ariel: a review of international english literature
ISSN 0004-1327 Vol. 42 No. 2 Pages 5–22 Copyright © 2012

"My Body is History": Embodying the Past, Present, and Future in Dionne Brand's *Sans Souci and Other Stories*

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> First of all my hands and my body feel like they don't belong to me. I think that they're only extra baggage because there's nowhere to put them or to hide them. The truth is I begin to hate my own physical body, because I believe it has betrayed me by merely existing. It's like not having a shelf to put it on or a cupboard to lock it in; it's useless to me and it strikes me how inefficient it is. Because the ideal form in which to pass a war is as a spirit, a jumbie. My body is history, fossil, passé.
>
> –Dionne Brand ("I used to Like the Dallas Cowboys," *San Souci* 128)

Dionne Brand's short-story collection, *Sans Souci and Other Stories,* contains narratives that relay both contemporary and historical experiences of black, female oppression, often simultaneously and always from a female perspective. The issues of gender, race, diaspora, spirit possession, and language that feature prevalently in Brand's writing have been examined by several critics; Johanna Garvey, for example, reads the collection in terms of Brand's treatment of nation, diaspora, and exile, arguing that "struggling with the consequences of a colonized past in the Caribbean as well as with the contemporary realities of global economics, [the] women [in Brand's fiction] express a repeated need to leave the place they occupy . . . and to find a space of empowerment" (486). Marlene Goldman has looked at how Brand's characters "leave the place they occupy" in terms of spirit possession and argues that Brand's stories are "not solely informed by embodied experiences of trauma and dispossession," but rather that her "under-

standing of spirit possession . . . provides the foundation for her critique and transformation of the racist, classist, and sexist dimensions of Toronto's urban space" (5). Others, such as Meredith Gadsby and Kara Goodwin, explore issues of language in relation to gender and race to show how Brand "alters the conceptualization of privilege to destabilize the power structures inherent in oppositional constructs of meaning" (Goodwin 120). Kathleen Renk has examined several stories in *Sans Souci* by exploring Brand's "focus on the ability of the mind to delve into memory and invoke images that destroy and illumine" (97); Renk specifically locates this focus in storytelling: Brand's "narrative approach," she argues, "relies on a storytelling practice that foregrounds a dissolution of boundaries between storyteller/listener and the past and present" (98). In her work on Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon,* Julia Grandison puts a similar emphasis on agency, memory, and language, contending that "Brand's text shows that even in the most debilitating moments of traumatic memory, agency may be expressed in language that references the future" (774). Grandison, like Renk, situates these verbal expressions in a temporal space between past and present; "moments in which circumstances or memories of traumatic content occur," Grandison writes, "are presented as considered pauses in time rather than jarring, possessive intrusions" (765). Of interest to my own project, however, is the relationship between past, present, and future, and the *physical* experience of trauma and possession as depicted in Brand's collection.

As the narrator in "I used to Like the Dallas Cowboys" suggests, the body is often figured as a symbol of history, and in possessing such a body one is also forced to possess the history of its oppression; one might say that female black bodies in the collection are haunted by history, by ghosts that "signal 'a form of memory that is *lived only through the body*'" (Goldman 5, emphasis added). Scholars have examined the reclamation of the historically implicated black female body in the work of other black women writers. Ajuan Maria Mance, for example, writes about the ways in which Lucille Clifton's poetry "advocates a vision of African American women's subjectivity that is based in the black female body" (129) and examines how Clifton uses poetry to "revise and explore the

meanings assigned to the black female body" (133). Similarly, in *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, Carole Boyce discusses the represented black female body in the works of Toni Morrison and Shirley Anne Williams as a historically "marked" or "inscribed" site, as "*read* text," which is re-defined and recovered in various ways throughout the narratives (138, emphasis in original). While scholars such as Maria Casas and Gabrielle Civil have explored Brand's representation of the black female body in her poetry, little has been written about the importance of the body in Brand's prose. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand writes that the

> Black body is situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the Diaspora. . . . those leaping bodies, those prostrate bodies, those bodies made to dance and then to work, those bodies curdling under the stinging of whips, those bodies cursed, those bodies valued, those bodies remain curved in these attitudes. *They remain fixed in the ether of history.* (35, emphasis added)

To live in a black body, Brand suggests, is to embody a history. It is not, therefore, surprising that Brand's characters in *Sans Souci* often "experience" the past through the body. While past and present are often depicted as very physical experiences for Brand's characters, the future is often evoked as a transformation of the body in either imaginative or spiritual terms—what Michael Lambek might term an "alternative state of mind" or even an alternative state of body (726). Certainly, many stories in the *Sans Souci* collection resist any attempt to separate body/mind experiences—a duality that Lambek troubles by asking a series of questions:

> Isn't it odd that we speak of altered states of mind but rarely of altered states of body, even when we know we mean the latter? Is this because part/whole relationships are differently conceived or experienced in mind and body? Do we use mind-talk to express our condition holistically and existentially, and body-talk to break it down? (727)

Rather than separate mind and body, Brand's stories suggest that they are inextricably linked, and that the body plays a fundamental and productive role in the psychological processes through which her characters confront history and the dynamic between past and present experiences.

Drawing upon recent developments in neuroscience, Melba Cuddy-Keane has proposed that the presence of such bodily "thinking" in literature enables a unique mode of analysis and exploration of the process she calls "embodied cognition," through which, "deflecting immediate confrontation, the body embarks on a detour which makes temporal and spatial 'room' for the play of nonconscious thought" (13). Bodily engagement in *Sans Souci* often appears as just such a physical "working through" of both present and remembered experiences. Furthermore, Cuddy-Keane's theory provides a particularly useful paradigm for analysing characters' experiences of place in a collection that is often concerned with diaspora and ensuing issues of displacement, movement, and belonging;[1] "[e]mbodied cognition," she argues, "is a crucial component in human spatial navigation, or 'wayfinding'" (6). She continues,

> finding our way through and about places involves the body's exploratory navigation of its environment, in addition to the conscious learning of landmarks and signs. While the moving body thus contributes directly to conscious knowledge, it may also be devising nonconscious strategies for spatial navigation that indirectly activate similar schema for the navigation of mental space. Bodies may instigate the shifts we make between wayfinding strategies, enabling cognitive change. (6)

By suggesting that the body navigates both physical and mental space, Cuddy-Keane points to the important role of the body in dealing with complicated or even traumatic psychological experiences. Using this focus on the body as a departure point, I propose that characters' bodies in *Sans Souci* play a major role in the "working through" of memories, and cannot be separated from "moments of anticipation, where past, present, and future converge" (Grandison 781). By exploring ways in which history, present, and future collapse not only in temporal space,

but specifically on and around the site of the body, I hope to show that, in many of the *Sans Souci* stories, black female characters both revile and revere their bodies as symbols of history so that they become ultimately empowered in the face of oppression.

In "Sans Souci," the bodily abuse that Claudine suffers not only has the effect of conflating present and past but also causes her to wilfully evoke imagined alternatives. Claudine's body is immediately linked to her environment.[2] While the people who live in Sans Souci are described as being "as rough as the grass" that Claudine "[rips] from its tendrilled roots," the grass is specifically connected to a very female experience; it keeps the women in a "protracted battle with its creeping," and although Claudine is "afraid of it covering her," her body is entwined with the grass, which "[hangs] like tattered clothing from her hips, her breasts, her whole large body" (1). Similarly, the "lush immortelle trees with coarse vine spread among them [look] like women, with great bushy hair, embracing" (1). Garvey has read the fraught connection between place and body in Brand's collection as an example of how the female body resembles "occupied territory" and argues that "these women express a repeated need to leave the place they occupy [in order to] find a space of empowerment" (486). Similarly, Gadsby, in her discussion of Brand's *No Language is Neutral*, suggests that the "battle with language is also a battle over space. Brand chronicles the violence to both body and landscape" (131). Also present, though, is the implication that the unstoppable growth of the grass and trees represents a resistance to uprooting that are also manifest in the bodies of the women, especially in Claudine.

Claudine's own history is described largely in terms of the violence inflicted on her body, but it is a violence that she continues to confront through memory. Describing the rape, the narrative voice asserts that "anyone would have seen that he [the rapist] was killing her" (12). Figured as dead, and compared to the hogs "that were strung on the limbs of trees and slit from the genitals to the throat," Claudine's body is reduced to a state of lifeless immobility (12). When Claudine tells Uncle Ranni—who is ambiguously positioned in the story as her possible rapist—about "her trouble," he reacts with a "lacerating look" that

echoes the violence of the rape and causes Claudine figuratively to experience a series of bodily mutilations as a "look across her face as before, cutting her eyes away, cutting her lips, her head, slicing her" (8). Even her pregnancy is described as a kind of bodily violence—"Her flesh all around it, forced to hang there protecting this green and angry thing. It reached into her throat, sending up bubbles and making her dizzy all the time" (7)—while the description of the rape and that of the birth of her first child are conflated by the near perfect repetition of the line, "that is how her first child was born" (12).

Claudine nonetheless attempts to imagine alternatives that confront her bodily restrictions and suffering. After the rape she imagines diving into the sea to cleanse her body but is restricted by it: "The water would hit her face . . . ; it would wash her limbs and everything would be as before and this would not have happened—a free fall, a dive, into the sea. No. Her body would hit tufts of grass before reaching the bottom and it would hurt even more" (12). Although we can read her repeatedly rehearsed dive into the sea as a desire to cleanse her body after the rape, it also appears in a broader sense as a desire to cleanse a history of violence in the same way as the violent act of ripping the roots of grass at the beginning of the story can be read on a metaphorical level as a struggle against the roots of history that continue to encroach on the female body. We might then read this re-enactment of trauma—Claudine's memory of the rape—as one that involves "more than merely the resurgence of a disempowering past because the form of . . . expression sometimes equally depends upon the articulation, or willing, of a future" (Grandison 766). While the persistent violence in the story suggests that Claudine is physically possessed by a history of paralysing abuse, nuances in Brand's writing complicate such a straightforward reading. This is perhaps most evident after the rape when Claudine feels "as if she [were] carrying his [the rapist's] body around" and her body becomes both possession and possessor; carrying this man's body, she metaphorically carries a history of abuse that becomes inscribed in her own body (*Sans Souci* 13). In his discussion of spirit possession, Lambek suggests "that our ability to symbolize means that we are never fully bound by present circumstances, that we can think about the past and

anticipate the future, and therefore that we can always imagine alternatives" (722). Claudine's wilful remembering of the past, her battle against the "roots" of history, and her continual imagining of diving into the sea, are all very agential endeavours that imply a willingness to own and overcome even the most violent memories. It is through Claudine's attempt to "*know*" and "*remember*" the man who "would come often" that her body takes on a transformation; her body is described as "turning into a tree," with all the implications of being rooted to a history but still growing into the future (2, emphasis added). In contrast, the man is reduced to the inanimate remnant of a tree, "a piece of wood" with "no memory" (4).

In "No Rinsed Blue Sky, No Red Flower Fences," the unnamed protagonist appears, like Claudine, restricted by her surroundings–in this case, her small city apartment and her black female body. Struggling in poverty and with the conditions of city life, she feels "reproach for such weakness and then pity for *her blackness and her woman's body*" (*Sans Souci* 86, emphasis added). Such restriction is countered, as in "Sans Souci," by her dream of diving into water. In both stories, as with much of Brand's fiction, the sea "recalls the trauma of the Middle Passage and also provides a touchstone for characters who desire an escape from pain, a release from madness, a dissolution of the body, a contact with spirits and/or ancestors" (Garvey 486). Like Claudine, the woman in "No Rinsed Blue Sky" directly links her experience in water to her body; she imagines being in the ocean, "the blue and moving water, rushing past her ears and jostling her body, cleaning it, coming up a different person each time as she dove through a curling wave," (*Sans Souci* 87) and she dreams of herself as "female and male, neutral" (*Sans Souci* 91). Despite this temporary liberation, she awakens from her dream to find herself "lying, still on the floor, now surrounded by her body and her heavy face" (93) in a claustrophobic pose, with "a film of flesh and thought to remove before rising and trying to decide what to do next" (93). Although the story offers no apparent positive resolution, one might read the woman's simultaneous focus on, and rejection of, the body as a "working through" of oppression and history, which leads to its imagined "cleansing." After all, the black body is, as Brand writes, "a

cipher of the dreams, memories, horrors, and fears of Black bodies" (*A Map* 40). The woman's embodied "thinking," then, may prove productive, in the way that Cuddy-Keane suggests, by instigating and enabling cognitive change. While this change may not be overtly acted out, the woman's relationship with her body does lead her to imagine an alternative existence, and thus to retain a degree of agency: "Evoking the future, even to reject that future, is *necessarily* an agential endeavour; thus Brand's text shows that even in the most debilitating moments of traumatic memory, agency may be expressed in language that references the future" (Grandison 774). While the narrator's self-degradation of her body re-enacts a violent history of oppression and abuse, it also enables her to create an alternative reality or future, albeit fleeting.

In "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms and Waterfalls," Blossom becomes powerful ultimately by claiming and confronting a history of suffering, which is figured as a literal battle between her body and black history. This battle is figured as brutally violent and resonates with Frantz Fanon's interpretation of possession as a "muscular orgy in which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence is channelled" (19). After a period of crying and sleeping, Blossom wakes up "feeling shaky and something like spiritual," and she has the feeling "that she was holding she body around she heart, holding sheself together, tight, tight" (*Sans Souci* 38). The implication here is that Blossom feels a fracturing of her body, a splitting of herself, which becomes fully realised when the Yoruba spirit Oya enters Blossom's body and "she feel she body beating up and breaking up" (39) until it becomes, in a way that recalls Claudine's transformation, "part water and part tree" (42). Oya, the goddess of wind, tornados, storms, and hurricanes, is associated with "the chaos that disrupts unjust social orders" (Brooks de Vita 784). A volatile force bringing turbulent change, Oya "appropriates traditionally masculine powers in the service of her own disturbance of rigid, oppressive, or ostracizing social orders" (Brooks de Vita 734). For these reasons, Oya is often depicted as a defender of women, and was important to enslaved Africans who "relied heavily on the transformation and transcendence Oya's Àjé promised" (Washington 48). Whether we choose to read Blossom's encounter with Oya as spiritual possession

or as the loss of reason and sanity (the latter of which, as Lambek points out, is the reading most likely to be adopted in the Western world), the event allows Blossom to exchange a way of life that is dependent on patriarchy, marriage, and a Western system of wage slavery for one in which she is powerful and autonomous; as Lambek writes, possession suggests a "shift from an account in which people merely submit to an *altered* state of mind to one that offers people an *alternative* state of mind," (723, emphasis in original) or, I would argue, state of body.

Shifting its "state," Blossom's physical body becomes paradoxically both redundant and essential. At times "she feel as if she don't have no hand, no foot, and she don't need them," but she also feels her "body come hard like steel and supple like water when she say Oya" (39). In her exploration of Blossom's transformation, Goldman argues that "Blossom might never be able to articulate the impact of slavery, racism, sexism, or the deprivations instigated by the state's bureaucratic control." Following Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological*, however, Goldman adds that Blossom's "experience of possession demonstrates the haunting way these forces and other 'systematic compulsions work on and through people in everyday life'" (7). One might then argue that Blossom *does* articulate the impact of these oppressions, through her body.

The suffering of black people that Oya forces Blossom to confront is perssonified and appears as a terrifying, "old and hoary" face who enacts incredible violence on Blossom's own body; "Suffering" makes Blossom vomit in fear and causes her "fingernails and hairs [to] fall out," leading Blossom to fear "she dead" (39, 40). In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva explains the kind of fear that Blossom experiences in terms of abjection: the alarm caused by the loss of distinction between self and Other, "the place where meaning collapses" (2). Blossom is effectively forced to battle herself, her own body, and to undertake the truly terrifying task of warring against her own history of suffering. Having failed to find fulfilment in her marriage, to locate satisfactory employment, or to connect to the outside world at large, Blossom turns to face herself and, in doing so, experiences self-abjection. "[One] can understand that [the abject] is experienced at the peak of its strength," writes Kristeva, "when

that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject" (5). However, it is by facing suffering, or the history of her body, that Blossom is able to survive and gain "the power to see and the power to fight; . . . the power to feel pain and the power to heal" (*Sans Souci* 40).

As Brand suggests in "Sans Souci," it is only when one has the power to feel pain, to confront a violent and oppressive history, that one can gain the power to heal; indeed, only "those who see the hoary face of Suffering and feel he violent slap could come to dance with Oya" (42). The blurred boundary between the apparent "death" Blossom approaches and the "rebirth" she undergoes perhaps references how "Oya's connection to the unborn and newborns is closely tied to her relationship to death and the ancestors" (Washington 50). The collapse of past and present, as well as the hopefulness of Blossom's future, stand as examples of how Grandison's temporal "pause" has a very physical grounding: "In effect, Brand's portrayal of possession effects a re-possession of women's bodies and geographic spaces that were previously understood as patriarchal and colonial possessions" (Goldman 17). Blossom's body, having fought the history of violence and oppression, becomes aligned with the powerful, spiritual aspects of an alternative Afro-Caribbean history. Facing the suffering of the body, Blossom learns to fight the war against it spiritually, in what the narrator of "I used to Like the Dallas Cowboys" asserts is "the only way to fight a war" (*Sans Souci* 127). This shift to spiritualism, or to imagination and memory as occurs in "Sans Souci" and "No Rinsed Blue Sky," does not, as I have attempted to show, mean that the body is rejected but rather that it undergoes a corresponding transformation that makes it powerful in the face of history.

In "At the Lisbon Plate," the narrator undergoes an experience of self-abjection similar to that which Blossom suffers. Sitting in a "bar on Kensington," the narrator is unable to experience her present situation without considering her past and her history (*Sans Souci* 95). Recognizing the effects of that history in the relationship between herself and the white bar owner, Rosa, the narrator, reflects on how their

relationship would have operated in the past: "It has struck me more than once that a little more than a century ago I may have been Rosa's slave and not more than twenty-five years ago, her maid" (97). Such recognition propels the narrator backward into a recollection of her past where she remembers her elderly aunt attempting to "scrub the black out of [her skin]" as a child (100). As history is personified for Blossom in the form of an old face, so the narrator in "At the Lisbon Plate," who keeps getting "mixed up with old ladies" (99), confronts her history in the form of an old woman who tells her stories and invades her "like a spirit" in order that the narrator might see something she "will recognize" (104, 98). As history and present merge, the voice of the narrator, the old woman, and that of a captive slave woman from the old woman's stories amalgamate, creating the sort of temporal pause between past and present that Grandison locates in Brand's novel. Renk elaborates:

> The story makes the past and present contiguous and allows women to participate in both the pain and strength of the past. The old woman, then, becomes an emblem for the unrecorded and painful past, and just as she is present in the narrator, she and her story are buried within the lives of each Caribbean woman past and present. (103)

Speaking as the captive slave woman, the narrator describes her experience aboard a slave ship: "That hell-hole stank of my own flesh before I left it, its walls mottled with my spittle and waste. For days I lived with my body rotting and the glare of those eyes keeping me alive, as I begged to die and follow my carcass" (*San Souci* 107). "Living" the past as her own current experience, the narrator is forced to physically and emotionally experience the trauma of her history.

However, occupying the rotting body of her history also enables the narrator to think through her past in a way that gives rise to a form of imaginative escape. Indeed, Alison Crawford, in her work on body mapping and trauma theory, promotes "recognition of the importance of the body, as a site for registering and continuing to register traumatic experience" (708). The narrator's experience certainly appears to be what Crawford terms a severe case of "sensory and bodily re-living of

traumatic events," in which the individual is "entirely dissociated from conscious awareness and [is] mentally 'pulled-back' into the physical and sensory dimensions of the traumatic event" (707). In the process of being "pulled back" into the past in such an extreme way, the narrator of "At the Lisbon Plate," interestingly, views her *present* body as an empty space: "I lift up my camisole and I have a look. It's hardly me there anymore. There's a hole like a cave with an echo" (*Sans Souci* 102). It is inviting to read the narrator's self-description as an erasure of self: what Goodwin has termed (in her reading of several other stories in the *Sans Souci* collection) as an "absence left by the legacy of colonialism and racialism" (121). However, it is possible to read the hole in the narrator's body as a kind of physical embodiment of Grandison's "pause," as another "feature of Brand's writing" that similarly "[complicates] the encounter of the traumatic past with the present in moments of pause that also evoke the future" (774). By this I mean that, in experiencing such abjection—both as corpse and as empty body—the narrator, like Blossom, suggests that it is necessary to confront the past in the attempt to overcome it; the hole in the narrator's body may then be read as an absence left by history but also as a space where the future may be evoked. An ambiguous but suggestive passage in Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* suggests a similar reading:

> Transform us into being. That one door transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies empty of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed. . . . I am, we are, in the Diaspora, bodies occupied. If we return to the door it is to retrieve what was left, to look at it—even if it is an old sack, threadbare with time, empty itself of meaning. (94)

While the narrator's body in "At the Lisbon Plate" is "emptied of meaning" and "occupied" by history, she chooses to return to look at that history in an attempt to retrieve what is left; as the narrator reveals, "it was one of [the old woman's] stories that led me here, in search of something I will recognize, once I see it" (*Sans Souci* 98). In doing so, rather than having interpretations placed into her empty body, the narrator creates her own imagined interpretation in which she re-claims and rewrites

her history: "The old woman has given the go-ahead. Now that they're all gathered—Rosa, the big white boy, the professor, the moneychangers and the skin dealers, the whip handlers, the coffle makers and the boatswains, the old timers and the young soldiers. I'm going to kill them" (113). The story ends with an imagined violent killing (an erasing) of the "oppressors" and with the narrator asserting, "That'll make up for it" (113).

Such active remembering of the past is central to the story "Photograph," in which the narrator recalls the hardships of her childhood. Here, the female body is both feared and desired and therefore appears ultimately uncanny. As Goldman demonstrates in her work on "Blossom," the "uncanny," which concerns the "*heim*" or home, and "typically surfaces in conjunction with crises concerning matters of possession and inheritance" (2), appears a relevant and productive concept with which to examine a collection pervaded by issues of diaspora, belonging, place, and history. Not only is the female body the maternal home, but it is also connected to concepts of home as "domestic space, and nation—sites that, as Brand's fiction demonstrates, are capable of being possessed, dispossessed, and repossessed" (17). In "Photograph," while both the mother and grandmother beat the children, the Grandmother's body is also a homely place of refuge:

> We jockeyed with each other, lied to each other, quarrelled with each other and with her for the boon of lying close to her, sculpting ourselves around the roundness of her back. Braiding her hair and oiling her feet. We dreamed in my grandmother and we woke up in her, bleary-eyed and gesturing for her lap, her arms, her elbows, her smell, the fat flesh of her arms. We fought each other for the crook between her thighs and calves. (*Sans Souci* 75)

The narrator, who dreams and wakes "in" her grandmother, suggests her possession of the grandmother's body as "home." While the single remaining picture of her grandmother is "gray and creased and distant," the narrator's detailed recollection of her overrides the faded image and replaces it with one that is vivid and vibrant: the narrator's detailed de-

scription of her grandmother is, in effect, a "written" photograph (56). Indeed, the grandmother's body is intimately connected with language and storytelling.

The children listen to the grandmother's "tongue lapping over a new story or embellishing an old one" (71), while their own words are learned from their grandmother and described in such a way that connects them to the grandmother's body: "All of the words which we knew belonged to my grandmother. All of them, a voluptuous body of endearment, dependence, comfort, and infinite knowing" (74). Conversely, the narrator is harshly beaten by, and estranged from, her mother, whose violence is attributed to a rage that stems from the hardships and oppressions she has suffered in order to financially support her family: "My mother had walked the streets of London . . . with one dress on her back for years, in order to send those brown envelopes. . . . But her years of estrangement had left her angry and us cold to her sacrifice. She settled into fits of fury. Rage which raised welts on our backs, faces, and legs" (75). If one reads the narrator's relationship with her mother and grandmother as one that exemplifies the hardships of oppression and the violence of black history (embodied in the mother), and the embracing of the black female body as "home" (exemplified by the grandmother), then "Photograph" suggests that—like many of the stories in *Sans Souci*—living in the black female body also means to live with the violent history of black oppression; as the grandmother warns the narrator as a child, "[laugh] and cry live in the same house" (61). Still, the narrator's privileging of her grandmother's body elevates it to a powerful position in the narrative.

By writing about her experiences of violence, abuse, and hunger, as well as about her grandmother, the narrator suggests that she has repossessed her own body and assumed a similar power to that which she represents in her grandmother's language and body: "We were all full of my grandmother," the narrator asserts; "she had left us full and empty of her" (74–75). As Renk argues, the "grandmother's stories . . . are associated with the fullness of the grandmother's body, and are transformed into material objects that float in the air around the children and create a way to control and manipulate the world" (107). The narrator

demonstrates a willed desire to remember and think her past, which appears as a potentially enabling act. The possible power of the body, which the narrator of "Photograph" locates in her grandmother, and which Blossom ultimately achieves, is fully realised in "Madame Alaird's Breasts."

"Madame Alaird's Breasts" is perhaps Brand's most hopeful and celebratory story about the black female body. As a French teacher, Madame Alaird is imbued with a powerful command of language, but—as in "Photograph" where the grandmother's body and words are linked—it is a power that is inseparable from her body: "Her voice resonated through her breasts, deep and rich and Black" (*Sans Souci* 79). Madame Alaird's body—her breasts and "full lips"—assumes a power and presence in this story that overwrites a history of trauma and suggests a hopeful embracing of the black female body, particularly for the young generation of girls she teaches: "Madame Alaird's breast's gave us imagination beyond our years or possibilities," recalls the narrator (80). Indeed, Elsa Luciano Feal, who reads the black female body in terms of the "Caribbean erotic and how it has been textualized in Dionne Brand's fiction," asserts that in "Madame Alaird," Brand presents the "body of the black woman [as] beautiful and desirable, the site of social agency and change" (193–94). The children are so invested in this black woman's body that they are "jealous of Madame Alaird's husband" and watch him "cut-eyed" (83). When Madame Alaird goes through a "gloomy period," the children create a narrative of explanation around her body that centres on male violence: "'It must be she husband, oui! Madam Alaird don't need he. . . . So he have Madame Alaird catching hell, or what? Cheuupss! You don't see he could use a beating!'" (82). Although Madame Alaird is an embodiment of liberation, power, and success for black women, the children's story inscribes a violent past onto her body, a reminder of a history of oppression. However, the mere presence of Madame Alaird's body powerfully and voicelessly rejects the story and any dependence on her husband, making the children wonder, "'[h]ow could she need he?'" (82). For the children, Madame Alaird's body provides, like the grandmother's body in "Photograph," an inspirational model of black female power; as Feal asserts, Brand "endows her female characters with the

power to redirect their lives. For the girls in 'Madame Alaird' the erotic, and its promise, becomes a force to aspire to" (198–99). Ultimately, the children's hope for the future is not isolated from the body as purely imaginative or spiritual but is directly linked to the black female body: Madame Alaird's voice *is* black, and she appears to the children as "a vision, a *promise* of the dark-red fleshiness of real life" (82, emphasis added).

Thinking and "living" through history, Brand's characters demonstrate the fundamental importance of the body in confronting the past and in imagining the future. Brand's writing in *Sans Souci*, then, supports Crawford's assertion that if

> the body cannot be allowed or encouraged to add to the narrative of experience or to add its own form of narrative, to be brought into autobiographical memory, then traumatized subjects and their experiences are at risk of being left outside of meaning, outside of making-sense. (718)

Brand ensures that the body is always present in her narratives, and, in doing so, she resists perpetuating dualities of body and mind that threaten to ignore the complexities of such a relationship. Whether recollecting the past, struggling to live in the present, or imagining or living an alternative future, Brand's characters are repeatedly, and often violently, engaged in a passionate relationship with the body. By making the bodies of black women sites of inscription for past, present, and possible future events, these bodies ultimately assume an overwhelming presence and power in Brand's writing, a power that is liberatory for black women who re-claim their past. The black female body—its history, present, and future—not only "takes over" Brand's characters, but it also dominates the text.

Notes

1 See Garvey for a detailed discussion of diaspora and its effects as represented in *Sans Souci.*

2 McKittrick provides a thorough exploration of the relationship between the black female body and space and landscape in *Demonic Grounds*.

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