

"In the Middle of Becoming" Dionne Brand's Historical Vision

JOANNE SAUL

L'auteure, Dionne Brand, compare sa vision historique dans son livre « Another Place Not Here », et dans ses mémoires « A Map for the Door of No Return », et elle explore le potentiel du « déracinement » ou les ruptures historiques de ses récents écrits.

Rootless or "routeless" is how so many people describe the current condition of the "global soul." Pico Iyer, for example, goes to great lengths to illustrate how the current global condition can be defined in terms of dislocation and not belonging—he sites airports and Hong Kong hotels and the city of Toronto as the metaphors for our rootless condition. He begins his book *The Global Soul* with a description of his house on fire and his literal homelessness mirroring what he considers his lifelong homeless state. And he celebrates this condition. Give in. It's the future. Let's face it. Iyer revels in this kind of freedom of movement and lack of roots, arguing that in a country of "mongrels" like Canada, "it's no bad thing if one comes without a pedigree" (56). As Stuart Hall argues, this postmodern vision has had the effect of eroding a sense of history:

The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places, and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached—disembodied—from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear free-floating. (622)

Paradoxically, however, as Linda

Hutcheon noted in her book *The Canadian Postmodern*, Canadian writers of the 1970s and 1980s were concerned with the voicing of difference through the exploration of diverse historical accounts that challenged any single unifying narrative of history and of nation. Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to refer to works that use various strategies to foreground the constructedness of both fiction and history in the writing of the text. Such writing problematized the whole field of history writing so that "history" was seen to have much more in common with fiction per se, and historiographic metafiction was seen to be characterized by a deep questioning of "metanarratives" and the impulse to rewrite, re-envision, and deconstruct historical narratives. History was central to these texts, but

less archive, an anti-materialist perspective that we adopt at our peril. (264)

Novels like Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, Jane Urquhart's *Away*, Elizabeth Nickson's *The Monkey Puzzle Tree*, and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* are examples of these less experimental texts. Why might these writers be preoccupied with this kind of representation of the past at this particular historical moment? According to Pamela McCallum and Christian Olbey,

The question of historical representation in the current postmodern moment is very much on the agenda of contemporary historians, literary critics, authors, and cultural producers in general. (165)

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history as process—or "text"—rather than "fact."

More recently, however, as Herb Wylie suggests, fiction concerned with history in Canada has been less experimental, less self-conscious, less self-referential:

these texts for the most part convey that the past matters, that it has a material significance and does not simply amount to a disembodied, textual, referent-

They suggest that such debates may be a response to

the difficult challenge of writing history in a cultural moment of postmodernity marked by features such as extreme relativism, undecidability, and profound skepticism regarding the possibility of material referentiality, let alone the desirability or even possibility of social transformation. (165)

In a moment that has seemed to value the present over the past, and sameness over difference, the writing (or rewriting) of history now reemerges as both highly fraught and highly politicized. So, while choosing to incorporate history and the past into one's fiction does in itself require a level of skepticism about the recording of history, a number of more recent texts want to make much firmer claims about the past; they want, as aunt Emily insists in the

her recent quasi-memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) in order to suggest a shift in Brand's thinking about the power of history and its inscription on the female diasporic subjects of her works. The way that Brand negotiates disparate geo-graphies and histories speaks volumes about her sense of human agency, potential, and creativity, against a backdrop of history that is haunting and deeply scarring. For if her novel seems to offer little hope

The novel's title is an intertextual reference to Brand's collection of poems, *No Language is Neutral*: "In another place, not here a woman might touch something between beauty and nowhere, back there and here, might pass hand over hand her own trembling life" (34). This tension—between beauty and nowhere—forms the basis for much of Brand's writing. For Brand, it is the paradox that confronts members of the Black diaspora. Ruptured from a past by a brutal history of colonization, Brand's characters are often homeless and in exile, inhabiting an in-between space of "not nowhere and is" (18). Elizete, for example, is literally an orphan. Completely cut off from her past, she knows no family, has no ancestors, no lineage. She arrives under a Samaan tree seemingly from nowhere. Adela, the "great-great-great-ma" of the novel survives only as a ghost-like presence. She was too busy "grieving bad for where she came from" to care for and nurture her children. As Elizete remarks, "the place she miss must have been full and living and take every corner in her mind, so when she reach, there was no room for here" (20).

The tension of being haunted and completely filled up with a past while, at the same time, being forcefully removed from one's past is the condition of each of the characters in the book. And each tries to respond in some way to this double bind. Elizete attempts to "map" the island by naming what she finds:

I dreaming up names all the time for Adela' things. I dream Adela' shape. I even get to talking to she as if she there and asking how she like this one or that one. Tear up cloth flowers, draw blood bush, monkey face flowers, hardback swamp fish. (23)

Elizete's act of naming shows how the rupture with the past—being cut off from history—might in theory have the potential to open up a space of creativity, by however small an act.

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novel *Obasan*, to "get the facts straight" (183).

Enter Dionne Brand whose writing is fundamentally absorbed with the question of history. Born in 1953 in Trinidad, Brand immigrated to Canada when she was seventeen. She is an activist, a poet, a novelist, and an essayist who has published extensively, whose work is well recognized in Canada, and who has won awards for both her poetry and her fiction. Her strong interest in history is reflected in two volumes of social history that explore the lives of Black women in Canada in the interwar years. Brand does not write historical fiction per se, but her fictions are shaped by history. If Brand's writing lacks the parodic experimentalism and playfulness of the historiographic metafiction examined by Hutcheon, it is because, for Brand, "history," and the history of slavery in particular, is an inescapable fact for so many of her characters. "History," Brand says "hovers over them, whether they want to or not, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not" (2000: 24).

In this paper I have chosen to focus both on Brand's first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) and

for the diasporic woman caught between "another place" and "here," in *A Map to the Door of No Return* Brand begins to chart, more positively, a potentially new way of envisioning citizenry, both national and global, within a world order dominated by the expansion of global capital.

In Another Place Not Here traces the lives of the two main characters, Verlia and Elizete, back and forth from an unnamed Caribbean Island to Toronto and explores the negotiation of place in the migrant's embattled search for belonging. The book is divided into two parts. The first, narrated in island dialect by Elizete, a labourer at a cane plantation on the island, tells of her abandonment by her mother, her abusive relationships, her love for Verlia, and her journey to Toronto after Verlia's death during the American invasion of the island. The second half tells the story of Verlia's immigration to Toronto at age 17, her role in the Africanist "Movement," her return to the Caribbean, and her death. The lesbian relationship between Elizete and Verlia provides the backdrop to Brand's exploration of displacement, dispossession, and exile.

“Where you see nowhere,” she tells Adela in her mind, “I must see everything. Where you leave all that emptiness I must fill it up. Now I calculating” (24). However, her later confrontation with the streets of Toronto recalls Adela’s reaction to the Caribbean island—Elizete has no names for this place that so completely rejects her knowing of it. For the female illegal immigrant, Toronto is a space of radical unbelonging that explodes the benevolent myth of Canadian multiculturalism.

Throughout the novel, the distance from the past is countered by a sense of history as haunting. The history of slavery in the Caribbean and the echoes of colonization are inscribed not only in the island where Elizete lives, but are also carried with both Verlia and Elizete as they journey at separate times to Toronto. Ghosts haunt the island:

And the living, they lived in the past or had no past but a present that was filled, peopled with the past. No matter their whims and flights into the future some old face or old look, some old pain would reappear. (44)

Similarly, the chains of slavery echo on the bus on Jane Street in Toronto because history is inescapable:

and you thought you were sloughing off skin over the Atlantic dressing in your real self. Here. Impermanence, which perhaps you felt all along. Perhaps it was built into you long before you came and coming was not so much another place but traveling, a continuation, absently, the ringing in your ears of iron bracelets on stone. (65)

There is movement in this novel—both characters make the migration to and from the Caribbean island—but they carry with them a past that is shared by other members of the black diaspora who settle in Toronto and bring with them the lasting scars

of a history of colonization. As Verlia writes in her diary,

It’s the fact. Fact. Fact. Intangible fact of this place. It’s not possible to get rid of that. So much would have to have not happened. It’s like a life sentence. Call it what we want—colonialism, imperialism—it’s a fucking life sentence. Nobody I come from knows these words but they do the time. (215)

And this vision of history as inescapable makes the novel a tragic one. There seems little room for escape—for self-definition—apart from one’s inscription by history and also (very forcefully) by gender. In fact, in this text history is gendered (or gender is “historied”). There is a very real sense throughout both parts of the novel that women feel the brunt of the neo-colonialism on the island and the systemic racism in Toronto. On the island, Elizete is treated as a possession, passed between “owners” who abuse her. In Toronto she is raped while working as a domestic servant, mistreated by factory owners, and constantly on the run from the police. The women’s shelter in Toronto

cannot compensate for the utter devastation wrought on each of the characters throughout the novel. Because Verlia’s death revisits her dreams as a child of being released from her home, and her family—the image of the house drifting off to sea—it is described as liberating, as an escape from the physical world into a place “less tortuous, less fleshy” (247), a release from the confines of a body that is already claimed by history. With this ending, Brand seems to suggest that death is the only relief from the kind of historical determinacy that pervades her novel. History as haunting indeed.

Or maybe not. Or not entirely. Because even though the connection is tentative, Elizete does find Abena in Toronto and the basis for some kind of relationship is established. And Elizete does attempt to reclaim the island from its “nowhere-ness” by naming it. In fact, it is this vision of mapping, of beginning to explore different ways of belonging in the face of the burden of the past, that is taken up and given a much fuller articulation in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, written only five years later and subtitled, “Notes to Belonging.” Although it begins with

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where Verlia and her ex-lover Abena work is full of women needing help and their situation is hopeless: “Go home,” counsels Abena, “this is not a place for us” (230). Community—between women, between mothers and daughters—is negligible; connection is fragile.

When Verlia is killed during the American invasion of the island, her tentative connection with Elizete is shattered. And although Elizete seeks out Abena in Toronto, their meeting

the sense of lack—Brand’s grandfather does not know the tribe he came from—this “rupture in history” (5), this “wound” (11), this “absent presence” (21)—necessitates “new maps.” And this text—a mixture of memoir, travelogue, poetry and prose—is itself a kind of map.

Throughout the text Brand explores the metaphor of the “door of no return,” a term used to refer to the many ports along the West coast of Africa from which slaves were brought

to the Americas. According to Brand, it is the symbol for that historical moment that haunts the consciousness of blacks in the Diaspora; it is both indefinable and inescapable, a space that she admits exists both in history, but perhaps more forcibly in the imagination. It marks the end—of roots, of belonging, of beginnings—but it is also the creation place of blacks in the diaspora. Brand explores this paradox throughout her text. “I don’t know where I’m from,” (177) says Brand; “I’m from no place at all that I could describe” (181). Cut off from her past, yet haunted by that past, she seeks the freedom that she associates with a relief from history. She yearns to discover “how to be human, how to live without historical pain” (157); and wants to “feel as if history was not destiny” (168). And yet, she admits, that she can’t “unhappen history” (203) because, as she says,

Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is 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. Where one stands in a society seems already related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. (25)

This statement appears to echo Verlia’s in *In Another Place Not Here*. However, in this text, Brand begins to explore some alternatives to being claimed in this way by history and raises important questions as to the nature of present-day citizenry in Canada (and in the world more generally). McCallum and Olbey suggest that by rewriting the genre of the slave narrative in *In Another Place, Not Here* Brand raised fundamental questions about the effects of global capital on her present-day characters:

by exploring the interpenetration and interlinking of multiple forms

of oppression, by revealing how the weight of the distant past is felt on the historicity of the present, Brand’s novel adds a crucial voice to ongoing discussions of pressing issues for cultural materialism. (178)

Similar conclusions can be drawn about *A Map to the Door of No Return*. For Brand, the past continues to shape the present; the effects of colonialism—the ultimate displacement and dispossession enforced on her ancestors—get played out in the neo-colonial American invasion of Grenada, for example, or in the racism of the courtroom on Jarvis Street in Toronto and the Mimico Youth Detention centre in Mimico, where the youth facing trial are predominantly non-white, or in Burnt River, Ontario where the author is either viewed with suspicion or ignored altogether.

However, while this immense historical burden engulfs the characters in her novel, in *A Map* Brand charts something new. “I want to draw new maps,” says Brand. Maps that can allow for the complexities of belonging; can allow for a redrawing of space and place, and allow for a rethinking of connections and alliances. So that maybe history doesn’t have to be destiny. So that maybe identity doesn’t have to be irrevocably fixed by the past. “This dreary door which I’ve been thinking about,” says Brand, “though its effects are unremitting, does not claim the human being unremittingly” (42). In *A Map* the cityspace, while harbouring the homeless and the destitute, can, at the same time, become a space of multiple and colliding identities:

A city is a place where old migrants transmogrify into citizens with disappeared origins who look at new migrants as if at strangers, forgetting their own flights. And the new migrants remain immigrants until they too can disappear their origins. (2001: 63)

For the young girls that Brand describes facing trial in the courtroom in Toronto,

the city is beautiful and reckless, a roller coaster of laughter and lipstick, of talking and dissing and high-fiving and wide eyes of mock offence and wonder, of rap music and boys they cruise, and of just, well, cool. (105)

This is a very different version of Toronto than the one Elizete confronts in *In Another Place*.

But this is no mere celebration of multiple identities colliding. Brand wants to forge connections between and among communities—connections that seemed impossible in her earlier novel. She makes these connections as she travels. And she travels a lot. To Toronto, Grenada, Johannesburg, London, Sydney, Burnt River, Amsterdam, Vancouver. She makes links between members of the Black Diaspora, aboriginal populations in Australia, New Zealand, North America, members of the Jewish diaspora—links between other peoples that have been subjected to imperialism, both past and present, links that are transnational, transglobal. And she also evokes numerous intertexts throughout her writing, thus creating a community of mentors, guides, and teachers in art, in music, in dance, in print. And she also acknowledges the gift of forgetting given by all of those who stepped through the door of no return. It is that act of forgetting that allows for the possibility for new maps.

Too much has been made of origins,” argues Brand,

And so if I reject this notion of origins I have also to reject its mirror, which is the sense of origins used by the powerless to contest power in society. The overstrong arguments about “culture,” which are made both by the defenders of what is “Canadian” as well as defenders of what is labeled “immigrant.”

These are mirror/image—image/mirror of each other and are invariably conservative.... In opposition to the calcified Canadian nation narrative we read calcified hyphenated narratives, without exception, from all other groups in the nation which stand outside of that narrative. (70)

Brand's new maps are based, at least in part, on ruptures. Because, even though people are shaped, to some extent, by their pasts, historical ruptures are part and parcel of the Canadian (mostly urban) reality that reflects the wider global reality. And these ruptures—and the sharedness of these ruptures—allow for the possibility of imagining alternatives to other people's labels (if we're lucky), and may also serve to transform both the nation and the globe into a space of potential connectedness. Brand states,

Rootlessness is not a problem for me, and it doesn't have to do with Canada in particular. I think it has to do with that door. I think that after that door, rootedness is impossible. I think that rootedness is origin for some. How can you face that history and feel any rootedness?... If we were to use it well, this idea of no place, of rootlessness, it would be an incredibly interesting starting point for relocating selves in the world. (qtd. in da Costa)

Which brings me back to where I began, with this notion of rootlessness. And yet "rootlessness" with a difference. "Rootlessness" as a starting point. As the beginning of a notion of political efficacy. But only the beginning. "We're in the middle of becoming," argues Brand, "...we haven't arrived" (da Costa). *A Map* begins to chart that state of becoming. And that moment constitutes a dialogue with the past and a refusal to be mired in history. Where this map will lead remains unclear. But Brand's

project may offer a vision for relocating selves in the world while probing the ruptures between self and place and history and language. There are obstacles to overcome (for example, Brand refers specifically to state practices in regards to First Nations peoples), but Brand's text sets out this terrain of becoming and offers a new, albeit tentative, map for the journey.

Joanne Saul received her Ph.D. in Canadian Literature from the University of Toronto. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at Wilfrid Laurier University where she is researching the interplay between history and memory in contemporary Canadian writing by women. Her articles have appeared in Studies in Canadian Literature, Biography, Essays in Theatre, and a/b: Auto Biography Studies.

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ALISON PRYER

Forgive and forget

You were the first
to pull me onto his lap
to take me into his arms
to bury his face in my hair.
You were the first
to slowly undress me
to lie down beside me
to run his hands over my skin.

I caress these jagged
fragments,
the threadbare childhood
memories
I've held close all these years,
fearful of losing my past, my
self, you,
wishing I could remember
more
after a life spent on the run.
I hold the pitiful tatters of my
story, his story
and wonder what happened
next?

I left your home at seventeen—
never went back.
You are sixty now, and sick.
You have a bad heart.
I doubt we'll meet again.
First I'd have to know:
What will I get if I forget?
What must I give if I forgive?

Alison Pryer lives in Vancouver.