

Dionne Brand in Conversation

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This discussion with Dionne Brand took place in the fall of 2002 in Calgary, Alberta where she was participating in *Wordfest*, an international writers' festival held every autumn. In the past decade Brand has emerged as an important voice in contemporary postcolonial, Black and Canadian writing. Her books articulate a complex exploration of the histories that shape human experiences and the many ways in which people live, suffer, and struggle for change. Her vision is at once compassionate and uncompromising. She is the author of numerous books of both poetry and fiction including *Land to Light On*, for which she won the Governor General's Award for Poetry (the most prestigious literary award in Canada) and the Ontario Trillium Award for Literature in 1997. She also won the Pat Lowther Award for poetry in 2003. *In Another Place, Not Here*, her first novel, was short-listed for both the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Trillium Award. I began by asking her about working in the different genres of poetry and prose.

Dionne, you are well known as a premier Canadian poet yet the publication of your novel In Another Place, Not Here (1996) appears to mark a significant shift toward the prose narrative in your choice of genre. Why prose? Why narrative?

The truth is that novel actually started out as a poem, but then it fell out of poetry and it became too "watery." I was trying to keep it together as a poem for quite a while, but it kept resisting being too taut, which is one of the major qualities of a poem and so I simply had to let it wander

where it will. Then it moved out into prose. I had hoped that the whole thing would be a poem, but it didn't work out.

Also, I'm not sure if you have to make the choice: I think you can say that poetry can lend something to narrative. When I started to write prose, I knew that I didn't want to write the narrative of exposition, dialogue, action, and resolution. I wanted to explore how to use language in prose. *In Another Place, Not Here* did not maintain meter, and didn't advance all of the propositions that poetry must; but it nevertheless shook out meaning, that is—packed meaning into the sentences so that the lines in it were as potent as a line of poetry. But it wasn't enough to be poetry.

That reminds me of a line by Coleridge: "The definition of good prose is—proper words in their proper places; of good verse—the most proper words in their proper places" [in his Table Talk 3 July 1833].

Exactly ... I call it "perfect speech," absolutely perfect speech. When I thought about writing prose, I thought not so much of the story, but the way, the way of the telling. All stories are common to some degree you know, but the important thing is the language that the story is told in.

So at some point story falls away and what the reader remembers or retains is a certain experience of language?

Exactly, exactly. You remember that you're in these lines, and that it's a sensory experience, if you will, as you go through it, that you're actually going through an experience of language. I think I lose audience sometimes because of that, but I don't care because I'm trying to practice the art of it, and I've given myself room to fail a lot as we go along. But contemporary market forces of course pull the writer toward a certain kind of storytelling.

I have heard some argue that poetry is superior to narrative precisely because of its refusal or better its resistance to the process of commodification. Beyond the fact that even the most elitist and arcane poetic practices appear to breed their own circuits of commodification, do you feel that there is nothing re-

trievable in narrative's capacity as a commodity circulating within a wider literary marketplace?

Absolute commodification belies our actual experiences: true artists always break open a space, they move against those enclosures and break open creative places over and over again. All of my misgivings about narrative aside, I'm more confident about the possibilities of those breakages and spaces than about the strength of various forms of domination.

Well, historically, Black cultural production in the Americas begins with the need to face the absolute imposition of commodification on the body, a cultural production that is conceived within the need to resist what Fredric Jameson, in another context, refers to as the overwhelming weight of what is.

Exactly

I'm interested in the relationship between African-descended Canadian writers and academia. Sometimes in English departments one can detect a kind of anti-narrative stance based, it seems to me, in the proposition that narrative is always already complicit in hegemony. Within the orbit of this type of thinking (language poetry and poststructuralist theorists, for example), the only real potential for a politically resistant or truly radical text would be a poetry characterized by linguistic ingenuity and the relentless subversion or deconstruction of meaning that resists the signifying closures active within a genre such as the novel. With this in mind, I am interested in your transition from poetry to narrative, especially since it appears to me that you sometimes cover similar material or ground in both your poetry and prose. Could you talk about this transition and about what implications, if any, it has for your work?

Perhaps I share that stance about narrative. I'm ambivalent here. I think there is this basic difference between poetry and prose: poetry interrogates the reader, the reader interrogates prose. I don't think of myself as making the transition from poetry to prose, because I think of myself as still and always producing poetry. Poetry takes longer, even

though it's shorter. It takes me longer to write. It seems to take me four or five years or so to write a book of poetry. You come to it.

Every time I come back to writing poetry, I have to use a laser-focus to cut off all of the waste of prose and dismiss the utter attention that prose pays to an audience. The process is in some ways like shoving another person out of the room. The conversation, in poetry, is a conversation with language, its meanings, origins, and relevance as a descriptor of human existence. But the conversation in prose is a conversation with a local audience. At least today, and here. It might not have been for Zola or Dostoyevsky. And even as I say that I realize that it isn't for Marquez or Saramago or Fuentes. So, not in all cases. This is why *In Another Place, Not Here* is so difficult for some to enter—certainly because of its poetic qualities but also because of the demands of that local audience which sees racial difference as a sealed and unobservable narrative or, more dreadfully, as a narrative of ethnography. To enter Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, as if one were a social worker looking for pathologies would be a travesty. One would miss its fragility, its aridity; one would forego a communion with an author of searing compassion; one would miss the chance of self-observation. It's this misunderstanding, deliberate or unwitting, which makes me attend poetry so steadfastly. Because it requires much of its reader—the reader's own fragility. It's impossible to commodify poetry and that's its strength. I think I'm still engaged in poetry as a liberatory project, as terrible and as hopeless as I know that proposition to be in this moment.

But that's how I came to writing and it allows me to continue to write, otherwise I'd be suicidal, if I didn't think that my work had a resistant quality. There are many reasons why I've written prose. One is my own curiosity about how it would be—that if you write, what do the different shapes mean? How would you execute them? Also, to some extent, it has been about not being able to make a living on strictly poetry. I would prefer to only write poetry, absolutely, because of how prose is compromised. Prose is compromised everyday in the newspaper, advertising, and television culture. To try to wrest it away from these moorings, or these approaches to it, is extremely difficult. I've often thought

that the way I've gone about my work is to try to wrest it away, but I'm not sure if that's my true project. I could equally discard it.

Part of the project of the Black poets of the sixties, and the Black Arts movement, was very much about revealing the poetry at work in the language of ordinary, struggling, Black people. Is this idea—that poetry should be another instrument with which to engage cultural and ideological aspects of a political struggle—a part of your practice of the prose narrative?

Yes. To put *In Another Place, Not Here* in this context, this is precisely why I gave that poetic Black language to Elizete [a peasant character] from the beginning. It's her own tongue, and it's a lyrical tongue. I wanted to redeem the language that I know exists in her body. She isn't an object; she isn't a figure without discourse or the ability to read her situation, and she has a language in which to read it that is more apt than any language that I or the other characters in the book, let's say Verlia, would have. Verlia [an educated woman] is illiterate in that language in many ways. That's precisely why I gave Elizete the first voice in the book and also why the voice is lyrical in the description of the body's condition, and that it has control over its own condition. Elizete has developed a speech through which to speak her life.

So yes, those were my initial longings for poetry and how I saw poetry act. I saw poetry act in that, really for want of a better word, redemptive way, that is, in its redeeming of ordinary people's lives. That's how I wanted it to act. Now, from that moment when I was seventeen, thinking about these issues, to this moment, my ideas have moved of course. That's its ancestry. My work is an ongoing conversation with myself and my time, I suppose. If it began in the redemptive qualities of art, of language, then it's moved to another point in *Land to Light On*. There is a pull of the communal that can also cripple ideas to some extent, precisely because of the overwhelming nature of oppression. But it can lock you into certain responses. Because of the nature of the social forces at present, you have to respond all the time with repositionings. The voice is constantly recalibrating its register against those forces as well as against the internal stagnation of community in the face of those forces.

I think the voice becomes more and more certain. Certain is not the right word, I don't like certainty. It's gets more and more wrought, I hope, in some kind of way. It doesn't have to do some other things any more, it doesn't have to describe some other things any more. ... It simply has to keep sounding.

Could you speak about the role of history in your fiction?

In *In Another Place, Not Here*, I wanted to report a historical moment through Verlia's body. The politically charged period of the sixties and seventies gone too soon, or too quickly, or unrecorded as taking place in the body, because the master narrative had taken over its description post 1970s. Through the 1980s and 1990s Marxism was discounted by many as a legitimate political alternative; people spoke of "throwing it on the dust pile," "the end of Marxism" and so on. I thought I needed to preserve that moment in Verlia, because there's a kind of forgetfulness that capitalism produces once it's scooped up all these things and thrown them off, even though it leeches from those movements. It leached from those movements, you know from the civil rights movement and the Black power movement etc., it leached off language, it leached off all kinds of possibilities. Capitalism co-opted many of the ideas of the 1960s and 1970s movements, and the ancestry of those ideas were lost and somehow absorbed into the big capitalist machine. I wanted to talk about that moment, that moment of Black politicization: how it was important for a whole group of Black people and how it gave them a language and the tools for actually reckoning with the world, because we really would have been dead without this. It gave us a critique of the world that ultimately continues to save our lives. I wanted to talk about the victories of that moment, not so much about the defeats. The moment does end in a kind of defeat, but the collective victory of that moment was a kind of breaching of those walls of negativity and racism, through all the vagaries and crazinesses of that period spanning 1960 to 1975, 1977 let's say, maybe 1980. Intellectually, Black people in general, in the Americas, breached these walls of racism, and were able to re-think themselves in quite different ways. Never mind the subsequent defeats and retreats.

It always seems to be this advance and retreat, but the retreat is never quite back to square one—

I can't remember who said it, but somebody said that if you thought of all the people in the Black movement in those twenty years that were killed, and if you thought of Black people as a nation, then really you would have to say that the government of a nation was killed off. Thinking of all of the uprisings in the Caribbean and in South America, thinking about these events as a nation, bound by the early experience of slavery, and seeing the massive destruction, and the advances we had made, you would really have to say that there was a war, and that the leadership and intelligentsia were, in the main, killed.

It is as if they came in and took off the heads of the movement.

That's virtually what happened. Then they took over the narrative, that big, unwieldy, not necessarily connected, narrative. I don't want to say that there's some kind of conspiracy, but there is! [shared laughter] A sense of defeat took over how what happened to us was described for the next generation, and the next generation fell into a deep despair. Sometimes I feel the nihilism of the 1980s and the 1990s was just incredible depression and despair. And so I wanted to stop and recount that moment and how it really gave an incredible moral boost to listen to Malcolm or Martin or Huey, or in Canada the resistance at Sir George Williams and so on.¹ I thought I was so lucky to be young in that time and to have those examples of political activism. I wanted to repeat that moment, and I knew many other young women like me at the time. We were all in Toronto, and this is what we felt, and this is what we lived. I wanted to account for it, in the character of Verlia. I wanted to show the gains and the mistakes we made, and all those things. In Verlia, I am retracing and recapturing that moment of human and political awakening, which has been gobbled up and consumed by this awful machine. This moment has been secreted away from subsequent generations of people, and capitalism has a way of making it look confusing—it wasn't; it was coherent—and capitalism has a way of making resistance look

futile—it wasn't; it was a serious dream, and still is. There still exists a need for a place for people to live without dread.

In Another Place, Not Here puts the issue of political protest back on the table for this early twenty-first century generation, and I think what the anti-globalization protests show is that a lot of young people are becoming aware of the need to draw on past models of protest and social change to address this political moment.

It's true; it's wonderful.

One other thing along these lines about this novel is that young women really respond to it. When I teach In Another Place, Not Here one issue that always emerges is the way that the whole period gets written up as very much a male affair, the way that the great "stars" of the civil rights movement (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, the Black Panthers) tend to dominate our own memory of this period. So Verlia also teaches them about the strong roles that women played in this movement, roles often elided in patriarchal representations of this period.

That was one of the objectives of doing it that way. I wanted to work in the novel with the fact that I, and a lot of young women in the movement, experienced that revolution not in a second-hand way, but as a way of saving our own lives. It never occurred to me to have a male protagonist; women were in that movement and they were in that movement to save their own lives, not to save Black manhood or any of those things; they were in it because it was also a liberatory idea for them. They wanted to be free of racism themselves, and it charged them, it charged us, it charged me, certainly. It was the moment when I felt in full body, in full bloom with possibility. That description of Verlia walking into the subway with afro in full bloom, that was like a lot of young women that I knew (*In Another* 158). And it wasn't style; it was politics. I wanted to make politics resonate throughout, to say that it was a matter of saving our own lives.

I remember my aunt picking out our afros when we were kids and teaching us these songs: "ungawa, got that afro power baby."

That was so joyous, it was a metaphor for all the liberatory effects of the time, and that's what I wanted to make ring in the book: this joy that Verlia felt in the middle of this crowd, a crowd that suddenly had a future, and had decided that the past was past. I wanted to show the utter joy of collective political resistance, the way in which its marvelous aspect is also an aesthetic pleasure. I wanted to show that liberation was political thought, and liberation is aesthetic power.

One can hardly avoid the tendency in contemporary academics of colour to favour a plethora of discourses that allow us to discuss race, gender, and sexuality without drawing any sustained attention to the category of class beyond what is by now the obligatory recital of the holy trinity of "gender, race, and class." Please discuss the influence of Marxism on your own writing process, in any or all of your books, and your opinion on its importance for Black writers and Black critics working now. It seems to me almost all past (and present) Black writers and intellectuals who remain pertinent today have had to come back to class dynamics in the Black community, and yet this is precisely the issue that has fallen off the table in contemporary discussions engaged by many if not most Black writers and intellectuals connected to the academy.

This is an important discussion to initiate. We can all find ourselves in the same room, in a sense, talking about racism, but when we begin to talk about other things then we begin to see we don't necessarily stand in the same room. I guess that all of my protagonists in the novels and the short stories at least, have been working-class people because, first, that's who I know, and, second, that's who I'm interested in. I'm really not interested in the aspirations of the middle class, which I've found fault in at times and whose ideas of progress are perfectly in synch with capitalism. And Marxism has played a role: it's my intellectual standpoint; it's the only theory, in a sense, that gave me reasons or descriptions for what I saw. I certainly know that Marxism has had an influence on my writing in the sense that it influenced my thinking. Marxism was the only way I could find to describe the layered condition that I lived, or that Black folks in the West lived, and it was the most interesting way of

coming at these experiences for me. It described the world that I saw, so it wasn't a question of adapting some kind of theory to the conditions, but it seemed that the conditions suggested the theory. That's what first drew me to Marxism, although it's gained a reputation as being "theology" rather than description and analysis. But it seemed to me useful to describe what I saw. It provided the most appropriate categories in which to describe how I saw the condition of Black people. Perhaps I took from it what I could. I wasn't enamoured of certain ways in which that theory got practiced and wielded. I think its actual practice elided its dynamism, some possibility it had for investigating capitalist accumulation. It seemed a much more dynamic theory than how certain states put it into practice.

What went wrong with some of those states, of course, is that there wasn't only Marxism at work, but also previous ways of living that had not been uprooted, nor had people fully realized what impact they had on their actual lives. In *Another Place*, when Verlia goes to a Caribbean island where there's a revolutionary socialist transformation taking place, she brings all these categories of Marxism, and she thinks that things ought to move in this direction and they ought to move quickly in these directions. She can't understand the persistence of slavery, and she can't understand the persistence of a plantation economy, and she can't understand the resistance of workers to any appeal to destroy that. Well, what she hasn't taken into account is the way in which certain economies crawl into everyday practices, and there's a logic to them, they have a common sense logic about them. If it took five hundred years to make them, it will take just as long to undo them. Those ways of living have also built on other folkways, which were not strictly capitalist culture, but folk culture. So where or how one plants or doesn't plant something is also a folkway, and a lot of overzealous revolutionaries might want to intervene in certain cultural structures about which they know nothing. So what Verlia has to understand is the need to rethink the way she applies Marxism. She has to take into account critique and self-critique; she has to be open to understanding the ways in which culture and traditions layer on to other traditions, the ways current identities are encrusted and layered with former selves, former consciousnesses and so

on. That's the struggle for her, that's where I try to work out that idea of a kind of overzealous revolutionary, who herself has a rigid idea about the application of politics.

Is this idea worked out in the ironic aspect to the relationship between the Caribbean-Canadian woman and the Caribbean woman, where the first-world Verlia is ostensibly there to educate the third-world plantation labourer in the ways of revolutionary activism and yet learns more from Elizete?

Yes, and on the other hand I didn't want to idealize Elizete, in the sense of idealizing the working class as always being ready for and always generating its own revolutionary processes because that's also not true. In some senses, Verlia is a kind of middle-class figure even though she comes out of the working class. At least she's a middle class intellectual; at least she's become that. But I also didn't want to idealize Elizete, and that was the strongest problem, not idealizing Elizette as earthy, the salt of the earth who intuitively knows the kind of things a revolutionary of Verlia's background wouldn't know. Elizete doesn't know these things, though she does know those traditional practices, and she herself has constructed a strategy that is perfectly logical in some ways, which embraces as well as rejects traditions. She revises her (possibly) great-grandmother Adela's rejection of the land and the place by committing herself to naming the place. But she still thinks it's somehow in tune with the old woman: if Adela left her a kind of void, then she's filling it up with those names she believes Adela would use. She has her own critique, organic if you will, and uses it to go about digging herself out of that spot, redeeming her self. But I didn't want to say this was necessarily "the" way, which encourages the impossibility of crossing paths with any other sets of sensibilities. So she's not a back-to-the-land character, because in many ways the land, the land worked by slave labour, is hated.

Elizete loves the "rush" of the trains in Toronto—

I didn't want to leave her in the land, which is why she comes to Canada. We don't need that romance, a return to agrarianism. And, the way in which the technological world interacts with an agricultural

world is important to describe: so yes, the rush of the train is equally invigorating to her. The rush is, in a sense, away from the land. Her movement is a demystification of the rural as idyllic. I wanted to trouble all those ideas, or to suggest an aesthetic: Marxist concepts tied in with how two people interact, or with how it might be possible to struggle to live through social change with all one's sense intact. One piece of the character Elizete came to me from an experience when I worked in a women's counseling service. A woman came to me. She had some children at home, she had some children in Toronto, and she'd been illegally in Toronto for ten years. She was really on the skids this time, and I said "God, why don't you go home girl?" She said to me, "Look at my foot," and I saw all these marks on her legs. I said, "Where did you get that?" She said, "In the cane." And I thought, I can't tell her anything.

And the character Verlia?

Verlia was a revolutionary going to another place to bring the revolution there. Of course, she went with good will, and, having grown up on an island herself, she also went to a space she had inhabited before, so I wanted her to have a confrontation with life on the island, with something which was solid in some ways, with the philosophy that people had created to live, which had in it regressive moments as well as progressive moments. Through the character of Verlia I wanted this politics, this learned politics, to have to confront another place, and I didn't want that to win, but also I didn't want Verlia to win either. I wanted to see how the confrontation, the interactions, would work themselves out. In some ways what takes place on the island is a further development of what it means to be revolutionary in the metropolis. And she obviously fails there, Verlia does, in Toronto. She receives a political lesson, but she's unable to translate it, at least in that situation, into anything other than the underground group. She's faced with the sheer power of what must be opposed, but oddly can only collect herself into that radical left group, which has to commit itself to ongoing revolution, to death really, because it's never going to be alright. That's the point I suppose I was at, in that political moment. I'm not sure if I've moved far from that.

What Verlia faced in Toronto was the eradication of leadership, completely, and so therefore there was no mass movement in which she could any longer participate, and at the same time that she also faced the backlash of capitalism, or capitalist discourse, saying that they were foolhardy. Losing doesn't mean that you're wrong; it merely means that you've lost. But it's a very fine distinction, and it's the distinction that Verlia is faced with: whether losing means that you're wrong, or whether losing merely means that you had a foe who was in practical ways, in mechanical ways, more powerful. It's open; it's ongoing.

Could you speak for a moment on the relationship between politics and aesthetics in your own work and on the importance of these elements to African-descended writing in Canada?

I think that, as [Edward] Said points out, all writings produced by Black writers are immediately politicized as soon as they hit the page—as all writing is politicized—precisely because the conflict is in process. And it is precisely because of the ongoing nature of the conflict and the balance in the conflict, that all Black writing that enters the world now is immediately politicized. So whether a writer who is Black thinks that a work is or is not political, it really doesn't matter.

*The world will take care of that for you! [shared laughter]. This reminds me of a passage in *A Map to the Door of No Return* where you describe the interpenetration of history and Black experience in the Americas as a haunting: “One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives.”*

In *A Map to the Door of No Return* I speak about the artist Albrecht Dürer who, in the early sixteenth century, was painting lions and tigers at a moment when most Europeans had not seen these animals. In terms of aesthetics, you can read Dürer as a major artist of his time, but you can also read him as a colonizing eye. You can read him as simply an artist, if you like, but he was engaged in his time, and he sought out artifacts from the so-called “new worlds” to paint. He painted Katherina,

the slave of a Portuguese factor named Joao Brandao—a man who owned and sold slaves. He drew Brandao also. In his diary Dürer wrote, “I drew a portrait of his negress with metal point.” What does it mean? It means that in 1519 when he was producing these drawings, there’s a great colonial movement, there’s a great invasion going on in Africa and India, and his artistic practice dwells on the booty from that trade, that’s what it means. It means that the world is being shaken up, and he is expressing that in what he represents. So an artist is always engaged in their time; their time enters them; it’s unavoidable. I understand the impetus in some Black artists not to want their work read through a political lens all the time. My position is to read all work through such a lens: let’s read all works, not just the works of Black writers, through that lens. If we do, perhaps we can come to something approaching honesty. Then too, there is a feigning of innocence on the part of artists which allows them a certain space for creativity, and which I agree we ought to have. But it can also be an awful conceit, which renders people’s lives flat and available for depositing the taken-for-granted dreck of the culture.

Is this tension built on a definition of art that views the political and the aesthetic as mutually exclusive concepts?

Precisely. And I think this is the nub on which this culture that we live in always gets Black artists. That it sees rightly that art is politically charged, because it is, because we are living in a politically charged moment, that’s suffused in race and racism and the ideas of land and border and belonging. And what it expresses is its conflict with us in that moment. It’s more about social definitions than about our own self-definitions. We are merely sort of writing our life, like every other artist in every other place. How it’s taken up has to do with apprehensions in the society, just where we stand within that conflict, how that society scripts us into its narrative. So I think that this is how we’ll be read, but this is due to the nature of the present politics. And I’m not so sure that I’d like it otherwise, what would I be asking for otherwise?

It seems to me that much of what ties your characters together in both In Another Place, Not Here and At the Full and Change of the Moon, is a

desire for a release from a specific historical script or narrative that, in some ways, has been a significant feature of narratives produced out of the matrix of new world experience since Columbus.

Precisely. Perhaps what's significant about all the characters in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* is their wanting to be released from history, from both personal as well as public history. If I could think of an emotion coming out of that book, it would be this desire for release. For example, the character of Adrian cannot eat and cannot take the burden of the struggle. And, I wanted to say that political struggle was invasive and distorting too. In some sense, I wanted to look all around the questions; I didn't want to only go for Verli'a's idea of political struggle as in the first novel, but I also wanted to say that political struggle itself could be terribly distorting. I believe that the African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral said that we won't be fit to live in the world we're fighting to make. Adrian's father, who was an organizer in the oil industry in Curacao, is frightening to Adrian. Not because Adrian is a weak man, or doesn't want to pick up struggle, or is a lout, or any of those things, but because that power, that task, is equally scary, terrifying. To pick up struggle is also terrifying and he is merely human. The story that his father has given him, the story of resistance, which any of us would love to emblazon over our own lives, scares him, because it is also a story of great terror and torture. And, it is a narrative of complete sacrifice of the body and will—Adrian's grandfather has died a horrific death, burning to death after trying to organize the oil-workers. When the father picks up the struggle he becomes a kind of stone. So what I wanted to talk about there were the sacrifices of struggle, and how they can be as debilitating as what you're fighting against. I was trying to explore those political ideas, to explore them through various human beings who have human frailties, but also to explore that struggle as something ultimately as destructive as it is liberating. That's why I started the novel with Marie Ursule, an enslaved woman who herself poisons the slaves on a plantation. We have to acknowledge that act as an act of horror, as much as we have to acknowledge it as an act of liberation. It's an act of horror

to confront this other horror. And sadly we must call it an act of liberation. But we could do without them.

Thank you.

Notes

1 Malcolm X (Muslim name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz 1925–1965) was an internationally known African-American political radical in America during the 1960s. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1964) was the pre-eminent African-American leader of the non-violent civil-rights struggle waged in America during the 1950s and 1960s. Huey P. Newton (1942–1989) was an African-American political radical who was a co-founder of the Black Panther Party, a radical political organization that sought to protect and improve the lives of urban African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. Sir George Williams University (later to become Concordia University) is located in Montreal. Brand refers to events that occurred during the later stages of 1968 and 1969 when a number of students (including six Black students) accused biology professor Perry Anderson of discriminatory grading practices. The ensuing protests resulted in the occupation of the University's computer centre by students and culminated in the destruction of the computer centre by fire on February 11, 1969.