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ICCS Research Report

Project: “Moving forward and going back: A poetics of mobility in anglophone and francophone Caribbean poetry in Canada”

I am recklessly here, to move forward is as the same as staying and going back, there
is no forward, even that is optimistic
(Brand 2022, 26)

My research stay in Tkaronto/Toronto at York University with Prof. Andrea Davis from August to October 2022 coincided fortuitously with the university’s reopening and the resumption of multiple cultural events after continuous Covid-19 lockdowns. Trinidadian Canadian writer Dionne Brand’s anticipated publication and public launch of her momentous volume *Nomenclature*, which gathers her new and collected poems spanning several decades, concluded the first half of my stay. Brand’s readers were invited for her choral reading together with Canada-based scholars and writers Christina Sharpe, Idil Abdillahi, Canisia Lubrin, Courtney McFarlane, and Sam Tecele at Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). This immersive experience, a celebration of one of Canada’s most renowned writers – not only because of the profundity of her work but also because of its trenchant record of contemporary living – echoed throughout my time in Toronto and continues to resonate deeply. The speakers offered their chorus of voices to the audience, as Brand’s lyrical I was shared through a collective reading, propelling the expansive I of her poems even more profoundly into the here and now: “I am recklessly here, to move forward is as the same as staying and going back, there / is no forward, even that is optimistic” (2022, 26). Brand’s long poem “Nomenclature for the Time Being,” first published in her new volume, offers a record of present living in times of one global crisis that is the pandemic amid multiple other ongoing latent crises. Her poetics makes space for the complexities and ambiguities of present living. As such, it proposes movement as not just unidirectional and teleological, geared towards an aim that is progress, but it unfolds into a prism of mobilities that can be multiple, back and forth, or halting. Brand thus unapologetically offers staying as a possibility, going back as a possibility, and bluntly shows the delusions that can be encapsulated in ideas of forward movement.

Against the backdrop of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, environmental extraction and exploitation, Caribbean writers have long tackled issues of mobility. These are often linked to their ancestors' rupture into the Americas: the displacement of the Middle Passage or mercantile movement of indentureship, but also more recent migration to North America, among other places. While many of these mobilities have been forced and violent, controlled by others to support the continuous flow of trade and capital, Caribbean literature makes space for im/mobilities that are complex and fraught as well as ones that can be liberating as writers imagine other ways of moving. Poetry in particular holds that tension and ambiguity between immobilities and mobilities, mobilities as both confining and liberating, since, according to Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire, what he calls "poetic knowledge" offers "an astonishing mobilization of all human and cosmic forces" (Césaire 1990, xlvii). My dissertation with its tentative title "'Thinking with the Archipelago': Diasporic Im/Mobilities in Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean Poetry" carves out a poetics of mobility articulated in contemporary anglophone and francophone poetry. Drawing on mobility studies, the term "mobility" and its concomitant "immobility" offer a more far-reaching angle to explore not just *one form* of movement, such as migration, or *only* movement; rather, working through im/mobilities makes space for various forms of mobility that have shaped the Caribbean, as well as their often attendant immobilities so as to illustrate their relationality. I resort to an archipelagic framework, springing from Martinican writer Édouard Glissant, to conceptualize these im/mobilities across the Caribbean and its diaspora in the U.S. and Canada. Steeped in the Caribbean's geographical formation as an archipelago, this framework invites a reading of mobilities across the various islands, islands and mainlands, as well as encompassing the movement of the ocean. For Glissant, the archipelago can also be adopted as a form of thinking ("*la pensée archipelique*"), which to him is "one that opens, one that confirms diversity – one that is not made to obtain unity, but rather a new kind of Relation" (Glissant 2021, 164–65). As I took this framework to my research in Canada, particularly Toronto and Montréal, places to which a considerable number of Caribbean people immigrated from the 1960s onwards, I was interested in how im/mobilities have been constituted between the wider archipelago of the Caribbean and Canada, in both anglophone and francophone spaces. What does it mean to read the archipelago against the backdrop of Canada's promise of multiculturalism?

Canada is internationally renowned for its multicultural policies, which evolved since 1971 to promote its cultural and ethnic diversity. The banner of diversity and multiculturalism, however, still largely excluded Indigenous and non-white presences, a case in point being its efforts to promote settler-colonial bilingualism of English and French while ignoring

Indigenous cultural and linguistic varieties (Jedwab 2014). Scholars have thus critically engaged with Canada's multicultural narrative, leveraged to mark ethnic and racial diverse presence as ahistorical and to disguise various other forms of ongoing oppression, such as Indigenous erasure and racism, in part more subtly expressed through its focus on assimilation into hegemonic conceptions of that very diversity (Davis 2019, 2022; Maynard 2017; Simpson 2011; Walcott 2003; Wayland 1997). As Andrea Davis argues, "multicultural politics and discourses of diversity are employed in Canada to suggest a kind of benign and all-inclusive citizenry, while simultaneously allowing the state to ignore the unique conditions of historical and contemporary dispossession, and the social and economic subjugation of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized populations" (2022, 6).

Canada's bilingualism of the two colonial languages English and French also makes it a popular destination for anglophone and francophone Caribbean migrants. In my research, I chart these mobilities across the Americas as they are translated to the poetic page. During my research in Canada, I not only witnessed Brand's choral reading, but I also had the chance to meet and talk to other Caribbean Canadian poets like Canisia Lubrin, Lorrie Jean-Louis or Marie-Célie Agnant. Pursuing an archipelagic reading of the texts, I am interested in the Caribbean's presence across the archipelago of the Americas, extending to Canada. In a personal interview with Montréal-based writer Agnant, she describes her relation to the Caribbean as such: "Haïti, et la Caraïbe toute entière, francophone ou pas, son histoire, et son destin, sont présents dans l'ensemble de mon travail littéraire." Even though the Caribbean is not always named, it implicitly figures in her writing. It is in poetry, then, that this subtle presence of the Caribbean as a whole can be articulated, as she continues: "Écrire de la poésie est une manière de réitération de ma présence au monde, et une façon de reconnaître, valoriser, apprécier la présence de l'Autre dans son humanité." This sentiment is poignantly evoked by poet Jean-Louis, whose debut collection *La femme cent couleurs* reiterates the speaker's existence within, or even as, the Americas as she repeats throughout the collection: "Je suis l'Amérique," which culminates in her steadfast assertion of her existence, voiced against the continuous erasure of Black and Indigenous presences in the Americas: "on me dit que je n'existe pas / pourtant / je me suis partout" (Jean-Louis 2020, 74). This harks back to Brand's initial quote of this essay, which similarly speaks to the necessity to claim one's existence despite continuous dispossession on the lands of the Americas: "I am recklessly here." Against the backdrop of colonialism and ongoing oppression, place-based belonging is thus of urgent concern to these writers and finds echo in Lubrin's book *The Dyzgraph^xst* when she writes,

whose earth is left without a means to unwanted us in place, why

we sing-back anyway, the chaotic corners of the mind after wretched

mind, who is left after the dysenteries, after the cities and the ruining
magic we no longer believe, a dusk we no longer need, what is I
but to always have been (t)here, I've asked it, what is I: I in an own place
(Lubrin 2020, 9)

Lubrin's poem critically engages with the notion of the "I" which is not any individual speaker but made multiple it speaks to a wider diasporic existence in the Americas. While the poem does not provide an answer to the question of the "I"'s who, it does inscribe its presence into the here and there – here, where it is potentially located right now, but also there, as its diasporic presence extends across not only the Caribbean and Canada, but also speaks for multiple other forms of erasure, like Indigenous erasure on these very lands.

While these excerpts only provide a glimpse of Caribbean Canadian archipelagic writing and their concerns with im/mobilities, they each exhibit a deep concern with not just individual forms of oppression and dispossession but are invested in a larger archipelagic understanding of the Americas. They are not interested in forward movement only, or optimistic conceptions of the future, to bring back Brand; rather, they offer a catalogue of movement that potentially makes space for an archipelagic Americas with diverse and shared planetary concerns.

To conclude, my research stay with Prof. Andrea Davis at York University, generously funded by ICCS (International Council for Canadian Studies), offered varied enriching opportunities for my research. Encouraged by these and other inspiring readings and discussions throughout the city of Toronto, personal correspondences with poets, exchanges with scholars in the field, a trip to Montréal for more profound research on francophone Caribbean poetry, I directly felt its output as I started writing substantial parts of my dissertation while in Canada. The direct exchange with experts and poets considerably shaped my research as I now put these new ideas onto paper.

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