

Orality and the Body in the Poetry of Lillian Allen and Dionne Brand: Towards an Embodied Social Semiotics

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Introduction

Recently, while waiting for calaloo in the Caribbean take-out shop around the corner from our flat, I had a conversation with the dark-brown-skinned cook. Where did I live, he asked? “Up near Ruskin Park,” I said, wishing to share my pleasure in the park, and belatedly aware that I was also overtly indicating privilege. On the edges of Brixton as we are, one’s choice of names is a statement of social allegiance. Did I like London? Yes; well, I liked Brixton (again, impulsively sharing my pleasure, but now aware of the signalling of allegiances). Where was I from? As always, a second of hyper-awareness, of computing contexts: if I had been speaking Spanish, I would say “Cuba,” though I was an immigrant to Anglo-Canada at age five; when I lived in bilingual Montreal I would say “Ottawa,” the bilingual border-city where I grew up; but here in London, I say “Canada,” letting the semiotics of dialect and skin colour convey erroneous signals. I am only white English-Canadian in certain times and places.

Was I here alone? “No, with my partner, you might have seen him around, he’s from Guatemala ...” here I stopped, at a loss, since my partner has roughly the same migrant history as I. Why did I say he was from Guatemala, while I was “Canadian”? I tried to explain: “You might have seen him pass by [...] He has black hair, sort of dark, looks Latin American.”

But the cook didn’t know what “Latin Americans” are supposed to look like. “Black?” he asked. “Dark white,” I firmly replied, and found myself facing yet another of those moments of grinding gears, of refer-

ential vertigo. The first I ever had was when an American roommate in university asked me, "So, how does it feel to be non-white?" "I'm *not* non-white," I protested immediately. But if I lived in the United States, as a Cuban immigrant I would be a "minority" (an alternative American term for non-white). My quick response revealed to me then the size of the investment I had in being on the "right" side of white.

A few weeks later, I happened to be in the take-out shop with my partner and I introduced him to the cook. I asked, "What would you call him?" The cook formed his lips to say "Bl-," and then asked him, "What's your name, anyway?," and when informed, "I'd call him Eduardo."

Despite the cook's grace and my own hapless embroilment in "race"-ist categories, I realized that the cook subscribed to a larger British binary, that of "white" and "black." "White" is "us" by whomever it is used; "black" is everybody else, or, as they say in America, "non-white" (non-"us"). Even for the cook, although "black" has strong inclusive connotations, it is an Other to a more powerful, and therefore exclusive "us"—white.

This exchange reminded me of certain moments in the work of poets Lillian Allen and Dionne Brand. Like many postcolonial writers, they focus on the fluidity of identities as a gateway to alternative, more just, social relations. In their work this has often been put in the service of exploring what it means to be female and black. By attending closely to the black female body caught in oppressive structures of meaning, they enter a site of contradictions in which the body is both social construct and body-as-self (Butler). This is the site at which they try to reconfigure the terms "female" and "black."

My argument is that Allen and Brand use orality to embody their poetry; and that this orality realizes languages or systems of meaning that are alternatives to sexist, racist discourse. Although both have worked at the boundaries between speech and print, performance and script, the trajectory of their technical development has been from opposite directions. Allen for a long time presented her poetry in performance, printing versions privately along the way; only her last two books of poetry have been widely distributed by independent publishers. Brand, on the

other hand, began to publish early, in standard English, and only later wrote extended passages transcribed from Trinidad English Creole to bring a more defined orality to her work. Brand's orality is thus the familiar reader's subvocalization, and her work raises the question, "how does material sound come off the page?" Allen's orality is concrete, and her printed work raises the question, "how does literature read this page?" In other words, how do the familiar categories of Western meaning-in-print confront Allen's transduction from embodied performance to print?

I take a social semiotic approach (Halliday *Language*; Hodge and Kress), which sees meaning-making as a practice in particularized social contexts. This allows a theoretical exploration of orality and performance issues in African-Caribbean women's poetry that are current in the critical literature (e.g., Cooper). I hope to anchor such discussions about the dynamics of gender/race/class/orality metaphors in a more rigorous theoretical framework. At the same time, the work of Allen and Brand offers an opportunity to reconsider and to deepen key notions of textuality and materiality within social semiotics.

Extending Butler's theory of performativity, I describe grammars of oppositional relations such as race, ethnicity, class, etc., all of which intersect through the material, multivalent signs that they arrange. Allen's and Brand's work with identity in its socio-categorical terms can be traced through these cultural grammars, which they re-construe using the tangible nature of their experience. They explore the "meanings" of their bodies in several directions. Brand has been interested in the articulatory power of her body and the relationship of its "language" with different senses of that term: what language her body speaks; and the relationship of her body's language to languages *about* her body. Allen explores similar questions more directly through performance and includes a concern with literary language and other verbal forms that exclude her body's language (as performance). Both Allen and Brand cite meanings clearly in their bodies, clearly practised by their bodies; and these meanings, made as embodied *subjects*, reverse the perspective of social oppressions aimed at the black female body as *object*.

Literary-Historical Context

Perhaps the strongest canonical influences on contemporary Caribbean poets are Derek Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Both are African-Caribbean poets, one relatively Eurocentric in style and thematics (Nobel Laureate Walcott), the other steadfastly Afrocentric (Brathwaite). Writing from an educated middle-class position within the Caribbean since the mid-fifties and sixties, they have been internationally recognized as talented and sensitive poets, but they have not been particularly interested in re-examining dominant structures of patriarchy. The conflicts that give energy to their writing are about race and class, as these have been constructed by the official history of the Caribbean. Phrases such as “the people” and “the African race” in Brathwaite’s epic-poetic narrative of the African New World diaspora, *The Arrivants*, for example, refer exclusively to men.

Brathwaite and Walcott belong to Birbalsingh’s “third stage” of English Caribbean literature, which lasted from roughly 1965 to 1980 (although both remain active and well-respected poets). According to Birbalsingh, writers at this stage espouse post-Independence interests, in contrast to their predecessors, who were concerned with probing *their* predecessors’ colonial outlook. The post-1980 generation on the other hand, Birbalsingh’s “fourth stage,” is concerned with their experiences as citizens of the “external frontiers” of the English-speaking Caribbean: London, New York, and Toronto (xi–xii). Although Birbalsingh does not say so, most of the diaspora poets of the 1980s are women. Most of these poets live and work in Canada and the UK (e.g., Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Nourbese Philip, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior, Grace Nichols, Amryl Johnson); but within the English Caribbean poets such as Lorna Craig and Opal Adisa Palmer have also established themselves. This grouping has been recognized in the critical literature (e.g., in Cudjoe, Davies and Fido, Williams, Wisker, Mordecai, and Wilson). The literature often excludes, however, the women dub poets.

Dub poetry is a performance-and-print genre that developed under the inspiration of reggae, both politically and aesthetically. Its combination of syncopated rhythms, attention to the beat in both writing and performance, and emancipatory activist content is what makes it char-

acteristic (see Habekost). Dub poetry by women tends to be socialist- or radical feminist in its politics. Within the self-defined enclave of dub poetry, a talented group of poets—Lillian Allen, Ahdri Zhina Mandiela, Afua Cooper, and Jean Binta Breeze¹ among others—developed similar themes and concerns to those of the African-Caribbean women poets who distribute their work primarily in print. Of these, Allen was performing in Canada in the seventies, although her commercial debut album *Revolutionary Tea Party* was not released until 1985. Her first commercially-distributed collection of print poems, *Women Do This Every Day*, was published in 1993.

As Black Power and other movements have done in the New World, African-Caribbean feminist poetics turns the object of prejudice into an object of pride—in this case, pride in the body. However, these bodies are female, and it is this particularity of experience that flowers into a strong, female sense of self. Brand has written with attention to the link between racism as an issue of physical appearance and sexism as a force that targets the female body, while showing the effects of social and political oppression on the poet's sense of body-as-self. Allen's poetry is strongly woman-identified, although her political protest is on behalf of those who are oppressed for any reason: race, class, age, ethnicity, national origin, and so on. As performance, it clearly locates poetry in the performer's body. In "Birth Poem," for example, she re-enacts a woman's labour-and-birth experience in sound and movement.²

Theoretical Approach

A social semiotic approach sees meaning-making as a social practice. Therefore identity categories such as gender/sex/sexuality, or race/colour/ethnicity are constructed during countless everyday interactions. My exchange with the Brixton cook was only one, particularly explicit, example of two people (re)constructing social categories together.

Social categories index groups of people. An index is an arbitrary sign that simply points to an entity, with no mimetic quality at play between sign and referent. Thus the group of people distinguished as "American" by their accent are distinguished by all English speakers for a variety of

reasons having to do with history and collective identity, but not with any necessarily objective feature of Americanness.

How these conventions of social identity are then deployed to mean specific things depends on the context of the interaction. Though I generally speak middle-class Canadian English, for example, I might use a quasi-British accent while reading a Beatrix Potter story to my son to stress the narrative function of my voice: "In the time of swords and periwigs and full-skirted coats with flowered lappets..." My projection (to use Robert LePage's term) of British English into a non-British situation carries certain meanings indexed by this accent, modifying the references of my sentences ("this takes place in another world") and suggesting as well all the connotations of Britishness appropriate to the story.

This type of impersonation happens every day at a subconscious level: we modify our verbal markers according to the costs and rewards balance inherent in the situation. Giles's *et al.* work in speech accommodation shows that speakers in face-to-face interactions will either imitate each others' speech characteristics (convergence) or create differences between them (divergence), depending on how they perceive the relationship. The poetry of Allen and Brand mobilizes the same strategies that I do in reading a Beatrix Potter story to my son. However, their work draws together speech, writing, and the body in important, innovative ways.

Performativity and the Body

Social categories rely on more than verbal modes in their circulation. Body language, facial expressions, vocal qualities, and other embodied signs are used to signal and mark identity. Commonsensically, there is a difference between markers that are in our semi-conscious control, such as verbal language and body language, and those that are not often changed, such as skin colour. But in some gender (Butler) and social semiotic theory (Lemke), the difference is a continuum between two poles:

Our community teaches us specific, if often inexplicit procedures for identifying, classifying, segmenting, and evaluating the semiotic body. We read bodies, and with them, patterns of movement, facial expressions and gestures, body lexis, stance, attitude, somatotype, vocal style, etc. We construct, by these social practices characteristic of our community and the subcommunities we belong to, socially meaningful semiotic bodies and their texts. The criteria, the categories, the procedures all have little in common with those of the physicist or biologist. They construct a different sort of material individual. (Lemke 5)

While the examples Lemke uses describe how we distinguish individuals, the same mechanism is used within communities to distinguish groups.

The particular distinctions practised and read in the body depend on historical context. For example, physical features constructing an Irishman in eighteenth-century London were clear to all, as were those constructing a Jew in 1930s Vienna (Epstein). In the same way, physical features constructing a woman are only visible in contexts in which a gender distinction is important. Although the markers are material, it is the social categories as signifieds (“Irish,” “Jew,” “female”) which fuel the semiotic embodiment of the signifiers, since it is only the importance of their politico-historical meanings that gives them value. Thus, whether verbal, visual, or somatic, the identity categories used to project a social identity will depend on the specific meanings of those categories in 1) their historical context, and 2) the particular context of the interaction.

Systems and Signs

These qualities of signs and social categories explain how historical meanings circulate. But how do they change? Or rather, how are they made to change, by poets such as Allen and Brand? To explain this we must look at the notion of semiotic value.

Signs of identity are generated by systems of difference similar to Saussure's "system[s] of pure values" (110). There are "race" systems, systems of ethnicity, of dialect/language, of colour, of nationality, of religious allegiance, of gender, of sexuality, of age groups ... There is no exhaustive list of social category systems, since they are contingent on changing social and political relations. They are all, however, closed systems in which each term is defined by all of the others. For example, within a certain grammar of race categories³ the term "Black" stands in opposition to "Asian" and "White": "Black" is meaningful *only* in relation to its oppositions, "Asian" and "White". That is, "Black" has the same meaning as "non-White and non-Asian;" "White" means "non-Black, non-Asian;" and "Asian" means "non-Black, non-White." In such a scheme, "the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others" (Saussure 113).

This sets up a dynamic of meaning-*making* rather than a set of meanings. In such a system, based on differences, each sign must be arbitrary (in the Saussurian sense):⁴

The processes of linguistic change amply demonstrate this correlation. It is precisely because two signs *a* and *b* are never grasped as such by our linguistic consciousness, but only the difference between *a* and *b*, that each sign remains free to change in accordance with laws quite unconnected with their signifying function. (116)

Identity signs are thus manipulated, modified, controlled, destabilized, "in accordance with laws quite unconnected with" those interior to the system. These "laws" or motivating principles are relations of power, relations that are cemented or modified during exchanges carried out in the everyday.

My introductory anecdote was one illustration: the cook sought to cement his world view and his (and my partner's) position in its binary race system—black/white—although a moment occurred in which categories were open to modification. But most exchanges are not as explicitly *about* social categories as the one I had with the cook; they are mostly embedded in that network of identity relations indexed by dia-

lect, dress, body language, skin colour, etc., in which we cannot help taking part. All of us are a part of the highly imbricated, inseparable processes of social and symbolic exchange, because all social relations depend on the exchange of symbols (accented words, culturally-specific somatic signs) while the exchange of symbols always affects these relations (Lemke).

In the Preface to her 1993 publication of selected poems, *Women Do This Every Day*, Allen writes: “as I prepared poems for this collection, I was required to “finalize” pieces I had never imagined as final. Like a jazz musician with the word as her instrument, reading and performing these poems is an extension of the creative and creation process for the work...” (9). In Allen’s performances, the black female body is re-created and re-defined in each new version, or performance. The combination of the specific meanings of a piece, the meanings generated by the social and power relations between performer and audience, and the larger cultural meanings of “female and black,” create a new meaning each time, through and with the body of the performer. As Allen has written in another context, “The poem itself becomes a Body that stands in the world” (personal communication).

Female and Black

What are the larger cultural meanings of “female” and “black”? It is impossible to answer this question without first acknowledging that the terms cannot be considered singly. Although the stereotypes that pressure relations between people make those relations complex, it is a fair generalization to say that black men have often tried to maintain a patriarchal relationship to black women, and that white feminists have often maintained a race hierarchy amongst women by ignoring the effect of race on their theory and praxis (e.g., see Smith xxv). The special point of view of black feminism is not just that black women are doubly oppressed, but that race and gender, as simultaneous oppressions, create a special position for black women.

Spelman uses the example of a 1986 New York Times article about “women and Blacks” in the US army to illustrate this, which she calls the “ampersand problem” in feminist thought. In the New York Times

article, it is clear that the “women” referred to are white, the “Blacks” referred to are male (114). She makes the point that since it is a group of men and women who are being contrasted, it makes no sense to see black women as a composite of the two categories. The category “woman” in this usage excludes black women, while “the men in question are not called men. They are called ‘Blacks’” (115). She also goes on to discuss “somatophobia” (fear of and disdain for the body) (126), arguing that in Western culture both women and blacks, independently, have been identified with the body, in a view of the body as essentially negative, more animal-like and sexual in a scheme of values that disdains the body.

Though these signifieds are culturally relative, in lived experience their meanings are part of the body-as-self. Given the somatophobia of European male culture, black women run a double risk of self-hatred by constantly having to confront the damaging consequences of representing a range of negatives. The following extract from Brand’s “no language is neutral” describes the subject-position:

... A woman who
thought she was human but got the message, female
and black and somehow those who gave it to her
were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman
at her, somehow they were the only place to return to
.....
... and it was
over by now and had become so ordinary as if not to
see it any more, that constant veil over the eyes, the
blood-stained blind of race and sex. (*No Language* 27)

Brand plays with names for the social subject here, starting with “woman,” from whose point of view woman and human are synonymous. All meanings, however, made around her and to her—meanings which are aggressions in themselves (“spitting woman/at her”)—make her “female and black,” that is, the opposite of human, that is, animal (by virtue of the semantic implications of the conjunction “but”). In the last few lines Brand shows the circularity, the mundane nature of these

meanings, by capping her narrative with an unstable referent for “now,” so that the narrative past tense is modified with the phrase “it was over by now.” People think they *are* somatic meanings (those meanings entailed by race and sex) in a timeless way.

I would add to Spelman’s analysis that politically conscious black women are in a unique position to understand the role of somatophobia in the oppression of both black men and white women; and to understand the contingency of the basis for that oppression. Faced with the contradictions of being female and black, the social underpinnings of the meanings of a “black” body and a “female” body become much more salient. African-Caribbean women poets in diaspora (like Allen and Brand, but also many of the other poets I listed above) are also aided in their perception of contingency by their experience of displacement from one social category system to another. As with other migrants, often the first social reality they have faced is a new social positioning as a different “kind” of black woman in a different set of social category grammars.⁵

Orality and the Body

These experiences may explain the strong commonalities in the work of African-Caribbean women poets in diaspora. An appropriate reading of this work, of the way in which it responds to colonizing grammars of the body, must include an awareness of the social constructedness of bodies as objects. Strictly speaking, in a social constructivist view there is no semiotic body prior to its existence in gender and race systems. That is one reason why the approach of these two poets sees a body as meaning, and meaning as necessarily embodied. The conflation of meaning/body and body/meaning allows them to explore the link between, first, the body as socially construed (through the performative cultural constructions gender/sex/sexuality and race/colour/ethnicity), and, second, the black female body-as-self.

“Meaning” in Brand’s work is thus alternative, subversive, and even radical in relation to dominant meanings/bodies. In these last few lines from “hard against the soul,” Brand gathers some of the themes of her

book *No Language Is Neutral* through the terms “body,” “myself,” “a place,” and “tongue”:

... I saw my own body, that
is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
as a place, another life, terra. They say this place
does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
before. (*No Language* 51)

Tracing the relationships between these substantives with variable first-person pronouns, she begins as subject of the body, the “I” that “saw.” Then she adds the body in its Westernized object position, although claimed with a possessive pronoun and intensifier: “my own body.” Next, an element of that same object-body—“my eyes”—assumes a subject position, and becomes an agent with the verb “followed.” The object of the subject-body is again the self, me, in object position—which, however, is a tangible, corporeal self in “touched myself.”

In other words, Brand creates a relationship between body-as-subject and body-as-object in which the object is also “another life,” a real alternative. The apposition of “a place” and “another life” names the amper-sand problem—how to exist as an embodied being in a culture which denies a place to that subject position. Next Brand conflates body and language through “tongue:” “They say this place/ does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic.” That is, palpable experiences of corporeality, lesbian sexuality, and oral language share a certain power to bypass the determinisms of Western history (as an antonym of myth).⁶

Language-less but not Speechless: Orality in Brand’s Work

Orality is often seen as the embodiment of verbal meaning-making, both in itself and as part of a cluster of symbols. The paradox is that orality is not necessarily spoken—as transcribed speech, it can be written. Brand is very adept at writing the “tongue” of the African Caribbean (hereafter Creole⁷).

In order to do this, she depends on the reader’s awareness of the difference between the usage of standard written English and that of spoken language. These differences are so wide that speech and writing have

been called “-lects,” or defined varieties of a language (Halliday *Spoken and Written Language*). Halliday’s written language corresponds to what Walter Ong has designated a grapholect. In Ong’s words:

A national written language has had to be isolated from its original dialect base, has discarded certain dialectal forms, has developed various layers of vocabulary from sources not dialectal at all, and has developed also certain syntactical peculiarities. This kind of established written language [... is] a “grapholect.” (107)

But spoken language can also be written, by representing its “dialectal forms” and characteristic vocabulary and syntax. Although it is not heard, or even written with attention to individual sounds, it can evoke strong subvocalizations.

For example, in a passage in “no language is neutral” Brand is subtle in her evocation of Creole in writing, avoiding phonetic spellings but signalling a Creole syntax. The passage narrates the experience of a young, rural Trinidadian recently arrived in Toronto:

... Nothing is a joke no more and I right
there with them, running for the train until I get to find
out my big sister just like to run and nobody wouldn’t
vex if you miss the train... (*No Language* 29)

In this passage, the morphology of Trinidad English Creole is written: double negatives (“nothing is a joke no more;” “nobody wouldn’t”), a zero copula (“I [...] there”), and Creole person and number agreement (“my sister [...] like” [to run]). In the English grapholect, these meanings would normally be represented with the following signs: a single negative, the copula “am,” and the suffix “-s” on the verb to indicate it agrees with a third-person singular pronoun. The reader therefore takes away the meaning that this text is not grapholectal. Brand’s use of stereotypical Creole morphology signals which set of verbal patterns she has in mind as a spoken correlate to these graphemes. That is, she is not

interested in “writing” us a message; she is interested in “speaking in writing” a message.

Writing speech forces the writer to choose who is speaking. This is because the verbal patterns of present day written English are much more uniform than the ranges of English spoken throughout the world; and any one set of spoken verbal patterns (dialects) is a trace of the provenance of its speaker.

From this point of view, speakers are paradigmatic of social subjects. And social subjects, as I illustrated in my introductory anecdote, are unavoidably embodied. Each one of us is White, Black, Asian, woman, man, child, old, young, or on continua between these or similar categories as idealized references. This is not to say that the grapholect does not have its own varieties signalling social identities; only that the English grapholect, because of its uniformity across different English dialects, is used to signal or connote universal, disembodied values in contrast to the emphasis on the local, embodied nature of spoken verbal patterns (Casas).

The Transcription of Creole

The sociolinguistic situation of most Creoles is that their speakers control at least one other dialect and usually more. In 1961, DeCamp used the term “continuum” to describe the situation in Jamaica:

Nearly all speakers of English in Jamaica could be arranged in a sort of linguistic continuum, ranging from the speech of the most backward peasant or labourer all the way to that of the well-educated urban professional [who speaks Standard Jamaican English]. Each speaker represents not a single point but a span on this continuum, for he is usually able to adjust his speech upward or downward for some distance on it. (82)

The continuum can be correlated with other features besides social class, education, and urban/rural identity. Functional varieties can also be placed on the continuum: writing is associated with the end of the continuum closest to standard Jamaican English, while protest songs and oral literary genres such as dub are associated with the end closer to

“the speech of the [...] labourer.” Making the distinction more concrete, it can be said that orality is in the dialect of one end while literacy is in the dialect of the other (a dialect, not coincidentally, much closer to the grapholect in syntax and lexis).

The transplantation of Creoles to the metropolitan speech communities creates a wider range of dimensions on which to draw symbolically. With interesting and important exceptions (see Rampton), the use of Creole is restricted to members of a specific ethnic group. This reinforces its status as a distinct, recognizable linguistic entity. At the same time, its use negotiates social relations through a complex network of intertexts in the mass media and in different discourses. These discourses include the romantic, with its roots in Montaigne’s noble savage; youth culture, with its “sound” (in London, house music, and hip hop); reggae as a political protest tradition; and images of Creole speakers as the underclass, the poor, and the Other.

For Brand, these stereotypes are double-edged. They include connotations of black identity as unlettered and ultra-somatized (Fanon), as well as other chestnuts of the essential African in the European Orientalist imagination. But it is precisely these images she turns to in demonstrating her position as a black woman in diaspora. For example, in “I Have Been Losing Roads,” she uses written Creole on two levels: as an interior, private language; and as the language of a publicly “raced” woman:

If the trees don't flower and colour refuse to limn
when a white man in a red truck on a rural road
jumps out at you, screaming his exact hatred
.....
“Is really so evil they is then
that one of them in a red truck can split your heart
open, crush a day in fog?” (*Land to Light On* 4)

Hinting at the vulnerability of the speaker, Brand shifts from written English to Trinidad English Creole at the Creole third-person plural ending on “colour” (not “colours” as in written English). This Creole in the line suggests an inner emotional reality contrasting with the outer reality of events in the third line, which is rendered in unambiguously

written English: “jumps out at you, screaming his exact hatred.” The final three lines, placed in quotation marks, are of course in Creole. Through this more emphatic code-switch, bolstered by the rigid conventions of print (quotation marks), the poet performs the switch in identity that the racist in the truck has forced on her. She has gone from a neutral written position to a marked, embodied, spoken-in-writing position, effected by the obscenity of the racist.

Unlike Allen, Brand uses movements from orality to writing in a marked way in *No Language Is Neutral* and *Land to Light On*. In some passages, however, Brand performs a linguistic *tour de force* which blends Creole and non-Creole English in an ambiguous code:

I lift my head in the cold and I get confuse.
It quiet here when is night, and is only me
and the quiet. I try to say a word but it fall...
.....
... I did not
know which way to turn except to try again, to find
some word that could be heard by the something
waiting. My mouth could not find a language.
I find myself instead, useless as that. I sorry.
I stop by the mailbox and I give up. (*Land to Light On* 5)

Her use of code ambiguity gives Brand access to meaningful syntactic ambiguities. In this passage, since the Creole past tense and the non-Creole English present tense have the same structure (e.g., zero dental suffix on the end of “lift,” “confuse,” “try,” “stop;” unmarked tense in “get,” “find,” “give”), the consciousness of the speaker constantly and easily shifts between narrator (past tense) and participant (present tense) of the action; but it also shifts in the same manner (but not in the same moments) between a literary, relatively assured persona, and a Creole-speaking, apologetic and “sorry” persona. It is both of these who “give up” in the final line.

I want to stress that these are not solely levels of poetic idiom, or a play on registers. Just as we can “speak” writing (reading aloud a bedtime story, for example), we can “write” speaking. The material affor-

dances of (visual) writing and (aural) speech in our exchanges of verbal signs can be subordinated to the social meanings of each technology. In Brand's poetry, a moment comes when her body cannot speak the language of "the something/waiting" ("my mouth could not find a language"). Interestingly, this statement is made in non-Creole English, and it objectifies her body ("my mouth"); but it marks a moment at which she slides into Creole and a different subject position, a different referent for the pronoun "I:" "I find myself instead..." That is, the Creole-speaking self is language-less, but not speechless—for it is this persona who voices the final "I give up."

The Black Female Sound: Orality in Allen's Work

Although Brand may speak to us in writing, Allen actually speaks. Like Brand, she is adept at transcribing Creole (although she uses phonetic spellings and Brand does not). Like Brand, she uses European stereotypes of the African to motivate an alternate practice of meaning-making and therefore of social relations. Unlike Brand, though, she places her words in the medium of sound.

Allen's career has been a double play of performance and publication. The cultural space she occupies together with other dub poets is unique in Canada, and it has sometimes required a push against the literary establishment as a centralizing, homogenizing force. In the following "One Poem Town," Allen characterizes the Canadian literary scene as elitist and exclusionary by virtue of its orientation to the written; and (perhaps) written because of its intention to exclude:

Hey! Hey! Hey!
this is a one poem town
.....
.....
keep it kool! kool! kool!
on the page
'cause, if you bring one in
any other way
we'll shoot you with metaphors

tie you cordless
hang you high in ironies
drop a pun 'pon you toe
and run you down, down, down
.....
so don't come with no pling, ying, jing
ding something
calling it poetry
'cause, this is a one poem town
and you're not here to stay

Are you?
(*Women Do This* 117)

In this (printed) poem the poet equates the coldness, passionlessness, and bloodlessness of the written mode with its medium, the page. The literary terms she lists (“metaphors,” “ironies,” “puns”) are the silencing jargon of literary critics, which, ignoring the poet’s chords, tie her “cordless” (although, subversively, the pun on “pun” works best with the Jamaican pronunciation of “pun” [to rhyme with the last syllable of “upon”]). She also makes the point that the word “poetry” is both defined by and synonymous with the poetic practices of the dominant players (“so don’t come with no pling, ying, jing [...] calling it poetry”). These dominant players, like John Wayne, guard a mass of white male privileges. The coda (“Are you?”), depending on its spoken inflection, can be either a menacing final threat against the poet (as in the sound version, “One Poem Town,” in *Conditions Critical*, 1987), or, in a sly projection by the plingingjing poet, a sign of doubt from the kool poets.

In “So What (Perspective Poem),” Allen contrasts the high literary poetic tradition as transmitted through the discipline of English literature (always written, never musical) with the enormous social power of an activist’s song:

So what so what so what
So your years of schooled craft

have created fine poems
so it ended pollution
so it stopped wars
so it fed starving children
so it gave life to the dying
so it brought peace to one single land
so no one should imperil its form
.....
so, so self assured and turgid
so what if I write a poem like a song
(*Women Do This* 127)

Again, the meanings of the final line depend on imagined spoken inflections. “So *what* if I write a poem like a song” (i.e., what difference does it make if I write a poem like a song? –angry, exasperated); or perhaps, “so, what if I write a poem like a *song*” (i.e., therefore why don’t I write a poem like a song instead—suggesting an alternative); or even, “so, what if I write a poem like a song?” (i.e., what would happen if I wrote a poem like a song?—speculative). All of these inflections are carried by the spoken voice, even if they can be signalled (as here) in writing.

In performance, it is easy to see the connection between orality and the body: if a text is spoken, there must be a specific body with a specific somatype, voice quality, timbre, pitch, and movement style making its sounds. The relationship between the body and the spoken word is inescapable.

Allen is very aware of the differences in essence and technique between oral and written versions of the “same” text. Her emphasis on the process of creation, on “versions” rather than on a final written artifact, is part of a resistance against language forms that are relatively rigid. Fighting social structures symbolized, or even propagated by writing as a Derridean metaphor, she undermines the process of codification of her signs by creating multiple oral versions:

You have taken my abstractions
broken my images
carved images-of-broken on my mirror

dis word is my hand
: my weapon
(*Women Do This* 87)

The only word spelled outside of orthographic conventions in the poem is “dis.” By referring to its sound, and to its status as a term in an oral language, Allen is making a reference to its concreteness. Paradoxically, this index of concreteness applies in writing as well: when we read “*dis* word,” we are meant to realize it refers to the very ink on the very page we are holding in our hands. The poem is self-reflexive; unless “dis word” is itself rather than a representation of a word, the poem has no meaning.

In sound texts, Allen draws attention to the materiality of the moment through “natural” sounds such as screams of protest and protest chants. In addition, her vocalizations imitate sounds that bring up strong emotions, such as ambulance and police sirens. Other sounds, expressing essential experiences of a female body (such as birth labour), are used to break taboos about women’s experience, to make an emotional link with female listeners, or simply to voice experience in a way that short-circuits the codings of a dominating language.

For example, Allen’s “Rub A Dub Style Inna Regent Park,” opens with the sound of a human voice—just perceptibly a human voice—imitating a siren. This sound has an immediate meaning, that of “siren” and all its experiential and emotional associations: fire, urban violence, disaster—and thus pain and/or apprehension. The sound also has ambiguous meanings, however, depending on the addressee of the dub. For listeners in dominant social and cultural positions, it has the meanings I have just presented; but for the listeners from whose point of view the ballad is sung, inhabitants of an inner city housing development who are the target of racist police violence (Regent Park), the sound of the siren also acts as a visceral forewarning of police presence and therefore of *police* violence.

In “Riddim An’ Hardtimes,” as in many of Allen’s written texts, Jamaican English Creole as an oral language is signalled with phonetic spellings and other markers of Creole:

music a prance
dance inna head
drumbeat a roll
hot like lead
.....
dem pounce out the music
carv out the sounds
hard hard
hard like lead
an it bus im in im belly
an' a Albert Johnson
Albert Johnson dead
dead
dead
(*Women Do This* 63–4)

The context here is the death of Albert Johnson, a black man who was shot by Toronto police who were called to a domestic dispute. Allen composed a dub poem to raise morale and support the community as it responded to Johnson's shooting. In "finalizing" this tremendously physical piece, Allen uses phonetic spellings in a marked way.

Primarily Allen uses phonetic spellings to evoke certain sounds. These are the sounds of a certain language (Creole) shared by a certain community. The problem is that writing cannot actually make the sounds. So Allen depends on written markers of Jamaicanness: the text is full of graphemes that arbitrarily stand for key, identifying sounds of Creole (e.g., "d" for the theta "th" of standard English). At the same time, she is calling attention to the non-standardness of her practice. In this dimension, her phonetic spellings are a visual disruption of the standardized system of English orthography. By iconically signalling with a "broken" standard a "Broken English" (the name for Creole in the Anglophone Caribbean through much of the twentieth century), she creates a powerful visual reminder of the social agenda of dub and its very strong differences with the Eurocentric police establishment.

Conclusion

Spelling phonetically carries a huge social cost, signifying in most contexts an absence or deficit of “literacy” (although most phonetic spellings are perfectly readable); this is just a hint of the larger socio-political and cultural meanings of “literacy.” By spelling phonetically Allen also distorts the European literacy/orality hierarchy, since the context here is literature (a book of poetry) and literature has high prestige.

This is only one of the strategies Allen uses to turn traditional European notions of meaning-making against themselves, creating openings for the expression of an alternate subjectivity. Indeed, her entire work appropriates European stereotypes in order to refuse European mind (literacy) versus body (orality) dualities. Brand’s poetry carries out a very similar project, though she uses conventional spellings and confines herself to print. Her poetry is radically innovative, though, in its ability to dislodge social categories by re-arranging perceptions of embodied identity.

Cooper has pointed out that the space between the oral and the scribal, performance and print, in Jamaican popular culture is a “literary continuum along which both ‘performance’ and ‘non-performance’ poets operate” (81). This is applicable to most poets from the formerly-English Caribbean. The poetry of Allen and Brand is oral and orality-oriented in a variety of ways; my argument has been that they embody their poetry through orality in order to re-direct meanings about race and gender. In addition, Allen’s printed work calls attention to its determined transduction from embodied performance to the printed page. This quality has motivated me to work towards an embodied social semiotics, that is, a theory that can account for the presence of the semiotic body on the printed page. Such a semiotics, as critical theory, should offer a platform from which to critique entrenched Eurocentric linguistic interests (in the sense that traditional linguistics recreates the ampersand problem across all social categories). It also offers, however, an alternative poetics and grammatics, whose textual analyses avoid recreating the very meanings that postcolonial writers/artists deconstruct. My hope is that such an approach gives us a chance to read with more depth these important texts.

Notes

- 1 Breeze spans generic boundaries, having begun as a dub poet and moved into a less restricting sphere of poetry in any style.
- 2 The Black American feminist and African-Caribbean feminist response to sexism within the Black Power movement developed roughly concurrently and with many cross-influences. An important influence on the African-Caribbean women poets that has not been noted so far is the contemporary work of African-American women writers, such as Morrison, Lorde, Angelou, Cliff, Walker, Marshall, Brodber, and Hooks. Brand and Allen have named some of these as their influences (e.g., Brand in Morrell 170). Caribbean women poets who have acculturated in the United States (such as Lorde), however, do not write about the same things in the same ways and their work is not therefore, to my mind, quite comparable (notwithstanding Davies 59–72). I have followed a Caribbean canonical line of descent for Allen and Brand rather than an African-American one because their themes and orientation seem to me fundamentally Caribbean—and Canadian—rather than American.
- 3 The most publicly accepted UK system of race.
- 4 Saussurian value is closely linked with the arbitrary sign, some of whose implications were developed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. The arbitrary sign has therefore become synonymous with an asocial, decontextualized approach to texts. In this section, however, I show an alternative deployment of value and the arbitrary sign which is based on the assumption that, while the gap between signifier and signified is indeed perpetually unstable, it is also subject to control by local agents of social change (as well as local agents of conservatism).
- 5 The transferrals and transmutations that “race” signs undergo when social subjects are displaced has been brilliantly explored by Fanon within the framework of psychoanalytic psychology (1986).
- 6 “Tongue” may also refer to nation language, the “tongue” of the African Caribbean: “Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree.” (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* 13) In essence, Brathwaite is referring to Caribbean English Creoles, coining the term “nation language” to negotiate complicated ambiguities in the naming and definition of the Creoles as nascent languages.

- 7 I am aware that with this term I am eliding the difference between many different Caribbean English Creoles, as well as their diaspora counterparts. (See Sebba for a description of one such, popularly known as “creole” among its users.) Since my remarks are most often about the relationship between any one of these historically- and lexically-related languages and standard written English, however, I use “Creole” to designate the generic political entity.

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