

A Map to the Door of No Return

Notes to Belonging

DIONNE BRAND



VINTAGE CANADA

Also by Dionne Brand

FICTION

At the Full and Change of the Moon
In Another Place, Not Here

NON-FICTION

Bread out of Stone

POETRY

No Language is Neutral
Land to Light On
Chronicles of the Hostile Sun

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VINTAGE CANADA EDITION

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Forgetting

David Turnbull writes in *Maps Are Territories*, “In Order to find our way successfully, it is not enough just to have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as practical mastery of way-finding.”

In order to find our way successfully ...

1

My grandfather never remembered our name and perhaps therefore, in a large sense for me, our way. I balanced on the word at the tip of his tongue. He left me in this anticipation and therefore curiosity. For the name he could not remember was from the place we could not remember. Africa. It was the place we did not remember, yet it lodged itself in all the conversations of who we were. It was a visible secret. Through the BBC broadcasts we were inhabited by British consciousness. We were also inhabited by an unknown self. The African. This duality was fought every day from the time one woke up to the time one fell asleep. As we went out to be schooled in Englishness and as we returned home to say Christian prayers in the evenings. One had the sense that some being had to be erased and some being had to be cultivated. Even our dreams were not free of this conflict. We floated on an imaginary island imagining a “Dark Continent.” That “Dark Continent” was a source of denial and awkward embrace. The African self so abiding yet so fearful because it was informed by colonial images of the African as savage and not by anything we could call on our memories to conjure. No amount of denial, however, dislodged this place, this self, and no amount of forgetting obscured the Door of No Return.

2

Wishing to search for this door I have sought out a book of maps: Charles Bricker’s text to *Landmarks of Mapmaking: An Illustrated Survey of Maps and Mapmakers chosen and displayed by R.V. Tooley*. In this book of the history of maps, places mature from landlocked water to open seas. The coastlines of “new territories” are peppered with forts and settlements, the interior is filled with dread and imagined riches. Explorers, sailing along the coast, called what they did not or could not see deep and dark, moving inland little by little toward their own fears.

Bricker notes, “Ludolf, the 17th century German founder of Ethiopian studies, never visited Abyssinia — but relying on the reports of Portuguese missionaries like Father Lobo he constructed a new map of the region in 1683.” Without ever having visited himself. Which proves to me something of which I’ve had a nagging inkling — that places and those who inhabit them are indeed fictions.

This news has cemented the idea that in order to draw a map only the skill of listening may be necessary. And the mystery of interpretation.

This skill, this mystery eluded my grandfather and me. The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place. Ironically, or perhaps suitably, it is no one place but a collection of places. Landfalls in Africa, where a castle was built, a house for slaves, *une maison des esclaves*. Rude enough to disappear or elaborate and vain enough to survive after centuries. A place where a certain set of transactions occurred, perhaps the most important of them being the transference of selves. The Door of No Return — real and metaphoric as some places are, mythic to those of us scattered in the Americas today. 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 made like art. To be a fiction in search of its most resonant metaphor then is even more intriguing. So I am scouring maps of all kinds, the way that some fictions do, discursively, elliptically, trying to locate their own transferred selves.

So far I've collected these fragments, like Ludolf — disparate and sometimes only related by sound or intuition, vision or aesthetic. I have not visited the Door of No Return, but by relying on random shards of history and unwritten memoir of descendants of those who passed through it, including me, I am constructing a map of the region, paying attention to faces, to the unknowable, to unintended acts of returning, to impressions of doorways. Any act of recollection is important, even looks of dismay and discomfort. Any wisp of a dream is evidence.

3

The door is a place, real, imaginary and imagined. As islands and dark continents are. It is a place which exists or existed. The door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. It was the door of a million exits multiplied. It is a door many of us wish never existed. It is a door which makes the word *door* impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable.

There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. As if the door had set up its own reflection. Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between. Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing; one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space. One imagines people so stunned by their circumstances, so heartbroken as to refuse reality. Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space. That space is the measure of our ancestors' step through the

door toward the ship. One is caught in the few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence.

Castles and forts, the most famous being St. George d'Elmina and the Cape Coast Castle, peppered the coast of West Africa for such purposes from the 1600s to the end of the trade. From Elmina in 1700, William Bosman, the Dutch chief factor dealing in gold and slaves, wrote in his letters home, adoringly, "... for to speak but the bare truth of it, for beauty and strength it hath not its equal upon the coast." All of those castles, their strong doors leading to ships, have collected in the imagination as the Door of No Return. Elmina sits there still. Whitewashed over the sea. There is a fishing village below. The harbour is filled with colourful boats. I've seen photographs.

For those of us today in the Diaspora this door exists as through a prism, distorted and shimmering. As through heat waves across a vast empty space we see this door appearing and disappearing. An absent presence. Though few of us have seen it, or consciously attach importance to it, this door in its historical connectedness was the point of departure, not only physical departure but psychic renting, of our ancestors.

Leaving? To leave? Left? Language can be deceptive. The moment when they "left" the Old World and entered the New. Forced to leave? To "leave" one would have to have a destination in mind. Of course one could rush out of a door with no destination in mind, but "to rush" or "to leave" would suggest some self-possession; rushing would suggest a purpose, a purpose with some urgency, some reason. Their "taking"? Taking, taking too might suggest a benevolence so, no, it was not taking. So having not "left," having no "destination," having no "self-possession," no purpose and no urgency, their departure was unexpected; and in the way that some unexpected events can be horrific, their "leaving," or rather their "taking," was horrific. What language would describe that loss of bearings or the sudden awful liability of one's own body? The hitting or the whipping or the driving, which was shocking, the dragging and the bruising it involved, the epidemic sickness with life which would become hereditary? And the antipathy which would shadow all subsequent events.

The door looms both as a horror and a romance, though. The horror is of course three or four hundred years of slavery, its shadow was and is colonialism and racism. The romance is of the place beyond the door, the Africa of our origins. Some of us reinvent these origins as a golden past of serenity, grandeur, equality — as one living in a state of dread invents its opposite for sustenance. Invention aside, any past without slavery would be golden. Some would simply like the relief of its existence, its continuity rather, its simple connection as a touchstone to our present. This door is the place of the fall.

When these Slaves come to Fida, they are put in Prison all together, and when we treat concerning buying them, they are all brought out together in a large Plain; where, by our Chirurgeons, whose Province it is, they are thoroughly examined, even to the smallest Member, and that naked too both Men and Women, without the least Distinction or Modesty. Those which are approved as good are set on one side; and the lame or faulty are set by as Invalides, which are here called Mackrons.

... When we have agreed with the Owners of the Slaves, they are returned to their Prison; where from that time forwards they are kept at our charge, cost us two pence a day a Slave; which serves to subsist them, like our Criminals, on Bread and Water: So that to save Charges we send them on Board our Ships with the very first Opportunity; before which their Masters strip them of all they have on their Backs; so that they come Aboard stark-naked as well Women as Men: In which condition they are obliged to continue, if the Master of the Ship is not so Charitable (which he commonly is) as to bestow something on them to cover their Nakedness.

You would really wonder to see how these Slaves live on Board; for though their number sometimes amounts to six or seven Hundred, yet by the careful Management of our Masters of Ships, they are so regulated that it seems incredible: And in this particular our Nation exceeds all other Europeans; for as the French, Portuguese and English Slave-Ships, are always foul and stinking; on the contrary ours are for the most part clean and neat.

... We are sometimes sufficiently plagued with a parcel of Slaves, which come from a far In-land Country, who very innocently perswade one another, that we buy them only to fatten and afterwards eat them as a Delicacy.

When we are so unhappy as to be pestered with many of this sort, they resolve and agree together (and bring over the rest to their Party) to run away from the Ship, kill the Europeans, and set the Vessel a-shore; by which means they design to free themselves from being our Food.

I have twice met with this Misfortune; and the first time proved very unlucky to me, I not in the least suspecting it; but the Up-roar was timely quashed by the Master of the Ship and my self, by causing the Abettor to be shot through the Head, after which all was quiet.

— Letter, William Bosman, 1700

Migration. Can it be called migration? There is a sense of return in migrations — a sense of continuities, remembered homes — as with birds or butterflies or deer

or fish. Those returns which are lodged indelibly, unconsciously, instinctively in the mind. But migrations suggest intentions or purposes. Some choice and, if not choice, decisions. And if not decisions, options, all be they difficult. But the sense of return in the Door of No Return is one of irrecoverable losses of those very things which make returning possible. A place to return to, a way of being, familiar sights or sounds, familiar smells, a welcome perhaps, but a place, welcome or not.

6

The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we observe and are observed as people, whether it's through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments. The door exists as an absence. A thing in fact which we do not know about, a place we do not know. Yet it exists as the ground we walk. Every gesture our bodies make somehow gestures toward this door. What interests me primarily is probing the Door of No Return as consciousness. The door casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora. Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. All human effort seems to emanate from this door. How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history.

7

Very few family stories, few personal stories have survived among the millions of descendants of the trade. Africa is therefore a place strictly of the imagination — what is imagined therefore is a gauzy, elliptical, generalized, vague narrative of a place. Many in the Diaspora have visited the Door of No Return at slave castles in Ghana or Gorée Island. They tell of the overwhelming sense of grief and pain these visits give. One does not return to the Diaspora with good news from the door except the news that it exists and that its existence is the truth. Its perpetual “no” denies them relief, denies an ending or reconciliation. Some have recorded a sense of familiarity beyond the door; some have spoken of a welcome, or of no welcome. But their grief, our grief, remains unassuageable at a profound level. No seeing can truly verify the door, no real place can actualize the lost place. Not in any personal sense.

8

Flung out and dispersed in the Diaspora, one has a sense of being touched by or glimpsed from this door. As if walking down a street someone touches you on the shoulder but when you look around there is no one, yet the air is oddly warm with some live presence. That touch is full of ambivalence; it is partly comforting but mostly discomfoting, tortured, burning with anger, unknowable remembrance. More disturbing, it does not confine itself to remembrance; you look around you and present embraces are equally discomfoting, present glimpses are equally hostile. Art, perhaps music, perhaps poetry, perhaps stories, perhaps aching constant movement — dance and speed — are the only comforts. *Being* in the Diaspora braces itself in virtuosity or despair.

9

One has this sense as one observes bodies in the Diaspora, virtuosity or despair, on the brink of both.

A body pushing a grocery cart through the city housing at Lawrence and Bathurst in Toronto, her laundry, her shopping all contained there, dressed as if on her way to a party, gold chain around her neck, lipstick — as if moving with all her possessions. Young, perhaps a mother, the cart trundling farther away from the supermarket than it ought to go.

Or someone equally young at a bus stop outside a university explaining some theory of pan-Africanism in which polygamy is the authentic family structure. And how it was, he says, back in Africa before we were brought here. He has an earring in his left ear, his lips curl in superiority. His companion is a young woman who looks at him skeptically yet uneasily, as if she knows that she will have to give in to the argument for the sake of the coming romance.

And another body making its way through a second-hand bookstore looking for Nabakov's *Lolita*; imagining himself this mix of sophistication, taste, and dark passion. He stands reading in the store, the smell of paper, crumpled, dusty, curled around him, the quiet of the shelves buffering the street noise up the stairs and outside, and the sweat of his disturbing presence if he climbs the stairs and goes into the street, unhappily, still himself.

Still another, her mind on the odd lyric to a love song as she burns hair in a beauty salon, the rows of permed wet hair waiting to be blown dry, the Saturday still too early to think of going home, the love song about how good someone promises to make love to her.

Yet another is heading straight to the library to crack her head on Kristeva and Spivak before she sits before a committee that will always be present to her as she

makes her way grudgingly and insecurely through academia, through life, never sure, always sure that she is never in control.

That one, a boy still, limbs longer than he can handle, eyes more shy than he wants to reveal. He'll be shocked into hardness any second now, just out of his mother's reach, her hand oiling his face. He'll know in a minute what's expected; she'll know by and by. Their two paths are virtuosity and despair.

10

“We need a cognitive schema ...” This door is really the door of dreams. This existence in the Diaspora is like that — dreams from which one never wakes. Then what here can be called cognition let alone a schema? A set of dreams, a strand of stories which never come into being, which never coalesce. One is not in control in dreams; dreams take place, the dreamer is captive, even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming. Captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts, to be out of possession of one's mind; our cognitive schema is captivity. But what of all rebellions, emancipations, political struggles for human rights? Aren't these part of the schema, too? Yes. Except for the perpetual retreats and recoveries. In the Diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity. The door of dreams.