

A DIALOGUE OF DIFFERENCE: DIONNE BRAND'S WRITING WITHIN CANADIAN CULTURE

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Dionne Brand, a poet, novelist, essayist, life-writer and documentary film-maker, is a relatively well-known figure in the Canadian English-language literary culture. She was named the Poet Laureate of the city of Toronto in 2009 and is particularly admired for her rich and evocative use of the language: a finalist and winner of many awards, her collection of poetry *Land to Light On* won the most prestigious of Canadian literary prizes, the Governor-General's award for poetry in English in 1997. However in many aspects her status in the Canadian literature remains ambiguous. She is not a writer who can be overlooked; in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* (2004), for example, she is chosen for analysis by major authorities on Canadian writing: Eva-Marie Kroller on "Exploration and Travel", Coral Ann Howells on "Writing by Women", Susan Egan and Gabriele Helms on "Life Writing" and Janice Fiamengo on "Regionalism and Urbanism"¹. Even this list, however, has interesting gaps, especially when

it comes to Brand's fiction, the category of literature that ordinarily receives most attention from critics.

This article aims to provide an introduction for readers outside Canada to this very interesting author, as well as to suggest what is central in Brand's work, and why her choices work against full acceptance in Canadian culture. The approach is primarily thematic and gives priority to the importance of her personal experience and intellectual reflections as a black-skinned woman politically engaged within the Black Diaspora. Since Brand always uses the term "Black", not variants like African American or African Canadian, we also use the same term. This paper begins by situating Brand in the Canadian literary market, providing her own articulation of what her role as a writer is. It refers frequently to her essays and then looks at three literary works: the short story "Blossom" (1988), her first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), and the complex text *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) which is best classified as life-writing.

¹ Eva-Maria Kroller, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

In his survey of the Canadian publishing industry, George L. Parker indicates that Canada remained a cultural colony long after being granted state autonomy in 1867: for nearly a century Canadian readers still depended on books imported from Britain and the United States². It was only in the 1960s that Canadian publishers who favoured Canadian authors appeared, when good economic conditions coincided with a self-conscious cultural nationalism supported by a program of government grants for the arts³.

Dionne Brand (b.1953) came to Toronto from her native Trinidad and Tobago in 1970 just when Canadian literary culture was rapidly expanding. As a black-skinned teenager, she had to accept poorly-paid jobs, yet she also took a bachelor's degree at the prestigious University of Toronto and later continued her studies. Her first book of poetry, *Fore Day Morning*, was published in 1978, and other publications followed quickly. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Canadian nationalist sentiment did not create a favourable climate for writers whose interests lay within minority areas of Canadian society or outside Canada entirely. Peter Dickinson's 1999 study *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada* argues that women writers of colour do not fit in well with the agenda of "nationalist sentiment" propagated by major Canadian publishers such as Mc-

Clelland and Stewart.⁴ In support of his argument, he examines the reviews of Brand's early books of poetry, which were recognized as original and meritorious but which puzzled Anglo-Canadian reviewers by their emphasis on race and gender, as well as by the so-called angry tone of the poems: for example, Dickinson cites Catherine Russell in 1983 referring to this poetry as having "a threatening tone" and being "primitive in its violence and nakedness"⁵.

Brand's strong talent could not be denied, moving her from the very small Williams-Wallace press, which specialized in African-Canadian writers, to publishers within the inner circle of the Canadian literary world. Nonetheless, there are many obstacles still preventing the whole-hearted acceptance of Dionne Brand's work as part of the central Canadian tradition. In a thematic survey of Canadian literature, Faye Hammill comments that "Brand positions her modern-day characters as inheritors of centuries of discrimination and racially motivated violence"; still, she concludes that "space prohibits exploration of the complex politics of Brand's poetry"⁶. Dickinson, the subjects of her book being homosexual Canadian writers, is sympathetic to Brand's personal concerns and feels that she is "a borderline case" because her "race, gender and sexuality necessarily preclude full participation in national citizenship, and thus prevent her

² George L. Parker, "Publishing Industry", *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, ed. W.H. New, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, 905–909.

³ *Ibid.*, 910.

⁴ Peter Dickinson, *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 162–163.

⁶ Faye Hammill, *Canadian Literature*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 128.

from ever 'being' a Canadian writer"⁷. He does use the words 'politics' and 'political' frequently and provides some analysis of Brand's documentary film *Listening for Something* (1996), a long conversation with the American poet Adrienne Rich; Dickinson summarizes this dialogue as concerning "the nation-state, citizenship, global capitalism, revolutionary socialism, racism, feminism, sexuality and the positioning of themselves and their work in relation to each of these subjects", but stops short of providing a more detailed account of Brand's political beliefs⁸.

Yet Brand, though it took her a number of years to come out as a lesbian, from the beginning of her career has emphasized the historical and political issues which have shaped her thinking and writing. In 1990, she stated: "I don't consider myself on any 'margin', on the margin of Canadian literature. I'm sitting right in the middle of Black literature, because that's who I read, that's who I respond to"⁹. She repeats this in a number of interviews but most explicitly in *Listening for Something*. Both she and Rich show considerable sympathy for each other's differences, but Brand does choose to place a polemical statement near the very end of her film: "Concretely what I think I am doing when I am writing poetry is speaking to Black people and especially to those that share the same kind of history." Rich asks, "What do you feel about being overheard?", to which Brand responds that everyone has the right to

'overhear' her poetry, but that primarily she cares "about interpretation by Black people"¹⁰.

One would have to read Brand's writing very selectively, filtering out the references to politics present and past, to miss seeing her as a very ideologically engaged writer. Whether it is poems about her experience of the American invasion of Grenada in 1983, or those in her latest volumes referring to atrocities in Afghanistan and Iraq, Brand presents herself as a writer deeply concerned with political issues. Her ninth volume of poetry, *Inventory* (2006), gives the final position to a poem that starts with imagined protests from her readers: "On reading this someone will say / God, is there no happiness then"; she concludes firmly, after listing horrific massacres in different parts of the world, "I have nothing soothing to tell you, / That's not my job, / my job is to revise and revise this bristling list, / hourly"¹¹.

In her conversation with Adrienne Rich as well as in her autobiographical writings and in novels with reference to her own experience, Brand speaks at length about commitment to her own version of revolutionary socialism, drawing on the ideals of communism and an ideology of resistance developed by the Black Power movement in the United States and anti-colonial movements in the Americas and Africa. For her, as she tells Rich, communism "meant that there was a way out" of the

⁷ Peter Dickinson, *Here is Queen: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*, 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰ Dionne Brand, director. *Listening for Something ... Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation*. Video. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada Studio D, 1996.

¹¹ Dionne Brand, *Inventory*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006, 89, 100.

stagnant social system she saw in Trinidad, people of colour still living in poverty and working for “the big bosses”: “I became a communist before I ever read Marx”¹².

As for Canada, her country of immigration, Brand interprets assimilation as both impossible and undesirable – rejection of her by the dominant culture, refusal by her to accept the conditions for assimilation. She often writes of a forced and false show of innocence by the dominant Anglophone elite. In one essay, she asserts that the First Nations constitute an “absent presence [...] at the core of Canadian identity, a whole set of people relegated to the present past” and ironically lists the items that are widely accepted as truly Canadian: “wilderness, beer, hockey, the North”, none of which mean anything to her¹³.

More provocatively she states: “There is an official Canadianness that functions here. It functions to exclude as it functions to define.”¹⁴ In her experience, Canada is far from being the multicultural utopia it presents itself as. In the United States, as she asserts, the existence of racism is at least acknowledged, whereas “in this country one is faced with a stupefying innocence”¹⁵. For example, she objects to a journalist from the influential Toronto *Globe and Mail* newspaper who explains away a riot in downtown Toronto as simple “young discontent and rowdiness”

and concludes that Toronto was certainly not the scene of “racial unrest”¹⁶. Brand argues cogently that he ignores the fact that this riot followed ones in the United States, violent outbreaks after a videotape of a young African-American being beaten up was widely screened. Brand then switches her register ironically to address the journalist: “Well, I was there, honey, and let me assure you it was racial unrest. I felt it myself, the imperative to tear down all manifestation of a system that keeps its foot at our throat, saw it on the faces of the young Black people on the street”¹⁷. She also notes that the journalist should have linked this anger with that felt in the Canadian Black community just a short time earlier when two police officers accused of killing a Toronto black teenager were let go by the court without charge.

The issue of anger in writing about Canadian society is one that Brand also interprets in terms of racial politics: “Reviewers always comment on the ‘anger’ in my work, for example (anger having been categorized as a particularly ‘Black’ emotion), and on its portrayal of ‘the Black experience’. White work, on the other hand, is never questioned for its portrayal of ‘the white experience.’”¹⁸ Furthermore, she ascribes a specific ideological role to herself as a writer, as she makes clear in describing the conflict she had while serving on the jury for the Governor-General’s award for poetry. When the other two jury members, both male and white, want to reach a

¹² Dionne Brand, director. *Listening for Something*.

¹³ Dionne Brand, “Imagination, Representation and Culture,” *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics*. Rev. ed. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁵ Dionne Brand, “Notes for Writing through Race”, *Bread Out of Stone*, 191.

¹⁶ Dionne Brand, “Whose Gaze, and Who Speaks for Whom”, *Bread Out of Stone*, 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

decision through consensus, Brand insists on taking a vote so that her opposition to their judgment is recorded. She explains that she sees her role as “contesting those very values [...] that come to stand for Canadian culture. I bring to a jury another definition of the meaning of poetry in everyday life. My tradition says that your speech must be relevant, charged, politically conscious, memorable. It must pursue human freedom.”¹⁹ Brand bases her stand on “my tradition”, the notion that the writer should be politically engaged, a stance much more common among writers in Europe and South America than in English-speaking Canada.

The Black immigrants that Brand depicts have to make choices about their relationship with their place of settlement, which in her fiction is most often the city of Toronto. According to research by the Canadian sociologist Wsevoid W. Isajiw, immigrants and their children, in particular those from minority groups, tend to adopt one of several possible strategies to deal with identity issues. As minorities, their ethnic attachments are complicated for them by the attitudes, often prejudicial or racist, of the dominant ethnic majority. Every migrant needs to integrate economically, but also, in order to feel psychologically comfortable, has to find a personal balance between ethnic identity and conformity to the norms of the country of settlement²⁰.

This standard narrative of racial humiliation appears frequently in Canadian fic-

tion, the best-known example being that of Hungarian Canadian John Marlyn’s novel *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957). It is not one, however, that Dionne Brand favours in her fiction. In her very fine short story, “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms and Waterfalls,” she turns the formula inside out. Her protagonist is an ordinary working-class woman from Trinidad, who migrates to Toronto and encounters a wall of prejudice: like most Caribbean women, she is reduced to poorly-paid jobs taking care of white children or cleaning white homes.

However, a variety of devices are used to signal that this will be a reversal of the narrative of immigrant shaming. First, there is the elaborate title which identifies Blossom as a “goddess”. Then, throughout the story Brand uses a third-person narrator speaking a version of Trinidadian English. This is Blossom’s own language, and its appearance on the page signals difference by its non-standard grammar and vocabulary. In this way, although the story takes place in a setting familiar to Anglo-Canadian readers, it is also situated within an ethnic community foreign to many of them. Moreover, the opening paragraph describes the success of Blossom’s commercial venture in the Toronto Caribbean community where she runs an “obeah house and speakeasy on Vaughan Street”²¹.

In the second paragraph, the narrative time moves back to the early years of Blossom’s settlement where repeated

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁰ Wsevoid W. Isajiw, *Understanding Diversity: Ethnicity and Race in the Canadian Context*, Toronto: Thompson Educational, 170–171, 193–194.

²¹ Dionne Brand, “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms and Waterfalls”, *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1989, 31.

failures have soured her feelings about Canada: "Every once in a while, under she breath, she curse the day she come to Toronto from Oropuche, Trinidad."²² Immediately, however, the following sentence rejects the notion that Blossom completely lacks agency: "But nothing, not even snarky white people, could keep Blossom under."²³ For several years Blossom is defeated more than once, but she remains extraordinarily resilient.

Indeed, the story has strong comic moments as Blossom unexpectedly defies the roles that she has been assigned. When the doctor who employs Blossom makes a sexual advance, "she grab on to he little finger and start to squeeze back till he face change colour from white to black and he had to scream out"²⁴. The doctor's wife supports him, driving Blossom into a rage: "Here this dog trying to abuse me and she watching *me* cut eye! Me! A church-going woman!"²⁵ The scene escalates in a spectacular and very funny way: Blossom hurls the laundry into the swimming pool and clutches the man so strongly around the neck that the police have to free him. Still she refuses to leave without her last day's pay, and her resistance does not end here. As the sequel shows, immigrant women have become aware of how Canadian society functions: the next day Blossom and her friends return to picket her employer's upper-class house, denouncing him as a rapist, and waving a Black Power flag. The narrative of shaming is reversed, as the

man's neighbours peer through their windows: "Not a soul ain't outside, but you never see so much drapes and curtain moving and swaying up and down Balmoral."²⁶

The saga of Blossom's life in Canada continues according to this pattern. When she realizes that her husband, another Caribbean immigrant, is simply living off her, she again becomes enraged; brandishing a bread knife, she chases her panicked husband down the street. Blossom now feels deeply depressed, her life in Canada being a failure in all respects. She sits in her Christian church seeking comfort. What comes instead is forces from Black Caribbean religious belief, rousing her to the most significant of her acts of resistance. The powerful goddess of the title of the story, Oya, forces Blossom in a "terrifying dream" to "look at Black people suffering"²⁷. In a fierce battle the monster Suffering devours almost all of Blossom, but "Blossom was never a woman to stop [...] So she roll and dance she grain-self into a hate so hard, she chisel herself into a sharp, hot prickle and fly in Suffering face"²⁸. Finally Blossom becomes able to be possessed by Oya herself, armed with "the warrior knife" and performing the ritual "warrior dance"²⁹.

In the economic sense, Brand's story shows an immigrant finding success within the ethnic small business world; this is what Isajiw calls immersing oneself fully in the ethnic community to the exclusion

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, italics in original, 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

of the dominant Canadian one³⁰. Paradoxically, it is only by ignoring white Canadian society that Blossom satisfies her ambition to be someone of importance, a status she did not have in her homeland or for many years in Canada. She has become an obeah woman, the priestess of a powerful goddess, able to give advice and help others: "From that day, Blossom dress in yellow and red from head to foot, the colour of joy and the colour of war against suffering. [...] Black people on Vaughan Road recognized Blossom as gifted and powerful by she carriage and the fierce look in she eyes."³¹ Blossom is not politically sophisticated enough to relate her situation to larger political issues, but she is one of a number of the very strong Caribbean women who populate Brand's fiction, women who respond with resistance to their subordinate status as Black immigrants in a white society.

Strong rebellious women also appear as the three protagonists of Brand's first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996). Like Blossom, Verlia, Elziete, and Abena move from Caribbean islands, but not for economic reasons; they intend to join the political struggle for Black rights that has arisen in North America in the 1970s. Isajiw describes this mode of relating to the country of settlement as a refusal to immerse one's identity either in the dominant community or the ethnic minority, instead of finding a home in a large movement which may be political, cultural or reli-

gious³². Though this novel is not autobiographical in its general plot and none of its characters are self-portraits, the three women's preoccupations and experiences do reflect those of Brand.

The least, like her, is the youngest, Elziete, abandoned by her family, raised by a stranger, and, when the novel begins, married to a brutal man and working on a sugar plantation. Elziete grows up suffering from the absence of any specific past, personal or communal: she "needed history, something before this place, something that this place cut off. [...] They had been taken. [...] sold".³³ It is through her meeting with Verlia, a political activist, and their love affair that she finds the strength to escape economic and sexual slavery. Yet Verlia dies in the American invasion of an unnamed island that has chosen a socialist government, leaving Elziete again without any sense of meaning in her life. In searching for traces of her lover in Toronto, she meets another Caribbean woman, Abena, also Verlia's lover at one time, who runs an office to help women of colour. Abena is the oldest of the three protagonists; years of social consultation have made her cynical about prospects in Canada for these immigrants: "No revolution is coming, baby, no fine bright morning. No sister, no amen to this"³⁴.

The city that Brand describes in her novel is certainly not the Toronto pictured by middle-class white Canadian authors.

³⁰ Wsevolod W. Isajiw, *Understanding Diversity*, 194.

³¹ Dionne Brand, "Blossom", 41.

³² Wsevolod W. Isajiw, *Understanding Diversity*, 195.

³³ Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1996, 41.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109–110.

Instead, readers see it through the eyes of these women as a shabby and dangerous place. Dealing every day with the problems of Caribbean immigrant women, Abena keeps repeating: "Go home, this is not a place for us."³⁵ Elziete experiences this violence herself; hired by a white man to clean his house, she is raped and beaten up by him. At the same time, Elziete is politically conscious enough to resist the seduction of what may be called the "Canadian Dream", a version of the well-known American Dream: "They thought that the time would come when they would live, they would get a chance to be what they saw [...] But ghostly, ghostly this hope."³⁶ Meanwhile, Elziete herself, though she finds no real solution in Canada, keeps up her resistance through her memories of Verlia.

Structurally, Verlia is the central character in the novel, linking Abena and Elziete in Toronto even after she is dead. She is also the closest in her experience to Brand. At first, she reflects the determination of a young Dionne Brand leaving Trinidad for a Black Diasporan world she has imagined from information about the Black Power movement after the assassination of Martin Luther King. In the essay "Bathurst", whose title refers to the Toronto subway station at Bathurst and Bloor Streets, the centre of a growing Caribbean community, Brand recalls the excitement of being Black in Toronto in the 1970s: new ways of dressing based on African styles, Black Power fists raised in salute,

the importance of communist and Islamic ideas, all of which made her growing up in North America so different from the white experience of the same period: "We didn't go to Woodstock, we couldn't stand John Lennon and the Beatles, we couldn't care less if Elvis lived or died [...]. There was no comfortable identity to fall back on, no suburb waiting, it wasn't our mothers and fathers we were defying, it was history."³⁷ Instead, her memory is of being part "of a troop of pamphleteers steadily working this corner from 1972 to 1978", helping to rouse public consciousness about the jailed African-American Angela Davis or the Black Torontonian Albert Johnson mistakenly shot to death in his own house by white policemen³⁸.

Verlia (*In Another Place, Not Here*), from adolescence chooses a radical path. She leaves her island consciously rejecting poverty, the abuse of women and passivity. The rhetoric of what she calls the Movement replaces that pervading her homeland where tag phrases, generations after the end of slavery, still preach acceptance of every kind of suffering and abuse: "The words she'd heard all her life till now: 'Is only God knows', 'Is so things is', 'God has a way for us'"³⁹. For Verlia, Toronto is a place in which she can be active and assert power. At first her expectations are satisfied by joining a Black revolutionary group; even the simple task she is given of pasting up posters for a protest rally

³⁷ Dionne Brand, "Bathurst", *Blood Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics*. Rev. ed. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998, 29–30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30–33.

³⁹ Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, 166.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

turns her into “a new person”⁴⁰. Work and readings in revolutionary socialism make Verlia able to analyse the Canadian society she encounters in Toronto not, as it is officially said to be, as multicultural, but sharply divided into two separate worlds, “one so opaque that she ignores it as much as she can – this one is white and runs things”, while “the other world growing steadily at its borders is the one she knows and lives in”⁴¹.

With time, Toronto seems less fruitful a ground for her work than Verlia has believed; many of her political comrades have left the city, some moving to Africa. Unlike Abena who espouses a moderate socialism, Verlia believes that violent action is necessary. Eventually, she goes to an unnamed island to take part in a revolution that places a communist government in power: in a fictional parallel to Brand’s experience in Grenada, she finds herself there during an American invasion. In reality, as a Canadian citizen, Brand was flown out by the American military, while Verlia, who has participated closely in the revolution, is given a more dramatic end, leaping over a cliff down to the sea rather than being captured and killed. The last lines of the novel – “She is laughing and laughing and laughing [...] She’s flying out to sea [...] She’s in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy” – return the readers to the title of the novel, “In Another Place, Not Here”⁴².

Furthermore, the title of this final section of the novel, “Verlia, Flying”, con-

nects the image of a triumphant escape to mythological goddess figures like Oya in “Blossom” and stories passed down through generations in the Caribbean or African slaves who walked back home on the sea or flew away from captivity. *In Another Place, Not Here* is part of Brand’s engagement as a writer, her obligation to transform oral history and fragments from the works of the colonizers into a coherent written narrative for the Black diaspora.

This sense of mission is especially apparent in the autobiographical musings of *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001). Here, Brand explores the slippery foundation for the sense of belonging among Black Caribbeans like herself: on the one hand, they confront an enormous gap in historical knowledge, and, on the other, an intense desire to base identity on a specific place of origin. Again, in this text Brand’s position as a Canadian writer is ambiguous; she presents Canada, her long-time place of settlement, as one of the objects of analysis and not as a new homeland.

Critics have had trouble assigning *A Map to the Door of No Return* to a specific literary genre. Eva-Marie Kroller finds that it combines “travel-writing with memoir, history, linguistic study and a dozen other genres”⁴³. Susan Egan and Gabriele Helms are more persuasive when identifying it as life-writing; they note that the text is part of a new tendency to “explore questions of identity and po-

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 168–169.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 247.

⁴³ Eva-Marie Kroller, “Exploration and Travel”, *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Kroller, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 89.

sitioning in innovative ways through the autobiographical and biographical practice of the personal essay⁴⁴. Initially readers may find this hard to see because the text does not have the chronological structure common in an autobiography. Although it begins with Brand's childhood in Trinidad, it then moves rapidly back and forth in time and from place to place, often ones that are neither the writer's homeland nor Canada. In analyzing changes in postcolonial literature, Elleke Boehmer usefully distinguishes two generations of writers originating in imperial colonies: "Whereas early post-independence writers tended to identify with a nationalist narrative and to endorse the need for communal solidarity, from the late 1980s and into the twenty-first century many writers' geographic and cultural affiliations became more divided, displaced and uncertain."⁴⁵ Brand was a child in 1962 when Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain; still a young teenager, she had made up her mind to join Black Power movements in North America. However, she came to doubt that a radical social change would occur in Canadian society. Her text is a good example of what Boehmer calls "the writing of 'not quite' and 'in-between'", in which a more confident identity is not asserted.⁴⁶

In Brand's view, all places of settlement are irredeemably wrong for the descend-

ants of those brought from Africa as slaves to the Americas: "One stands on a street corner in Ocho Rios or in a marketplace in Montevideo or at a newspaper kiosk in Chicago or Sofia, one stands there and imagines another territory, another history."⁴⁷ She traces this sense of being homeless back to the most traumatic of places, the one alluded to in her title, the Door of No Return. This was what Africans sold into slavery called the huge fortress-prisons on the west coast of Africa, where slave-dealers brought men, women, and children and from where they were packed into ships to be taken to the New World. Customarily, captives from different tribes and languages were mixed together to prevent resistance based on linguistic, religious and cultural traditions.

Beyond the generalized term 'Africa' and its slave forts, members of the Black Diaspora in the Americas have no homeland. Dionne Brand opens her text not with the date and place of her birth in Trinidad, but with her attempts at age thirteen to break through the wall of not-knowing: "My grandfather said he knew what people we came from. I reeled off all the names I knew. Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandigo? He said no to all of them, saying he would know if he heard it"⁴⁸. No matter how many tribes she names, none of them stir her grandfather's memory; this failure becomes, as she writes, "a rift between us [...] A small space opened in me"⁴⁹. Over

⁴⁴ Susan Egan and Gabriele Helms, "Life Writing", *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Krolller, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 238.

⁴⁵ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 225.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁴⁷ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2001, 49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

time she realizes that she is dealing with something larger than her own family: “It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.”⁵⁰ The subtitle of her text is “Notes to Belonging”, in which the preposition ‘to’ causes a subtle discomfort for readers; normally, one would write ‘notes about or on belonging’. The preposition ‘to’ distances Brand from the experience of belonging. There is no place that she feels she belongs to, yet, as her reflections show, there are a great number of them that are deeply significant to her.

In regard to the structure of *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Kroller makes an insightful observation: Brand’s “approach is one of question and answer, with repeated runs at a topic or formulation and with provisional conclusions”⁵¹. The central topic, belonging, is treated in a number of ways: as Brand’s personal dilemma, as a collective problem for the Black Diaspora, and as one that traumatizes the marginalized in contemporary societies, from aboriginals in Australia and the homeless in the city of Toronto where Brand lives. With 51 titled sections on 224 pages, the text often moves forward without apparent links of the subject or theme to what has gone before, forcing readers to find these themselves.

For example, as has been indicated, the first section of the book “A Circumstantial Account of the State of Things” describes Brand’s vain attempt to make her grand-

father recall the name of his tribe and her pain when he cannot remember. This is followed by a much shorter section called “Maps” which explains the extraordinary ability of the rufous hummingbird, so tiny it “can fit into the palm of a hand”, to travel “five thousand miles from summer home to winter home and back”.⁵² Here, the commentary is left up to the readers. It turns out that human beings can lose their sense of a place of belonging more absolutely than even very small creatures.

Throughout the book Brand is constantly travelling, but every place she visits reminds her of empire and colony, the dominant and the dominated. For example, when she lands at the airport in England, she encounters people from former British colonies, those like herself who were born into a colony: “I know we marched into schools in the same classical music, we wore the same uniforms [...] we stood in lines waving flags at completely indifferent royals we sang English airs, we played London Bridge, we danced the maypole”⁵³. Their version of imperial culture was at odds with the natural and historical reality around them: it was a hodge-podge of incongruent elements, pseudo culture for the inferior so that they would remain inferior.

When one’s history begins with a traumatic act of violence, Brand argues, the self that is formed is deeply troubled, a condition worsened by racist attitudes: “To live at the Door of No Return is to live self-consciously. To be always aware of your presence as a presence outside of

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹ Eva-Marie Kroller, “Exploration and Travel”, 89.

⁵² Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 76.

yourself. And to have ‘others’ constantly remark on your presence as outside of itself”⁵⁴. Though there are no longer slaves in the Western world, black-skinned people can still be subjected to horrific acts of violence by white authorities. Brand refers to newspaper accounts, such as one in 2000 of “25-year-old Marcus Omofuma, a Nigerian asylum seeker” who died while being deported by three officers from Vienna, transported “bound and gagged”, found dead en route in Sofia; “no charges were brought against the officers”⁵⁵. In 1997, the *New York Times* reported how a policeman in that city had bragged to fellow officers about “ramming a broom handle” into a Black man’s rectum; he even waved the broom handle around the precinct house⁵⁶.

These stories are told in the opening part of a long section, the title of which is a quotation from the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott: “Pray for a life without plot, a day without narrative”⁵⁷. Three sub-sections on racism against black-skinned people create expectations in the readers that the whole section will continue this way. However, in sub-section four, Brand moves back from her subject to a panoramic view of the human beings that have been singled out as inferior. She begins abruptly: “There are other bodies in the world which are brutalized” and lists examples, beginning with women forced by the Taliban in Afghanistan to be “entombed alive in burquas” and continuing with “the emaciated bodies of

the death camps of the Holocaust”, “specters in Bosnia”, and “starved and famine bodies of ghostlike children in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea”⁵⁸. She emphasizes that the focus in her text on black-skinned bodies “is not a case for exclusivity, only for a certain particularity. A particularity which has its resonances against those other brutalized bodies”⁵⁹. Brand’s writing encompasses many issues and concerns that are not her primary subjects but those which she does not forget.

In the last quarter of the text, in the fifteen-page section called “October”, Brand describes her own birth into political realities, her witnessing of the American invasion of Grenada and the violent repression of its revolutionary socialist government. She went to Grenada in 1983 as part of a Canadian program to provide assistance to new governments, but her personal motivation was to heal her own wounds: “I had come here in search of a thought, how to be human, how to live with historical pain. It seemed to me then that a revolution would do it”⁶⁰. For a short time, it seemed that “history was not destiny. I wanted some relief from the enclosure of the Door of No Return”⁶¹. Then, she had seen the bodies of her Grenada colleagues falling from an American shellfire off a cliff, as she later described in the novel *In Another Place, Not Here*. Bitterly, she calls her belief that the United States would tolerate another socialist regime in the Caribbean “childish and impossible”⁶².

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 167–168.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 168.

In the last three pages of *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand reflects again on her “grandfather’s forgetting” which African tribe they belonged to, which she found so painful and with which she began her text. Now, however, she interprets this as a kind of a “gift” that was passed on to him through the generations, “most especially the one in my family who stepped through the Door of No Return”⁶³. A great trauma might seem to be best forgotten, although it cannot cease affecting the generations that follow. The diaspora was left “to travel without a map”, just as their ancestors did from the Door of No Return. After this, “a map was only a set of impossibilities”, “only a life of conversations about a forgotten list of irretrievable selves”⁶⁴. This, the final, sentence of her book admits a defeat; the hope suggested by the title is deemed impossible.

What Dionne Brand brings to the literature of her country of settlement is a profound concern with the issues that are broader than those central in Canadian lit-

erature. Like many countries with a continuing immigration, and especially with its official policy of a multicultural society, Canada and its writers are strongly interested in questions of identity. However, Brand’s literary works are not about the desire to acquire a Canadian identity. As she emphasizes in both fictional and non-fictional texts, racial prejudice in Canada is still too much alive to make this a realistic goal for the majority of black-skinned immigrants and their children. However Brand’s criticism of Canadian society is nuanced: she suggests both in her fictional works, essays, and life-writing that the Black Diaspora has no real homeland in North America; the trauma of its lack of specific origins hinders the development of the sense of belonging. Migration from an economically poorer country like Trinidad to a wealthy one like Canada cannot solve fundamental problems for Black people. At the same time, the dominant majority in Canada has to recognize that racism does exist and that the creation of a healthy multicultural society is still an ideal that has not been reached.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

KITOKS BALSAS: DIONNNE’S BRAND KŪRYBA KANADOS KULTŪRINIAME KONTEKSTE

Milda Danytė

S a n t r a u k a

Šiuolaikinės rašytojos Dionne Brand, gimusios Trinidade 1953 m. ir įsikūrusios Toronte 1970 m., vieta Kanados literatūroje yra savitai dviprasmė. Nors gerbiama už kalbos poetiškumą ir laimėjusi ne vieną premiją, ji vis tiek nėra dažnai minima kritikų ir publikos pripažintų rašytojų. Šio straipsnio tikslas – pristatyti D. Brand kūrybą ir paban-

dyti paaiškinti, kaip rašytoja sąmoningai skiriasi nuo daugumos gerai žinomų Kanados kūrėjų. Būdama aktyvi, politiškai angažuota juodaodžių judėjimo dalyvė nuo pat atvykimo į Torontą, D. Brand meistriškai išnaudoja poezijos, romano ir esė žanrų ypatumus, kad apmąstytų tokius reiškinius, kaip antai rasizmas, istorinė atmintis

ir traumos, kurie dar ir šiandien trukdo Š. Amerikos juodaodžiams susikurti stabilią tapatybę. Straipsnyje analizuojamos autorės keliamos temos ir aptariamas stiprių moterų personažų kūrimas

D. Brand apsakyme „Blossom“ (1988 m.), romane „In another place, not here“ (1996) ir ilgoje autobiografinėje esė „A map to the door of no return: notes on belonging“ (2001 m.).

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