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Being in the Black Queer Diaspora: Embodied Archives in *A Map to the Door of No Return*

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Abstract: Poet, novelist, and essayist Dionne Brand's unconventional memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) provides a method for identifying how the embodied experiences of Black queer subjects form an archive for understanding operations of power within Black queer diasporas. Using the analytic of sensual worldmaking, a term I use to describe Black feminist narrative writing that locates embodied erotic and sensual experience as an authorizing source of knowledge about identity-based power dynamics, I illustrate how *A Map to the Door of No Return* offers a Black queer archive of experiences and narratives in the Black diaspora. Brand manipulates the form of memoir to produce a creative text woven from multiple archives: the author-speaker's Black lesbian embodied experiences, colonial journals and travelogues, and the archive of metaphors used by Black subjects to narrate and understand the African diaspora. In so doing, Brand constructs what Marlene Goldman (2004) calls a "community of witnesses" to diasporic Black queerness.

Keywords: Dionne Brand, Black queer diaspora, memoir, embodied archives, sensual worldmaking

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In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Trinidadian-Canadian author Dionne Brand (2001) recalls the role of two particular books in shaping her experience of desire: a text on the Haitian Revolution called *The Black Napoleon*, whose author she cannot recall, and D.H. Lawrence's 1928 novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Despite the different thematic foci of these texts, and the very different ways Brand recounts experiencing them—a deeply private and individual encounter with the histories of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines on one hand, and a surreptitious but communal schoolgirl consumption of a story about a forbidden romance on the other—they share the status of foundational texts in Brand's lifelong reckoning with literature. Though the themes of Blackness, colonialism, gender, and intimacy introduced in these texts have also been taken up in Brand's body of work, in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, she makes clear that the primary resonance of these two books in her own life is in their corporeal trace:

Books leave gestures in the body; a certain way of moving, of turning, a certain closing of the eyes, a way of leaving, hesitations. . . . These first two books shaped me, and I suspect I have been writing these two books ever since, recalling and reimagining them. I had been seduced by them. The fact is, I remember them only in my body. I cannot quote a single line from them, and I have not ever felt the need to return to them physically, though I know that I always return to them as I write. (2001, 191-92)

I am interested in using this passage as a starting point from which to think about embodiment, feeling, and narrative creation as an intertwined and recursive set of concerns in Brand's writing. The writing found in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, like Brand's other works, demonstrates how the embodied experiences

of diasporic Black queer women can be used as archives from which to generate theoretical and material understandings of how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the Black diaspora, as well as how queerness and womanhood are lived within diaspora.¹ These embodied and textual archives allow us to understand diaspora as an existential condition which negotiates various forms of gendered, racialized, and sexualized orientation and disorientation. I read *A Map to the Door of No Return* and some of Brand's other prose in the terms of what I name "sensual worldmaking," a method through which Black queer authors translate their lived, embodied experiences into theoretical and literary knowledge. Brand's incorporation of lived experience into literary narrative across fiction, essays, and memoir works to articulate how the margins occupied by Black queer subjects are perceived and experienced.

Amber Jamilla Musser (2014) writes that sensation "marks the body's existence as a perceiving subject and the world's existence as an object to be perceived" (1). Sensation is both structural, as evidenced by the use of language and other forms of exchange to communicate overlapping but not identical meanings of a phenomenon like heat or pain, and individual, to the extent that sensations are housed and experienced from within individual bodies. Musser therefore theorizes sensation as a way to critically read the convergences of bodies with societally produced identities. She writes, "by theorizing sensation we acquire a way to understand structures at a level beyond the discursive. . . . Though each body reacts differently, we read structure as a form with multiple incarnations and many different affects" (23). An attention to sensation thus enables an analysis of how structures of perception and structures of power—heat and pain as well as race and gender, for example—are made manifest within individual and embodied subjectivity.

Sensual worldmaking borrows from Musser a focus on the ways sensation encompasses both structural and individual phenomena, with a particular focus on what Black feminist literary scholar Barbara Christian (1988) identifies as literature's capacity to communicate the sensuality of experience. Christian writes, "For me, literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense" (77-78, emphasis in original). Speaking as a literary critic, a scholar, and as a Black Caribbean American woman reading other Black women's literature, Christian identifies sensuality as a central component of literary language, and therefore as holding a privileged role in allowing Black women to have their individual experiences of reality affirmed. As evidenced by the passage cited earlier, literature appears to have played a similar role for Brand in both confirming and creating reality through the gestures, sounds, and pacing books leave in the bodies of their readers as well as their authors. The co-construction of embodied experience and literature—sensual worldmaking—is thus critical for the ways Brand theorizes Blackness, queer womanhood, and diaspora.

Brand's body of work bears a sustained concern with what Black queer women's embodied experiences suggest about the ways Black women are positioned within structures of power, and pays particular attention to the ways they can be rendered marginal and disposable in the world in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.² Two overlapping patterns in Brand's work illustrate this sustained concern: on one hand is a pattern of self-reflective writing, which ranges from personal essays in the collection *Bread out of Stone* (1994), to the memoir reflections of *A Map to the Door of No Return* and *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading* (2020), among others. Another pattern is found in her writing about the Grenada Revolution and U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. The poetry collection *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* (1984), the essay "Nothing of Egypt (1994)," sections of *A Map to the Door of No Return*, and the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) are some of the places where Brand writes about the Grenada Revolution and the U.S. invasion which is often described as bringing about its fall. Brand herself traveled to Grenada in order to participate in the revolution and witnessed both the invasion and the chaotic events which preceded it. In many ways, then, the threads of self-reflective writing and writing about the Grenada Revolution are intertwined within Brand's body of work. These two threads also illustrate Brand's literary

investment—spanning four decades and multiple genres—in materializing and personalizing the politics of the Black diaspora.

The conditions of the transatlantic slave trade and the ensuing Black diaspora have resulted in the far-reaching dispossession of people of African descent and have both produced and sustained cultural and historical erasures. Scholars have discussed the ways that Black subjects are visible within the archives of colonialism and slavery primarily as economic objects, and/or as subjects *to* the law who are simultaneously denied human subjectivity within the eyes of the law. *A Map to the Door of No Return* turns to embodied experience as an archival source, not to fix or immobilize or render transparent the experiences of Black diasporic subjects, but as the necessary material for a textured accounting of how Black lives are lived in this diasporic wake. Early in the text, Brand recalls a childhood experience of her grandfather's forgetting, though he once knew, "what people we came from" (2001, 3). Describing the disappointment and frustration young Brand and her grandfather shared, she asserts, "we were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were" (5). Recognition of this crisis of historical identity animates the discussions and explorations in this text. As Erica L. Johnson (2014) writes, "Brand structures something as intimate as personal memory and identity as an intervention in the archive," an intervention which recasts what archives are to be consulted, where they are found, and what questions to ask of them (150).

Brand's archival interventions are legible within a context of Black feminist scholarship which has theorized various possibilities for literary narratives as methods of interrogating and contesting archives of slavery. Marisa Fuentes' (2016) historical work *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* narrates the myriad forms of violence against enslaved women in eighteenth century urban Barbados. The text speculates on how these violences, most often visible in the archive through the first-person accounts of white men, might have been experienced from the perspective of the enslaved women themselves. Fuentes details how her quest to "tell a story from the standpoints and thoughts of the women about whom [she] wished to write" was made impossible by the overwhelming absence of Black women's subjectivities in the archives—their voices, their perspectives, their handwriting (145). Fuentes' scholarship meditates on the revisions to archival and other historiographical methods—and therefore the discipline of history itself—which are necessary in order to research, write, and teach about the lives of enslaved Black women rendered fragmentary at best, and inhuman disposable refuse at worst, in the dominant archives of slavery and colonialism. *Dispossessed Lives'* immanent critique of history's disciplinary emphasis on producing coherent and empirically substantiated narratives insists on an increased attention to the kinds of narratives that can(not) be produced while historicizing the lived experiences of Atlantic slavery and its aftermaths (146).

Elements of Fuentes' historical critique are previewed with a literary focus in Saidiya Hartman's (2008) essay "Venus in Two Acts." Hartman argues that historical archives are necessarily sites of violence when they are used in an attempt to recover information about Black women and girls whose lives were constrained by the very kinds of violence the archive necessitates and produces (2). Hartman simultaneously contends with the myriad violences which can and have happened through acts of narration and identifies narrative as a set of strategies and tools which allow for a partial telling, a partial (and potential) recovering, of the lives of the enslaved (11). Crucially, Hartman introduces the term *critical fabulation* as a writing method for a studied speculation of that which cannot be found in the archive. Critical fabulation takes the shape of "straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive" while simultaneously "enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration" (11). Critical fabulation's attention to the discursive power of literary narrative is tempered by a keen awareness of its' limited capacity for precise or exact

representations. The method thus gestures to the potential for literary creativity to spark small guiding fires against the potentially overwhelming oblivion of historical erasure, silence, and absence.

In her more recent work *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, Hartman (2019) names *close narration* as another method of research and writing about archivally marginalized Black women and girls. As Hartman deploys it in this book, close narration “elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents so that they might yield a richer picture” (xiv). Critical fabulation and close narration share a political and structural commitment to efforts at partial recovery, yet I notice in Hartman’s description of close narration a different emphasis on the construction of the text’s voice.³ Close narration “places the voice of the narrator and character in inseparable relation,” a tactic which treats the literary and archival subjects as co-producers of the narrative voiced by the author via the text’s narrator (xiii). Hartman’s methods of archival manipulation are concerned with the products of bureaucracy: “the journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists, trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files” (xiv). *A Map to the Door of No Return* conducts a similar “breaking open” of its archival sources, which include the author’s memories, sensations, and feelings as well as colonial travelogues and records of enslavement. Brand’s writing thus helps to illustrate sensual worldmaking as a method similar to critical fabulation and close narration, though a method in which one’s embodied experiences are included among the archives to be literarily manipulated. In conversation with sensual worldmaking, close narration allows us to think creatively about the relationship between narrator and author, particularly when—as in *A Map to the Door of No Return* and much of Brand’s other work—one simultaneously inhabits the role of subject, narrator, and author.

While Hartman has mobilized these speculative archival practices in service of critiquing and augmenting processes of academic knowledge production, critical fabulation and close narration are in close conversation with other ways to theorize fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and memoir which are thematically concerned with Black histories. For instance, *A Map to the Door of No Return*’s incorporation of the archival traces of Caribbean colonialism into a creative literary form is central to Johnson’s concept of the neo-archive. Drawing on traditions of post-colonial Caribbean literature which have grappled with the violent histories of slavery and colonialism, Johnson proposes that the neo-archive is comprised of “fiction that creates history in the face of its absence” (2014, 157). Johnson considers *A Map to the Door of No Return* as an exemplar of a neo-archival method, focusing particularly on Brand’s self-reflective engagement of archival sources such as colonial travelogues and maps, as well as her use of affective knowledge—forms of knowledge based in self-observation, looking, and feeling (160). Even as she insightfully draws attention to the ways that *A Map to the Door of No Return* exceeds the traditional genre constraints of memoir or autobiography, Johnson does not specifically mark neo-archive’s particular relationship to these autobiographical forms (162).⁴ In contrast, I am particularly interested in the ways that *A Map to the Door of No Return*’s position as a memoir, even an unconventional memoir, facilitates the deployment of Brand’s lived and embodied experiences as part of the affective knowledge of the neo-archive. Brand’s mobilization of her memories of bodily experiences—stress, pain, and tension as well as pleasure, intimacy, and rest—are integral to her complex uses of literary genre to theorize life in the contemporary Black diaspora. As I elaborate further in this article, the memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return*, the essays in *Bread Out of Stone*, and the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* reflect different relationships between normative expectations of the role of lived experience in the genre and Brand’s use of such material in the texts. Sensual worldmaking, critical fabulation, and close narration as strategies for reading Brand’s writing reinforce an understanding of how Black queer women’s bodies can serve as archives of experience in post- and anti- colonial literature.

Sensual Worldmaking: Perceiving the World from Elsewhere

Throughout *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand examines memories which convey the experience of being positioned, as a Black diasporic formerly colonial subject, on the margins of the “centers” claimed by colonial metropolises and geographic imaginaries. In one such example Brand illustrates her experience of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) radio station as a technology of anchoring British imperial control during her childhood in Trinidad and Tobago. In the rare moments when Caribbean islands are referenced or discussed on the BBC news reports, they are positioned within colonial narratives. The experience of listening to and being hailed by the BBC, as Brand narrates, is thus to experience a form of colonial worldmaking. She writes:

You hear that you are living elsewhere. The BBC announcer is calling you, telling you the news. Elsewhere is not a bad place at all. It is simply elsewhere. You have heard it described as an island. You have read of islands, such as in the *Tempest* described as uninhabited except for monsters and spirits; you have read of pirates and buccaneers on islands; you have read of people banished to island, prisoners. You have seen on the borders of maps of islands, natives, nubile and fierce. You are living on an island, banished or uninhabited, or so it seems through the voice of the BBC. You are therefore already mythic.” (2001, 13)

The imposition of elsewhere conscripts the listeners into an understanding of geography in which “elsewhere” is positioned against a “here,” a center, which is definitively not where the colonized subject listener is positioned. For those listeners like Brand positioned in Trinidad and other island states colonized by the British, there is a dissonance between the “here” which they might actually inhabit, be it the particular island, the (post)colonial nation, the region of the Caribbean, and/or the Commonwealth, and the use of multiple forms of narrative to enforce that the post-colonial here is actually the metropole’s elsewhere. William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is referenced for its role as an authorizing colonial text, while additional unnamed narratives perpetuate other tropes of island experience such as pirates and prisoners, and colonially produced maps portray island inhabitants as uncivilized “natives.” The cumulative effect of these sonic, textual, and cartographic colonial narratives is to subordinate the island’s inhabitants’ ways of living, being, and knowing to those represented by the imperial reach of the BBC.

We can understand the repeated practice of listening to the BBC as acts of both narrative and physical incorporation into colonial worldmaking, in which understandings of the world are constructed in order to reflect and justify arrangements of colonial power. The subsumption of the local Caribbean “here” into the “elsewhere” imposed by the narrative technologies of colonial worldmaking is also manifested as a particular orientation of embodiment. This section of the text is interspersed with reflections on the forms of physical engagement involved in listening to the radio: Brand opens the section by positioning the reader within the “ovular sound of the BBC” at the first eight a.m. broadcast, “your ear against the radio again at four in the afternoon,” and the tactile adjustments necessary to protect the radio wires from sea rust (13-14). As illustrated by the production of the Caribbean islands as “elsewhere,” these bodily movements and adjustments in order to hear the BBC day after day function as a mode of gaining a kind of entry through “the door to being in the big world” (14). Brand recounts a collage of fragments of world news headlines spanning events in the 1940s - 70s, covering events in other Commonwealth nations, European nations, Britain itself, and elsewhere in the Americas (ibid.). The juxtaposition of these events, including the death of world leaders, traveling politicians, and civil conflicts, demonstrate how the quotidian daily acts of tuning in to the radio are also a mode of being connected to broader world events, both within and beyond the colonial ordering of power.

If listening to the BBC was a form of incorporation within colonial worldmaking, the periods of time defined by their absence from radio enabled other ways of making the world according to something other than the arrangement of colonial power. Through close narrative attention to the sensual experiences of the times in which the BBC was not a priority, Brand uses the method of sensual worldmaking to illustrate an alternative to colonial worldmaking. On Sundays, for instance, when there were no BBC broadcasts, “the island was the island; the island was itself, quiet, cicadas signalling across fields. Sun absorbing everything into light, sleep blessing the eyes after lunch at two o’clock; or the rain dipping the island grey, drench it into the same silence” (15). While Brand as the narrator admits to having found these Sundays boring in contrast to the “strange intimacy of . . . envied cosmopolitanism” felt on the other weekdays, the experiences of Sundays are narrated with an attention to how bodies orient themselves to the here of the island, rather than how they are oriented to the narrative technologies which construct the island as elsewhere (15). This is not to suggest that life on the island was idyllic away from the radio, as Brand points out that the school days which fell between eight a.m. and four p.m. were dedicated to instructing students in the “proper” forms of bodily comportment and language, with proper signifying, as with elsewhere, the existence of a center or a “here” against which one’s position must be confirmed (15). Nonetheless, Brand’s narrative portrayal of her encounters with the presence and absence of the narrative and communication technologies of the BBC radio illustrates how narrating embodied experiences can be a form of expressing how orientations to knowledge can take shape in bodily orientations.

Diasporic Orientations

In her important reading of the queerness of *A Map to the Door of No Return* and its signification on the diasporic metaphor of the Black Atlantic, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) argues that the text is “fundamentally queer . . . Rather than eroticize individual bodies, it offers what Chela Sandoval calls a ‘social erotics’ . . . and puts together the fragmented experiences of those whose lives, as Butler writes, were never supposed to ‘qualify as the “human” and the “livable”’” (208). Tinsley locates *A Map to the Door of No Return*’s queerness in its emphasis on narrative, historical, and intimate linkages among individuals and groups in the Black diaspora who have been made subject to processes of dehumanization. In this way, *A Map to the Door of No Return* and Tinsley’s analysis of it conduct the *work* of what Jafari Allen (2012) terms black/queer/diaspora, a process of “interrogat[ing] dynamic, unsettled subjects whose bodies, desires, and texts *move*” (214-15, emphasis in original). Tinsley’s and Allen’s frameworks make visible some of the conceptual possibilities of reading Blackness and queerness together not only to identify or examine Black queer subjects, but to understand more deeply how both terms have operated in relationship to processes of exclusion from and reclamation of humanity.⁵ For this reason, I propose thinking about the metaphor of the door of no return as a vehicle through which Blackness and queerness are theorized together in *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

As a title figure of *A Map to the Door of No Return* as well as a key symbol of the African diaspora, the door of no return emerges throughout this text as both real and not real, “The door, of course, is not on the continent but in the mind; not a physical place—though it is—but a space in the imagination” (2001, 96-97). By deemphasizing the physical materiality and geographic specificity of the door and prioritizing its presence in the mind and in the conceptual narratives of the Black diaspora, Brand redirects the narrative and conceptual focus of the text away from locating this figure in the physical sites of the door, instead examining the door as a locus of disorientation. The disorientating violence of the door of no return is transgenerational, linking enslaved ancestors with those presently living and through diaspora. “Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing; one senses a

surreal space, an inexplicable space. . . . Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space” (20). The un- or semi-conscious space of the surreal positions Black subjects with unstable access to the forms of consciousness and coherence on which the orienting strategy of an explanatory narrative must be based. When understood through the framework of sensual worldmaking, Brand’s framing of the Black diaspora as de-spatialized through the metaphor of the surreal door of no return allows for a metaphorical and material re-spatialization based on embodied experiences.

In light of Brand’s use of metaphor to de- and re- spatialize the Black diaspora, the representative function of metaphors and the limited representability of the Black diaspora suggest that metaphors of the Black diaspora are necessarily imperfect and incomplete. Through this incompleteness, “ metaphors provide conceptual bridges between the lived and the possible that use language queerly to map other roads of becoming,” which makes the exploration of metaphors and language essential for practices of worldmaking within the Black and queer diaspora (Tinsley 2008, 212). Brand addresses this need explicitly:

To have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness like art. To be a fiction in search of its most resonant metaphor is then even more intriguing.” (2001, 18-19)

Metaphors and fiction, as forms of creation, are positioned as integral to revealing the existential crises of Blackness in the Americas in the wake of transatlantic slavery while simultaneously providing evidence of language’s inability to resolve this crisis. Black diasporic subjects must therefore negotiate the ways that their lives have been narratively and materially constructed through forces of imperialism and colonialism. I read Brand’s analysis of forms of orientation in the Black diaspora through the figure of the door of no return as a form of what Tinsley calls “using language queerly” in order to illustrate forms of queer bodily orientation (2008, 212). By doing so, Brand constructs a queer vision of the African diaspora that illustrates how queer framings are consonant with those of diasporic Blackness. Paying attention to what Tinsley calls materially-informed metaphors, I read the above passage’s references on movement and positioning—lodging, inhabiting, inside, outside, escape, in search—as reflections on corporeal as well as symbolic locations. What Brand describes as the resultant contingency of Black belonging, the being of “a being living inside and outside of herself” (2001, 19) for instance, is a form of queer diasporic bodily orientation. Indeed, “hav[ing] one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor” can lead Black and queer subjects to experience self-alienation and distancing from their selves through the perpetual awareness of being “outside of [one]self” and “unable to escape [the sign that one makes]” (19). This is not to say that all Black diasporic subjects are queer, but that queer Black diasporic subjects have to engage in their own narrative creation or risk misrepresentation.

Sara Ahmed’s (2006) theorizations of orientation and coherence are helpful for making further sense of how the metaphor of the door of no return is borne out bodily, as a trope made literal. Ahmed writes, “objects become objects only as an effect of the repetition of this ‘tending toward’ them, which produces the subject as that which the world is ‘around’” (120).⁶ Brand’s characterization of the door of no return as a trope that Black subjects inhabit reinforces the significance of orientation and direction in the narratives around which Black life is organized: the Latin and Greek etymological roots of the word “trope” refer to turning.⁷ Through its charting of the ways that Black subjects in the African diaspora repeatedly turn themselves towards the door of no return, *A Map to the Door of No Return* proposes that Black life in the diaspora shares a tending *towards* the door. However, Ahmed notes that this logic of orientation informs normative power, namely whiteness and heteronormativity. Black people tend towards the door in

uneven ways that are informed by trauma, rather than hegemonic and representational power. There is no “straight line” towards, or away from, the door. Black people are therefore interrupted as subjects because the world is so rarely “around” us, and the door as an object is shaped by the ways that the “tending towards” it is informed by wounding. The orientations toward the door and around Black subjects which characterizes Black life in the diaspora are subsequently disrupted.

Brand’s use of the methods of sensual worldmaking in her writing illustrates how embodiment in the black diaspora spans a range of experiences of orientation and disorientation in relation to objects and knowledges: one is oriented and some contexts and disoriented in others, even when those contexts exist within the same moment of space and time. Expanding on the earlier discussion of the use of the BBC radio to produce bodily orientations towards the colonial center, for instance, Brand reflects on the ways traveling to London reaffirms the British Empire as an orientating device. “Landing in London is landing in the familiar,” Brand writes (2001, 77). The putative consistency of British colonial urban engineering—“I know the narrowness of the street; I know the circus I’m walking toward”—and the shared cultural and educational experiences imposed upon other post-colonial subjects passing through airport customs—“we stood in lines waving flags at completely indifferent royals, we sang English airs”—grants Brand a sense of a kind of familiarity in otherwise unfamiliar cities, such as London, England and Sydney, Australia (75-76). Brand has already been made a subject of the colonial worldmaking which emerges from London and the empire it represents. To walk down London’s streets and feel a sense of familiarity may mean that one is familiar with the ways that objects, streets and buildings, are arranged in space relative to one another, yet this familiarity does not preclude discomfort, nor does it preclude sensations of being disoriented. In spite of the potentially alienating distancing from oneself, sensual worldmaking and other forms of fictionalizing and creating oneself are potential strategies for attempting to resolve the existential crises of Black diasporas.

Brand’s luggage is lost while she is en route to a poetry reading in Amsterdam. The uprooting represented by the loss of her luggage is also borne out in the movement through the city while she waits to be reunited by her belongings, “I walk along the canal, getting lost, losing my bearings, until something else takes me eyes, a window. A woman is in the window, she is standing next to a table, she looks at ease. . . . My character Maya stares at me impatiently, waiting for me to recognize her” (210). Brand narrates experiencing Amsterdam as the site of the loss of her belongings as well as her orientation. Thinking trans-temporally and trans-regionally, she contrasts her experience of being lost and being disoriented with the narrative, material, and ideological possessions of white male European colonially mandated travelers, specifically the eighteenth century British geographer Thomas Jeffreys, “I have no compass. Nor do I have a dispensation from a king to map a shoreline or, in my case, a city. . . . I cannot reflect, question, demonize, or assimilate the monuments of Europe. I have no centre which domesticates the periphery. I do not even have my own luggage” (209). Brand describes this disorientation as emerging from a lack of access to the technologies of colonial worldmaking, as she has neither a compass, nor special instructions to try and overtake the society, nor a militarily-backed ideology of superiority.

Brand’s narrative of this disorientation argues that the kinds of orientation which accompanied white European travelers on their colonial conquests are unavailable to Black diasporic subjects. This returns us to thinking about Ahmed’s framing of orientation as both a racialized process and as a process of racialization. Ahmed theorizes links between spatial and bodily orientation and whiteness by illustrating the ways that “whiteness becomes a social and bodily orientation given that some bodies will be more at home in a world that is orientated around whiteness” (2006, 138). The familiarity and comfort experienced by white subjects in a world orientated around whiteness provides “the promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (134). Disorientation, in contrast, is experienced as a range of disruptions to one’s

ability to feel one's body moving easily and comfortably through the world. While whiteness as an orientation has been buttressed by state power which facilitates the transformation of white disorientation into the logics of "discovery," "encounter," and "exploration," Black diasporic travel—and to a certain extent existence—is denied access to these forms of meaning-making.

Crucially, Brand also traces the connections between this disorienting trip to Amsterdam and her highly regarded novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Significantly, Brand is able to make sense of an unnamed Black woman she encounters by reminding herself of Dutch colonialism in the Caribbean. When "this window, and this woman, the one sitting so casually, find their way into the novel," it is through the form of the character Maya, a third-generation descendant of Bola, a woman born into slavery who spent her life feeling as fully as her body would allow (2001, 210). Ahmed writes that queer orientations "are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy" (2006, 107). The character Maya, as well as her ancestors Bola and Marie Ursule, might not be visible in a genealogy which privileges whiteness and paternity. Brand transforms an experience of embodied disorientation into a queerly oriented narrative of multigenerational and embodied Black diaspora. The self-reflection in *A Map to the Door of No Return* on the narrative process of creating *At the Full and Change of the Moon* allows us to turn to the second thread in Brand's oeuvre, her writing on the Grenada revolution.

Sensual Worldmaking and Disorientation in the Grenada Revolution

Scholars of the Caribbean have developed rich interdisciplinary narratives historicizing cultural responses to the Grenada Revolution, the period between the takeover of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) political party in 1979 and October of 1983 when the charismatic NJM leader Maurice Bishop was assassinated, and the United States invaded Grenada under the direction of Ronald Reagan. Shalini Puri's (2014) *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* carefully excavates hundreds of cultural products, ranging from plays, visual art installations, government documents, blogs, books, and more as an attempt to witness and make sense of the enduring cultural legacy of this period. Literary scholar Laurie R. Lambert's (2020) *Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution* gives an explicitly gendered account of literature produced about the revolution.⁸ Lambert argues that Brand's writing "forms part of a postcolonial and Caribbean feminist archive of revolution that is constantly rethinking how and why revolutions of the past remain a part of our ongoing present," with a focus on the ways that Brand's "autobiographical interventions offer readers a sense of the way [she] positions herself in the world and how she thinks through connections between the solitary work of writing and collective efforts to resist neocolonialism" (112-13).

Brand's writings on the Grenada Revolution and the following U.S. invasion use sensual worldmaking to critique these events from an explicitly Black, lesbian, feminist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial perspective. Viewed from this lens, Brand's writing on the Grenada Revolution illustrates how instances of anti-Black imperial violence are experienced within a Black queer woman's body and processed through a diasporic Black feminist subjectivity. I suggest that Brand's narrations of the events of October 1983 frame her embodied experiences as reflecting orientations, in the sense of positions and directions, of a plural experience of the invasion. Brand thus uses her bodily experiences as a ground from which to theorize the embodied, political, and existential conditions of those who witnessed the revolution in Grenada as well as those of people engaged in struggles for freedom elsewhere in the world. I examine three textual sites where Brand explores experiences of orientation and disorientation: the 1996 novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, the 1994 essay "Nothing of Egypt," and *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

I suggest that Brand creates a refracted narrative of a plural voice and plural body, using sensual worldmaking as a method of “invention and imagination, to remember specifically the lives of black women, including black queer women, whose radicalism may not fit within traditional definitions of Caribbean revolution” (Lambert 2018, 56). This sense of refraction is drawn from Lambert, who suggests that Brand creates liminal spaces within her writing to account for the multiple valences of “wins” and “losses” during the Grenada Revolution by “refracting [historical events] through the genres of poetry and fiction” (56).⁹ This refraction of the Grenada Revolution also recalls Johnson’s neo-archives. In this instance, Brand’s writing about the event of the revolution uses multiple genres and voices to both intervene in and construct alternative historical narratives. While Lambert reads Brand’s poems in *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* as functioning as “her own ethnographic account of the revolutionary events [Brand] and others experienced” (Lambert 60) and not as a universalized experience, I read Brand’s prose as voicing something in the middle—a voice and experience that is individual and singular in some ways, yet gestures towards a larger collective body in a way that does not seek to claim a colonizing or imperial universal, but instead constructs what Goldman terms a “community of witnesses” (26) to a Black queer woman’s account of revolution.

In the essay “Nothing of Egypt” from the collection *Bread Out of Stone* (1994), Brand reflects on her personal negotiation of participation in Black political movements in Toronto before going to Grenada, “despite the uneasy feeling that Black women’s experiences were secondary and that men exemplified the voice, the life, the physical body and spiritual breath of the movement. . . . The movement did not examine patriarchy. It examined white patriarchy but only as something that white men did to Black men not as something that men did to women, and in this it deserted its highest goals: freedom from all exploitation and oppression” (137). The failure of these revolutionary goals in Toronto help spur Brand towards Grenada, where another set of revolutionary failures await. “Nothing of Egypt” shows how the changes of revolutions are deeply tied to individual bodies, therefore illustrating how the failures of movements to meet their goals might also be borne out corporeally. Brand writes, “Revolutions do not happen outside of you, they happen in the vein, they change you and you change yourself, you wake up in the morning changing. You say this is the human being I want to be. You are making yourself for the future, and you do not even know the extent of it when you begin but you have a hint, a taste in your throat of the warm elixir of the possible” (138). In this passage, the strategies of sensual worldmaking are at work through the explicit linking of embodied experience to embodied knowledge of potential revolutionary futures. The embodied self is the site of change as well as the evidence of future possibility. This passage articulates revolution as not only an external process, but also as an internal process of making decisions about how to remake oneself. The use of the second-person address in this personal essay registers the voice as plural, linking both speaker and audience in its revolutionary possibility.

In some ways, the forms of violence that Brand narrates about the Grenada Revolution and US invasion are not necessarily exceptional within the broader network of misogyny and homophobia Black queer Caribbean women can be situated within. It is instead, as Lambert illustrates, amplified. Lambert (2018) writes of Elizete and Verlia, the queer Caribbean women characters at the center of Brand’s novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, “for the women represented in Brand’s later text the end of the violent revolution is not so much a surprise as it is a recursion, albeit on a spectacular scale, of the hardships and trauma they have faced their entire lives” (57). From here, we can more clearly understand the ways that the sensual disruption and embodied disorientation experienced during the US invasion is consonant with the ways both fictional and real queer Caribbean women have experienced other forms of misogynist and homophobic violence.

The character Verlia was born in the Caribbean and migrated to Canada at a young age, and as a young adult traveled to an unnamed Caribbean island in order to participate in an unfolding anti-capitalist revolution, modeled after the Grenada Revolution. *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) is not strictly an

autobiographical novel, despite clear resonances between Verlia's movements and those Brand has narrated elsewhere, such as in "Nothing of Egypt," though it is deeply attentive to the embodied experiences of its protagonists. A chapter towards the end of the novel takes the form of entries in Verlia's journal after she has traveled back to the Caribbean. These journal entries are a form of documentation of the revolution which are rooted in its author's—Verlia's—body and provide mediated access to Verlia's internal dialogue:

Today I feel calm but I don't want anyone to touch me and I'm not turning the radio on. I'm not leaving this place. I'm not moving.

Five o'clock in the morning I heard the droning of their planes in the sky. I am so angry I will break.

The radio is playing up-tempo music as if nothing is happening. I can't stand it. I wish Elizete would turn the fucking thing off. I've got to get out of here. If I don't my head will split in many, many pieces.

I'm putting my clothes on. the radio went off. I'm going to meet the other cadres. My head is hurting me. (1996, 227-228)

While "Nothing of Egypt" constructs a plural voice through invoking the reader with a second-person address, this section's use of the first person constructs a plurality through an invitation to witness.

Renée Larrier (2006) identifies the use of the first person as a defining characteristic of what she terms Caribbean autofiction, Caribbean creative writing which explicitly centers the narrator's subjectivity in "direct response to . . . slavery and its legacy of economic exploitation" in the Caribbean (6). Reading *In Another Place* as a form of Caribbean autofiction bypasses the questions of authenticity and facticity which often accompany readings of first person texts, focusing instead on the twin processes of testimony and témoignage, or witnessing (21- 24).¹⁰ In reading these journal entries readers are brought into contact with how Verlia feels physically and emotionally as she cycles through stillness, anger, and anxiety, and are therefore called to witness the revolution in its intimate and personal unfolding. Through the turn to a first-person account for Verlia's character Brand places a Black queer woman's subjectivity at the center of a call for a diasporic "community of witnesses" (Goldman 2004, 26). Such a call invites the readerly audience to approach the event through witnessing as a kind of seeing that implies accountability from the viewer. In her use of sensual worldmaking strategies to appeal to or address an audience of Black diasporic witnesses, Brand illustrates that Black queer womanhood is lived within community—illustrating Black queer women's relationships to one another, to broader Black communities, and to the larger structures of power which target multiple aspects of their identities.

In an echo of "Nothing of Egypt," *A Map to the Door of No Return* gestures towards the desire for freedom, both personal and communal, which influenced Brand's desire to travel to Grenada:

You had come here for some purpose. Small, certainly; foolish, certainly. It's still hard to say what it was without someone sneering at it as if it is childish and impossible. I wanted to be free. I wanted to feel as if history was not destiny. I wanted some relief from the enclosure of the Door of No Return. That's all. (Brand 2001, 168)

The repetition of want in this passage emphasizes the central role of desire in this particular recollection and the larger project of the book. For Brand, desire is as ubiquitous as it is ephemeral, scattered across phenomena from "assigned objects" to "repetitive, clichéd gestures" (195). *A Map to the Door of No Return* imagines desire as something to be arrived at through close attention to embodiment: "putting the senses back together" (195). In contrast to desire's reintegration of the senses, Brand provides another narration of waiting out the U.S. attack on Grenada as an experience which disrupts and disorients the senses. She

writes, “your body cracks to each sound of gunfire. You genuflect to each bombing attack of F15s. By the time it’s over you are brittle, your teeth feel like crushed stones, you are skeletal, you have a single wire of electricity running up your back over which you have no control. That is only the corporeal” (168). Invoking the communal use of the second person once more, this narration evokes a body’s fragility in the face of the hovering violence in the aftermath of the revolution. Specifically, this narration extends embodied sensations of the first person “I” of a Black Caribbean lesbian into the second person “you” of the reader. This body’s movements are not volitional, but the product of sustained tension.

This unwilling corporeal submission to U.S. imperial and colonial violence characterizes much of Brand’s memories of this time and her commentary on its political significance. The analytical power of this passage lies in its precise location of the grandest scale of international imperial violence in the most intimate register of a embodiment: we quite literally find the impact and residue of United States imperialism in the marrow of a Black lesbian woman’s bones. By illustrating both the shattering of the senses and desire as an effort and longing towards putting the senses together again, *A Map to the Door of No Return* theorizes embodiment and sensation as they are implicated within orientations and disorientations. The framework of sensual worldmaking allows us to identify how the book approaches what Tinsley names as the queer coupling of “*putting the world together and putting the senses back together at the same time*” (2008, 211, emphasis in original). Both sensual worldmaking and the “making sense” of Brand’s framing of desire require an explicit reckoning of the ways bodily senses are engaged, whether in response to violence or to pursuits of freedom.

Conclusion

Through these first-person texts which foreground the bodily experiences of their narrators, Brand is able to invoke a politicized diasporic collective in bodily terms without collapsing Brand’s body into that of others or collapsing the condition of diasporic subjects into that of their enslaved ancestors. These texts demonstrate how the condition of disorientation and inexplicability is carried forth in the wake of slavery and detail the alternative forms of place- and meaning-making that emerge in the spaces of the Black diaspora. In an interview, Brand responds to a question of how pleasure and community interact within her novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. She states:

Ultimately, politics is about pleasure . . . I think Eros is ultimately what we have been fighting for. To express ourselves in the most lustful and pleasurable ways. When you’re fighting for or organizing towards a society that you would want to live in, it surely would be a society which is not just about making rules, but about making life pleasurable, and opening spaces. (Abbas 1999, 6)

Brand’s writing works in service of constructing new societies and worlds through close examination of the worlds that currently exist. This world and the worlds being created are not only pleasurable, but the attention to embodied sensation which Brand has cultivated throughout her literary career provides models for generating deeper understandings of the kinds of knowledge anchored in embodied experience.

Notes

1. In this essay I use Black and African diaspora interchangeably.

2. For an extended theorization of the metaphor of Black diasporic life in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, see Christina Sharpe (2016).
3. In a response to a virtual roundtable convened for *Wayward Lives*, Saidiya Hartman (2020) describes her practice as “critical fabulation, speculative history, close narration, and documentary poetics. All are methods for engaging and remaking the document, for building story from sampled utterances, photographs, fragments, and sonic traces, for attending to the radical thought of everyday life, for assembling and composing alternative narratives of Black existence.” Elsewhere, it would be useful to explore the nuances of overlap and divergence among these methods.
4. In one instance, Erica L. Johnson (2014) remarks on the way Dionne Brand “historiciz[es] her feelings” (162) as a form of work that is simultaneously archival and memory-work, yet the particular ways that memoir facilitates such a historicization differently than neo-archives constructed in fiction or poetry texts, for example.
5. Matt Richardson’s (2013) discussion of the ways lesbian neo-slave narratives written by Black lesbians “restore Black female slaves to memory as desiring sexual subjects” is another relevant node in the discussion of how Blackness and queerness are erotically imagined in literature (22).
6. Julietta Singh’s (2018) discussion of the “body archive” reflects another praxis of sensual worldmaking responsive to notions of tending and turning toward. She writes, for instance, “the body archive is an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself. And vitally, it is a way of thinking-feeling the body’s unbounded relation to other bodies” (29).
7. I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer who drew my attention to this link between “trope” and “turn.”
8. While an extended historical treatment of the Grenada Revolution is beyond the scope of this paper, for a fuller discussion of these events see Laurie R. Lambert (2020); Shalini Puri (2014); and David Scott (2013).
9. Dionne Brand (2001) also writes about books giving her a “refractory hunger” (191).
10. Specifically, witnessing and testimony are necessary to create archives of survival in the context of national violence and atrocities, such as that of the Grenada Revolution (Larrier 2006, 23).

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