

'Eroto-histories' and counter-memories of violence in contemporary Caribbean women writers

Towards an eroto-historiography

In Dionne Brand's last novel, *What We All Long For*, a young Vietnamese woman living in Canada as an artist is intent on creating an ambitious installation which in the process of creation comes to embody a *lubaio*, a large structure in the significant shape of a female figure.¹ It is made up of different materials, a collection of the discarded remains that had lain dead on the beach like "tree stumps, twigs and rope, debris" (WWL, 14), and lumber and railway ties found on the streets of Toronto. On the whole structure there are figures, signposts, directions, charts. The statue's arms bear rolls of cloth and fragments of paper on which the city's longings and desires are written in different languages. Each longing hung on it tells an unarticulated story about "bodies hurt or torn apart or bludgeoned" (WWL, 158), bodies hovering between the present and the past, bodies waiting to live. The *lubaio* represents a sort of relic, a memento, a trace, and at the same time an 'exquisite corpse', that is, a surrealist work of art composed of unpredictable images and words logically interrelated, governed by irrational principles. In other words, the *lubaio* represents repressed stories, memories of loss and pain, but it also shows a passage towards alternative and unforeseen realities, towards unexplored routes and directions.

The creative texts of Caribbean women writers like Michelle Cliff, Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo and Patricia Powell investigate on the one hand the idea of the recovery of the trace, the witness of the unsaid, an anti-normative genealogy, and on the other they explore the possibility of desire, of moving toward unpredictable places. The very etymology of the term desire – from Latin *de-sideris* – refers to the ability to read the constellations in order to draw a direction. These authors rewrite the historical experiences of abuse, loss, and violence through a highly erotic and drifting form of writing which traces the fluctuations of new psychic and critical constellations which destabilize the dominant topography of History and question institutionalized epistemologies. As some scholars have pointed out, "to think outside narrative history requires reworking linear temporality. It requires 'the rewiring of the senses'"² in order to apprehend multiple temporalities experienced as cyclical, interrupted, multilayered. Indeed, these Caribbean women writers share "a queer desire for history", a desire for a different kind of past. By proposing alternative space-time narrative

¹ Dionne Brand, *What We All Long For* (Toronto: Knopf, 2005). Hereafter references in the text as WWL.

² Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities. A Roundtable Discussion", *GLQ* 13.2-3 (2007), 177-95, 185, 187; see also M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 308.

models opposed to the teleological ones of official historiography, their works seem to suggest a reflection on what Elizabeth Freeman has called an “erotohistoriography”: a space-time model based on the conception of a deeply embodied, discontinuous and unpredictable temporality produced by pleasurable relations between bodies which exceed the present and recover the past through skin memories – “the body’s recollection of pleasure”. “Against pain and loss”, as Freeman asserts, “erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times”. Moreover, “we might imagine ourselves haunted by ecstasy and not just by loss; residues of positive affect (erotic scenes, utopias, memories of touch) might be available for queer counter-historiographies”, and “historicity itself might appear as a structure of tactile feeling, a mode of touch, even a sexual practice”.³

Freeman’s engagement in this new historiographical project is an attempt at countering those unqueer stances which have often cast eroticism and materialist history, pleasure and the dialectic, as theoretical foils.⁴ Actually, her thought is very much indebted to that of African American feminist author Audre Lorde (1934-1992) whose work has dealt with the importance of the power of the erotic within women’s cultural and political commitment. In her famous essay “Uses of the Erotic”, Lorde defines the erotic as an empowering creative force halfway between self-consciousness and the “the chaos” of the strongest feelings which proves to be a practical and intellectual tool allowing women to contest systems of oppression within the context of patriarchal and heterosexist models of power-knowledge:

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.⁵

The claim to the use of the erotic in the spheres of language, bodies and history is central to the erotohistoriographical project which names a practice of tracing histories written on queer bodies, a need to understand “time as fully incorporated, as nowhere existing outside of bodies and their pleasures”.⁶ Time is also understood in terms of “binding” which invokes a sense of connectivity, a mode of travel across time and space. As Freeman points out: “‘Binds’ also suggests the bonds of love, not only attachments in the here and now but also those forged across both spatial and temporal barriers: to be ‘bound’ is to be going somewhere”.⁷

A suggestive example of the kind of erotohistoriography Freeman argues for is offered by Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982),

³ Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography”, *Social Text*, 23.3-4 (Winter 2005), 53-68; 59; 66.

⁴ In this essay Freeman argues that “was it not the distinctly unqueer Frederic Jameson who wrote, albeit in a very different context, that history ‘is what hurts. It is what refuses desire?’”, *ibid.*, 59.

⁵ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53-59, 55.

⁶ Freeman, “Time Binds”, 58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1982). Hereafter references in the text as *Z*.

considered by the writer herself as a “biomythography”, a synthesis of history, biography, and mythology.⁸ It is a lyrical compendium of the author’s life experiences spanning from her vivid childhood memories in Harlem in the early 1930s to her adulthood in the late 1950s spent travelling around New York and Mexico. As the daughter of Caribbean immigrants to the United States, Lorde bears witness to the history of a “racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society” through her skin memories, namely, through her black lesbian body’s recollection of pain and grief as well as pleasure and enjoyment. Doubly dislocated, from her African roots and from the cultural heritage of her parents’ Caribbean origins, Lorde retells her own history by charting a matrilineage both personal and mythical. Indeed, Lorde revises the traditional structure of family trees based on patriarchal filiation in favor of a queer genealogy defined, instead, in terms of female affiliation: “I felt the age-old triangle of mother father child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing either or both directions as needed” (*Z*, 7). That ‘I’ can reclaim a home and a plural identity only by virtue of her connection to her maternal ancestry which proves to be queer as it envisages emotional bondings between women regardless of sexual intimacy: “*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*” (*Z*, 14; italics in the text). The narrative exemplifies the idea of a “corporealized historiography” as it explores the way in which the protagonist’s life is shaped and affected by the emotional and physical relationships with other women across time as well as space: “Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home” (*Z*, 3). History/biography and myth merge throughout the novel insofar as the legendary figures of African mythology (MawuLisa, Afrekete), as well as the protagonist’s Caribbean female ancestors (Ma-Liz, Aunt Anni, Linda) uncannily live on in the women she meets throughout her lifetime. This ‘temporal drag’ – the pull of the past on the present – produced by pleasurable relations among queer bodies is highlighted by the cyclical narrative structure of the novel which opens with a sort of prophetic invocation, “*To the journeywoman pieces of myself. Becoming. Afrekete*” (*Z*, 5), and ends with an unforeseen fulfillment: “*And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me ... Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters*” (*Z*, 249, 252; italics in the text). Afrekete is the mythic name given to Kitty, Lorde’s lover who becomes a bridge to distant times and places. Indeed, their erotic encounter invokes at once the real New York City of the narrative’s present identified by its multiethnic rhythms

and scents; the maternal Caribbean island, Carriacou, both real and mythic, conjured up by images of sea shores, exotic spices and fragrances, which Lorde can only imagine from her mother's recollections; and finally the legendary, atypical and timeless Africa embodied by Kitty/Afrekete, "*the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become*" (Z, 255). By claiming a "new spelling" for her name – "*Zami: a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers*" – the poet assumes a collective identity which reconnects her with her lost past and future projections. Indeed, the appropriation of these 'queered' legendary figures allows Lorde to cross centuries as well as continents in order to envisage and inhabit a symbolic diasporic space for her erotic community.

Audre Lorde proves to be the direct literary ancestor of Michelle Cliff, Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo and Patricia Powell for whom the writing of history becomes a sensory and erotic practice, a kind of 'historicist *jouissance*'. From this perspective, their works display at once the search for 'queer' genealogies and a genealogical revision of history through fragmentary, discontinuous, circular narratives which represent a sense of transgressive characters, rebel women, transgenders, lesbian revolutionaries, libidinous women who counter traumatic events by exploring the experience of pleasure.

Sexuality in the field of history

The writings of these contemporary Caribbean women offer a queer erotized version of diaspora, narrated until then exclusively from a male or heteronormative perspective, by proposing liminal constructions of gender, sexuality and race which redefine the borders of nation and community. Buried and forgotten 'queer genealogies' are unearthed in their texts from a local and subaltern viewpoint. As Caribbean Canadian writer Nourbese Philip points out, "Genealogy is 'an account of descent from ancestors by enumeration of intermediate persons' from two Greek words meaning 'descent' and 'one who speaks in a certain manner'".⁹ It means therefore speaking in an unofficial language which challenges colonial historiography. As Jamaican-born Michelle Cliff declares:

To write as a complete Caribbean woman demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the artforms of these of our ancestors and speaking in the *patois* forbidden to us. It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting.¹⁰

In her literary production Michelle Cliff rewrites Caribbean history through a 'creolized' narration which unmask the cultural violence

⁹ Marlene Nourbese Philip, *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997), 11.

¹⁰ Michelle Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985), 14.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

produced by patriarchal colonialism, class privilege, racism and homophobia. As Cliff argues in her literary production, in a violently homophobic and racist society like Jamaica, passing straight and white is what allows public recognition and access to speech; yet, a paradox is implicit in the concept of passing as it represents at once the overcoming of silence and also its very assumption: “passing demands quiet. And from that quiet – silence”.¹¹ Cliff begins her “journey into speech” by “claiming an identity they taught [her] to despise”, namely, her homosexuality as well as her blackness uprooted from her white Creole identity. The (semi)autobiographical narratives of *Abeng* and its sequel *No Telephone to Heaven* evolve around the story of Clare Savage, a Jamaican light-skinned girl who is forced to face racial and sexual prejudices since childhood. In *Abeng* the strange death of two characters defined as “battyman”, “funny” and “queer” provides Clare with an implicit warning against the risk of transgressing sexual norms. In one of the most suggestive scenes of the novel, Clare explores her sexuality through an increasing emotional relationship with her playmate Zoe, a dark-skinned girl with whom she enjoys an erotic bodily contact while they are having a swim in the river:

Zoe’s naked body was lean and muscled. Her hips were narrow and her thighs long. The patch of tight curly hair between her legs glistened in the river water and the sun. Clare’s own body was also long. The gold of her legs and arms met the brown of Zoe as the water cascaded between them ... Lying beside Zoe on the rock. She had felt warm. Safe. Secluded. She felt that this was something she had wanted all along ... she had wanted to lean across Zoe’s breasts and kiss her.¹²

¹² Michelle Cliff, *Abeng*
(New York: Plume, 1984),
120, 124.

Issues of gender and sexuality are strictly intersected with those of race and class in the novel; indeed, the pleasurable encounter between the girls is marked by the discovery of the multiple differences written on their bodies: the gold of Clare’s light skin contrasting with Zoe’s dark skin makes Clare reflect upon her privileged social position as the daughter of a descendant of English slave-owners in Caribbean plantations opposed to Zoe’s disadvantaged status as working class and black.

Clare’s uneasiness in perceiving her identity as fractured goes back to the history of her family. Indeed, identifying with his white ancestors, Boy Savage has taught his light-skinned daughter Clare to pass for white and forget thereby the African roots of her dark-skinned mother. Yet, like Audre Lorde, Cliff offers an erotohistoriographical counter-memory through the recovery of revolutionary and legendary female ancestors erased by patriarchal family trees which not only reconnect Clare with her matrilineal genealogy but also make her acknowledge the existence of queer sexualities in Caribbean cultural traditions. In *Abeng* it is the figure of Mma Alli which gives historical intelligibility to non-eteronormative sexualities. She is a warrior and obeah woman who invokes the historical figure of Nanny, the Jamaican Maroon leader who fought against slavery.

Mma Alli was a one-breasted warrior woman and represented a tradition which was older than the one which had enslaved them ... Mma Alli had never lain with a man. The other slaves said she loved only women in that way, but that she was a true sister to the men – the Black men: her brothers. They said that by being with her in bed, women learned all manner of the magic of passion. How to become wet again and again all through the night. How to soothe and excite at the same time. How to touch a woman in her deep-inside and make her womb move within her.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 35.

Mma Alli also helps Inez, a captive woman who was repeatedly raped by slave owner Judge Savage, to reclaim her body and discover her lesbian sexuality. By revising her remembrance Clare learns the secrets of *jouissance*, the power of the erotic, and therefore the way to experience agency.

In *No Telephone to Heaven* the literary heir of Mma Alli is Harry/Harriet, a transgendered transvestite described as “Mawu-Lisa, moon and sun, female-male deity of some of their ancestors”.¹⁴ His/her presence in the novel bears witness to a history of colonial violence and oppression as his/her body is abused and raped by a British officer and scorned and despised by the homophobic Jamaican community. S/he struggles to come to terms with her/his ambiguous gender and sexual identity whose complexity is highlighted by Cliff herself: “Harry/Harriet is the novel’s lesbian in a sense; he’s a man who wants to be a woman, and he loves women, which is complicated”.¹⁵ Between him/her and a grown-up Clare develops a close friendship which resonates with homoerotic tones as shown in some scenes recalling Clare and Zoe’s naked bodies on the river shore: “They could swim as girlfriends ... warmed by their feast and the sun, they lay side by side under a sky thrilling in its brightness. Touching gently, kissing, tongues entwined, coming to, laughing” (*NTH*, 130).

¹⁴ Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone To Heaven* (New York: Plume, 1989), 171. Hereafter references in the text as *NTH*.

¹⁵ Meryl F. Schwartz, “An interview with Michelle Cliff”, *Contemporary Literature*, 3.4 (1993), 596.

After migrating from Jamaica to the United States and subsequently to England, Clare eventually travels back to her ‘grandmother’s land’ under Harry/Harriet suggestion where in the end they both join a guerrilla group fighting against Anglo-American neo-colonial oppression, Clare as a warrior and Harry/Harriet as a nurse. Thus, once again, two female historical figures are invoked through their bodies identified respectively with Maroon Nanny and Mary Seacole, a nineteenth century Jamaican heroine who overcoming gender and race prejudice pioneered the nursing profession travelling around Europe and the colonies during the Crimean war.

Actually Harry/Harriet plays a central role in the novel insofar as s/he helps Clare to recover her past, her cultural roots, and a deeper sense of self which enables her to identify with her blackness and queerness. Cliff’s narrative performs the last act of counter-memory by showing Clare dying in a revolutionary attack.

O je t’adore, O je t’adore, O je t’adore
...

Kitty-woo, Kitty-woo, Kitty-woo
Whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip
Back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw

She remembered language.
Then it was gone.

cutacoo, cutacoo, cutacoo
coo, cu, cu, coo
coo, cu, cu, coo
piju, piju, piju
cuk, cuk, cuk, cuk
... (NTH, 208)

The last words she pronounces conjure a passage towards an unpredictable pre-language space where her dead body has become one with the earth, her mother-land, and with the bones of her maternal ancestors.

The conclusion of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone To Heaven* strikingly echoes the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* by Trinidadian Canadian writer Dionne Brand.¹⁶ The process of 'diasporization,' founded on colonial slavery, the Middle Passage, and the subsequent postcolonial migrations from the Caribbean, is represented in the novel through a poetic fluidity between time and space and a non-linear narrative divided between the perspectives of two black immigrant lesbian protagonists, whose voices are registered by the distinctive rhythms of their speech, from Elizete's potent demotic to Verlia's terse idiom. The novel begins with the words "GRACE. IS GRACE, YES. And I take it, quite, quite, like thieving sugar" (APNH, 5). The word grace seems to connote an exclusively female sensuality and pleasure similar to Cixous' *jouissance*, but also a release from strife and sexual subordination, a moment of sight. Indeed, the metaphor of "thieving sugar" reveals a strategic re-appropriation of the Creole language 'stolen' from the sugarcane fields. Its erotic connotation refers to the idea of stealing language as well as pleasure from the economy of the colonial system. Political commitment and sexual pleasure are deeply connected in the image of the two protagonists of the novel Verlia and Elizete – rebel women fighting against the US military invasion of Grenada in 1983. Echoing Clare Savage who dies in a guerrilla attack against the American imperialist politics in Jamaica, the final scene of the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* depicts the image of Verlia, leaping from a cliff:

She is flying out to sea and in the emerald she sees the sea, its eyes translucent, its back solid going to some place so old there's no memory of it ... Her body has fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sigh of lighting left after lighting, a faultless arc to the deep turquoise deep. She doesn't need air. She's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy (APNH, 246-247).

¹⁶ Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* (Toronto: Vintage, 1996). Hereafter references in the text as APNH.

The ocean, the site of an ineffable trauma, becomes a psychic territory, a passage towards an imagined elsewhere.

Brand's 'desiring writing' throughout her literary production can be understood as a deeply embodied language that 'performs' a textual/sexual eroticism and at the same time a drifting writing that traces literary trajectories going beyond normative limits towards other places, other ways of inhabiting the world. The very title of the novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, poses crucial questions about the imaginable existence of this 'elsewhere' for queer diasporic subjectivities. It could be guessed that it is certainly a place of imagined pasts, but also of projected futures and unrestrained desires, an elsewhere discovered maybe for only brief, but intense moments, in the pleasure and sensuality of the black female body.

The collection of poems *No Language is Neutral* (1990), instead, represents Brand's first attempt to theorize the body, sexuality, and belonging beyond the confines and limits of a discursive space which, far from being neutral, is ideologically gendered and raced.¹⁷ As in Cliff, Brand's poetic language oscillates between two languages, standard English and Caribbean Creole toward the creation of 'another tense', another language with which to express the fluidity of an identity in a constant process of becoming. Brand searches for a language that can express the ephemeral boundaries between bodies and subjectivities, that can give voice to the body and the self in an alternative socio-sexual economy. She finds that language in, and through, the desiring black lesbian body.

¹⁷ Dionne Brand, *No Language is Neutral* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990). Hereafter references in the text as *NLN*.

I want to wrap myself around you here in this line so
that you will know something This
grace, you see, come as a surprise and nothing till
now nock on my teeming skull, then, these warm
watery syllables, a woman's tongue so like a culture ...
language not yet made I want to kiss you deeply,
smell, taste the warm water of your mouth as warm as
your hands. I lucky is grace that gather me up (*NLN*, 36).

Brand strives to write a 'herstory' for the black lesbian body, a body which is not only inscribed and positioned in different spaces – Trinidad, Toronto – but also marked and written upon by particular regimes of discursive power – colonial and neo-colonial. She moves a critique to identity politics which relies upon stable and fixed definitions of subject positions in order to make subjectivities and abject bodies intelligible. The poet traces an imagined genealogy of lesbian identity, giving a queer description of that ancestry in a culture where established lineage holds considerable significance: "there are saints of this ancestry / too who laugh like jamettes in the / pleasure of their legs and caress their sex in mirrors" (*NLN*, 51). These lines point to the always already existence of women loving women, as well as their cultural and linguistic value in

history. These “saints” are “like jamettes”, loose women who are not afraid of expressing their sexuality and eroticism openly, representing, thereby, a threat to dominant order and authority. The very notion of jamette – from Trinidadian Creole: under the diameter of respectability, belonging to the lowest social classes – reveals the idea of a transgressive identity and space, a “taking space” which also means a “making space” through the subversion of patriarchal and heterosexist norms.¹⁸ Dionne Brand abandons the idea of a geographically defined homeland, and searches for her own provisionally imagined “terra”, her own land to light on, an elsewhere. Hence the ‘nowhere’ becomes the ‘nowHere’, the here and now of the body which turns into a discursive site of belonging and identity. As the following lines suggest: “your planet is your hands, your house behind your eyebrows”,¹⁹ it is precisely the erotic autonomy of the lesbian body that allows for the creation of this inhabitable space.

¹⁸ See Carol Boyce Davies, “Carnivalised Caribbean Female Bodies: Taking Space/Making Space”, *Thamyris*, 5.2 (1998), 333-346.

¹⁹ Dionne Brand, *Land To Light On* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 44.

A woman who looks
at a woman and says, here, I have found you,
in this I am blackening in my way. You ripped the world
raw. It was as if another life exploded in my
face, brightening, so easily the brow of a wing
touching the surf, so easily I saw my own body, that
is my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
as a place, another life, *terra*. They say this place
does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
before (*NLN*, 50).

In the erotic energy of the excess produced by two female desiring bodies looking at each other, the poet is released to another space. She becomes other than herself, (in) another place, “another life” where she can speak her own language, “grace”. She represents herself as place, a place which has always existed, and is now reconfigured by redesigning its own ideology, history, and language so as to reflect what it has excluded. Brand upsets the dialectical relation between ‘beauty’ and ‘nowhere’ by reversing the island/ocean metaphor: the Caribbean sea becomes the no-place that needs to be re-presented and conjured up in order to make sense of.

The ontological and existential space for the descendants of the African diaspora therefore can be envisioned neither here nor there, but only in the liminality of the ocean in-between. The image of this no-place is what Brand calls the “Door of No Return”, metaphor for the African doorways from which millions of slaves were thrown adrift into the unknown.²⁰ As Brand writes: “imagining our ancestors stepping these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing, one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space”.²¹ This painful and uncanny experience is reflected in the suspension of identities in those “few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is

²⁰ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return. Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage, 2001).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

the only space of our true existence”.²² Brand realises that this laceration of history, this wound, this ‘absent presence’ needs a new kind of narration which redefines the concepts of belonging, identity, and genealogy.

Her second novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) tries to narrate a new tale by offering counter-visions of the diaspora.²³ Time, space and language function to reject and erode dominant paradigms of reality. The idea of cyclical time suggested from the beginning by the title is pursued through a non-linear, fragmented prose and a constant narrative instability between imagination and syncretic real events, past and present, and multiple and dislocated narrators. The novel represents the traumatic experience of colonial slavery and spans the time and geography of the African diaspora itself, from the early nineteenth century to late twentieth century, from the sugar cane plantations of Trinidad to the urban streets of Toronto, New York and Amsterdam. It begins with the story of Marie Ursule, a 19th-century Trinidadian slave whose passionate act of rebellion – organizing a mass suicide – has the desired effect of wrecking a plantation’s economy. She sends her young daughter, Bola, off to safety in a remote place, Culebra Bay, where she begets numerous offspring who subsequently scattered throughout the world will be haunted by a legacy of passion and oppression. Bola is described as a child who was born as “balled into a moon”, with the sea mirrored in her eyes, reflecting future projections.

This is what Marie Ursule had seen in her child’s eyes, the sea, and a journey to be made that melts the body. She has seen the child in the sea ... there in the sea, in the middle of Bola’s eyes, Marie Ursule saw skyscrapers and trains and machines and streets ... her heart came like water in her hand and her face splintered in faces of coming faces, and she knew that if it was the future she was looking at, then she was keeping this crazy child from it if she took her along (*FCM*, 44-45).

The representation of Bola seems to evoke the ancestral female figure echoed in the potentially subversive figuration of “tidalectics” coined by Kamau Brathwaite, of which he writes:

Why is our psychology not dialectical – successfully dialectical – in the way that Western philosophy has assumed people’s lives should be, but tidalectic, like our grandmother’s – our nanna’s – action, like the movement of the ocean she’s walking on, coming from one continent / continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future²⁴

Brand’s vision of the diaspora engenders a rhizomatic matriarchal genealogy originating in Bola’s womb, a transgressive and non-heteronormative womb as it is not regulated and naturalized by the social prescriptions of the colonial system. Brand queers Brathwaite’s ancestral

²² Ibid.

²³ Dionne Brand, *At The Full and Change of the Moon* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1999). Hereafter references in the text as *FCM*.

²⁴ Kamau Brathwaite, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (New York: We Press, 1999), 34.

figure by inscribing on Bola's body a sensual pleasure, a desiring excess. Her body in fact lusts for everything she sees and touches, for her own flesh.

What her eyes touched she craved, craving raw like a tongue, and pinned to one look, one shadow, one movement of an almond leaf, one wave, one man, one woman with a fish basket, one moment. And soon forgotten. She moved to the next lust ... lust for everything she saw ... and lust for her own flesh. She would knead her soft thighs and smooth them in her fingers for hours ... she only took note of her senses (*FCM*, 67).

This freedom to enjoy the body for itself is handed down to two of Bola's descendants a century later: a fifty year old woman who is overtaken by a "sudden and big lust", and Maya who appears in a window in Amsterdam, a window that cannot contain the liquidity of her body, the energy flowing like blood from her sex. Erotic desire revises the heterosexist and patriarchal paradigms of the diaspora, evoking thereby Audre Lorde's theorizations of the power of the erotic, the erotic as power. Sexuality in Brand's writing is assertively inscribed in the narratives of Caribbean transnationalism.

Brand's characters continually cross national, temporal and sexual borders, torn between the spectre of the traumatic past and the anxieties and confusion of the present. Bola's dislocation in that remote place far from the conditions of slavery is embodied by many of her descendants including her great-great-granddaughter Bola (the second Bola), who chooses to live in isolation in an abandoned family home in Trinidad where she gets rid of memories and language. Her only companion is the ghost of her foremother whom she used to visit at the country cemetery metaphorically named "Paradise":

I would stay all night with our mother and the morning would find us looking at the sun coming over the Paradise hill ... It was beautiful to watch us, I'm sure, sitting side by side. Two figures sitting bent over in thought, our mother's blue dress with lace and I in my new crisp uniform ... just a woman and a girl laughing and talking at a gravestone, the beautiful afternoons when the sun would purple and rise to the west of the cemetery and our slender figures would part clouds in the seams of the strafed clouds and our laughter and my mother's thoughts filling the cemetery and my voice answering hers (*FCM*, 269-70).

It is significant that it is Bola's forgetfulness and reverie that enable her to recover the fractured remains of a lost cultural history. On the value of forgetfulness Brand writes: "In another century without knowing her, because centuries are forgetful places, Marie Ursule's great-great-grandchildren would face the world too. But even that forgetfulness Marie Ursule had accounted for. Forgetfulness is true speech if anyone listens" (*FCM*, 18).

Violence in Paradise

New erotized versions of submerged violent histories are displayed by Indo-Trinidadian Canadian Shani Mootoo and Jamaican American Patricia Powell whose works bear witness to the memory of “other Middle Passages” involving the diasporic crossings of indentured Indian and Chinese immigrants to the Caribbean.²⁵ Accounting for an undocumented past, *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Mootoo and *The Pagoda* by Powell tell stories of personal and collective traumas resulting from the effects of colonialism and hetero-patriarchy on constructions of family ties and individual identities. Both texts explore how to revise official histories to include the experiences of women and other forgotten and denied subjectivities. Indeed, they portray transgressive in-between characters who defy rigid categorizations of gender, sexuality, race and class. With reference to this, Johanna Garvey points out that “a narrative fashioned from a non-normative perspective – a queered position located in the spaces between or outside the binarisms – may be the most effective challenge to the violence those norms unleash and a crucial antidote to the repeated traumas of Caribbean history”.²⁶ Strikingly, both novels display similar ‘confessional’ narrative strategies which resort to the device of the writing of a letter by a witness-narrator as a means to disentangle and disclose hidden secrets and mysteries.

Cereus Blooms at Night deploys a sophisticated narrative framework composed of un-chronological fragments, digressions, changes in point of view. Set on the island of Lantanacamera, in the small town of “Paradise” – once again, a fictional evocation of Trinidad – sometime in the early 1900s the narration evolves around the story of Mala Ramchandin, a mad old woman retired in a nursing home.²⁷ Her story is told by Tyler, a male-to-female transgender nurse and her caretaker in the Alms House who sends out the recording of Miss Ramchandin’s story like an open letter to her lost younger sister Asha in Canada. Bound by “a shared queerness”, Tyler feels inexplicably drawn to the strange woman, and begins to sift through the mass of gossip about the nature of Mala’s presumed patricide and to piece together the tragedy of her life. The narrative goes back three generations as it explores Mala’s childhood, the life of her parents Chandin and Sarah Ramchandin, back to the history of her grandfather who came from India as an indentured laborer on the Caribbean sugarcane. The core of the plot contains submerged traumatic memories and ‘public secrets’ – the lesbian relationship between Mala’s mother Sara and her aunt Lavinia with their subsequent elopement to Canada, the ensuing incestuous relationship between Mala and her father, Mala’s alleged madness, the transgender identity of Tyler and Otoh – which must remain officially invisible as they prove to be incommensurable within the colonial

²⁵ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery contributed to a mass influx of indentured labourers from China and India in order to supply cheap labour for the sugar plantations – immigrants submitted to conditions that amounted to a state of servitude while undermining wages for black workers.

²⁶ Johanna K. Garvey, “Complicating Categories: ‘Race’ and Sexuality in Caribbean Women’s Fiction”, *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, 10.1 (2003), 94-120, 106.

²⁷ Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1996). Hereafter references in the text as *CBN*.

structures of intelligibility that support the hetero-naturalisation of kinship, gender and sexuality. Mootoo's poetics shows the opacity of the Caribbean space which cannot be experienced through the conventional parameters of knowledge based on vision and language. Rather, it requires alternative epistemologies that bear witness to the unspeakable, since "words alone cannot describe" (CBN, 19).

Inhabiting the liminal edge of social acceptability and rejection, Mala 'reterritorializes' that very patriarchal house which had been a theatre of colonial violence and sexual abuse into an inhospitable and anti-domestic space where the confines between human and non-human, life and death are blurred. Indeed, she experiences an ecological as well as a synaesthetic approach to the surrounding world:

Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings – every fibre was sensitised in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. Mala responded to those receptors, flowing with them effortlessly, like water making its way along a path (CBN, 126-7).

Mala's non-verbal language is deeply embodied, governed by the pleasurable anarchy of her senses; her body, suggestively, becomes a "vibrant network of synaesthesia" (CBN, 121) open to symbiotic becoming. Not by chance, her sensorial perception goes beyond visual episteme: since "her eyes were of little use" she feels, hears, smells her surroundings by "becoming one with the trees, shrubs, weeds, fences, thorns, water, and mossy ground" which makes "her heart drum with excitement" (CBN, 151). From this perspective, Mootoo's writing reveals a new field of perception, a sort of oceanic sensorial expansion flowing into an empathic *jouissance*.

Another privileged epistemological form that challenges the transparency of language proves to be the act of listening, a form of ethical communication which tries to grasp the secret that fails to get across.²⁸ Tyler, who strikingly evokes Cliff's character Harry/Harriet, is the only character able to perceive that Mala's behaviour is not an expression of madness but rather an effect of trauma which requires an alternative account. By becoming her witness – by "listening and sifting, cutting and sewing the lot" – Tyler tries to disclose a buried archive of precarious family ties and incest which unveils the traumatic experience of indentureship and its effects as homophobic and gender violence. He explicitly counters the heteronormative force of the patriarchal impulse that claimed to judge both his story and Mala's as too perverse and too unpleasant to be worthy of preservation. In *Cereus* the act of storytelling is significantly related to an ethical assumption; indeed, the very inter-

²⁸ Sarah Ahmed, *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 137-160.

subjective narrative structure of the novel offers the possibility of “giving an account of oneself” only by virtue of a full exposure to the vulnerability of the other. In Butler’s words, “one can only tell an autobiography, and one can only reference an ‘I’ in relation to a ‘you’: without the ‘you’ my own story becomes impossible”.²⁹ Actually thanks to Mala, Tyler can give an account of himself and tell the exciting possibilities of his “becoming-woman”, as well as his sexual relationship with Otoh, a female-to-male transgender who eventually falls in love with him/her.

History writing, story-telling and cross-dressing are also at the core of Patricia Powell’s novel *The Pagoda* which unfolds a powerful imaginative exploration of the emotional and psychological dimensions of the indentured Chinese experience in the Caribbean.³⁰ Set in rural Jamaica in 1893, *The Pagoda* tells the story of Lau-A-yin, a Chinese immigrant woman who passes most of her life for a man identified as Mr Lowe. Yet, unlike Harry/Harriet and Tyler for whom cross-dressing is a personal choice, or unlike Otoh who undergoes an extraordinary and unexpected “transformation”, Lowe is coerced into a transgender identity; her masquerade is in fact a means of survival, a matter born out of necessity. Her disguises function as a way of coping with the multiple traumas suffered since her childhood, when she is forced to flee from China to escape an arranged marriage at the hands of her violent father and travel aboard a ship of kidnapped Chinese to work the plantations in Jamaica. To escape the travel restrictions imposed on women in China, Lau-A-yin dresses as a man and becomes a concubine to Cecil, the white slave trader who repeatedly rapes her. As a result of the sexual abuse she suffers during the long passage, she gives birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. In Jamaica she lives for thirty-five years as Mr Lowe, a shopkeeper. But his arranged marriage to a lesbian “octoroon” eventually turns into a love relationship and the two of them have to face the secrets of their past. As in Mootoo’s novel, in *The Pagoda* a fire symbolically destroys both the site where the victim has tried to create a shelter against violence and the body of the oppressor; and again, ineffable traumas require the necessary acts of writing and telling. Indeed, after the ensuing burning of the shop and the death of Cecil, Lowe decides to rejoin her lost daughter and eventually succeeds in writing her a letter recounting the hidden origins of their family.

Issues of gender are closely interrelated to sexuality – as the novel is mainly concerned with the unfolding of unconscious desires and fantasies – but also to bodily yearnings and cravings. Lowe ponders over the complexity of her confused identity: “and how you to love some other person when the body you inhabit has more to do with somebody else’s fantasy. The fantasy of somebody you love” (*P*, 221). Also, in the novel sexual desire and intimacy are mingled with the remembered traumas of the past; Lowe’s response to her wife’s lovemaking is, in fact, always

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24.

³⁰ Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (New York: Harvest Books, 1998). Hereafter references in the text as *P*.

fraught with the memories of her rape by Cecil, a body memory which haunts her physical and intimate attachments to others.

The Pagoda, therefore, reveals the complexity of homoerotic desire which Lowe must negotiate through her close relationships with her abuser Cecil, her wife Miss Sylvie, and her estranged daughter Elizabeth. The narrative shows an intricate web of precarious family plots evolving around cross-dressing; actually, Lowe must take, out of necessity, the roles of man, husband and father while desiring those of woman and mother. Like Mootoo, Powell represents a subjectivity irreducible to any identity categorization: neither male nor female, neither heterosexual nor homosexual. The cross-dressed body becomes the space of desire and at once the locus for the negotiation of power. In Powell's words, the transvestite self has to do "with characters' bottomless longings, their insatiable cravings and fears, their feelings of helplessness, and power and powerlessness, their desires spurred on by their fantasies and dreams".³¹

Lowe's is a body that transgresses space, "a body full of psychic and psychical wounds, a body tingling with memories, a body on which desires and fantasies are negotiated, a foreign body trying to create a wholesome self".³² This metaphorical transvestite body locates personal crises of identification within sites of historical and cultural significations that allegorize the instability of the colonial state. Through the representation of illegitimate children, incestuous relationships, disowned ties of blood and family bonds based on affiliation, the novel unveils a counter-memory which destabilizes the institutional foundations of colonial bio-power.

Envisioning floating gender and sexual boundaries and shifting cultural and ethnic borders, Shani Mootoo and Patricia Powell's narratives grant cultural authority to the discursive space for queer diasporic subjectivities, a space which, nevertheless, is far from being depicted as idyllic. Indeed, the Alms House of Paradise where Mala and Tyler live and the pagoda that Lowe wants to build as a means to reclaim her culture and heritage prove to be (het)eroto(pic) spaces in both the Foucauldian sense as other spaces or "counter-sites, a kind of effectively realized utopias in which ... all the other real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted",³³ and also in Lorde's terms of an erotic community founded on the full recognition of deeply embodied desires and pleasures.

The writings of Cliff, Brand, Mootoo and Powell reveal the weaving of erotic and sensual bodies, gendered, sexualized and racialized bodies, which are temporarily positioned, continually adrift and out-of-place. Their texts become counter-memories as they look to past and present experiences for the hidden histories of those excluded from dominant narratives, breaking the silences of (hetero)normative history and producing 'eroto-stories': female narrations which translate the traumas of diaspora, migration, and denied sexualities into an empathic *jouissance*.

³¹ Patricia Powell, "The Dynamics of Power and Desire in *The Pagoda*", in Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek, eds., *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 196.

³² Ibid., 192.

³³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, 16 (Spring 1986), 22-27.