

At The Full and An Interview with

BY RINALDO WALCOTT AND LESLIE SANDERS

En avril 1999, Dionne Brand, auteure de "At the Full and Change of the Moon" a accordé une entrevue à Leslie Sanders et Rinaldo Walcott au sujet de son livre qui raconte l'histoire de Marie-Ursule, une esclave noire qui a empoisonné tout le personnel d'une plantation sauf sa fille Bella dont les descendants se sont éparpillés à travers le monde. Ce deuxième roman de Brand en racontant l'histoire de ces descendants touche un pan de l'histoire noire, de la mémoire, de la souffrance, des traumatismes et des chances de s'en sortir. Durant l'entrevue, on a abordé de nombreux sujets dont la diaspora noire, la littérature noire et les critiques, le patriarcat, le capitalisme, le discours national. Ce roman nous promet une fascinante lecture par la richesse de son écriture et de son propos.

In April 1999, Dionne Brand, Leslie Sanders, and Rinaldo Walcott sat down to have a conversation about Brand's second novel *At The Full and Change of the Moon*. The interview took place over a promised riposte, and was a conversation among friends. The novel concerns itself with the contemporary lives of the descendents of Marie Ursule a slave who commits a rebellious and horrific act of mass poisoning on a plantation but saves her daughter Bolla. The descendents of Bolla scatter across the contemporary black world—the Caribbean, North and South America and Europe. *At The Full* is a novel concerned with questions of trauma, pain, and suffering. It takes fragments of history as an incitement to tell the story of the

predicaments of the contemporary lives of Bolla's descendents. Therefore the novel raises many issues and questions concerning memory, history, pain, trauma, and any possible recovery.

Brand, Sanders, and Walcott had a conversation that touched on a wide range of issues. In the excerpts from the interview we have tried to maintain one main thread: discussion concerning *At The Full*. However, hints of other aspects of the conversation are evident. Questions related to the black diaspora, to the politics of reviewing black fiction in Canada and to issues of reading practices, are discussed

in the interview. As well hints of the ways in which national discourse, patriarchy, and capitalism impinged on our lives are gestured to. *At The Full* is a novel rich in texture and story. It is a novel that will provoke interesting and arresting readings for some time to come. Brand's insights on this novel are quite revealing of some aspects of her writing process.

Leslie Sanders/Rinaldo Walcott: Do you want to begin by talking about how you came to this new novel [*At the Full and Change of the Moon*]?

Dionne Brand: A long, long time ago I read this piece in V.S. Naipaul's *The Loss of El Dorado* and he made reference to this woman, who was a slave, called Thisbe, who had poisoned a plantation. And she was brought to trial and they had tortured her. And they wanted her to give up her husband's name as one of the ringleaders of the poisoning. And she didn't. And before they hung her she said, "This is but a drink of water to what I've already suffered." And I remember that. So I had that woman somewhere in my mind. And then I reread that same incident in Rhoda Rhedock's history of women and slavery, *Women and Labour in Trinidad and Tobago*. And somewhere else again. But, anyway, I just thought, you know, what a thing to say. I mean there are these kinds of characters that I always marvel at because I can't understand their resolve. When I look into myself I think I'm weak at some level, in the face of such statements. So I'm always fascinated with that kind of resolve. I don't know how it comes about, or what qualities one need have, or what situations one need be in to make those kind of statements. And what she had done was a really horrific thing. But nevertheless, this is what she had said. So she was with me. And then the way the first line came to me. The first line of the book is actually the first line that I wrote, which is, "Maria Ursule woke up this morning knowing what morning it was and that it might be her last." Because one would have to conceive of that day. And go through all of the little pieces of it. One would have to conceive of that day, and waking up that morning, waking to do that kind of thing. And these kinds of acts always fascinate me. And so, so I started from her. But then my other was the situation, in a sense, of black people scattered all over, the diaspora. Because you go to all kinds of cities and you see all kinds of people. I remember going in 1992 to Amsterdam, and walking along that that street that comes down from Central Station and suddenly

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Change of CanLit

Dionne Brand

seeing black people, but mostly black men, walking Dam Square. And looking really dry in the face. And you have to watch for just a second before you know what the play is that's going down. And really it's about selling drugs and selling life; and I stood there for awhile and watched. Or I'd keep going back to that street and watching. And what occurred to me was: where are they from? what were they doing? how did they arrive here? So these arrivals also fascinate me. And how people don't really see themselves in the ways, really, that we who look at life's minutiae all the time do. But people are just living, just living life. And I saw this one guy. I remember standing there for about an hour, and going back every day, all the week that I was there and seeing this one guy just doing this business on the street, this busy, busy business that night. And you could see the ebb and flow of him. And he was very quick! A very quick motion in the body, the way he fell into the street. I mean fell like walking into the street, like plunging into the street with a swiftness, you know? Trying to make himself visible and invisible as well, you know, because he has to avoid the cops and such. There were quite a number of men like this and I was just fascinated by how they had arrived on that corner, in that place. So I kept that one too. I mean the whole thing was a question of just keeping little images. Then too, I had just lost my luggage, and I needed a pair of shoes and I needed a pair of pants and other things. And I'm walking down this street, and I suddenly turn around, and I see this Black woman in the window. And I'm always interested in Black people wherever I meet them. And then, I look around and I see this very domestic scene in the window and I think it's a house, and I think it's a woman in a window and then I walked down and there is another one in another window, and another one, in another window, and then I realize what it is.

(Laughter)

DB: And then I realize what's going on. And what's interesting to me is these are not slick, magazine-like photographs of women who are prostitutes. It's not any of your glossy schtick about prostitution and it didn't look, even look, like prostitution in Toronto. It was very, very domestic. These are women of all different kinds of proportions, you know? Not any one kind of body. And they're largely black and they're in these windows, so I thought, wow! So that moment stayed with me. And I think about how to write those things down, how to write passages. How to write what looks like journeys across

water, across mind, space, and how people are always able to adapt, to fit, to figure out how to do this hustle which life has presented us with. And it's always a hustle, because it always takes place, it seems to me, always on the edges of another life. Of other peoples lives.

LS/RW: So it seems to me that you are suggesting that factual history and other kinds of fragments, events, happenings inform the construction this novel. I wonder if you can say a little bit about the way you see history working in your fictionalizing of those moments, those events. I am particularly interested in how those fragments can tell us something about History, but are not historical in the way Historians think of history.

DB: You know, I have to admit that I don't think of the book as historical, at all. Not in a strict sense, I never thought of it like that. And I don't. I really thought of it as, let me see if I can say it right. It is about how imagination is long, and open. And how, really, you are always guided by your imagination. So I think it would have taken that man on the Amsterdam street a leap, some trajectory through his imagination to arrive on the street. I was more interested in that kind of passage, a kind of opening. That all of those people would have had to have the most magnificent of imaginations to envision themselves where they had landed, or where I had seen them, or where I had apprehended them. And they would have had to have thought outside any of the other places that they have been. So it looks like they live on imagination. They arrive on the street on imagination because nothing real would tell them to be there. Because it just wouldn't work. It would have to be this kind of flood to arrive there. So I didn't think of it historically, but if I wanted to be accurate to some extent I would say that those factual historical statements represent half a sentence, if anything, in the book, right. Because I'm a little fastidious, right? I investigated a little further, right? What would it mean, for example, to find those two nuns in the book? Mère Marguerite and Soeur de Clemy. I didn't go looking for the nuns. I didn't know the nuns would arrive but, I was looking at some of

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the books of the time, seventeenth/eighteenth century, nineteenth century to see what the writing was like. To see what people were doing, and what they were reporting on. And I found this memoir of Père Labat, who was a French priest who had gone out to the Indies. And it's a very jolly account of his trip. It was in 1761 or so and he's an eighteenth century man who's a priest, who goes to the colonies to see what's up. It's a kind of fun trip he's making, by ship, you know? And he arrives and he tells all along what happens to him. And because he's a man, in his mind, in his imagination, in his time, he recounts his journey. He's also an adventurer and he wants to see the wonderful new world; how the colonists are getting along, (laughs) and all that kind of stuff. And in this account he talks about meeting these two nuns and I use their real names in the book, Marie Marguerite de St Joseph and Soeur de Clemy. They had come out, he said, in 1691, and on the ship *Tranquille* and they had come out with two novices, and they had a plantation, and they had nineteen slaves. And I just found that a marvelous image. I could see them going to the port at Marseilles. And I could see their nun's habits dragging on the ground, and the bundles and bags and the two novices and trying to get the stevedores to load them up.

LS/RW: What order were they in?

DB: Ursulines. So, you suddenly see all of that. And this wasn't a great part of his account it was a few lines in his account of these two nuns, and that they had died out there. They had not made their novices nuns, so there was this huge conflict with the Jesuit priests, who wanted to claim their estate. So I'm not looking at something called History. But something like, a small impression in a book, by a guy, and I think, that's really interesting to write down, and to write down in its smallness, in the smallness that it appeared in the small life.

LS/RW: I was wondering how do debates about history, archives and reconstructing the past motivate you or influence you?

DB: I'm sure it does, but once it translates into fiction, it becomes something else, for me. So I guess, I'm reluctant to pin it down in that kind of sense because I know that what I've written is not a historical novel. It's not historical fiction. First of all, it's [history] a third of the book and I think it overwhelms, hopefully, the rest of the book. It penetrates the rest of the book, and it hovers over the rest of the book. Here I do not mean history in the sense of a true record. I haven't written a historical fiction in that way. What I was interested in was those small acts that overpower centuries. Like the accumulation

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of small acts, whether it was the act of Marie Ursule, or the governor, the lieutenant governor who makes the Proclamation of Abolition. And that's real. So sometimes I import a historical document of some kind but I know that it also becomes very amorphous, when it's translated into fiction. So I was really much more interested in the twentieth century descendents and how history hovers over them, whether they want to or not, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not. So that is what made me do the nuns the way I did.

(Laughter)

DB: (Laughs) If you read it right, the nuns are several centuries old and they only exist as a kind of impression. And, I suppose what I was trying to say was that the past is also something that hovers in our imaginations. And it repeats, and sometimes we can see it and sometimes we can't see it, and sometimes it's forgotten deliberately, or unconsciously. But it is this crumbling thing, this crumbling estate, or this crumbling plantation which shadows the times that we live in now. If I wanted to say something about history, that's what I wanted to say.

LS/RW: Are you saying that history is traumatic for black people like slavery's traumatic for black people? And then Maria Ursule also does this act; it's clearly a traumatic act and in that act Bola must live. And you have these descendents who spread out, and have, in some ways, interesting lives, but lives that are full of pain and trauma, pitfalls and failures, and attempts to get up and go again. Are you suggesting, in some way, that the impacts of history happen both in its small moments, its fragments, and its larger acts? And I know that you said Maria Ursule's act was a small act, but to me it was like this BIG act, right? She woke up one morning and commits that act. So, what does imagination have to do with history, for you, in the book?

DB: I think, I think that Maria Ursule's act is a very complex and contradictory one, because at one moment it was intended to free her but it's an act of death. There were always acts of poisonings on plantations in the Caribbean. There were suicides. I think that Maria Ursule's act released the imagination or the way one could imagine the future. It was both horrific and freeing in some kind of way. It releases the other characters into their own imagination. The one's that survive Marie Ursule are her daughter, who doesn't know anything about it, who is three or four, and who has no recollection of it, and who has no recollection of slavery either, or of what Marie Ursule is about, save that she is her mother. Someone she calls her mother, and sings for. And next Kamena who doesn't want the kind of end that Marie Ursule envisions. Who (Kamena) wants to find another kind of Country, another citizenship, another beginning. And the novel talks about him trying to find his own childhood. And he thinks it's possible. So, you have at the other end of Marie Ursule two people that have other directions, other ways of looking at the world because her way of looking at the

world is so disastrous. We can look at it and admire it and say, "what a strong woman" but, yet it must have terrified her. And in the novel it does and I want to leave Thisbe alone now, I mean the historical figure and talk about Marie Ursule. She cannot see as Kamena does. She can't see the hills; she can't see that possibility at all. And, and as Bola who is very new, and fortunate in this and that she is let go, and has the sense that Marie Ursule is a very dangerous woman. So I don't see Maria Ursule's act as necessarily heroic, even though, we now would say she was heroic. But it was also an act of great despair. That attention to finding the poison day in and day out. Her hand is deep, is deep in some, some horror. I guess that I just think that we are corrupted by what we live, and what we have to do to get out of how we live. That we are deeply implicated in it too. I know sometimes it requires what I often call heroic acts, or that it often requires what is called courage. But it's not always great works, I'm not saying that Marie Ursule shouldn't have done that, but I'm saying that act is such that it implicates you.

LS/RW: You said earlier something about the psyche so I want you to ask something about the exploration of the interior lives of the characters. And the importance of exploring the interior live of the characters *vis a vis* having all kinds of other external forces shape how we come to know the characters.

DB: Well then I have to admit to a certain kind of, well I have to say that when I think about writing a novel given that I happen to be black, I'm more interested in the interior life. Because I think that's a much more fertile place. If I can be said to have a project, then it is to explore the interior life.

LS/RW: The explicit engagement is with what do these characters do with what they have to work with. So you look at Priest; how does he work this move from good to evil. And you look at Adrian; how does his attempts to try his hand at hustling work? Like taking his sister's money because he thinks he can score and then loosing it. And how do they work out their psychic troubles? In particular, the male characters, I'm really interested in them. How do they work out masculinity? And given that we've got this range of characters: we've got Emmanuel Greaves, we've got Sones, we've got Priest, and then we've got Adrian. We've got this range of black, male characters each happening in a different kind of space. But each, as successful as they may be at what they do, are failures around masculinity. I was just wondering about your exploring that kind of interior process. I found the male characters really convincing actually. I mean it was an interesting exploration of the interior life of male characters that could actually take you back to an interesting sociology.

DB: Yeah, (Laughs) that's what I fear.

LS/RW: That's what you fear?

DB: I am trying really hard not to get sort of boxed into certain ways. Just because I am black and just because I live in the world as it is, as it's constructed now, then I'm

supposed to do these major things like represent, you know? If I write a male character, I'm supposed to represent maleness in some kind of way and I'm trying not to do that. I'm really trying to do that person. As wishy as that sounds, or as not up to the task of doing the political job, I'm really trying to write that guy that I saw on the street corner in Amsterdam because there was something that I saw that struck me about him, about his impatience, his dissatisfaction, his disaffection, his look of hauntedness. Just the fact that he had to be standing there on that corner, doing that. And where might he have come from? Who was he? So you've got to start really, really tiny. I'm not starting from theme and I'm not starting from some sort of ethnographic drawing. I'm not trying to write sociological treatise. I'm not starting from there at all. I just start from this impression of this busy, little man ... working this corner, right? Or starting from this little line, about this Private who was sent back from the First World War for misconduct, and what that might have been like. All black writers are expected to make signs for other people that will identify black bodies and code them. So that someone who's living this other life will be able to identify what's this that's happening now, and why this is happening now. I don't want the job of addressing, or signing "black behavior." This is just this guy I saw on a corner, that I was curious about. This is just curiosity.

LS/RW: So basically, you see your work as a challenge to the burden of representation of black artists continually must confront?

DB: Yes. And I know that's supposed to be my job, right? It's like a shoe that's just waiting for you to wear. It's a coat just waiting for you to put it on. And I also know that reviewers will review it that way because it's the only way we have in this society of looking at it. And the interesting thing is, I think that is particularly Canadian. I don't think that it is always that way in the U.S., or England—this way of looking at all things black. Though strangely enough, in 1958, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Naipaul wrote of the same problem, "I cannot help feeling that it might have been more profitable for me to appear in translation." (Laughs) So then nobody says in his case "What are you saying about those Trinidadian people," or in my case, "What are you saying about those Black people?" I would echo his sentiment. You wish that your work might be looked at with a literary eye. Rather than this assigning of all black writing to an anthropological space or a sociological space.

LS/RW: Okay, let me ask you a kind of a broader, more general question. Because we are kind of hinting in this conversation around the politics of sociology and literariness when black

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work is taken up in North America. And you've made very clear that you are interested in having the work read and understood through literariness. A number of years ago you said in *Other Solitudes* you didn't write from any margin. You didn't write from any Canadian margin. You wrote from a centre. You wrote from the centre of black literature. And if people wanted to understand your work they had to read Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, and Bessie Head, a host of Latin American writers and so forth, just to name a few. And when *In Another Place* was published, the book still wasn't read from within that place.

DB: I really still think that Canadian criticism needs work. You still have reviewers who are struggling to figure out the origins of their own literature. That is those they consider "their own" and "literature," right? The level of criticism is not deep enough. It's not thoughtful enough. Well I often think, okay, how did I come to reading, right? And maybe I'm assuming that that is how everybody comes to reading. That is, reading is an act of faith, and it's also an act of investigation. So, when I'm sitting at ten or eleven, and reading Durrell, I don't have any idea about England. But I leap into it as a knowledge-making enterprise. I've just read this Italian novelist, a book called *Silk*. And another called *The Reader* by a German novelist. I leap. Right? I begin from the small assumption that it is possible to leap, and that I am curious. The novel doesn't only have to come to me, I need to go to it too. I have to go to the text and I have to say, I'm going to learn some things here.

As it is Black writers are either reviewed for what might be plumbed from their work as a sociology of Black people or they are remarked upon for not presenting any signs of it at all. Either way it revolves around the same preoccupations. Black writers in this country have still to receive an intelligent reading. The kind of reading that says "No, I don't know. I've never lived in that body but in good faith, I will go where the book is going because I am interested in what human beings do."

Dionne Brand is a Governor-General award winning poet for Land to Light On. Her work includes two novels, In Another Place Not Here and At The Full and Change of the Moon, as well as a collection of essays Bread Out of Stone.

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MARIANE MATTE

L'éclair

Finis les longs jours de ténèbres
 Redevierai-je celle aux paupières de
 rêve?
 J'ai fait taire la nuit
 Dans la mémoire frissonnante
 Des plaisirs douloureux
 Mes mains sont pleines de lunes blessées
 Et mon âme hurle dans la solitude de ma
 geôle
 Mon regard se perd
 Dans les ciels détrempés de l'angoisse
 Mais mon esprit est réveillé
 La philosophie culmine dans mes souliers
 Je suis en prison pour mieux me libérer
 Et danser sans fin
 Ma nouvelle joie de vivre
 Et l'ivresse d'un bonheur déjà acquis

Mariane Matte a passée de nombreuses années en voyage de l'Amerique du Sud en Europe carnets de voyage et poésie sont en attente de publication.

SHEILA PETERS

to the morel

through
 black humus
 de/composed
 un/buttoned
 the god's ancient erection
 nosing wrinkled through leaves
 the succulent phallus
 un/figged
 tastes the
 un/folding
 of may's warm and generous cunt

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