Book Review of *Chronicles: Early Works* by Dionne Brand. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011

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Naked woman, run
aloneness comes in the end
it covers ground quickly.¹

Chronicles: Early Works anthologizes the early writings of poet Dionne Brand, bringing together in one volume the previously published titles *Primitive Offensive* (1983), *Winter Epigrams* and *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* (1983), as well as *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (1984). The poems, variously and collectively, take the pulse of the times, exploring at once the historical and contemporary, the political and the personal: “a testament to a historical moment in which change seemed possible... African and Caribbean nations newly liberated from the colonial yoke, various liberation struggles in Central America, the US civil rights and various anti-war movements....women’s rights...”² At the heart of Brand’s aesthetics in this collection is a careful attention to the development and response of the human being in the face of colonialism, racism and diaspora. Among Brand’s collection of dualisms—historical-contemporary, political-personal, lies her continual illusion to body-landscape. This is where her early poetry finds its most startling and exciting qualities, in a continual play with corporeality where the body and landscape are a figurative space of subjugation in the violence of colonialism. This force of profound inquiry makes up for what is difficult in this volume: the harsh cynicism by which Brand approaches her poetic inquiry makes for a greatly despondent narrative into which the reader endlessly seeks a ray of hopefulness, possibility.

The language through which Brand speaks in *Primitive Offensive* is poignantly emotional as she voices the feminine colonized body. This is an abstract way to describe the effect each line has on the reader, which is to experience, aptly, a primitive, almost entirely visceral reaction to the harsh and yet hauntingly beautiful descriptions of colonial violence literally and figuratively enacted on the female body:

where do you think you're going
dismembered woman
limbs chopped off
at the ankles.³

The connotations here are rich and plentiful pointing to the most repulsive acts of human violence: subjugation, domination, rape, slavery, colonialism, and genocide. Yet, the beauty of Brand's language richly complicates our reception of these difficult images: the reader is mesmerized by the language and yet haunted by the image, at once in love with the flow and at odds with what that love means. There is sadness and a vulnerability described here but also a profound freedom, with the possibility of change.

Winter Epigrams is a long poem that explores the loneliness of transplantation, of Brand's own immigration to Toronto, Canada. This theme is confronted literally but also figuratively in the constant allusion to the cold weather characteristic of Brand's adopted land. The strangeness of this Northern season provides Brand with the territory to explore the coldness of racism and isolation, the deleterious effects of nostalgia and want; words that describe winter for Brand easily describe racism, diaspora and the emotions of immigration. In a poignant moment in her diary-like documentation, extreme winter weather has hit and Brand writes,

Everyone is covered by this silence
no one can be thinking of how to oppress anyone else
they will have to think of how silent it is.⁴

Suddenly, in this extreme of cold weather that disrupts and disturbs community life and contributes most greatly to isolation, silence falls and provides a hopeful retreat.

In *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* Brand enters into a direct conversation with the poet Cardenal and takes issue with his construction of a character, Claudia: "Brand's defense is equally witty. Critical of Cardenal's use and abuse of Claudia, she provides a lesson in feminist politics."⁵ Brand speaks directly to Cardenal when she begins the poem with "These verses are for you Ernesto;"⁶ and continues in a detailed, one-sided, conversation that connects all subsequent epigrams: "we could never talk, you and I"⁷; "we could never make love, you and I."⁸ This poem, though framed in the reference to Claudia, to a particular love poem, to Ernesto Cardenal, reads like a working-through of Brand's ideas on the events and ideologies that shape her contemporary world: the reverberations of slavery in the West; for example, the continued "sale" of the female body (in the mechanics of capitalism, in prostitution); feminist thought; and the continued struggles marked first by the Civil Rights movement.

Chronicles of the Hostile Sun is the final poem in this collection and the one that embodies the greatest degree of pessimism. *Chronicles* captures the “people and scenes Brand encountered in her work with CUSO”⁹ a social service agency that sent her to the Caribbean, particularly Grenada, at the time when the United States of America invaded Grenada. Thus, Brand’s interest is again in the transformation of the self and collective at the nebulous hands of colonization and war but here she is not so much recollecting or imagining but documenting; the style is diary-like. She brings political together with personal when she mourns, perhaps metaphorically, her Grandmother’s death: “I am never lonely for anyone/but you.”¹⁰

Chronicles of the Hostile Sun seems personally reflective of Brand and her own history and place in the destruction that has marked the twentieth-century. It might even be said to chart the body/landscape relationship with respect to Brand herself as she learns where her own body fits inside this world of destruction and where within her body power can be located. *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* is also the most pessimistic of the collection, offering in words of despair an articulation of a long drawn out sigh of disappointment.

Chronicles: Early Works is an intriguing snapshot of the early work of poet Dionne Brand. It bravely encompasses the arc of her aesthetic theories and life views as each are clearly in development. It would please any reader, but be most relevant to those interested in postcolonial studies specifically diaspora, slavery and the colonization of the female body. Brand’s rich language and power of allusion, particularly her sustained interest in the body/landscape and, consequently, the way in which that dynamic seeps into the language offers an intriguing text.

Notes

¹ Dionne Brand, *Chronicles: Early Works* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), 47.

² Leslie Sanders, foreword to *Chronicles: Early Works*, by Dionne Brand (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), vii.

³ Dionne Brand, *Chronicles: Early Works* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), 8.

⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵ Leslie Sanders, foreword to *Chronicles: Early Works*, by Dionne Brand (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), x.

⁶ Dionne Brand, *Chronicles: Early Works* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), 73.

⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁹ Leslie Sanders, foreword to *Chronicles: Early Works*, by Dionne Brand (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), xi.

¹⁰ Dionne Brand, *Chronicles: Early Works* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007), 137.