

Mapping the Door of No Return

Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand

In her recent memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), Dionne Brand makes a provocative contribution to the debate about Canadian identity:

Too much has been made of origins. . . . Here at home, in Canada, we are all implicated in this sense of origins. It is manufactured origin nevertheless, playing to our need for home, however tyrannical. This country, in the main a country of immigrants, is always redefining origins, jockeying and smarming for degrees of belonging. (64)

Brand goes on to insist: “Belonging does not interest me. I had once thought that it did. Until I examined the underpinnings. One is misled when one looks at the sails and majesty of tall ships instead of their cargo” (85). Rather than clinging to concepts of home and nation, Brand’s recent fictions, specifically her novel *At The Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) and her memoirs, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, outline an alternative possibility namely, “drifting”—and adopt the figure of the ship at sea as a metaphor for the continuing impact of the Black Diaspora.

In Brand’s writing, the notion of drifting offers an alternative to the boundedness of home and the nation-state. Indeed, by emphasizing drifting she underscores the inadequacies of the nation-state, particularly in its response to demands for social justice in a global era and in its long-standing practices of exclusion. Although claims to nationhood can be seen as contributing to projects of decolonization, Brand nevertheless promotes drifting as an equally legitimate resistant practice. She offers a cautionary warning to consider “the cargo” rather than “the majesty of tall ships”—in essence, to recognize the exclusionary foundations and ongoing limitations of nationalism.

Brand's emphasis on drifting and her refusal of a singular origin signal not so much an abandonment of history as a recognition of multiple histories based on shared experiences of class, race, gender, and sexuality. In contrast to writers who portray people and homes as linked by supposedly natural qualities based on biology and geography—what Edward Said terms “filiation” (20)—Brand's fiction demonstrates that the links between people and homes are social creations, discourses of “affiliation” which are learned, created, recalled, and sometimes forgotten (see George 16–17). Viewed in this light, her fiction can be read as a meditation on the politics and aesthetics of crafting affiliations. Ultimately, the concept of drifting invites readers to re-theorize home as a constellation of multiple sites—a series of somewheres that cannot be captured under any one place name. Drifting is particularly suited to a reconsideration of the Black Diaspora. Unlike the Jewish Diaspora, which critics have used to generate an ideal type, the Black Diaspora has not always been associated with a single origin, a specific place of return, or a nation to build.

As Rinaldo Walcott observes, Brand's texts map the “in-between space of what the black British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy calls the ‘[c]ritical space/time cartography of the diaspora’” (Walcott 42). The cartography of the Diaspora, according to Gilroy, can illuminate “the unforeseen detours and circuits which mark the new journeys and new arrivals that, in turn, release new political and cultural possibilities” (qtd. in Walcott 42). In a related attempt to actualize these “new political and cultural possibilities,” Brand's writing engages with spectres from the past: the victims and agents of the slave trade and the transatlantic journeys it initiated. Although her texts turn to the past, on the whole they demonstrate the futility of adopting a nostalgic response to lost origins and unknown destinations—a response that typically entails championing notions of belonging, home, and nation. By tracing the wandering paths and the solitary spaces familiar to those who have been dislocated, Brand's texts offer a politically-charged alternative to the desire for belonging and possession.

At the Full and Change of the Moon (1999) ranges from the 1800s to the end of the twentieth century and traces the lives of over a dozen people. The narrative begins on the day in 1824 that a renegade slave, Marie Ursule, supervises the mass suicide of her fellow workers on an estate in Trinidad. Before distributing the deadly poison, Marie Ursule sends her four-year-old daughter, Bola, to safety. Carried on the back of her mother's trusted friend, Kamena, and directed by Marie Ursule's dream of a destination, Bola

arrives at Culebra Bay, the former home of two Ursuline nuns who continue to haunt the estate. The novel repeatedly underscores the clash between those who embraced the so-called civilizing mission of Western European culture—a Eurocentric mission rooted in the Enlightenment’s faith in quantification, map-making, and its linear view of historical progress—and those “others” who found themselves in the space of in-betweenness epitomized by the Middle Passage. This latter space is characterized less by accumulation and linear progression than by drifting from “a lost origin to a forced destination,” a movement from “home to hell” (Raynaud 71).

The space of in-betweenness poses a radical challenge to conventional notions of chronology, geography, and subjectivity. As the editors of *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* write:

[H]ow do you spell “I am” when you are deprived of home, of place, of your sense of direction? How do you spell “I am” when the seamless web defining the self is torn? How do you spell “I am” when you are branded, when you are stacked away in the claustrophobic hell below the deck of a slave ship, when you are discarded because a commodity is damaged? How do you spell “I am” on water without boundaries? (*Black* 17)

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand comments on this space: “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” (*Map* 20).

Her texts repeatedly highlight the challenge of living in this “inexplicable space” and the difficulty of locating a sense of self on “water without boundaries.” Brand presents both the negative and, where possible, the positive aspects of erasure and drifting—the former connected to the trauma of the Middle Passage and the latter to those “unforeseen detours and circuits” that Gilroy believes can “release new political and cultural possibilities” (86).

A vivid example of an encounter with this space of in-betweenness is found in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* in the description of Kamena’s journey to Terre Bouillante, the secret Maroon camp. As the narrator explains, when Kamena first made his way to the camp, he had not so much plotted a course as “dreamed it, and been so lost he’d found it” (26). The first and only time Kamena found Terre Bouillante was during the rainy season. After fleeing Mon Chagrin, the estate where he and Marie Ursule were enslaved, he wandered through the rain for days on end and slept “covered in whole sheets of rain, so steady, so blistering, *he felt himself drown far from any ocean . . .*” (28; my emphasis). Gradually, Kamena lost all sense of direction and volition: “The days had spun him around, and the slaking rain beat him

so hard he lay down in surrender and opened his mouth” (29). Eventually, Kamena grew so weak, he “crawled along the horizon . . . room enough as under a bed” (29–30). Finally, nearly dead, Kamena felt somebody tying a rope around his belly and dragging him through the forest: “Tangled in the rope and in the trees, he gave up any control, his body becoming porous and falling apart like rotted meat He was sure he was what the forest leaves, what a shark leaves . . .” (30). Cared for by the other half-starved escapees at Terre Bouillante, a place of quiet peace, free from slavery, Kamena feels joy for the first time; it was like finding “his childhood” (34).

Kamena’s journey from Mon Chagrin to Terre Bouillante not only traverses a space of in-betweenness—the space where one is deprived of “home, of place, of . . . one’s sense of direction”—it also uncannily echoes the transport of African captives to the Americas. Images of disorientation, drowning, claustrophobia, loss of control, death, and decomposition allude to the horrific experience of the Middle Passage.¹

Eventually, however, Kamena must leave the sanctuary of Terre Bouillante to fulfil his promise to Marie Ursule and rescue Bola. While escorting the child through the forest, Kamena recognizes that he may never find his way to the Maroon camp again: “What had happened to him before had become sacred to him and unimaginable and perhaps something he could do only once. If he had to follow every step he made the last time, then he was likely lost. It was a another season and a different place” (32). Ten years pass, and Kamena has still “not found Terre Bouillante or given up his search even if it only took him farther into his own mind” (54). In the end, he dies searching for Terre Bouillante. Brand insists that Kamena’s “search is his destination.” She goes on to explain that “there is a sort of Africanist position about going back to that place before . . . before the great disaster. He cannot find it . . . [but] his descriptions of how to get there are his gift, because he moves from the realm of the physical into a completely different realm—into thought. From flesh into thought” (qtd. in Abbas 5).

A key question posed by all of Brand’s recent texts concerns the course that individuals should plot in the aftermath of “the great disaster.” As Brand’s comments suggest, she does not support the “Africanist position,” the nostalgic dream of returning to a prelapsarian home. But if she does not support the dream of returning home or, alternatively, of belonging to a new home, then what does she imagine are the psychological and political ramifications for descendants of the Black Diaspora? And what, if anything, does she posit as an alternative to nostalgia?

Initially it appears as if Brand offers no alternative other than unmitigated despair. Toward the end of the novel, in a letter to her dead mother, Bola's great grand-daughter, Eula, describes the irrevocable damage caused by the slave trade and expresses a longing for what has been lost:

I would like one single line of ancestry, Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace. . . . I would like one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything, or forgetting would not help them or matter because the line would be constant, unchangeable. A line that I can reach for in my brain when I feel off kilter. Something to pull me back. . . . I would like a village where I would remain and not a village I would leave. (246–47)²

The direct descendant of Marie Ursule and Bola, Eula feels as if she has nothing to hold on to, nothing to afford her a sense of wholeness or community. She feels “as if we had been scattered out with a violent randomness” (258).³

As the novel repeatedly demonstrates, Marie Ursule's gesture of launching her daughter into the future does not lead to a utopian outcome of health, wholeness, or community. In fact, this outcome is impossible, according to Brand, because one can never entirely transcend the hauntings of history. Referring to Marie Ursule in an interview, Brand acknowledged that her hand “is deep in some horror” and that we are “corrupted by what we live, and what we have to do to get out of how we live” (qtd. in Sanders 6). According to Rinaldo Walcott, a number of critics read black women's work within what might be called “‘the mammy tradition’—[the expectation] that black women should make all things right or at least smooth them over” (49). This is precisely the consoling gesture that Brand refuses to offer. Virtually all of Brand's characters are denied, or wilfully refuse, the solace of home and the experience of belonging, compelled, as they are, to navigate the flux and change instigated by the Middle Passage.

Brand is of course not alone in attempting to chart the space of in-betweenness. As one critic explains, writers who try to map this space often find themselves charting “the watery paths that have no signposts and that resist any return” (Garvey 255). Although Kamena's quest for *Terre Bouillante* vividly portrays this type of journey, the majority of the contemporary characters in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* do not find that the watery paths lead to an actual place of refuge or an escape from abjection. As Brand contends: “escape does not necessarily lead to rescue . . . the new place is not necessarily better, and . . . for somebody with a history of oppression there might not be any ‘better’” (qtd. in Martin 3).⁴

The psychological repercussions of the space of in-betweenness are forcibly conveyed by Eula's cousin, Adrian, who at one point finds himself

wandering through Amsterdam. His description of his surroundings emphasizes the plight of the descendants of the Black Diaspora:

The blocks from Dam Square to the station were littered with men like him—men from everywhere. . . . A debris of men selling anything, anything they could get their hands on. Dam Square seemed haunted, though it was bustling, haunted by these scores of men changing into other men, who looked the same. Haunted shifts of them from Curacao, Surinam, Africa. . . . Here he was like Kamena trying to find a destination. (180)

In describing these men, Brand drew on her own trip to Amsterdam in 1992. While readers might understandably focus on the negative aspects of the men's behaviour, interpreting Adrian's description of ghosts haunting a "damned" square as a case-study of abjection, Brand refuses to disparage the men's choices. Instead, she marvels at their deftness and ability to survive. In an interview, she has asserted that she was inspired by men's journeys: "I [. . .] [thought] about how to write those things down, how to write passages. How to write what looks like journeys across water, across mind, space, and how people are always able to adapt, to fit, to figure out how to do this hustle which life has presented us with" (qtd. in Sanders 3).

Referring to a man whom she watched in Dam Square, Brand states:

[I]t would have taken that man on the Amsterdam street a leap, some trajectory through his imagination to arrive on the street. I was more interested in that kind of passage, a kind of opening. That all of those people would have had to have the most magnificent of imaginations to envision themselves where they had landed. . . . They arrive on the street on imagination because nothing real would tell them to be there. . . . *It would have to be this kind of flood to arrive there.* (qtd. in Sanders 3; my emphasis)

Yet Brand is clearly ambivalent about the impact of the Diaspora. Although in interviews she celebrates the men's fundamental ability to adapt and to survive, she also acknowledges the overwhelming sadness of lives lived in isolation and exile. In her memoirs she writes: "He was in a kind of despair I have never experienced and experienced then only through his *drifting* into the street. . . . His *drifting* into the street, his slight hesitation—this was beauty. I saw that young man drop into the square like a drop of water into an ocean" (194; my emphasis).

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, the flood that brings Adrian to Amsterdam is not portrayed as a life-giving force. After surveying Dam Square, Adrian returns home, feverish with drugs, and lies on the kitchen floor, which in his imagination has become the ocean: "He felt himself convulse as if he were spewing up an ocean and he imagined sea turtles and sea cockroaches coming out of his mouth. His head was dipped in water, in

big blue water. . . . And his mouth was open, spitting an endless stream of shells and bitten bone and small white sea insects. He never wants to see the world again” (204–205). Unlike other characters, most obviously Eula’s brother Carlyle, who relishes the challenge of surviving on the street and could “change a passport from male to female and back, use it three times over, multiply it and subdivide it . . . bobbing and weaving . . . dipping and diving,” (167) Adrian ultimately drowns.

Later in *Map*, Brand revises her initial description of Amsterdam and her discovery of her character Adrian, confessing that his despair mirrors her own:

I am sad on Dam Square. All the way here, all the way here to look so dry faced on Dam Square. I feel like sitting there and crying. I feel bereft. I feel abandoned by Marie Ursule to city squares [. . .]. I am *adrift, spilled out*, with Adrian [. . .] at the end of this century in any city all over with world with nothing as certain as Marie Ursule coming. We are all abandoned, all scattered in Marie Ursule’s hopelessness and her skill. (*Map* 211; my emphasis)

As the recurring phrases “adrift” and “spilled out” remind us, Brand repeatedly invokes water imagery to express the after-effects of the Diaspora. As Johanna Garvey points out, the sea often serves as a “repository for memories of the Middle Passage” (267). In her memoirs, Brand confirms this link: “Derek Walcott wrote, ‘the sea is history.’ I knew that before I knew it was history I was looking at” (12).

Watery imagery likewise plays an important role in Eula’s despairing letter to her dead mother. Like her cousin Adrian, Eula cannot dissociate herself from the abject; all she can do is vent her fear and hatred of the sodden debris of history scattered all around her (240). In the case of Eula and Adrian, the overwhelming evidence of the “great disaster” and their own sense of abjection preclude any celebration of the ability to survive or of the power of the imagination. In her letter, Eula makes a veiled reference to this unspeakable disaster: “Perhaps I took it that accidents of great proportion could not happen, that one day in the middle of the street that everyone would be wrecked. Wreckage, Mama, that is all we look like, pure wreckage. The street is full of human wreckage, breakage and ruin” (240–41).

While such passages emphasize the negative implications of drifting, Brand nonetheless also reveals the positive imaginative and political possibilities of the diasporic space of in-betweenness. To a limited extent, readers glimpse these possibilities in the text’s acknowledgment of Kamena’s and Carlyle’s powerful imaginations and their mobility. A legacy of the space of in-betweenness, these attributes, which ensured the slaves’ survival, are perhaps most vividly embodied by Marie Ursule’s daughter, Bola.

When Bola arrives with Kamena at Culebra Bay, she is initially confronted by the ruins of the Ursulines' estate. On the one hand, by portraying Bola's flight to the ghostly estate, the text illustrates her intimate connection with the forces that ruined her mother's life. On the other hand, Bola, who was too young to have memories of slavery, experiences a freedom that Marie Ursule and even Kamena never attain—a freedom repeatedly linked to positive images of the sea.

Even before Marie Ursule executes her deadly plan, she glimpses the sea in her daughter's eyes (45). In contrast to Adrian's and Eula's experiences, this watery space is unequivocally a life-giving force for Bola. After she sets eyes on the ocean for the first time at Culebra Bay, its positive possibilities become apparent: "walking into a house was like walking into a wall, a barrier to the open, because this is what Marie Ursule had seen in her child's eyes, the sea, and a journey" (44). Bola soon discovers that the malevolent, ghostly nuns cannot cross water; she escapes from their presence by swimming far out to sea, until she "is alone in the water *like a boat and a shipwreck*" (61; my emphasis). The allusion to "a boat and a shipwreck," in keeping with the references to drowning, death, and decay, suggests memories of the Middle Passage. Whereas Kamena battles against fluidity and searches for Terre Bouillante until his death, Bola concludes that "searching is useless" (65). She accepts that the "sea is always changing and so is the sky," and never tires "of drowning in both" (61).

Bola's acceptance of flux and change can be viewed as a rejection of accumulation and possession—fixations that motivate both the slave owners and, in many cases, their victims. As if to lend credence to Bola's philosophy, the novel ends with a chapter dedicated to her with her children. As the narrator explains, Bola's happiness springs from her acceptance both of the ever-changing ocean and of her ever-shifting desires, her "great appetite for anything" (294). For instance, when she takes a new lover, and her children, all fathered by different men, clamour around her asking, "Is he mine, Mama? Is he mine?" Bola tells them sternly: "No one is anyone's. How much time I must tell you" (298). Bola's contentment seemingly lies in choosing the ocean over the estate, flux over stasis. She revels in her own physicality: "Like some endangered tree she bloomed, devoured, fell into all her senses" (295).

Bola's ability to embrace her body and fall "into all her senses" functions, in part, as a marker of her freedom from both slavery and sexism. Early on, Marie Ursule comments on the extent to which slavery curtailed bodily

expression and enjoyment: “Breathing in sleep was the only time you owned movement of your chest” (4). At least two female descendants of Marie Ursule follow Bola’s lead, championing the ownership and enjoyment of their own bodies. For instance, in her fiftieth year, after attaining a respectable middle-class life, Bola’s granddaughter, Cordelia, realizes that she is no longer satisfied with her possessions. Like Bola, Cordelia is suddenly “greedy for everything she had not had,” and what she had not had “was the enjoyment of her body clear and free” (121). We are told that

[s]he needed to break her own body open and wring its water out toward the ends of the room so that she was not in a room and not riding Emmanuel Greaves [her husband] but riding the ocean’s waves, her flesh coming off like warm bread in her fingers and floating out to sea. . . . It was the only time she did not have order and her legs wide and liquid carried her to another shore. (107-108)

Like Bola, Cordelia rejects the master’s notion of order; she selects lovers arbitrarily, choosing one because he had “caught her when her body was deciding to listen to its own logic and all the objects in range of her senses would now be their outcome” (123).

Again, references to water and the body, particularly the description of Cordelia’s “flesh coming off like warm bread,” allude to the decay and wreckage associated with the Middle passage and echo Eula’s sense of having been “scattered out with a violent randomness” (258). In Cordelia’s case, however, the imagery points to a very different and far more positive shattering of the self, a death of sorts (*le petit mort*) brought about by an absolute surrender to sensual pleasure.

Unlike Bola and Cordelia, who take lovers, Adrian’s sister, Maya, another of Bola’s pleasure-seeking granddaughters, devotes all of her attention to her own body:

She made herself strong and liquid. Her menses made her euphoric. After the initial gravity into which each period sank her, after the day of feeling the world as it was, hopeless and suicidal, after watching her body swell with water, she felt euphoric at the warm feel of her blood gushing uncontrollably as if a breath was let out, as if rightly she could give birth to the world and wouldn’t, giddy and spinning, anything possible, and an energy so powerful she felt that she could spring above time, and wondered why she hadn’t. (221)

References in this passage to the release of breath (“as if a breath was let out”) again recall the commodification of the slave’s body, when “[b]reathing in sleep was the only time you owned movement of your chest.” The emphasis on menstruation in the passage reminds us further that female slaves were particularly prized for their ability to reproduce valuable

“commodities.” This may explain why Maya, who feels as if she could give birth to the world, initially chooses not to procreate.⁵

Bola’s and her granddaughters’ celebration of physical pleasure emphasize that, although no one emerges unscathed, individuals respond quite differently to their ancestors’ passage through “The Door of No Return.” To varying degrees these women challenge the legacy of the Enlightenment’s obsession with quantification by embracing what I term the aesthetics and politics of drifting.⁶ We are told, for instance, that occasionally Maya glimpses the life she wants and the term she repeatedly uses to describe this life is “drift.” As the narrator states: “She only wanted to drift down streets or drift out into the country . . . She wanted to be nowhere on time and she wanted incidents of music in cafes and clubs when she drifted into music as if she were music itself. . . . Drift. She liked the word, suggesting streams of her appearing and dissipating in air” (215).⁷ To further highlight the allure of drifting, the novel concludes with Bola’s warning to her children to be quiet or she will “go back in the sea” (299).

The emphasis in *At the Full* on women’s experience of drifting represents an important contribution to diaspora studies, complementing and extending foundational investigations that inadvertently normalized male experience such as Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). As Gilroy himself acknowledges, his study presents a reading of “masculinist” diasporism, focusing, as it does, on practices of travel and cultural production “that have, with important exceptions, not been open to women” (qtd. in Clifford 319–20). Brand’s novel also engages with feminist implications of post-structuralist accounts of identity and difference. Brand’s images of women adrift sexually prompt readers to consider sexual difference not simply in terms of male and female, but in terms of all those “anomalous sliding positions ever in process, in between, which opens up the continent of sexuality to increasing points of disturbance” (Hall 50).

In *At the Full*, the connection between the impact of the Middle Passage and the politics and aesthetics of drifting remains implicit. In her recent memoirs, however, it emerges as a central theme. As the narrator states: “We have no ancestry except the black water and the Door of No Return. They signify space and not land” (*Map* 61). Later, she asserts, “Our ancestors were bewildered because they had a sense of origins—some country, some village, some family where they belonged and from which they were rent. We, on the other hand, have no such immediate sense of belonging, *only of drift*” (118; my emphasis). In discussing her work with reviewers,

Brand has been forthright about her intention to plot a text that drifts poetically and functions as an alternative to the colonizer's map:

The form, the sketches and ruminations, as early maps were, allowed me the freedom to pick up an idea and examine it in many different ways. The way it traveled was in some ways the way a poem travels. I could reach out and follow an idea. I could drop one thread and the pick up another. The form allowed the book itself to become a map to my journey for a new kind of identity and existence. (qtd. in Mavjee 28–29)

After noting that the age of map-making coincided with the slave trade, Brand explains that she wanted to fashion another sort of map: some maps “are made to places you don't know even exist—to a new place. I wanted to lift that idea of map-making. I want to live in another kind of world. In a sense, that is the map I am writing” (qtd. in Mavjee 28).

In keeping with her view that her “book is a map” (hence the title, *A Map to the Door of No Return*), Brand pays careful attention to the organization of her words on the page. Narratives, like maps, engage in tasks of spatial ordering, naming, dividing, and enclosing. The trick, for Brand, was to design a text that performs these tasks in ways that challenge rather than reinstall the maps that supported and continue to support oppressive institutions. It is no coincidence, then, that the structure of Brand's memoirs undermines any sense of a linear journey with a tangible origin and destination. For one, the text, which lacks a table of contents, offers a seemingly random collection of observations categorized under more than forty italicized headings, at least half of which are “Maps.” As it turns out, these fragments are organized on the basis of idiosyncratic associative links rather than an overarching teleological structure. As the narrator explains, “I've collected these fragments . . . 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” (19).

Aesthetically and politically, it is significant that both her characters and her texts are given to drifting. As she says, they “deliberately misplace directions and misread observations. They can take north for south, west for east. They can in the end impugn the whole theory of directions” (203). Even before Brand published her memoirs, a reviewer for *Quill and Quire* remarked on the tendency in her writing, particularly in the novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, to invite readers to suspend their desires for a linear narrative and “instead float with characters” (“In Another” 26). When

Joseph Clifton heard Brand read from her earlier novel, he, too, found himself spellbound by a text that, as he says, was “truly poetic in its fluidity and its mixture of politics and aesthetic” (Martin 5).

Because of its overt political engagement with plotting “a new kind of identity and existence,” Brand’s latest work makes an important contribution to the debate about belonging, nationalism, and the constitution of Canadian identity. Against the dominant Canadian narrative of home and belonging,⁸ Brand’s text focuses relentlessly on the Door of No Return, which “opens all nationalisms to their void” (49). It reflects her profound skepticism of what James Clifford terms the “old localizing strategies—by bounded community, by organic culture, by region, by center and periphery” (303).

Signalling, as it does, important shifts in debates about identity and belonging in the current transnational moment, Brand’s exploration of the aesthetics and politics of drifting raises a host of questions. Some of the most pressing questions relate to the politics of drifting, particularly, the valorization of drifting as a strategy to counter what Brand views as the unsavoury politics of belonging. Shortly after *At the Full and Change of the Moon* was published, a reviewer enquired about the novel’s celebration of Bola’s freedom, specifically how this freedom, which she characterized as “one of desire and appetite, and even childlike greed, work [s] alongside the world of politics which can be one of moral strictures, and works toward community” (Abbas 6). Arguing in defense of her character, Brand replied:

I guess I am advocating for a different sense of politics . . . not only the freedom from harm, or the freedom to control. 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. (qtd. in Abbas 6)

Brand’s argument is certainly compelling, and there is validity to the claim that her sensual and erotic writing about women is a “political act” because she writes “directly to women, not as symbols of male pleasure, but as sexual beings claiming their own pleasure” (Martin 5). Nevertheless, advocating the pursuit of pleasure and drifting as political strategies strikes me as somewhat limited, representing a compromised reaction to both slavery and sexism.

At every turn, Brand’s fictions express a longing for and, ultimately, a rejection of origins, belonging, and possession, including the potentially beneficial forms of origin, belonging, and possession associated with being part of a family and, by extension, a community. But, since, as we know, the

institution of slavery purposefully set out to destroy the bonds of family and community, then how does embracing “a politics of pleasure” that continues to minimize the claims of community and to valorize “desire and appetite, and even childlike greed,” contribute to the amelioration of black people’s lives who, to borrow Eula’s words, were “scattered with a violent randomness”? Furthermore, as Walcott observes, the estrangement of daughters from mothers is a central issue in Brand’s fiction—an issue that “sits at the heart of the question of community” (48). As we have seen, the repeated rejection of daughters by mothers functions as a marker of the devastating effect of the Middle Passage. If one of the corrosive legacies of slavery and sexism is their impact on inter-generational bonds between women, then once again it is unclear how this tragic inheritance is addressed by the fight to express oneself in “the most lustful and pleasurable ways.” Put somewhat differently, to what extent is Bola’s loss of Marie Ursule—a loss mirrored by Eula’s abandonment of her daughter over a century later (not to mention Brand’s own sense of feeling “abandoned by Marie Ursule”)—addressed by championing the politics of pleasure and embracing one’s ever-shifting desires?

One answer is that Brand’s portrait of women championing their desires breaks with the stereotypical portrayal of the mammy role, in which Black women are expected to take care of everyone else—including their own children—before taking care of themselves. Read in this way, the female characters’ pursuit of pleasure ensures that oppressive gendered and sexualized codes of behaviour are unlearned so that those who come after—the next generations—are liberated from the practices that contribute to the racial and sexual subjugation of both middle- and working-class women. This answer, however, strikes me as limited simply because Brand’s characters escape the mammy stereotype only at the cost of subscribing to the equally oppressive stereotype of the sexually promiscuous female.

In essence, Brand’s portrayals of female desire signal how individuals are positioned within particular ideological systems even as they demonstrate how these systems are exceeded by spatial, temporal, and libidinal flows and relations. Indeed, as critics observe, although Brand herself, owing to her repeated rejection of belonging, ostensibly embraces the politics of drifting, she nevertheless remains somewhat anchored as a Canadian writer. Recently, Peter Dickinson claimed that “Brand’s race, gender, and sexuality necessarily preclude full participation in national citizenship, and thus prevent her from ever ‘being’ a Canadian writer” (161). Yet, as Jason Wiens

points out, although Brand “clearly sets herself in opposition and antagonism to the Canadian cultural dominant . . . she has largely articulated this antagonism . . . through the nation’s established network of institutions, including Coach House Press, the National Film Board of Canada, and writer-in residence appointments at large, influential universities [. . .]” (3–4).

Brand, of course, would be the first to acknowledge that there is no utopian position outside societal institutions, and that, to borrow her words, we are all “corrupted by what we live, and what we have to do to get out of how we live” (qtd. in Sanders 6). Nevertheless, Brand’s insistence on tracing complex identities beyond the nation-state reflects the limitations of what Clifford terms “the old localizing strategies.” As Clifford argues, “articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state” (307). As a writer, Brand speaks from a specific place, even while she stresses what Rinaldo Walcott terms “outer-national” identifications, illustrating that each place is part of a much larger diasporic network of spatial and temporal affiliations.

Brand’s diasporic narratives reject both the model of the Euro-American modernist exile, whose desires for belonging are typically nostalgic and directed toward a lost origin—and the model of the immigrant—whose desires are reoriented toward a new home and a new national community. In effect, her drifting subjects reconfigure the trajectory and objects of the desire for belonging by forging decentered, transnational connections that are not necessarily based on the concept of a homeland or the “teleology of origin/return” (see Clifford 306). Ultimately, however, her texts do not entirely reject the notion of belonging. Although her characters remain scattered and disoriented in the wake of the Diaspora, readers are witnesses to and implicated in its legacy. In the wake of the Diaspora, a community of witnesses is formed through an act of imagination: to borrow Brand’s words, readers move “from flesh into thought.”

Just as Bola and her descendants are abandoned yet saved by Marie Ursule, the forces of rejection and expulsion associated with the Diaspora are countered by the drive “to retain, to salvage, to keep, and to pass on.”⁹ In the end, for instance, we are told that Kamena recounted his history “like a psalm,” offering this gift to Bola before “it slipped his memory” (296). Later, the narrator explains that “Bola has her own hymn, ‘Life will continue,’ she tells the children, ‘no matter what it seems, and even after that someone will remember you’” (298). As the quasi-religious references to “psalm” and “hymn” suggest, Brand’s novel implicitly retains notions of communion and community. But the self-conscious references to story-telling, memory, and

narration underscore that the community Brand has in mind is not predicated on an essentialized past. Her diasporan subjects bear traces of a past, but, as Stuart Hall reminds us, the past “is not waiting for us back there to recoup our identities against. It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. It has to be narrativized. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact” (58). Furnished with Brand’s fluid textual maps, readers are thus encouraged, in the literal and figurative sense, to remember and re-map complicated transnational diasporic communities—communities whose broken histories and transnational connections repeatedly challenge the bounded, progressivist narratives of nation-states.

NOTES

- 1 For instance, the description of Kamena crawling “along the horizon . . . room enough as under a bed” recalls the claustrophobia of the slave ships. As critics have noted, one of “the most striking images of the Middle Passage . . . is the tight-packing of the slave ships, an illustration often used in history textbooks and anthologies on the African American experience. . . . The injustice and brutality of tight-packing is unquestionable, the suffering and horror experienced by the slaves unimaginable” (*Black* 6).
- 2 In her memoirs, Brand speaks of her own grandfather who came “from a people whose name he could not remember.” As she says: “His forgetting was understandable; after all, when he was born the Door of No Return was hardly closed, forgetting was urgent” (223).
- 3 Eula’s nostalgic account of the absent ancestral line recalls a comment that Brand once made about her own experience. “When you grow up black anywhere in the western world,” Brand stated, “there is an uneasiness . . . an anxiety of place. It is as if there is nothing behind you” (qtd. in Zackodnick 13).
- 4 In her memoirs, Brand comments on this type of interminable journey and explicitly states that Kamena’s “unending and, as history will confirm, inevitably futile search for a homeland is the mirror of the book’s later generations—their dispersal, their scatterings to the extreme and remote corners of the world: Amsterdam, New York, Toronto. Their distraction and flights resound in him and back to him. It is their condition of being” (202–03).
- 5 In her memoirs, Brand contends that “the Black body is one of the most regulated bodies in the Diaspora. Perhaps the most regulated body is the female body, any female body. . . . By regulated I mean that there are specific societal functions which it is put to, quite outside of its own agency—functions which in fact deny and resist its agency” (37). She goes on to insist that to reclaim “the Black body from that domesticated, captive . . . space is the creative project always underway” (43).
- 6 The link established here between female bodies and water recalls the “oceanic” water imagery associated with *écriture féminine* and, in particular, the writings of Hélène Cixous. In the “Laugh of the Medusa,” for instance, Cixous writes: “We are ourselves sea, sand, coral, sea-week beaches tides, swimmers, children, waves” (260). As critics note, water, for Cixous, is “the feminine element *par excellence*,” reflecting the “comforting security of the mother’s womb” and “the endless pleasures of the polymorphously perverse child” (Moi 116–17). As in Brand’s novel, in Cixous’ writing it is “within this space that . . . [the] speaking subject is free to move from one subject position to another, or to merge oceanically with the world” (Moi 117).

- 7 Even though it promotes the fluid possibilities associated with the cartography of the Diaspora, the novel never wholly supports fantasies of transcendence. Maya, for instance, works as a prostitute. As a result, she remains complicit with the commodification of women's bodies.
- 8 The notions of home and belonging are underscored in the opening lines of Canada's national anthem: "O Canada!// Our home and native land!"
- 9 Claudine Reynaud p. 75. This tension also surfaces in Morrison's novel *Beloved*, as Reynaud observes.

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