

loss, no backward glance. No hope of making progress in the old "Brit'n," but it was better than living on the "rock." Here and there they slouched about the streets, men without future or hope or destiny, lost in London . . . (153)

The passage anticipates *The Lonely Londoners*, in which racism is treated overtly, and invites comparison with the essay-like passage early in *Moses Ascending*, in which Selvon describes, with the wry wit and irony he adopted in describing racism, the black man at work in the London dawn.

An Island Is a World gropingly explores yet another concern of Selvon's work, the power of love and brotherly compassion. The drunken jeweller Johnny is redeemed by his daughter's love, and there are strong hints that it is the answer Foster will find when he has completed Father Hope's treatise ". . . about a universal religion, a common ground" (236).

This edition is physically attractive, with clear print on high quality paper. Ramchand's introduction is especially valuable, not only for its examination of the text and its biographical basis but for its explanation of the political situation in Trinidad in the 1940s, the setting of the novel. A complete set of Sam Selvon's works, in similar handsome form, would be welcome.

SARA STAMBAUGH



Carol Morrell, ed. *Grammar of Dissent*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1994. Pp. 256. \$17.95 pb.

Carol Morrell's *Grammar of Dissent*, a selection of writing by Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand, demonstrates how, in their writings, these three writers subvert the Eurocentric perspective while foregrounding that of the people of the African diaspora. In excerpts of their work included in this volume, Harris, Philip, and Brand employ such tools of the colonizer as form and language to "negotiate a new literary space" (Hutcheon and Richmond 9), interrogating a range of subjects, among them racism, sexism, class, culture, and history.

This richness of subject matter is evident, for instance, in the work of Claire Harris. In "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case," Harris exposes the injustice of a judicial system which demeans and dehumanizes a young, black girl while exonerating a racist policeman. In "Where the Sky Is a Pitiful Tent," the poet's concern is war and oppression, her inclusion of Rigoberta Manchu's account of his experience of the Guatemalan war reinforcing the notion that in spite of the toll in lives taken by war, the struggle for freedom will persist. "Nude on a Pale Staircase" probes the importance of memory, which is viewed

as integral both in the assessment and preservation of the past and in the initiation of change now or in the future.

Through prose as well as poetry, Harris also explores—among other subjects—the issues of quest and identity. “Travelling to Find a Remedy,” for instance, suggests that a journey back to ancestral roots is not inevitably a remedy for the diasporic African’s sense of exile. Time and place have changed the female narrator, who parts from a Nigerian man knowing that she cannot fit into a patriarchal system: “I cannot stand on the edge / of your life . . . There are advantages / to your ebon calm / your reason / but I was not born to it” (65).

The problem of language, too, is a major interest of the three poets, though probably more so for Philip and Brand than for Harris. The foisting of Standard English on the colonized deprived them of their natural speech and hindered the transmission of their own language, culture, and history to their descendants. Through demotic language, Philip—like Brand—attempts to liberate the African. Her two works, *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* and “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” deconstruct Standard English while exploiting demotic language to reveal the true nature of the colonizer’s discourse, one that ignored the reality of the colonized and perpetuated oppression and racism. In the latter work, she indicates how scientific language supports racism and marginalizes non-whites as well as women:

De Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted much of his time to “proving” that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to, women, blacks and other peoples of colour. (137)

In alluding to the bible and incorporating biblical language, *She Tries Her Tongue* stresses how the language of Christianity effectively silenced the oppressed, a point reinforced by the accompanying quotations from historical documents. The prose account in the margin, showing the diasporic mother empowering the child by blowing the demotic language into the child’s mouth, emphasizes the crucial role of the woman in reclaiming and preserving through orality the natural language of Africa.

The richness of subject matter is evident also in the selections from Brand’s writing. “Old 1” and sections of *Hard Against the Soul*, for example, dwell on the virtues of old age, with old female ancestors viewed as the repositories of experience and wisdom. Other works enlarge upon the evils generated by an exploitative capitalist system. In this connection, *Diary—The Grenada Crisis* exposes the chaos, poverty, and destruction induced when capitalist countries wage war on a relatively powerless society. *Primitive Offensive* touches on yet another subject—the insidious effects of slavery. Cantos I, II, VI and VII subvert Eurocentric history to reveal the enduring racism of those who traded

in slaves. European heroes, like De Las Casas, Isabella and Ferdinand, are dislodged from their pedestals and replaced by Toussaint l'Ouverture and Dessalines, blacks who led the struggle against slavery. Like Philip, Brand utilises historical facts and specific dates to underscore the barbaric nature of the slave trade: "describe 1492 / describe 1498 / describe 1502 / describe 1590 / describe 1650 / describe, describe, describe" (Morrell 196). Again like Philip, she implicates the Church—"ecclesiastic nostrils for gold" (194)—in the evil of the trade.

Brand's dedication to feminism as it pertains to black women and, in particular, black lesbians adds a special dimension to her work. The excerpt from *Hard Against the Soul* is a unique and honest depiction of the narrator's discovery and acceptance of her lesbianism: "I have become myself," she claims (242). There is a daring expression of joy in the discovery, as she says to her lover: "You ripped the / world raw. It was as if another life exploded in my / face, brightening" (242). Sadly, Brand intimates in *Bread Out of Stone*, the marginalisation of lesbians is a fact of life, and even women, those "whose conversation sings the borders of lesbian hate" (175), may be active in such exclusion.

Morrell's choices from the writings of Harris, Philip, and Brand are in many respects quite felicitous. While the excerpts from larger works might not be fully satisfying to the reader, the volume as a whole reflects with clarity the widely ranging interests of each of the three poets, and it offers as well a view of both the commonalities and divergences in their subject matter. It exhibits, too, the stylistic similarities and differences among the writers. It is clear, for instance, that experimentation with form and language—illustrated by Philip's use of juxtaposition and counterpoise in *She Tries Her Tongue*, in which the poetry itself shares the space on the page with historical edicts and a prose account—attracts all three writers. Yet Harris, her innovative variation in form and style notwithstanding, is somewhat less given to the use of demotic language than are Philip and Brand. Morrell's introductory essay, providing as it does a succinct analysis of each writer's work, is especially helpful, and the biographical sketches of the writers facilitate comprehension of their work as their art has been forged from their experiences in Trinidad and Canada. Some explanatory notes would have been valuable, since many readers may not be conversant with a number of allusions in the works. Without question, though, the volume demonstrates that Harris, Philip, and Brand have infused Canadian literature with new blood. *Grammar of Dissent* is a decidedly worthwhile addition to Canadian and Caribbean literature.

STELLA ALGOO-BAKSH

WORK CITED

Hutcheon, Linda, and Marion Richmond, eds. *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990.