

Landscape and Poetic Identity in Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry

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Mi dear, times hard
but things lush-lush here
on this piece of stream
of conscious landscape -
this wilful Eden trod on by every race.
(Nichols *Startling the Flying Fish* 59)

But our contemnners who see this climate as seasonless and without subtlety also see us as a race without temperament, therefore without any possibility of art. The subtler races are given to the slow colorings of autumn, the sparkle of the first frost, the gentle despairs of fall, the sweet mulch of leaf decay, and all the tribal rituals of contemplative hibernation, spring cleaning, and the slaying of the crop gods, the span of life divided obviously into four seasons, and while we can see all this in a single tree, the earth here is almost illiterate, water and sun refuse to repeat the pathetic fallacy we studied at school. *How dumb our nature is then.* (Walcott "Isla Incognita" 55 my emphasis)¹

The hurricane does not roar in pentameter.
(Brathwaite "History of the Voice" 265)

This paper explores some of the ways that Caribbean poets handle nature, landscape, and place in a selection of recent works. My first epigraph, taken from Grace Nichols' most recent collection of poems, acknowledges the enduring image of the land-as-Eden in Caribbean poetry but it does so with a knowing wariness which I argue is characteristic of women's poetry. The second and third epigraphs are taken from two of the region's most renowned *male* poets because Derek Walcott and

Edward Kamau Brathwaite have been so instrumental in establishing the parameters which have come to define a recognizable (if not 'authentic') Caribbean poetic tradition. In the second epigraph, Walcott argues that the sheer weight of poetic representations of the seasonal cycles in temperate lands has accreted meanings that slide onto the *subjects* of those lands and, by contrast, deny the full subjectivity of those who *do not* inhabit temperate lands. Brathwaite, too, suggests a close connection between geography and cultural production when he argues that the steady rhythms of the pentameter cannot give voice to the volatile geography of the Caribbean.² He goes on to argue that the reliance on European literary models to express the realities of the Caribbean resulted in impossible formulations in local writing (he gives the example of a West Indian child writing in an essay, "the snow was falling on the cane fields") and a confused and contradictory aesthetic in which writers tried "to have both cultures at the same time" ("History" 264). Where Brathwaite sees confusion, Walcott sees possibilities, as this address to his European and African grandfathers, in "The Muse of History," makes clear:

I give the strange and bitter and yet en-nobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift. (64)

Again, poetry and Nature are implicitly linked in the idea of the mother tongue as a kind of Eden. The positions associated with Walcott and Brathwaite and the polarized trajectories they imply of hybridity-versus-nativism respectively (to summarize crudely), although derived from the ferment of the pre- and post-independence cultural moments of the 1970s and 1980s, continue to inflect Caribbean poetry. It is worth noting here, too, that despite obvious differences in their engagement with debates about an appropriately Caribbean poetics, both poets have consistently represented the Caribbean landscape in feminized terms and the Caribbean subject in search of agency as resolutely male. If, in colonial discourse, the New World was routinely represented as virgin

land to be penetrated, conquered, and mapped as territory, then nationalist/post-colonial discourses have also routinely metaphorized the nation as woman—as that which is being fought *for*; the symbolic currency through which competing claims for the land are made visible. This conflation of woman with the land is inseparable from woman's *natural* association with the home and the sense that the domestic space provides an obvious and uncomplicated site of belonging for women—and one which should, and can, be protected from colonial intrusion. Men are perceived as being located exclusively in the *public* sphere, doing the dirty political work necessary to maintain kith and kin. In this highly gendered and over-determined context, what are the possibilities for women's participation in cultural activity?

Louise Bennett's work provides an obvious platform from which to begin answering this question, for her oeuvre represents the first substantial contribution by a Caribbean *woman* poet. Bennett writes exclusively in Jamaican Creole, the everyday or demotic language of most Jamaicans, or what Brathwaite terms, "nation language" ("History"). Using a gallery of (mostly female) ordinary Jamaican speakers, her work has been highly influential in establishing Jamaican language and culture as an alternative, indigenous, cultural resource to that of European cultural forms. Bennett presents the choice of employing Jamaican Creole as a deliberate and self-conscious rejection of inherited poetic models:

I began to wonder why more of our poets and writers were not taking more of an interest in the kind of language usage and the kind of experiences of living which were all around us, and writing in the medium of dialect instead of writing *in the same old English way about Autumn and things like that*. ("Louise Bennett interviewed" 47 my emphasis)

Here, as in the citation from Walcott with which I started, a certain kind of nature is inextricable from the very definition of poetry itself. And, indeed, for many commentators this emphasis on Creole speech represented an important trajectory, facilitating a shift away from the embarrassingly derivative West Indian poetry of the 1940s through to

the 1960s, which was, for the most part, reliant on ideas of Nature and the pastoral as embodied in English poetry. Bennett's work, then, signals a shift away from Nature and landscape in its consistent focus on Jamaican *people* and in its privileging of Creole speech as a powerful source of agency and national identity.

This emphasis on voice and speech, particularly *women's* speech, represented by Bennett's poetic trajectory, became the dominant paradigm for a securely anchored sense of identity, replacing the privileging of place and landscape which characterized earlier work. Although Bennett's significance is now widely recognized, it is important to note that this recognition came in the 1980s after she had been publishing for some decades, having published her first collection, *(Jamaica) Dialect Verses*, in 1942.³ The 1980s is now widely acknowledged as the decade in which Caribbean women writers started to make an impact in significant numbers but it is also the decade in which disillusionment with independence gains momentum in the Caribbean and spawns further waves of migration. In other words, several factors intersect to facilitate literary production by women and widespread receptiveness to the texts they produce. What I am foregrounding here is the importance of literary history: what it excludes and includes at specific cultural moments and how this might be gendered; and what kind of writing it might, in turn, *engender*. The gender of the poet *does* matter but *how* it matters is less to do with so-called biological facts and more to do with the cultural meanings that have accreted to biology. An emphasis on literary history, I suggest, allows a way out of the familiar essentialism-versus-constructionism binary that fractured feminist debates (amongst others) in the late 1980s, and it allows us to revisit the battle for a Caribbean poetic voice, as embodied in the Walcott *versus* Brathwaite polarity, with a more forgiving eye.

So, to return to Bennett, I would argue that her position as a literary mother figure may not be as straightforward as current celebrations of her work suggest. Bennett's archive has come to encapsulate the strong, black Caribbean woman, who, in turn, is seen as representative of *all* Caribbean women.⁴ These monumental women are perceived as rooted in the soil and have a robust physicality and agency (vibrant,

earthy speech being the privileged signifier of such agency) that provide the discursive amplitude with which to challenge European cultural norms.⁵ The endorsement of Bennett's work, and of Creole speech, invariably hinges on an insistence that the home (and yard) are separate and distinct from the public spaces and institutions in which Politics, mediated through Standard English, takes place. These private spaces represent areas uncontaminated by colonial culture—or, rather, I would argue, a nostalgic construction of that possibility. As such, it might be argued that the people in Bennett's work function as an alter/native notion of the pastoral, in its broadest definition. Bennett's oeuvre, then, while usefully unsettling the dominance of the male poet, has, to some extent, consolidated woman's place *in the home*—representative of mother *tongue* and mother culture, if not in any simple way, of motherland.

A brief discussion of a poem by Bennett that explicitly focuses on questions of belonging/homeland is useful here. In "Back to Africa" the speaker questions the idea of the black Jamaican going back to Africa to affirm his/her black identity, pointing out that, "You haf fe come from somewhe fus / Before you go back deh!" The speaker shares her common sense wisdom with the reader who is interpellated in the poem as sharing in the *labrish* (gossip) with the speaker, before inviting the consensual conclusion, typical of Bennett's poems:

Go a foreign, seek yuh fortune,
But noh tell nobody sey
Yuh dah-go fe seek yuh homelan
For a right deh so yuh deh!
(*Selected* 104)

In this, and many other poems, Bennett deploys an irreverent and playful register to explore questions of belonging. This represents a radical departure from the dramatic quest for cultural moorings which characterizes, for example, the rugged sailor, Shabine, in Walcott's "The Schooner Flight," or the wandering black male subjects of Brathwaite's *The Arrivants*. In the latter, "the spade" laments the endless wanderings that characterize his existence:

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Ever seen
a man
travel more
seen more
lands
than this poor
land-
less, harbour-
less spade?
(*The Arrivants* 34)

While in Walcott's "Schooner Flight," Shabine embraces the identity of an epic voyager and actively takes flight from the land, embracing his mobility with an upbeat rhetorical swagger:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I have a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.
(*Collected Poems* 346)

The anxiety about belonging—to place and to culture—which is a recurring theme in the work of Walcott and Brathwaite (and others) is presented in Bennett's poem in much less angst-ridden terms, grounded in a kind of common-sense women's wisdom. These three poems were all written in the 1960s and, despite the differences between them, reflect an emphasis on belonging and *placedness* which is characteristic of the cultural climate of the period. My point here is that Bennett's irreverent tone marks an important intervention in the debate about belonging and place, and of the place of the local within poetic discourse. This is not to dismiss the agonized concern with the region's violent history of uprootings and dispersals which is the focus of many of Walcott and Brathwaite's early works. It is to suggest that the interruption provided by Bennett's work allows us to ask questions about the dominant national(ist) concerns (which the work of Walcott and Brathwaite is indicative of), but it also provides an opportunity to (re)assess the place Bennett occupies as the obvious literary mother for more recent

Caribbean women poets. In what follows, I argue that recent Caribbean women's poetry provides a diverse range of representations which suggests that these poets are able to embrace nature and to negotiate a variety of poetic paths through the contested terrain of the land. In doing so, they draw upon a broad range of poetic models that suggests that the embattled scenario outlined above and the rather stern boundaries mapped therein have been negotiated with but also challenged and transgressed.

Grace Nichols' work provides a good starting point here, for her work consistently presents black female subjects who take exuberant pleasure in their bodies and align themselves with elemental forces. In "Afterword," from *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, the black woman is presented as secure in her physicality/sexuality and is closely in tune with the landscape:

The fat black woman
will come out of the forest
brushing vegetations
from the shorn of her hair

flaunting waterpearls
in the bush of her thighs (24)

In "Invitation," the tone is more playful and challenging:

My breasts are huge exciting
amnions of watermelon
 your hands can't cup
my thighs are twin seals
 fat slick pups
there's a purple cherry
below the blues
 of my sea belly
there's a mole that gets a ride
each time I shift the heritage
of my behind

Come up and see me sometime. (13)

Here, Nichols deploys imagery that might be seen as problematically endorsing the conflation of woman with land, and especially with the flora and fauna of that land. But the speaker's playfully knowing tone of voice, consolidated by the mischievous invocation of Mae West's provocative invitation to "come up and see me sometime" powerfully undermines such a reading.

Nichols exploits this woman/nature conflation further in poems in which the black woman's body is deployed as an elemental force capable of questioning and challenging canonical texts and the poetic conventions associated with them. One such irreverent intertextual engagement is apparent in "With Apologies to Hamlet," for example, where Shakespeare's "to be or not to be," becomes "to pee or not to pee" (*Lazy Thoughts* 6). "My Black Triangle" is similarly playful in rewriting John Donne's famous address to his lover, "Oh, my Bermuda!":

My black triangle
sandwiched between the geography of my thighs

is a bermuda
of tiny atoms
forever seizing
and releasing
the world (*Lazy Thoughts* 25)

The woman's body is presented in the poem as fluid, transgressively spreading, "beyond the dry fears of parch-ri-archy" (25). Further, in "Configurations," the encounter between Columbus and the New World is reconfigured to offer an ironically feminist take on the familiar myth of conquering explorer penetrating the virginal landscape:

He does a Columbus—
falling on the shores of her tangled nappy orchard.

She delivers up the whole Indies again
But this time her wide legs close in
 slowly
Making a golden stool of the empire
of his head. (*Lazy Thoughts* 31)

The romantic conflation of woman/land *is* invoked but the metaphor is mobilized in the poem so that the (supposed) qualities of land/woman are not simply transposed (woman is (like) the land; the land is (like) a woman). Rather, the power of each is rendered distinctly. The image with which the poem concludes (quoted above) of the woman delivering sexual favours is inflected with irony that transforms this promise into a threat and consolidates the sense of woman's sexuality as a source of power. Nichols challenges those patriarchal representations of the black woman in which her association with the elemental renders her passive. In so doing, her poems strategically re-present these monumental and elemental women but with a playful self-consciousness and irony which destabilizes the stereotype.

In other poems, the challenging tone is lighter and more whimsical. So, in "Spring," the speaker, trapped indoors after a bout of flu, ventures outside, "only to have that daffodil baby / kick me in the eye." (*The Fat Black Woman's Poems* 34). The wry tone of voice manages both to concede the beauty of Wordsworth's daffodils and to simultaneously resist the extravagance of his construction. In "Wherever I Hang," the speaker contemplates questions of location and belonging before concluding:

To tell you de truth
I don't really know where I belong

Yes, divided to de ocean
Divided to de bone

Wherever I hang me knickers—that's my home.
(*Lazy Thoughts* 10)

Here, Nichols hijacks the familiar trope of *man* as the roaming, sexual agent and also teasingly undermines the high drama of Walcott's "Mass Man" by irreverently echoing its closing lines:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
(*Collected* 18)

Nichols' poetry, then, offers a sustained consideration of the power of the erotic; as the speaker cheerfully asserts in "On Poems and Crotches," "... poems are born / in the bubbling soul of the crotch" (*Lazy Thoughts* 16). Nichols' black female speakers invariably derive that power from an alignment with nature and an unequivocal assertion of belonging in body and land—and water. In her most recent collection, *Startling the Flying Fish*, the confidence that this elemental power generates allows the speaker to extend her generosity to an older woman tourist "basking on beach-warmth" whose husband tells her "she is no oil painting" (17):

Here with the wide sea, darling,
you can be a dolphin
or newly washed Aphrodite. (17)

The speaker notes that the woman's hands are labouring hands and this facilitates a connection *between* women *through* nature that modifies the critique of tourism implicit in the poem.

Olive Senior's work also explores the affinity between woman and the land, but in rather different ways to that of Nichols. In her first collection, *Talking of Trees*, the impact of the distinctive Cockpit country landscape where she grew up is manifest in several poems.⁶ "Cockpit Country Dreams" for example, opens:

In Cockpit Country
the hours form slowly like stalagmites
a bird sings
pure note
I-hold-my-breath
the world turns and
turns
(*Talking* 3)

In "Birdshooting Season" the speaker contrasts the girls' empathy with nature to the desire of the boys to contain/control it:

We stand quietly on the
doorstep shivering. Little boys
longing to grow up birdhunters too
Little girls whispering:
Fly Birds Fly.
(*Talking 2*)

The idea here of girls as both protecting and respecting the natural world is extended more systematically in Senior's second collection, *Gardening in the Tropics*, which includes a series of poems which explore gardening as a particular dimension of a woman's relationship to the land. In these poems, the speaker is located in the "humble kitchen garden" from which she offers her observations about life, farming, and history. The repetitive labour involved in preparing the soil, planting and weeding provides a space for reflection and meditation. But Senior also presents tilling the soil as a way of reading or interpreting history as the woman tending her plot shares with the reader what she finds buried in the soil. Nature, then, is not presented as innocent or outside of history, but always already imbricated in history; earth becomes an archive, which, with patience and humility, can be read. In the plantation economy, the small provision grounds which the slaves tended, provided an important source of sustenance and a vital alternative to the plantation economy (Wynter 95). Senior builds on this historical resonance by including references to more contemporary concerns, as in "Brief Lives" where a young man crosses "the invisible / boundary into rival territory" (83). The speaker's coy tone of address as well as the professedly humble scale of her subject matter—the kitchen garden—combine to produce a modest and self-deprecating register which Senior deploys strategically to distract attention from the politically contentious implications of the speaker's observations. "Brief Lives" opens:

Gardening in the Tropics, you never know
what you'll turn up. Quite often, bones.
In some places they say when volcanoes

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erupt, they spew out dense and monumental
as stones the skulls of *desaparecidos*
- the disappeared ones. *Mine is only*
a kitchen garden so I unearth just
occasional skeletons.
(83 my emphasis)

In “Seeing the Light,” the speaker catalogues the dramatic changes which colonization (old and new) inflicts on the Caribbean landscape in the name of progress:

Before you came, it was dark in our garden,
that’s true. We cleared just enough for our huts
and our pathways, opened a pinpoint in the canopy
to let the sun through. We made the tiniest scratch
on Mother Earth (begging her pardon). When we moved
on, the jungle easily closed over the scar again.
(*Gardening* 93)

In contrast, in “Amazon Women,” the speaker ranges across history to acknowledge the role woman have played. The feminist archival impulse of the poem is disguised by the use of asides, which, as above, self-consciously modify the epic dimensions of the poem’s subject matter:

But
you see my trial! I’m here gossiping
about things I never meant to air
for nobody could say I’m into
scandal.
...
... I hadn’t meant
to tell tall tale or repeat exotic
story for that’s not my style.
But we all have to make a living
And there’s no gain in telling stories
About ordinary men and women.
(*Gardening* 96–97)

Senior's work draws on that of Bennett in its explicit use of *labrish* as a poetic register. But, unlike Bennett's poems, delivered via Creole speakers who robustly occupy centre-stage/page without any self-conscious interference from the poet herself, Senior's speakers occupy the interstices, making deliberately partial and modest observations. Avoiding the comedy associated with Bennett's work in Creole, Senior's voice is mild-mannered and coy and cunningly *insinuates* rather than *declaims* its truths. And, while the idea of belonging that Olive Senior's work suggests is one that claims a rootedness in the land, this affinity with the land is carefully modulated by an appeal to the *garden*, rather than the larger-scale claim to *landscape* which characterized earlier Caribbean poetry. In other poems and in her short stories, Senior is careful to document the ways that the home is far from a safe haven for those who are vulnerable. Gardens in this context, then, are not a cozy extension of the nest; rather, they provide a precariously constructed liminal space between home and landscape in which the woman can contemplate matters (big and small), a place from which to articulate the piecemeal truths of a woman's wisdom.

It is perhaps worth noting, before shifting to the work of Lorna Goodison, that Senior does not always deploy this mild-mannered voice. In her most recent collection, *Over the Roofs of the World*, resistance to the steady erosion of the Jamaican ecosystem is declared with unequivocal irony in "Rejected Text for a Tourist Brochure":

Come walk with me in the latest stylee:
rockstone and dry gully. Come for the Final
Closing Down Sale. Take for a song
the Last Black Coral, the Last Green Turtle,
the Last Blue Swallow-tail (preserved behind glass). (53)

Goodison's work, like that of Senior, also suggests an affinity between nature and women but in Goodison's poetry, this affinity results, again, in a rather different poetic identity. For, where Senior speaks from the interstices, strategically disavowing a self-consciously poetic identity, Goodison embraces the role of Poet with a rhetorical flourish more akin to that of Walcott in, say, "Mass Man," ("some hand must crawl and

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recollect your rubbish, / someone must write your poems,” *Collected* 99) than to the Creole monologues of Bennett.⁷ In “Jamaica 1980,” the speaker concludes:

And mine the task of writing it down
as I ride in shame round this blood-stained town.
And when the poem refuse to believe
and slimes to aloes in my hands
mine is the task of burying the dead
I the late madonna of barren lands.
(*I Am Becoming My Mother* 10)

In “Jamaica 1980” the island is a “green-clad muse” while “Missing the Mountains” (in *To Us, All Flowers are Roses*) describes a more symbiotic relationship between nature and poet in its concluding lines:

Bury me up there in the high blue mountains
and I promise that this time I will return to teach the wind
how to make poetry from tossed about and restless leaves. (1)

In the “Heartease” poems, a link between the healing power of herbs provides a model for the women poet who heals with words, “I come only to apply words / to a sore and confused time” (38). The power of Nature in these poems is aligned to a notion of spirituality that eschews religion in its institutional forms in favour of a faith in the possibility of collective—and humane—action, despite harsh political realities:

So . . .
If we mix a solution
from some wild bees honey
and some search-mi-heart extract
better than red conscience money
and we boil it in a bun-pan
over a sweet wood fire
make the soft smell of healing
melt hard hearts and bare wire.
 (“Heartease 111” 38)

In other poems Nature is more ambivalently invoked, as in "On Becoming a Mermaid," in which the woman loses her sexed identity in the process of fitting into her new element:

you're a nixie now, a mermaid
a green tinged fish/ fleshed woman/ thing—
who swims with thrashing movements
and stands upended on the sea floor
(*I Am Becoming* 30)

Goodison's more recent work includes a more playful and sensual poetics than her proclaimed role as Poet-Healer suggests. So, in "The Mango of Poetry," the speaker, after describing the slow pleasure to be had from sucking the juice from a mango, concludes:

I'd do all this while wearing
a bombay-coloured blouse
so that the stain of the juice
could fall freely upon me.

And I say that this too would be
powerful and overflowing
and a fitting definition
of what is poetry.
(*Turn Thanks* 44)

Here, the figure of the woman indulgently consuming fruit offers an irreverent, intertextual challenge to both Wordsworth's definition of poetry and to the static representation of woman *as* the fruit of the land that featured in many early nationalist poems. In "River Mumma," from her most recent collection, *Controlling the Silver*, Goodison confidently and playfully updates the River Mumma myth of Caribbean folklore (which aligns the woman with the river as a siren capable of bringing prosperity, healing, or death). In the poem, River Mumma's "teased hair / is now bleached platinum" and her skirt is "bling-bling iridescent" (53), while "The River Mumma wants Out" suggests that River Mumma's power has been eclipsed by that of the Dance Hall Queen:

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Mumma no longer wants to be guardian
of our waters. She wants to be Big Mumma,
dancehall queen of the greater Caribbean. (54)

But this ironic treatment of the elemental power associated with women does not imply a complete rejection of this association as is evident in “Lush,” in *Travelling Mercies*, which concludes emphatically, “May lush remain the way of my world” (92). The poem opens:

Perhaps if you remain you will become civilized,
detached, refined, your words pruned of lush.
Lush is an indictment in this lean place
where all things thin are judged best.
What to do then with the bush and jungle
sprouting from your pen? (91)

The speaker, located in a generic metropolitan space—“this lean place”—offers an endorsement of the fecundity of the Caribbean landscape. The poem resonates with the spirit of Nichols’ *Fat Black Woman’s Poems* where the diasporic black woman is constrained by the lean choices available to her in the metropolis. That both Nichols and Goodison embrace lushness implies that the women/nature association can be mobilised powerfully when it is done strategically and with a playful knowingness. Goodison’s declarative, “May lush remain the way of my world” (92), as well as lightly echoing Naipaul’s *A Way in the World*, offers itself as a manifesto for reclaiming the plenitude of woman/nature.

By contrast to the poets discussed so far, Dionne Brand’s impressive oeuvre offers an important perspective in nuancing the discussion of woman’s alignment with nature/the body. Her work interrogates ideas about woman’s body as the site of belonging and empowerment and her identification with homeland. Her work is scrupulous in its excavation of the past and in its assessment of the present, and of her place within these times and spaces, as a black lesbian woman poet. In “hard against the soul,” a photograph of the speaker as a child in a yellow dress, “the ritual stab of womanly gathers at the waist” prompts a memory of being taunted, “*She look like a boy in a dress.*” The speaker, reflecting on her aunt’s defence, “*don’t say that, she look nice and pretty,*” concludes:

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Nice and pretty, laid out to splinter you, so that never,
until it is almost so late as not to matter do you grasp
some part, something missing like a wing, some
fragment of your real self.

(No Language is Neutral 49)

Here, the domestic home is presented as the space within which heterosexual norms are consolidated, inflecting the memory of home with a profound sense of something missing. The homage to Walcott, which is apparent in many places throughout this collection, and in the reference to Walcott's *Midsummer* from which it draws its title, is perhaps also tempered by a sense of something missing that Brand herself attempts to fill in in her dialogue with Walcott's oeuvre. The implication here is that home is always already an *unhomely* space for the lesbian poet.

Brand left her home in Trinidad to live in Canada in 1970, and her poetry frequently inscribes details of the place left behind. The sense of loss that inflects these poems is compounded by the harsh bleakness of the landscape of Canada, which consolidates the speaker's embattled isolation:

In this country where islands vanish, bodies submerge,
the heart of darkness is these white roads, snow
at our throats, and at the windshield a thick white cop
in a blue steel windbreaker peering into our car, suspiciously,

(Land to Light On 73)

Brand lived and worked in Grenada while Maurice Bishop's People's Revolutionary Government was in power and the personal disillusionment that resulted from the collapse of Bishop's government and the United States' invasion of Grenada is also charted in her poems:

Yes, is here I reach
framed and frozen on a shivered
country road instead of where I thought
I'd be in the blood
red flame of a revolution.

(Land 6)

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The disappointment attendant upon the collapse of the PRG in Grenada needs to be contextualized within Brand's consistent emphasis, in all her work to date (in both prose and poetry), on the need to forge collective identities based on political affinities informed by a strong notion of *justice*, rather than appeals to notions of identity anchored in biology or geography. In the following extract from the title poem of her collection *Land to Light On* Brand abandons, with great rhetorical panache, all attempts at arriving home to certainties of any kind:

You come to this, here's the marrow of it, not
moving, not standing, it's too much to hold up, what I
really want to say is, I don't want no fucking country, here
or there and all the way back, I don't like it, none of it,
easy as that. I'm giving up on land to light on, and why not,
I can't perfect my own shadow, my violent sorrow, my
individual wrists. (*Land* 48)

If belonging to place is fraught with difficulties, Brand does not present the black woman's body as providing an easy source/site of belonging. The visibility of the black woman in the bleak snowscape of a Toronto winter becomes an evocative symbol, in many of the poems, of this embattlement in the face of "gales of masculinity" (*No Language* 47). In some poems the only escape presented is to embrace old age, "I only know now that my / longing for this old woman was longing to leave the / prisoned gaze of men" (*No language* 48). In other poems, this sentiment is expressed more wryly:

At least two poets
one hundred other women I know, and I,
can't wait to become old and haggard,
then, we won't have to play coquette
or butch—
or sidle up to anything.
(*Winter Epigrams* 29)

In the title essay of her collection *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand describes her pleasure at being among a group of Caribbean women writers (at

the First International Caribbean Women Writers Conference, held at Wellesley in 1988) whose way of talking and walking evoke her own identification with the Caribbean. Brand describes this community of women in expressly earthy terms, using geographically specific markers to invoke the distinct and diverse Caribbean spaces with which the various women are associated:

Who would have thought through the bush at Guaya, the red earth at Trelawny, the black sand at Mahut, the river beds in tributaries of the Orinoco, the rice fields at Demerara that we would dust and dry our feet off here, and the leaf and sand and mud and dirt of those places would tumble out of the pages into these concrete rooms when we opened the books we write? (*Bread* 26)

But this sense of identifying with the constituency of Caribbean women writers is eroded as the conference wears on and Brand observes an avoidance of the sexed female body which she feels, by implication, endorses heterosexuality as normative:

Then I know what the eyes have not read passing over that earth and river and swamp and dust, more accurately, what the eyes demur, what is missing: the sexual body. (*Bread* 26–27)

Brand reads a short story of hers to the conference - it involves *double entendre* with specifically lesbian resonances—and she is consequently ostracized by the other women. And she concludes:

To write this body for itself feels like grappling for it, like trying to take it away from some force. *Reaction to the story confirms the territorial pull and tug.* (*Bread* 31)

So, while Brand invokes images drawn from Nature to describe her sense of community with other Caribbean women writers, her language shifts to invoke territory as the tensions that fracture this natural identification become evident.

In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh, Brand responds to a question about the way she manipulates both Creole and Standard English by replying:

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Yes, I now have control . . . I can go in and out of both languages. In *No Language is Neutral* I am also trying to be explicit about my sexuality. Just like writing in Creole, I thought it had to wait until I could do it really well, because lesbian sexuality is either not represented at all, or very badly by heterosexuals . . . My coming out is like my coming out in poetry now. I have found refuge in other lesbian writers like Adrienne Rich . . . (135)

Implicit in this comment is a sense that both literary and cultural belonging involve linguistic and sexual outings and homecomings. Further, belonging, in the fullest sense, involves aesthetic concerns that make the construction of alternative identities and multiple belongings possible. In other words, Brand implies that there is no natural resource from which the woman poet writes, or to which she belongs; instead she implies that poetic articulations can more productively be made—and interpreted—when natural categories are refused. This emphasis on representation-as-process is reflected in the lines below in which the speaker insists on her ability to name worlds with her words:

I have become myself. A woman who looks
at a woman and says, here, I have found you,
in this, I am blackening in my way. You ripped the
world raw. It was as if another life exploded in my
face, brightening, so easily the brow of a wing
touching the surf, so easily I saw my own body, that
is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
as a place, another life, terra. *They say this place
does not exist*, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
before.

(*No Language* 51 my emphasis)

Here, the sexual amplitude associated with women's bodies does, eventually, become the ground from which selfhood can be articulated, but the naturalness of this trope is undermined by the struggle (which the poem dramatizes) involved in representing the sexualized black wom-

an's body as the object of a female gaze. As such, her work suggests that assumptions about women's relationship to Nature cannot assume too many natural, sisterly affinities. Instead, I would suggest that "*the territorial pull and tug*" (*Bread* 31) over representations of the land and the woman's body, which Brand's work usefully foregrounds, offers a more realistic—and productive—way of thinking about the woman/nature conflation. As a result, perhaps, of exploring several peripheries, Brand's work implies a poetic I/eye that is rather more off-centre than most; as one of Brand's speaker's asserts, "Sidelong looks are my specialty" (*No Language* 26).

In an essay entitled "Landscape, Femininity and Caribbean Discourse," Ben Heller asks:

How does one write from the Caribbean as a woman, when Caribbean landscape and culture are itself metaphorized as feminine? Is this to write from a privileged position, close to the origin, from the inside of the inside? Will a woman writer be better able to "savor the meaning" of her land because, on a metaphorical level at least, she *is* that land? (7)

The response to these questions must be as appealingly partial and cagey as his own conclusions in relation to the women's texts he discusses. The women's work I have discussed suggests that women poets are acutely aware of their supposed affinity with Nature and the diversity of their responses to this conflation confirms that the engagement with Nature in their poetry indicates a strategically deployed manipulation of these tropes. Grace Nichols uses the woman/Nature alignment but, in irreverently infusing it with the black woman's sexual power, she destabilizes the romance of the patriarchal myth. Lorna Goodison harnesses the familiar alliance of women with Nature, nurture, and healing to construct a powerful poetic voice which delivers prophetic truths in a manner more usually associated with the male bard. Olive Senior's use of the garden trope allows her to make deliberately modest claims on the land and, in doing so, to quietly critique normative, patriarchal attitudes. And Dionne Brand persistently questions and re-negotiates affiliations with the body of the land and the body of woman in the work

of male *and* female poets, to foreground the constructedness of all of these identifications.

In short, while women poets may share a self-consciousness about Nature, their distinct subjective experiences as women as well as their varied engagements with poetic traditions, results in distinct political and poetic agendas in their work, which, in turn, inflects their inscriptions of Nature. There is no *natural* affinity between Nature and Woman. The work of the women poets I have discussed above suggests that their relationships with poetry and Nature are varied and nuanced. So, to return to Walcott's anguished exclamation, cited at the start of this essay, "How dumb our nature is then," I would suggest that the women poets I have discussed here have not necessarily *made our nature speak* but their persistent, playful engagement with Nature as it has been constructed in the poetry they have inherited—from Europe and the Caribbean—has generated a productive range of poetic possibilities. These poets, and many others whose work I have been unable to consider here, are clearly not constrained by the assumption that to write about nature is to write, to quote Louise Bennett, "*in the same old English way about Autumn and things like that.*" Instead, their work suggests a responsiveness to whatever the spade turns up, as Senior's speaker suggests below:

Gardening in the Tropics,
you'll find things that don't
belong together often intertwine
all mixed up in this amazing fecundity.
We grow as convoluted as the vine.
("The Knot Garden" 86)

To steal from and adapt one of Goodison's poems: long may lush—
and hybridity - remain the way of our worlds.

Notes

- 1 "Isla Incognita," written by Walcott in 1973, was published for the first time in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*.
- 2 Indeed, in a lecture given by at the University of Kent at Canterbury in 1988, Brathwaite suggested, with characteristic hyperbole, that "the empire was won in iambic pentameter."

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- 3 Morris in his introduction to Bennett's *Selected Poems*, published in 1982, was the first to discuss her work seriously as poetry.
- 4 The extent to which this emphasis excludes Caribbean women of Carib, Amerindian, Indian, Chinese or European ancestry is the subject of another paper, as it requires sustained attention.
- 5 See Eduard Glissant, Raphael Confiant, Jean Bernabe, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Antonio Benitez Rojo, Carolyn Cooper and Patrick Chamoiseau, among many others.
- 6 Cockpit Country is an inland area of Jamaica with a distinct eco system that has evolved because of the low hills that give the area an island-within-an island sense of remoteness and uniqueness.
- 7 Goodison frequently utilizes a wide range of registers of ordinary Jamaican speech but such utterances are seldom presented without being profoundly modulated by the poetic ambitions of the poem itself.

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