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# Writing Women into History: Margaret Atwood's and Dionne Brand's Interrogation and Relocation of Power

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the relationship between ancestral women and their arrival in a new landscape as represented in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and Dionne Brand's "No Language is Neutral" (1990). Atwood's poems focus on Susanna Moodie, an English emigrant who left behind written sketches of her life in Canada. Meanwhile, Brand's poem centers on an emigrated speaker who weaves oral stories of her ancestor Liney, who had been enslaved in Trinidad, and the story of her own arrival in Canada. Working with Jeff Weingarten's *Sharing the Past: The Reinvention of History in Canadian Poetry* (2019), this essay argues that Atwood and Brand question an uneven power dynamic of control and authority, between a formidable alien landscape and a dislocated foremother. But they relocate power in different ways. Atwood writes from a colonial perspective and relocates control to the speaker Moodie through her personification and conquering of the Canadian landscape. Contrastingly, Brand writes from an African diasporic perspective and her speaker struggles to relocate authority to Liney due to unreliable memories displacing Liney from the speaker. However, the attempted resurrection of Liney empowers Brand's speaker on her similar journey into an alien landscape. By analyzing the relocation of power, this essay argues that Atwood and Brand disrupt historical representations of women to demonstrate Moodie's and Liney's strengths within histories of pioneering and enslavement. Additionally, Brand expands Weingarten's argument to consider the challenges non-colonialists face when writing and empowering women who are exempt from history.

**Keywords:** power, control, history, Canada, immigration

Margaret Atwood's poetry collection *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Dionne Brand's poem "No Language is Neutral" both showcase a female ancestor, or "foremother," who enters into a new landscape. Atwood's poems focus on Susanna Moodie, a European who emigrated to Canada in 1832 and left behind written sketches of her life in Canada. Meanwhile, Brand's poem centers on an emigrated speaker who weaves oral stories of her ancestor Liney, who had been enslaved in Trinidad, and the story of her own arrival in Canada. In Jeff Weingarten's book *Sharing the Past*,

he argues that Atwood's poems "interrogat[e] and relocat[e] power, questioning the politics of historical representation as much as the mode one adopts while writing" (180). Both Atwood and Brand question an uneven power dynamic of control between an alien landscape and a dislocated foremother, but they relocate power in different ways. Atwood writes from a colonial perspective and relocates control to the speaker Moodie through her eventual conquering of the Canadian landscape. Contrastingly, Brand writes from an African diasporic perspective, and her speaker struggles to relocate authority to Liney due to unreliable memories displacing Liney from the speaker. However, the attempted resurrection of Liney empowers Brand's speaker on her similar journey into an alien landscape. Through differing depictions of the relocation of power, Atwood and Brand disrupt historical representations of women and expand Weingarten's argument to consider the challenges non-colonialists face when writing and empowering women who are excluded from history.

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie's* first poem, "Disembarking at Quebec," reveals an uneven power dynamic between the speaker Susanna Moodie and the Canadian wilderness she has entered. The poem highlights Moodie's isolation from the Canadian landscape almost immediately: "The moving water will not show me / my reflection" (16-17). The verb "will" personifies the water and gives it control over Moodie because the word suggests that the water chooses to ignore Moodie, rather than Moodie choosing to ignore the landscape. Moodie feels a disconnection from the landscape, but the authority of the environment's elements reinforce this isolation and assert the landscape's control. Additionally, line 5 resides as its own stanza between two longer stanzas in which Moodie discusses her feelings and possessions: "-a book, a bag with knitting-- / the incongruous pink of my shawl" (3-4). Not only does the landscape have the ability to accept or reject Moodie, but the physical space on the page between the line about the landscape and the stanzas about Moodie suggest that Moodie is physically isolated from the new landscape because of the pieces of European civilization that she brings with her. Moodie notes that the colour of her shawl is "incongruous" (4) and does not fit with her new environment, which suggests Moodie's dislocation from the European landscape, where she fits in. Through the depiction of the separation between Moodie and the Canadian landscape,

“Disembarking at Quebec” questions Moodie’s relationship with the landscape and reveals the landscape’s initial power over Moodie.

Similarly, in Dionne Brand’s “No Language is Neutral,” the speaker emphasizes the isolation and social standing of enslaved foremother Liney to question the power balance between Liney and the country Trinidad and to reveal the landscape’s immediate authority over her. Liney enters Trinidad enslaved to the people and government of the country of Trinidad. Similarly, Canada holds authority over the speaker, Liney’s descendent. Although the speaker comes to Canada freely, she yields her power to Canada and the city landscape of Toronto: “saying I / coming just to holiday to the immigration officer when / me and the son-of a bitch know I have [a] labourer mark” (Brand 66-68). In the speaker’s choice not to conform to Canadian English and be honest about her move to Canada, she recognizes that the immigration officer does not want her to be at home in Canada. Thus, Canada does not appear as a place where the speaker belongs and causes the speaker to view Canada as a landscape that is “other” to her. Teresa Zackodnik argues in her essay on Brand’s work that “othering [is] involved in the racist assumption that [the speaker] is not a Canadian but an alien who belongs elsewhere” (Zackodnik 197). Since the speaker feels pressure to enter Canada with a lie, Canada ultimately has control over her because she now resides in Canada’s land as an inauthentic other. Brand’s poem interrogates the power dynamic between the foremother Liney and the country of Trinidad to reveal that when an individual enters somewhere trapped in the expectations that the country has of them, the country holds authority over them. Unlike Liney, the speaker is not enslaved and is a free individual. However, the pressure the speaker feels upon entering to hide her true self and appear as a tourist, rather than an immigrant with plans to make Canada her home, reveals that the speaker, similarly to Liney, feels trapped in the expectations that this new country has of them. Thus, Brand interrogates a relationship where the landscape holds power over a foremother, just as Atwood does.

In Atwood’s “Further Arrivals” and “The Death of a Young Son by Drowning,” wild and animalistic characteristics, along with the claiming of the landscape, allows Susanna Moodie to

move up the hierarchy of power in the relationship between the Canadian landscape and herself. “Further Arrivals” shows the fading of Moodie’s civilized life from around her. Instead of holding on to civilized distinctions, Moodie and the other European immigrants release them and lean into the Canadian landscape: “the immigrants threw off their clothes / and danced like sandflies” (Atwood, “Further Arrivals” 4-5). In “Disembarking at Quebec,” clothes were items that separated the Europeans from the landscape. Here, the immigrants willingly shed their clothes and give in to the landscape, which suggests that the immigrants, including Moodie, are becoming further surrounded by the land.

Moodie then begins to see herself in terms of the animals: “[my brain] sends out / fears hairy as bears” (15-16). This simile demonstrates that the civilized vs. wild binary that initially separates Moodie and the Canadian landscape has been blurred. The depiction of Moodie viewing aspects of herself as animalistic contrasts “Disembarking at Quebec,” where the landscape takes on human aspects. By flipping who takes on which characteristics from the landscape to Moodie, “Further Arrivals” demonstrates Moodie’s newfound connection with the landscape. The Canadian landscape in “Disembarking at Quebec” holds power over Moodie because her separation from the environment inhibits her from the power to control whether she belongs in the landscape. However, Moodie takes back the control that the landscape has over her when she chooses to accept aspects of the environment as a part of herself in “Further Arrivals.” Thus, this poem depicts a now equal power dynamic between Moodie and the Canadian landscape.

While “Further Arrivals” begins to resurrect the power dynamic between Moodie and the Canadian landscape, “Death of a Young Son by Drowning” depicts Moodie’s conquest of the land and gives Moodie authority over the landscape. “Death of a Young Son by Drowning” describes the death of Moodie’s son “in the river” (Atwood, “Death” 17). The poem opens with a reference to the son’s journey down a different river: “the dangerous river of his birth” (2). Moodie’s choice to describe the birth canal as the landscape’s river unites the aspects of the landscape with those of Moodie’s human body, which demonstrates that the Canadian landscape no longer has control over whether Moodie

and the immigrants belong in Canada. Moodie's "river" has the ability to bring a new life into the world, whereas the landscape's river can take a life out of the world. The comparison of Moodie's birth canal to the landscape's river reinforces the current power dynamic between the two. Additionally, even after it takes the life of her son, Moodie no longer views the landscape in a position of power or as a threat. In "Disembarking at Quebec," Moodie describes the landscape as a place of desolation; however, after her son's death, Moodie notices the "bright sun and new grass" (22). Instead of the landscape being a dark unknown place, the landscape is now bright and welcoming to new life, such as the immigrants, which suggests that Moodie no longer feels as though the landscape has control over whether she belongs in it. The poem concludes with Moodie burying her son: "I planted him in this country / like a flag" (28-29). Moodie takes possession of the landscape. The simile "like a flag" alludes to explorers marking their conquests, which suggests that Moodie has now asserted her authority and claimed the land as her own. Through her son's burial, Moodie infuses the land with a part of her, her son, which further depicts Moodie's newfound power over the Canadian landscape.

Conversely, in Dionne Brand's "No Language is Neutral" the speaker draws on memories and stories of Liney in an attempt to resurrect Liney's history to guide herself in an alien country; however, the speaker struggles to relocate authority and control to Liney due to a lack of historical information and unreliable narration. The speaker recalls Liney's experience enslaved on a ship on the way to Trinidad from Africa and uses the experience as a guide since the speaker similarly leaves her home to travel to another country. The speaker intends to relocate power to Liney by resurrecting her in poetry: "History will only hear you if you give birth to a woman who is / a poet" (108-13). As a poet, the speaker can write Liney as a guide for herself in the poem, which should give power to Liney; however, the speaker relies on stories of Liney. Namely, Liney's son Ben serves as her storyteller, but because Ben only knows his own experiences of Liney and word-of-mouth stories about her, he cannot speak to Liney's own experiences. As the speaker has not lived Liney's life either, she cannot resurrect Liney as she once was. Instead, the speaker creates an imagined version of Liney. Zackodnik agrees with my claim that the speaker's Liney is a created version, and states that the speaker "cannot

be satisfied in an escapist flight to a past that did not exist for her, but it can be realized in her present” (Zackodnik 205). Although both Liney and the speaker travelled to a different country as an outsider, the circumstances in which they move countries are vastly different. Regardless of the speaker’s attempt, her resurrection of Liney is based on faulty narratives, which inhibits the speaker from resurrecting Liney or relocating control to her.

Although Atwood and Brand attempt to relocate power in different ways, both of them adopt a mode of writing that gives power to historically omitted and ignored women. Historians tell of emigration from Europe to Canada “predominantly, if not exclusively, [as] a history of men” (Weingarten 178). Jeff Weingarten argues that due to the disproportionately low representation of women in comparison to men, in history, female writers struggle to imagine or write a pioneering woman (178-79). Regardless of history’s relative lack of recognition of pioneering women, Atwood writes Moodie as an eventual conqueror to the land she was once threatened by. Although Moodie does not claim the land literally with a flag, the selection of poems showcase Moodie as a pioneer through the completion of a journey that ends in a landscape being claimed. Atwood manages to write into a history that ignores women through the depiction of Moodie as a pioneer and gives a voice for other unknown woman pioneers in history.

Brand’s speaker manages to find strength in her attempt to resurrect Liney, even though she does not relocate power to Liney’s historical self. The speaker hopes that through the resurrection of Liney’s history she will find the strength necessary to embark on a new life in Canada. Brand’s speaker navigates through the idea of Liney as a slave and the loving anecdotes that Ben tells of Liney. Similarly, throughout the text the speaker switches between her nation language, which is a kind of English spoken by individuals and their descendants who were brought to the Caribbean enslaved or as laborers, and Canadian English. The constant switching between the two dialects demonstrates the speaker’s struggle to find a middle. Zackodnik argues that Liney’s “history does not lie between her experience as a subject and as a colonized object; rather, it lies in her experiences as a divided subject, ‘in between’” (Zackodnik 199). Eventually, after the exploration of Liney’s history as a slave

and mother, the speaker comes to the conclusion that “[t]his city, / [...] cannot tell / me what to say even if it chokes me” (Brand 205-07). The speaker does not choose her nation language or her Canadian language; instead, she chooses to live speaking both as she wants to. The navigation through the different narratives of Liney from the past allows the speaker to take control over her choices in the present. Thus, Brand’s speaker finds strength in the fractured memories of Liney, which in turn writes Liney into a history from which she was previously exempt. Brand struggles to relocate power to Liney because unlike Moodie, a colonizer, there was not a historic record of Liney; however, she and Atwood both successfully change the historical perspective of their respective foremothers. This article has worked with Jeff Weingarten’s scholarship and demonstrated how both Atwood and Brand question an uneven power dynamic of control and authority between a formidable alien landscape and a dislocated foremother, but they relocate power in different ways. In doing so, Weingarten’s argument has not only been supported, but it has also been expanded to showcase how women can be written into history, even those originally omitted from it.



**Rylie Moscato** is an English major at Acadia University. Rylie will begin writing her Honours thesis in fall 2021, looking at various Canadian texts through feminist literary theory.

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