

“inventory is useless now but just to say”:
The Politics of Ambivalence in
Dionne Brand’s *Land to Light On*

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DIONNE BRAND’S *Land to Light On*, which appeared in the spring of 1997, won both the Governor General’s Award for Poetry (1997) and Ontario’s Trillium Book Award (1998). Yet critical work on the book is so far confined to a handful of reviews and a few pages of a paper published in the French-language journal *ellipse*. While critics have tackled Brand’s two novels, one of which appeared the year before and one two years after *Land to Light On* (*In Another Place, Not Here* [1996] and *At the Full and Change of the Moon* [1999]), hardly anyone has engaged with Brand’s most recent volume of poetry. But discussions of Brand’s poetry continue to appear. Two of the longer critical articles published since the publication of *Land* — one by Peter Dickinson, in his *Here Is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada* (1999), and one by Jason Wiens, in *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Spring 2000) — have both chosen to explore *No Language Is Neutral* (1990), a slim volume of poetry that has already received considerable critical attention (see Casas, Cook, Sarbadhikary, Walcott, Zackodnik). Dickinson’s and Wiens’s decisions not to deal with *Land* beg further attention because both of their papers shift from the language/identity problematic explored by most earlier commentators on *No Language* to the problematic of nation/politics, which is foregrounded in *Land*.

I don’t want to make too much of something that may well be a consequence of the time-lag involved in publishing. But there are a couple of reasons why critics may not be as captivated by Brand’s most recent book of poetry as they are by the preceding one. First, the new book is fairly pessimistic. Although *No Language* raises many of the same complex and difficult issues surrounding colonialism, racism, and sexism as *Land*, it also expresses a certain amount of personal and political hope. *Land*, however, left even an admiring reviewer “constantly working not to read the work as

autobiographical and to keep in check the growing sense of fear [she] felt for the creator of such a dispirited voice” (Gingell 182). Certainly, the newer book lacks the jubilation of the speaker who, in the final poem of *No Language* (the last in a sequence of lesbian love poems), declares,

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

... 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. (51)

The final poem in *Land*, in contrast, ends with the image of its female protagonist condemned to remain a metaphorical “prisoner / circling a cell, // cutting the square smaller and smaller and walking into herself / finally.... Even if she goes outside the cracks in her throat will break / as slate, her legs still cutting the cell in circles” (103). Brand presents, in the concluding lines of her two books, two images of women whose “coincidence” with themselves couldn’t signify more differently: in the first, the protagonist’s coincidence is a form of homecoming, her discovery or recovery of an alienated self; in the second, it represents her alienation from the hope of social changes that would free her from a set of interrelated oppressions.

Some reviewers of *Land* see its pessimism as a feature of a broader polemical and didactic approach, a poetic tactic they find objectionable. George Elliott Clarke criticizes Brand for offering “a kind of brokerage poetic: all ye who seek social enlightenment and political salvation may come unto such nirvana via my art” (Rev. 37), and complains that she never exceeds political romanticism (41).¹ Louise Fabiani is downright hostile to Brand’s polemical tone, declaring that her “choleric voice is full of anger and anger’s sorry cousin, self-pity.... Brand alienates by being in your face about racism, male chauvinism, and classism” (67). These reviewers’ objections to Brand’s newer book hinge on a term that has been central to the critical work on *No Language*: ambivalence. Indeed, Jason Wiens summarizes earlier commentary on that book as focussing “on how [Brand’s] writing develops a site of ambivalence adequate for the articulation of an identity triply rendered (gendered, raced, sexed) Other,” and announces his intention to “read the title poem of that collection through its doubled position within two particular national/cultural localities, examining how the poetry’s procedural workings and linguistic enjambments rearticulate these localities themselves as sites of ambivalence” (81). The charges against *Land*

centre precisely on what the reviewers perceive as a lack of ambivalence. It is from this perspective that Wiens makes his only reference to *Land*. As a postscript to his analysis of Brand's ambivalence towards both Canadian and Trinidadian nationalisms in *No Language*, Wiens throws in a passage from the title poem of *Land* which, he claims, indicates that "ambivalence appears to have shifted to refusal" of nation(alism) (98). But Wiens refuses Brand's ostensible refusal, arguing that "as literary texts continue to be deeply imbricated in nation-state structures, both here and abroad, a consideration of national contexts will remain necessary in approaching these texts critically" (98). Wiens thus salvages for his argument the ambivalence that he perceives as disappearing in *Land*.

In fact, Wiens need not have bothered, since ambivalence is as much a part of *Land* as of *No Language*. In Brand's more recent book, ambivalence infuses not just her views on language, identity, and nation, but her sense of politics (and, inseparably, her sense of the relationship between politics and poetics) in general. While Brand is reluctant to have anything to do with the binary and essentializing structure of colonial, racist, and patriarchal oppressions, and so often rejects the reversal of their terms in, for example, postcolonial nationalisms or sectarian feminisms, she simultaneously resists relinquishing these reversed binaries as the few tools gained for fighting oppression. *Land* charts Brand's political ambivalence through the expression of a contradictory political project: the simultaneous construction and subversion of collective identity as a political strategy.

The construction of various collective identities (of gender, race, nationality, etc.) as the basis for political claims, an endeavour broadly denominated identity politics, is a vast and complex political enterprise, and an exploration of its myriad permutations and theorizations is far beyond the scope of this paper. For my analysis of Brand, I need only note that, in general, identity politics holds "accounts of collective identities as based on some 'essence' or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others" (Calhoun 13). While the claim that those essences legitimize demands for political representation may ground a form of liberation politics both theoretically and practically effective, identity politics is often criticized for failing to acknowledge "the incompleteness, fragmentation and contradictions of both collective identity and personal existence" (15). Its political strategy of claiming value for categories of identity that have been suppressed or devalued in dominant discourses is accused of simply reversing the structure of binary oppositions enshrined by the dominant. Critics of identity politics often wonder how the "authenticity" criteria used to establish political caché can themselves escape becom-

ing exclusionary structures exercising the same more and less visible coercion as the sociopolitical systems in which they were spawned.

Transposing questions of identity in politics into the realm of poetics, Charles Bernstein (1996) has offered an interesting argument, to which Wiens refers, for the value of a poetry that, rather than attempting “to represent an already constituted idea of identity,” opens up “the possibility of encountering newly emerging identity formations” (2).² Bernstein’s argument centres on the question of the political implications of the poetic use of dialect, that is, the oral traditions of historically oppressed groups. He argues that understanding poetic uses of dialect as the representation of the “authentic” voice of an oppressed group (an understanding promoted by such theorists as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who argues for the liberatory use of Caribbean “nation language”) misses the point that dialect in poetry is never simply a practice of transcription; rather, “The poetic practice of the ordinary [carried out by the incorporation of vernacular] is synthetic and synthesizing, not essentializing. Verse dialect, like any representation of speech in writing, is always a form of invention” (17). Bernstein argues that although dialect contains the possibility of being read as the “positive expressivity” (11-12) of newly (and increasingly) liberated groups, it might be more usefully conceptualized as a form of “ideolect,” which Bernstein defines as “a dialectical poetry that refuses allegiance to standard English without necessarily basing its claim on an affiliation with a definable group’s speaking practice” (5). To locate dialect poetics under the rubric of ideolect is not to strip them of political import but to complicate the nature of both their political gestures and those of more experimental poetics in general. Poetry becomes, in this formulation, “an investigation of figuration rather than a picture of something figured out” (5), much in the same way that political identity, in poststructuralist formulations, becomes a mobile signifier rather than a static entity preceding, and awaiting, its own formal representation.³

Bernstein’s comments on the intertwining of the poetics and politics of identity provide a context for considering not only Brand’s use of Caribbean dialect in *Land*⁴ but also, and perhaps more importantly, her ambivalence towards (poetic) politics in general. Bernstein qualifies his argument against the identity politics of “dialect” poetry/criticism with the observation that

an ideolectical poetry, insofar as it may dismantle whatever self or group identities we may have already developed, risks making us more atomized and so more passive. In this state of “postmodern” paranoia, all collective formations — real or imagined — are ironized or

aestheticized, that is, debunked as arbitrary codes, with fashion and market ascendant as the arbiters of value. (19)

Brand seems, in *Land*, all too aware of that danger. While she appears deeply suspicious of collective identity, at times presenting it as a threat to the liberation of oppressed groups, she also suggests that it may be indispensable to precisely that same liberation. Unlike Bernstein, however, she doesn't attempt a synthesis of these opposing stances. Where he hopefully proposes that "If social identities are to be made problematic as part of the poetic process, this may be in order to forge new collective identities that will enable a more resourceful resistance to rigidly territorializing clannishness and paralyzing depoliticizing codicity" (Bernstein 19), her position is far more ambivalent. Although her use of dialect tends to operate more along the lines of Bernstein's ideolect than Brathwaite's nation language — that is, it tends to trouble rather than legitimate given cultural identities — Brand also uses a range of formal poetic devices, including inventory, discourses of the natural, irony, and metapoetic elements, to both shore up and subvert identity structures, sometimes at exactly the same moment. She thus suggests that her ambivalence towards identity politics is, to a certain degree, tied to the operations of language itself.

Brand's commitments to the identity-politics project of asserting political agency for the oppressed group are, for the most part, manifested in *Land* in a negative rather than a positive way. Instead of invoking a unified subject of resistance struggle, Brand focusses on constructing an essentialized global network of oppression. Thus she engages in the side of identity politics that neither its proponents nor its critics emphasize: the construction of the dominant oppressor against whom the recovered subject of oppression struggles. Brand achieves this primarily through the use of inventory. Over the course of the book she employs sometimes dizzying lists of contemporary and historical exploitations, items implicitly equated such that they become interchangeable signifiers, to describe a transnational network of oppressive power both impassive and impregnable. Brand suggests a way to read her inventories fairly early on in the book. In the first poem of the sequence, "All That Has Happened Since," one of the poems most densely packed with lists, the speaker discusses world politics with a politically engaged friend. She responds to her companion's argument for the possibility of revolt by one of the players in Sri Lankan politics from a strict Marxist perspective: "they're all the same, why are you hoping, I say, all the same class / and the Americans have them" (23). Brand remains committed to a base/superstructure model that elides differences within both capitalist and proletariat classes (what some have called an identity-politics

Marxism), reducing each of the members of these classes to his or her economic status. Continuing in this vein, her inventories often intend to draw attention to the root connectedness of a series of oppressions geographically and historically dispersed to show that, at base, “they’re all the same.”

Thus, in this poem, impatient with her companion’s desire to debate, the speaker uses inventory to convince him that there are no cracks in power:

... The pope wants to beatify Queen Isabella, I tell
 him, and has made thirty-three saints and seven hundred
 blessed, do you realize just how absurd we are here sitting at
 Arani, and the boy, JFK’s rocking chair sold for 450,000 dollars
 and European neo-fascists are glamour boys in the *New York
 Times*, do we realize they are more afraid of communists
 than fascists, that is not good news for us. I sit here and listen
 to radios, I hear their plots and stagger. (23)

With this list, a set of facts that may all signify differently are metonymically linked to suggest a structure of domination impervious to the pockets of resistance embodied in the political conversations and convictions of the speaker and her friend. From a socialist perspective, the beatification of Queen Isabella signifies the collusion of religious institutions with the capitalist class; the auctioning of John F. Kennedy’s rocking chair signifies the triumph of fetishization in capitalism; the *New York Times*’s feature on neo-fascists signifies the complicity of the media with racist enterprises. The use of inventory suggests not only that the items listed are connected (by the roles they play in a capitalist economic system) but that they are in fact interchangeable to a certain degree, since they are all reducible to the essence of “harm” as delineated in a later poem, “V iii” (45).

Similarly, an inventory of the players in contemporary global power dynamics constructs a simplified set of economic relationships:

in Chechnya, a Russian plane has dropped a bomb on a village
 the radio says, I just heard, ten billion to Yeltsin
 from the IMF, just today, just like any South American darling
 devoted sonofabitch, I know this is no news, nor walls
 of photographs of children in Bukavu, tents of refugees
 in Goma. (32)

This list creates a series of identities: between Chechnya, South American countries, Bukavu, and Goma as localities of oppression; between the International Monetary Fund, capitalism, and America as forces of oppres-

sion; and between Yeltsin and South American dictators (“any South American darling / devoted sonofabitch”) as the enabling middlemen of capitalism. The world thus dichotomized, the speaker shifts tone, mimicking the voices of complacent North Americans who accept the status quo by blaming the victims: “it’s their own fault, before it was communism / now they just don’t know how to work the gift of capitalism” (32). The speaker further places herself in opposition to this “harm” by inserting herself among the oppressed (“all of us want to fly to America right now ... and Americans wonder why, feel we must love them / that’s why, we’re just jealous”[32]). Then, in another shift of tone, she bitterly attacks academic approaches to the realities of oppression as absurdly and offensively quietistic; she mimics an academic voice, claiming, “I’m taking in conferences on pomo-multiplicity, / the everyday world, the signifying monkey, the post-colonial / moment, the Michigan militia, cyberspace, come to think of it / give each fleeing Hutu/Tutsi a home page, subalterns of their / own, I’m going to Bukavu with Windows” (32). For the speaker of this poem, several distinct academic approaches (from Dorothy Smith’s groundbreaking feminist sociology in *The Everyday World as Problematic* to Gayatri Spivak’s concept of the members of oppressed groups as “subalterns” to work on the liberatory potential of cyberspace) are rendered both equivalent and powerless. Brand plays two inventories against each other, constructing a monolithic oppressor against which an essentialized version of academe struggles fruitlessly.

A more complex version of essentializing logic is at work in “Islands Vanish,” where the speaker uses an inventory of historical events to suggest an essential racism operative across time and space. In this sequence, the speaker and two friends travelling to Buxton, a Southern Ontario Black community that was one of the destinations of the Underground Railroad, are stopped by a white cop in a snowstorm that comes to symbolize the frigidity and pervasiveness of white racism in Canada. The speaker concludes her account of the traumatizing encounter with the following observation:

That cop’s face has it. “They had been in this vast and dark country only a short time.” Something there, written as wilderness, wood, nickel, water, coal, rock, prairie, erased as Athabasca, Algonquin, Salish, Inuit ... hooded in Buxton fugitive, Preston Black Loyalist, railroaded to gold mountain, swimming in *Komagatu Maru* ... Are we still moving?
Each body submerged in its awful history. When will we arrive?

(77; original ellipses)

Like the company agents in the Congo in Joseph Conrad's story "An Outpost of Progress" (from which the quotation is drawn), the cop represents the colonial endeavour of reinscribing the landscape in order to erase all non-white presences. The initial erasure of the aboriginal peoples of North America is conflated with the racism faced by Loyalist Blacks who migrated to Nova Scotia following the U.S. War of Independence, by the former slaves who fled to places such as Buxton, by the Chinese immigrants who came to North America ("gold mountain") in the nineteenth century to work in the mines and on the railroad, and by the Indian emigrants whose ship, the *Komagatu Maru*, was turned away from Vancouver in 1914. The white cop embodies the racist impulse that runs through all of these histories; thus the speaker says that in facing him, "We stumble / on our antiquity. The snow-blue laser of a cop's eyes fixes us / in this unbearable archeology" (73). As in an archeological dig, in essentializing logic the diachronic becomes synchronic. Through inventory, a history of racism is telescoped into an essence that stands outside of time.

But Brand also suggests that she regards such essentializing manoeuvres as she engages in here as neither watertight nor unproblematic. If "Islands Vanish" posits an essential racism, it seems to do so at least somewhat self-consciously. By noting that oppression operates by a literal and metaphorical "writing" of categories onto intertwined landscapes, peoples, and histories, Brand obliquely acknowledges that her own project cannot escape being similarly politically inflected. At the same time, if Brand is here creating, through inventory, a monolithic oppressor, she also hints that this oppressive structure achieved this status, historically, precisely by means of identitarian logic: it used the series "wilderness, wood, nickel, water, coal, rock, prairie," in which each term comes to signify the category of free neutral exploitable resources, to erase the complexities of real power differentials. She illustrates the marginalizing potential of essentializing logic even more strikingly in "All That Has Happened Since," a poem cast in the voice of a foreign policy expert responding to a radio or television host's question, "what in the world is going on down there" (33). The use of "down there" to signify all countries that share a non-first-world status (despite not all being literally in the Southern hemisphere) is the first example of these commentators' racist oversimplifications. The expert proceeds to conflate a series of distinct groups with diverse histories and locales, and to label them all primitive. He tells the host,

well it's hard to say really, the krahn, the croats, the serbs,
the shia, the hutu, you see, the falasha, the hezbollah, well
democracy's run amuck, but what is it, the host wants to know

and the expert can no longer reach for anything
 but family disagreements and old forbidden grudges let loose
 by all that voting and free speech, the old underdeveloped
 don't have the same level of sophistication as us. (33)

Interestingly, this poem follows directly on the one (discussed earlier) in which Brand constructs an essentialized oppressor unsuccessfully challenged by the category of the academic, creating an irony that may or may not be intended.

Support for that irony's intentionality (and so for Brand's ambivalence towards the power of language to create identities) may be gleaned from the fact that Brand implies elsewhere in the book that she may, indeed, employ inventory self-consciously. She concludes the first poem of the metapoetic title sequence with the suggestion that this poetic tactic derives, at least in part, from the experience of writing from Canada. The speaker of that poem claims that in "this wide county" "It / always takes long to come to what you have to say, you have to / sweep this stretch of land up around your feet and point to the / signs, pleat whole histories with pins in your mouth and guess / at the fall of words" (43). The image of "pleating whole histories" concretizes the poetic device of folding over onto each other events both historically and geographically dispersed. Brand links this literary and ideological manoeuvre to the fact that she is working in a country that "just stretches your life to a thinness / just trying to take it in, trying to calculate in it what you must / do" (43). The speaker's struggle with the geographical vastness and variety of Canada may be read as a metaphor for her struggle with her ambiguous position in that country; it symbolizes her attempts to understand what she "must do" politically, living in a place of privilege where she can no more participate in "the blood / red flame of a revolution" (6) than she can achieve "full participation in national citizenship" due to her race, gender, and sexuality (Dickinson 161). In this context, "pleating whole histories" is not so much liberation politics dogma as it is the strategy of a writer trying to negotiate her "in-between position," a position defined by Rinaldo Walcott as "the simultaneity of being here and not being here" due to "the impossibility of imagining blackness as Canadian" (43). In addition, Brand tempers the essentializing effect of her own inventories by her admission that she is "guess[ing] at the fall of words" (43).

The ambivalence suggested here — the possibility that Brand's essentialism is primarily "strategic" or provisional (she's pleating "with pins in [her] mouth") — may also be implied by the fact that although Brand most often uses discourses of the natural in order to essentialize, she also

suggests “the body” as a site of resistance to a universalizing identity politics. Since essentialism naturalizes its objects, it is appropriate that Brand’s oppressive forces are envisioned at times as a literal force of nature. Oppression is so pervasive and inevitable that it seems that only another “natural” or elemental force can counter it. The speaker of “I Have Been Losing Roads,” for instance, gives up politics to

rely on confusion. I listen for
disaster, a storm in the Gulf of Mexico, arctic air
wreathing the whole of this unblessed continent,
mud slides burying the rich in California and the
devil turned in on himself in Oklahoma. (17)

With this inventory, she suggests that natural “disaster” is the single force capable of conquering an “unblessed continent” whose iniquities and inequities are signified by the lives of “the rich in California.” The speaker claims of oppression that “what I’ve learned, / the lie of it, is no amount of will can change it.” While her conclusion that “what I wish for is natural and accidental” (17) suggests sheer pessimism, it still echoes the identity-politics argument for a restoration of a prelapsarian “natural” order, the world as it was before oppression.

In these poems history becomes a natural, and so deterministic, force, much as in the identity-politics version of Marxism that we have seen Brand both invoke (23) and support through a series of inventories. The speaker of “XIV iii” offers a particularly vivid sense of the difficulty of bucking, at least at an individual level, its will. She claims,

if it was up to life my feet would be
bare and cracked and walking the hot pitched road at Guaya
with a broken face and hungry or tonight I would be
sitting ghostlike in a doorway in lamplight, my fingers
in smoke and my head tied in the violence of some man.
No one leaves that easy and I don’t forget it and
it can always grip me and everything must measure this
and it’s like someone escaping that I run to mere breathing. (85)

Although she has outwitted “life,” history has, in a sense, still prevailed. For if she has contravened history’s plan on a small scale, in the larger scheme she is still immobilized, since the effort of leaving has led to a withdrawal into the sensory and domestic. The smallest events of her existence, down to “mere breathing,” will remain fraught with the trauma of contradicting history. Likewise, the speaker of “IV i” confesses at the end of her conversation with a friend about politics, “I’ve / forgotten how to dance with him,

something heavy is all in my / mouth, I get exhausted at Arani, my eyes reach for something / domestic, the mop in the Kerala man's hand" (23).

But if Brand uses discourses of the natural in order to suggest the intransigence of the oppressor, and thus to support identity politics, she also uses them *against* the related identitarian impulse to naturalize the identity and role of the oppressed in liberation politics. In particular, she develops in "IV x" a mythology of "the body" as a site of resistance to essentializing tendencies. The poem opens with the statement, "here is the history of the body." The speaker's yoking of "history" and "the body" initially evokes a more postmodern perspective, in which what is supposed to be natural or given is shown to be a historically specific cultural construction⁵. However, the history that the speaker gives is an entirely physical or evolutionary one ("water perhaps darkness perhaps stars / bone then scales then wings then legs then arms" [34] and so on), encompassing what we often call prehistory. The speaker claims that "all that has happened since is too painful, / too unimaginable" (34) — that is, what we think of as history proper is excluded from the history of the body. Although history constructed this way implies the biologism that underlies the crudest forms of identity politics, in fact Brand uses her (pre)history of the body to criticize the essentialist impulse in liberation politics. She wonders of James and Trotsky, "what might have happened if one had said to the other, / comrade, this is the time you betray your body" (36). Brand's tangible body, the prelapsarian product of an evolutionary process untainted by the "all that has happened since," here comes to signify the paradox that utter (physical) individuality is absolutely universal, and so becomes a point of resistance to both revolutionary and conservative projects of identity creation. Standing in a crowd "waiting for a gesture" from a revolutionary, the speaker claims,

we happen on what was wrong in the first place,
 how the intangible took over,
 the things left in a language with carelessness or purpose,
 men's arms and legs and belly, their discreet assignments
 and regulations
 the things kept secret with a hand pressed to the mouth
 by priests, judges, mullahs
 this way they resist what they must become
 full knowing that we must throw our life away
 and all impressions of ourselves.
 Comrades, perhaps this is what you might whisper

on the telephone to the young men who adore you still,
 “Goodbye, then. And well . . . betray your body.”

(36; original ellipsis)

The appeal to a biological essence is here made in rejection of, rather than in aid of, the abstracting thrust of identity politics: the “betrayal” of the body signifies a mental abandonment of its tangible uniqueness. Brand uses discourses of the natural both to strengthen and to subvert essentializing tactics.

Brand’s most explicit critique of identity politics in *Land* comes, however, in its title sequence. There she overtly rejects nation(alism), both colonial and postcolonial, connecting it to a destructive universalism. The distrust of nationalism extends a distrust of Black and feminist politics Brand has discussed in other places. In an essay written originally for an anthology of Canadian women’s views on gender and writing, and reprinted in the first edition of Brand’s *Bread Out of Stone* (1994), Brand shows how identitarian logic has excluded her from both Black and feminist movements. Brand describes interviewing older Black women discussing their lives for a film on the subject. When her co-director asks one of their subjects’ husbands to speak about his wife’s life, Brand interrupts to ask the woman herself,

‘How was it for you?’ . . . They say it is because I am a lesbian that I’ve asked, and that because I am a lesbian I am not a Black woman, and because I’ve asked I’m not Black, and because I do not erase myself I am not a Black woman, and because I do not think that Black women can wait for freedom either, I am not . . . and because I do not dream myself ten paces behind, and because I do not dream a male dream but a Black dream where a woman tells the story, they say I’m not. (Morrell 177; original ellipses)

Brand’s repetition of the phrase “I am not” emphasizes the exclusionary moment inherent in the project of creating identities for liberation politics. She sees that the logic of the oppressor infects even those movements attempting to combat it. Having found herself outside the feminist movement because she’s Black (since models of womanhood in many North American feminist movements have been tacitly constructed as white womanhood), and outside Black liberation movement because she is a feminist and a lesbian (since the model of Black womanhood has been tacitly constructed as heterosexual and subordinate), Brand cannot straightforwardly endorse those politics. Although André Alexis labels Brand’s position, in the essays in *Bread Out of Stone*, a

“version of ‘Negritude’ (the belief in a universal black culture and consciousness),” Brand seems, at least in this essay, more than suspicious of the tradition of identity politics in which Negritude participates.

She elaborates further on this distrust of collective identities — be they racial, sexual, or national — in *Land*. Throughout the title sequence, the speaker insists on the culturally constructed character of “land to light on.” She declares that “it isn’t land, / it is the same as fog and mist and figures and lines and erasable thoughts, it is buildings and governments It’s paper, / paper, maps. Maps that get wet and rinse out, in my hand / anyway” (47). The experience of displacement and colonization, she suggests, impels one to realize that the dream of a pure homeland, before and/or outside of history, is mythical, the result of an abstract vision rather than concrete individual experience; despite the knowledge that “there is dirt somewhere older than any exile,” she says that

try as you might, your eyes only compose
the muddy drain in front of the humid almond
tree, the unsettling concrete sprawl of the housing
scheme, the stone your uncle used to smash his name
into another uncle’s face, your planet is your hands,
your house behind your eyebrows. (44)

The generalized vision of an postcolonial nationalism, which appeals to origins preceding exile, contravenes the particulars of individuals’ histories. In the final poem of the sequence, the speaker explicitly casts her rejection of “land to light on” in the terms of identity politics. She says, “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” (48). From the speaker’s perspective, nationalism and identity politics, require a “perfecting” of individual features in order to make the particular correspond to the universal essence. Such a perfecting is not only impossible, but it contains its own kind of violence.

As explicit as the resistance to identitarian logic is here, however, it is not *Land*’s final word. We’ve seen that Brand uses inventory as well as discourses of the natural to both support and subvert identity structures. Brand’s political ambivalence is perhaps most succinctly presented in her use of irony. In *Irony’s Edge* (1994), Linda Hutcheon focusses on three elements of irony central to reading Brand’s use of it: the role of the interpreter, the relation between the said and the unsaid in the ironic statement, and the evaluative elements at work in the functioning of irony. Working against “neat theories of irony that see the

task of the interpreter simply as one of decoding or reconstructing some ‘real’ meaning (usually named the ‘ironic’ one) . . . , a meaning that is hidden, but deemed accessible, behind the stated one” (10-11), Hutcheon argues that irony “happens” in the interpersonal space between the ironist and the interpreter and in the semantic space between the said and the unsaid of the ironic statement. Because “The ‘scene’ of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication” (2), it is inevitably politicized. But this, Hutcheon is quick to point out, does not mean that irony accomplishes an inherently radical *or* conservative gesture. Irony is “transideological” insofar as the kind of political agenda it supports depends largely on the attitudes and judgements inferred by both ironist and interpreter. It is the centrality of evaluation to the creation and interpretation of irony that gives it what Hutcheon calls its “edge.” The audience of irony is never safe from its inherent slipperiness, never free from the requirement to hold several possible (and often widely varying) interpretations simultaneously.

Hutcheon’s view of irony suggests it as a mode capable of a particularly subtle rendering of ambivalence: interpretation requires the audience to entertain multiple readings at one and the same time. Brand’s poems contain a number of ironic moments centred around questions of political agency and activism, all of which may evoke a series of interpretations whose undecidability produces in the audience an ambivalence mirroring Brand’s. For instance, one of the poems in “All That Has Happened Since” describes “a Baptist priestess preach[ing] to a sidewalk in this city” (30). While the speaker of the poem claims that “she is mad, thinking god could find her here, / and in her eyes that is her penance I suppose,” she adds a context that implies that this comment is not to be taken at face value, as a judgement of insanity upon the priestess. The speaker suggests that she is indicting not the woman preaching but herself and “all who might pronounce [the priestess] sane” for their choice “to avoid her as if we suddenly lost / consciousness of race and what she’s calling for” — presumably some form of social justice. In fact, the priestess’s actions are finally valorized, as an appropriate response to the fact that “her husband left her, took all her money / after she worked to bring him here, well after all / who else could explain but the pavement dense with answers” (30). In the end, the priestess “is mad, thinking god could find her here” not because she’s psychologically unstable, but because a world so unjust implies the withdrawal of “god.”

This reading of the priestess as signifying an essential race identity around which a movement may form is, however, complicated by the

consideration of the relationship of religiosity to race activism. Having identified her subject as a Baptist priestess, might the speaker not also be gesturing to the individualizing and compensatory thrust of Christianity (each soul must bear its burdens here on earth; rewards are received in the afterlife) that is so often given as the reason for its dismissal by many involved in liberation politics? Perhaps the priestess is mad precisely because she is searching for god in a realm in which the only effective politics are mass social movements (often mobilized by some form of identity politics). In addition, the reference to religion inevitably raises the context of the historically close ties between Christianity (especially its incarnations in the U.S. South) and the nineteenth-century Abolitionist and twentieth-century Civil Rights movements. In this context, the priestess's actions revive a certain form of race activism which was, in certain terms, highly successful. Whose god is this, anyway? There seems to be an undecidable amount of slippage between the possibility of the god as strictly the deity of a fundamentalist Baptist faith (in which case, it seems likely that the speaker derides the priestess's crusade) and that of god as the speaker's (and priestess's?) signifier for a principle of social justice.

The interpretations I offer here encapsulate the complexity of the Brand's irony. Hutcheon notes that irony "happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. What I want to call the 'ironic' meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally 'interact' ... to create the real ironic meaning" (12-13). If, in this case, the said is the assertion that the priestess is mad, and the unsaid the assertion that the priestess is in a certain way more sane than those who conform to society's definitions of sanity (as involving a certain code of behaviour — preaching to passers-by being one of many taboos), Hutcheon's ironic meaning happens when the reader holds the several possible interpretations of "mad" in her head at the same time as she herself evaluates the various kinds of evaluations which might be attributed to the speaker. The ironic meaning is neither that the speaker straightforwardly approves the priestess's actions nor that she condemns them; it is that both speaker and audience focus simultaneously on the social present and past, on (mainstream) individualist and (more radical) historicist interpretations of the women's behaviour, on the gains and losses of various forms of activism. Ambivalence about the possibilities for political engagement is an unavoidable response to irony as it appears in this poem.

That ambivalence is similarly evoked through irony in one of the poems of the book's first sequence, "I Have Been Losing Roads." After

developing the cold northern country as a space of total indifference, the speaker concludes,

If I believe anything it will not matter, though.
Life is porous, unimaginable in the end, only substance
burning in itself, lit by the heat of touching. It's good
how we melt back into nothing. (14)

The irony hinges on our interpretation of the speaker's assertion that it is "good / how we melt back into nothing." If we evaluate the speaker's tone as a thoroughly dispirited one (and there is a strong basis for doing this, since the preceding lines are unremittingly bleak — the speaker instructs, "On a highway burrowing north don't waste your breath. / This winter road cannot hear it and will swallow it / whole. Don't move" [14]), the lines signify a genuine gratitude for the fact of mortality. The speaker says in the following poem that she has "surviv[ed] the death of [her] politics" (15); in light of that death, her own physical demise might appear welcome. The statement is ironic, however, because this possibility is tied to the related possibility that the speaker is asserting that such an eventuality is "good" only in a world gone horribly wrong. Social commentary twines with the weariness of a failed activist. In addition, the position stated here echoes that of a privileged liberal intellectual taking consolation in a materialist philosophy — a stance which cuts both ways insofar as it is simultaneously suggested as the only feasible option for the activist who would avoid burnout *and* as the pose which spells the death of the activist spirit.

Brand wrestles with this same question through irony in the final poem of "All That Has Happened Since." There the speaker concludes,

I had hoped that some billowy humid
night swooning to its knees, the smell of coconut smoke
or some cold night cracking silence into its middle
with the smell of wood smoke . . . it would occur to me,
that nothing was wrong. (39; original ellipsis)

How we read these lines depends on what cause we assign to the hoped-for realization "that nothing was wrong." One way for the speaker to have that realization would be to "lose consciousness of race" (30), accepting co-option by the dominant system and becoming a liberal individualist, making her own (primarily economic) fate the measure of the "rightness" of the things. Read this way, these lines mock the privileged voice that would call her concerns about injustice fabricated and exaggerated, telling her one day she will realize that, in fact, "nothing's wrong"; it was

others, not the speaker herself, who had hoped that she would have that revelation. But they also may be read as more self-deprecating and disillusioned: the speaker, recalling her innocent optimism, refers to her former hope that eventually the world *would* change for the better. Marrying these two interpretive possibilities with a reading of the speaker as evaluating her hope negatively (she had been wrong to put things in the simple terms of right and wrong; political choices are never cut and dry) produces Hutcheon's "ironic meaning" — the same ambivalent pose that we've seen through *Land*. Brand's two contradictory impulses — towards the creation of and subversion of identity — remain fiercely unresolved.

Brand's ambivalence towards the poetics and politics of identity culminates in "Every Chapter of the World," the formidable final sequence of *Land*. This long poem, described as "a textualizing of the multiply constituted global crises at the end of the century" (Gingell 184), ties together, in good concluding fashion, a number of the themes that Brand threads through the sequences leading up to this poem. "Every Chapter of the World" is the only sequence in the book written consistently in the third, rather than first, person. This, and the fact that the protagonist of the poem remains "rum-soaked" and doesn't "escape" the land of her birth, suggest that we are to observe a stricter division between author and protagonist than has been the case in the other highly personalized poems. However, other specifically autobiographical details (for instance, that the rent of the house was \$12 a month, a fact that Brand mentioned in an interview) urge us to breach that division, and read the protagonist as the Brandian speaker of the rest of the book. This conflict opens up an interesting possibility: that the protagonist of the poem represents a person that the speaker of previous poems in *Land* might have become had she not "escaped." Here may be that speaker's version of what would have happened to her "if it was up to life" (85).

The poem describes the plight of a young woman living in a third world country who has "lost the kind of knowledge that makes you last // tells you how to change your shape" (91). Because "her head is chained to flight instead" (91), this woman lives in limbo, immobilized by her inability to either escape or accept the suffering and injustice of both her specific world and the global South. Irony is an especially strong force in this poem: throughout, it is unclear how we are to read the speaker's insistence at the beginning that her protagonist "should have stopped and changed shape" (89), and become "a woman rounding in uterus" (90). Does she really believe that accepting a traditional maternal role would have been the girl's saving grace, or does she in fact applaud the girl's

refusal to overlook a history of oppression while simultaneously noting its toll? She observes of her protagonist that

she can't think of it that way, all tidy like a swept floor
the broom resting out of sight and the unsightly

swept, she can't think of it that way, as just
doings of a passing race ...

... You see, to circle enemies and
greet them like metropolitan politicians do
is the liberal way, to circle, accept, so
much southern death is a sign of talent. (97)

If we interpret the speaker as sympathetic towards her protagonist, then we must conclude that to follow “the liberal way” is, for the speaker, a “talent” only of the immoral. If we interpret the speaker as unsympathetic towards her protagonist, however — if we believe, given other comments over the course of the poem, that some part of her condemns the girl for remaining trapped — then the lines suggest that she really does think that the girl lacks the “talent” of survival in the face of massive historical and present injustice. Immediately following the above passage, the speaker says that her protagonist “cannot speak of this or that massacre, this / or that war like a poet” (98). As with the lines discussed above, these lines can signify at least two ways, depending on the reader: they may spell the speaker’s self-indictment, but they may also signify the rueful suggestion that poetry’s “liberal way” is a talent, insofar as it has allowed the speaker to survive (“made her last”) better than her protagonist. Had the girl not clung so tightly to an awareness of suffering and injustice — even to the point of settling down in a traditional role and taking on the domestic concerns that would have eclipsed political engagement — she might have escaped addiction and even, at some point, re-engaged with political issues. Brand’s use of irony in this poem, more than anywhere else, forces the careful reader to sound the depths of her ambivalence.

Whether or not the speaker approves of her protagonist’s inability to avoid “seeing” (90) large-scale injustice, she draws a close link between resistance to the status quo and a vision informed by identity politics. The speaker’s disruptive knowledge is given in the form of inventory:

she knows 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 ...

every chapter of the world describes a woman at her own
 massacre, carvings of her belly, blood gouache blood

of her face, hacked in revolutions of the sun and kitchens. (95-96)

The image of “every chapter of the world” signifies both spatially and temporally. While the chapters of a book, at least of a novel, usually correspond to divisions of a narrative that unfolds over time, the chapters of an organization are a set of spatially dispersed individual groups that act simultaneously, and often in concert. The oppression of women described in “every chapter of the world” is thus an oppression occurring along synchronic and diachronic axes. The protagonist’s knowledge, which keeps her from “changing shape,” is knowledge of an essentialized network of oppression. How we interpret the speaker’s assessment of inventory (as powerful tool or destructive weapon) in this section depends, like so much else in this poem, on how we read her attitude towards her protagonist.

And inventories continue to pile up. A list of the unfortunates “who die” (98-100) is followed by a list of the exploitations that haunt the protagonist, a list that culminates in a string of third-world countries (100). The speaker, whose voice at this point melds with her protagonist’s, highlights how oppressive power uses the logic of identity, as she concludes the list of countries with a catch-all category, “all other anagrams scuttling // off that page” (100-01). This critique of essentializing logic, in turn, opens on the book’s penultimate expression of political ambivalence — the metapoetic admission that “inventory is useless now but just to say / not so fast, not so clever, boy, circumnavigating // parentheses may be easy but not the world” (101). This wonderfully ambiguous passage implies a whole set of possibilities expressive of Brand’s overriding political ambivalence. Is inventory always “useless,” in the sense that its essentializing possibilities always imply an abuse of power, or is it merely useless at a time when the scale of injustice has become as immense as now? Is there a specific historical moment at which inventory’s rhetorical capacities may translate into liberatory practice? Are the identity politics associated with inventory more strategic than substantive, a device used to check the impunity of power, “just to say / not so fast, not so clever, boy”? I’ve pointed out that in preceding poems Brand alternates between exploiting and criticizing inventory as an essentializing rhetorical technique.

At this point, she spells out the meaning of that oscillation: inventory creates a fundamental ambivalence in the speaker insofar as she sees that its effects depend largely on its reception.

Brand here links inventory to “the world” rather than to “parentheses,” suggesting that if it may have dangerous consequences, in the hands (and rhetorical context) of those struggling for social justice, inventory counteracts the material and ideological “parenthesizing” of vast segments of the population. When inventory’s (strategic?) rhetorical highlighting of the suffering of “the world” fails, this oppressive manoeuvre meets largely with success: “the uncivilized at the end of the day” (101) will choose to “surrender then if it means powdered milk, if it means / rice, semolina, surrender for airflights out of barren // ice, barren water, barren villages, surrender all parentheses, / all arguments” (102). The protagonist, too, gives in. In her final expression of political ambivalence, Brand has her speaker ventriloquize a variety of possible reactions to the protagonist’s surrender “to rum.” She lists a series of speculations about “what became of her, // what was her trouble: no lover, childhood beatings, / loneliness, a weakness for simple dichotomies, poor, rich // black / white // female / male” (102-103). Each suggestion issues from a particular context: the possibility of “no lover” sounds the voice of the aunts featured in “Dialectics”; “childhood beatings” derives from a middle-class Western psychologizing perspective wherein adult troubles like addiction are seen to be rooted in childhood trauma; and “a weakness for simple dichotomies” issues from a privileged academic context. What the voices share is an insistence that the girl’s demise is an isolated individual event. The speaker, however, derails their diagnoses by turning the final comment around and declaring that the girl’s “trouble” was not only “a weakness for simple dichotomies,” but “their details too, and / their missions, wandering through us like a sickness” (103). If the protagonist succumbs to the “simple dichotomies” of liberation politics, particularly identity politics, the racist, patriarchal, capitalist system must be credited with a large share of the responsibility, for the “details” and “missions” of *its* “simple dichotomies” constitute precisely the machinery of oppression the protagonist faces. At this point the speaker explicitly allies herself with the protagonist as suffering from a “sickness” that signifies both the experience of material oppression and the deep ambivalence that afflicts someone like Brand when she struggles against that oppression.

Susan Gingell claims that despite *Land’s* debunking thrust, there remains “some sense of the possibility of art being a kind of land to light on, when political and personal hopes have been dashed” (184). Would

Brand agree with Gingell's paradoxical statement that hope is given precisely because "the grounds of despair are so powerfully constructed by Brand's words" (184)? I have implied throughout this paper that Brand's political ambivalence necessarily permeates her feelings about her writing. Brand has claimed in an interview that through writing

I can comment on the political situation. I can object in poetry to the ways in which we are living, the ways in which we are made to live by the social structure. I think a poet is two things: someone who writes those things down, and also someone who advocates, vigorously, living in a great way. ("Unredeemed" 9)

But the speaker in "I Have Been Losing Roads" offers a harsh appraisal of her contribution to the struggle against oppression: "all I have are these hoarse words that still owe / this life and all I'll be is tied to this century and waiting / without a knife or courage and still these same words / strapped to my back" (9). If her words become a silent burden for Brand, it is because she sees all too well not only the strengths but the political weaknesses of two of language's major (and opposing) capabilities, the creation and subversion of identity structures. Poetry becomes a weight that is also an act of waiting, an expression of ambivalence that is, finally, a consequence of being given the time to consider. Surely the mere existence of such time for someone who, had she been born a century earlier, would have been denied it can only be cause for optimism? Brand is not even unambivalent about that proposition: rigorously, unrelentingly, this book refuses even the slightest complacency. If it expresses certain alliances with both postmodern and liberal critiques of identity politics, it also demands that neither stance serve as an excuse to relinquish the political urgency captured in the speaker's longing for "the blood / red flame of a revolution."

NOTES

¹ Ironically, in a later paper entitled "Harris, Philip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism," Clarke implicitly challenges the resistance to Brand that he expresses in this review. Arguing that criticism has largely failed these three Canadian-Caribbean women writers by portraying them "as standard-bearers of feminism, or anti-racism, or socialism, or anti-imperialism or anti-homophobia (and, in Brand's case, all of the above)" (178), Clarke calls for an engagement with these poets' "poetics, their structures, styles, influences; the histories of their textual productions, receptions and circulations; the literal connection between their theoretical *poesis* and their political *praxis*" (179) — in short, for a criticism that exceeds the practice of reading into their work, whether from a celebratory or a dismissive perspective, "a politics that eschews any engagement with poetics" (163).

² Although Wiens's use of Bernstein is not inconsistent with mine, it is differently oriented. Wiens draws on Bernstein mainly in order to qualify his own use, in examining Brand's employment of dialect in *No Language Is Neutral*, of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's concept of "nation language." Although my reading takes into account Bernstein's depiction of Brathwaite's nation language as being "as much a new standard to rally national spirit as it is a break from standardization" (7), it highlights Bernstein's broader argument about the relationship between the poetics and politics of identity.

³ For some poststructuralist attempts to avoid making identity the exclusive locus of politics, see Laclau, ed., and Laclau and Mouffe.

⁴ Although I am not examining Brand's use of Caribbean dialect in *Land*, such an exploration, particularly one made in the context of Bernstein's argument for idelect over dialect, is certainly relevant to a discussion of Brand's political ambivalence. I have chosen not to explore this partially because any such discussion would simply continue that begun by Zackodnik and Wiens in regards to *No Language*, and I want to look at Brand's politics in relation to other aspects of her poetics.

⁵ I use the term "postmodern" fairly loosely here, to designate the (broadly Derridean and Foucaultian) troubling of the assumption that culture secondarily befalls certain categories (e.g., nature, biology, speech) that remain, despite their entanglement with it, primarily uncontaminated by it. I recognize that to argue that this perspective is starkly at odds with the one often adopted by identity politics is to oversimplify matters. For the purposes of interpreting Brand's own complexly ambivalent position, however, I am setting a "post-modern" de-reifying approach, an approach which Brand often invokes in *Land*, in loose opposition to the more essentializing identitarian one she also adopts.

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