again to the women in her life whom she knew before she came to Canada

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁵ Stephanie McKenzie.

³⁶ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 68.

³⁷ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 90.

and who give her strength and determination to live by her own rules, make her own destiny, and defy the enfeebling demands made on women in this new culture.

Much of the present-day story of *A Map to the Door of No Return* deals with Brand's/the poet's retreat from Toronto into the North of Canada and further into the country, where she lives in solitude, writing and chopping wood, venturing out only occasionally to be rebuffed by the backwoods' hatred which, as she writes in *Land to Light On*, offers up a man who "threatens, something about your cunt".

*when a white man in a red truck on a rural road
jumps out at you...
and he threatens, something about your cunt ...*³⁸

Its pistons fired, eight you can bet. What else could drive
these roads, countried and snowed and waiting like a lion
to drag those words to a woman hunkered in winter
looking for cover? Snow white on the body, toes
icicles and she thinking of running. But where?
This land is merciless, and she's had enough of trucks,
licenses to kill. Certify her for fear, her crouching
escape no more than a woman bent out of kilter, her haunches
something like a past one can't speak of. These words tonight have
power. Rifles strapped to the back of the truck,
she strapped, too. Let no one say she can not be real.
The stars bear witness. But flakes fall like verdicts of judges.
Is winds that carry those threats. Accept and stand steadfast
amongst the barrels of the north. It's pretty here
and voices get caught with confusion. Like women
not knowing the truth of this world, that big red truck
has gained glory, a ship out at sea and the captain
not questioned.³⁹

In conclusion, and while we do not pretend to understand what it is like to be a black woman in Canada or in any other racist milieu, we would like to suggest that despite the fact that *Land to Light On* chronicles fear and bewilderment, this text most notably offers feminist hope with its depictions of strong and determined women.

³⁸ Brand, *Land to Light On*, 4.

³⁹ Stephanie McKenzie.

Moreover, one learns that one of the stages in healing and surviving this patriarchal world is sticking up the middle finger and raging against its might. And to take our argument even further (or to back it up in yet another sense), perhaps it is possible to claim that Brand does just this – wipes away the patriarchal foundations – by the very form of her text and the form of individual poems. A reader attune to form begins counting lines immediately upon opening Brand's text. No, the opening poem of “I Have Been Losing Roads” is not a sonnet, though many in this text's section are near sonnets. However, by the time we get to the section “All That Has Happened Sense”, we might start counting like mad as a conventional Petrarchan break or shift occurs in two of the poems (“here is the history of the body ...” and “Remembering Miranda's campaigns ...”). And by the time we get to “Land to Light On”, there are, indeed, two sonnets: “This those slaves must have known ...” and “I'm giving up on land ...”. Moreover, the entirety of “Islands Vanish”, unconventionally, but with echoic mention, reminds us further of the sonnet form and the tensions between Petrarchan openings and endings. The last section of the book, “Every Chapter of the World”, which is written in unrhymed couplets, further makes us aware that Brand is twisting the patriarchal canons to serve her own tributes, in verse, to fellow women.

On top of this, *Land to Light On* is an elegy. The book is a public elegy – mourning the reality of Canada. At the same time, this is an elegy for women and, in particular, the narrator of the piece. Brand plays with form and uses it in her unique way to complement this powerful tribute to woman whom Brand addresses and summarizes in the last section of *Land to Light On*, “Every Chapter of the World”:

... every chapter of the world describes

a woman draped in black and blood, in white
and powder, a woman crippled in dancing and

draped in dictators' dreams, in derelicts' hearts,
in miners' lights, in singers' shoes, in statues,

in all nouns' masculinities ...⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.