

In Search of a New Cognitive Schema: Unsettling Colonial Epistemologies in Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* unsettles the epistemic foundations of the (Post-)Colonial Anthropocene, which prioritize linearity, binarity, and purported objectivity. Dominant contemporary epistemologies, as Sylvia Wynter has demonstrated, race and gender legitimate knowledge production as the preserve of Man, to the exclusion of human and non-human others. Instead, writing towards the multipolarity and -modality of the Door of No Return, Brand posits and practices, through both form and content, an anti-colonial epistemology, in which temporality and spatiality are recursive and knowledge is embodied and pluriversal.

KEYWORDS: Dionne Brand, epistemology, Postcolonial Studies, Black Diaspora Studies

Much attention has been paid to the environmental themes and implications of celebrated Canadian writer Dionne Brand's prolific works of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction (cf. Lousley; Yusoff; Huebener 624). *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) has proven particularly generative for (new) materialist approaches (cf. Ortega-Aponte; Tinsley; McCoy and Montgomery). The book's interlacing of the hyper-local and global, suspicion of origins, and fragmented structure mirror key ecocritical concerns (Brand 51, 64, 69; Joseph 76; Adamson and Slovic 16). Above all, its blurring of genre and discipline presents a challenge to dominant epistemologies, whose downfall, Achille Mbembe argues, is necessary for overcoming anthropocentrism and colonial modes of knowing (19, 26). *Map*¹ can be read as a memoir, an extended non-fiction essay, a work of autofiction or autotheory, an episodic history, or perhaps even as poetry.² Its back cover labels it simply a "book of discovery." Part of *Map*'s categorical interminableness arises from Brand's citing of a plethora of fields alongside autobiographic anecdotes, including linguistics, philosophy, literature, cartography, Postcolonial Studies, physics, feminism, psychoanalysis, Media Studies, mythology, and history, creating a fundamentally multimodal text (Casas 32). Ecocriticism itself is one of these many disciplines engaged in *Map*, which returns throughout to discussions of water, and critiques environmental racism in Canada, to cite only two examples (Brand 123-24). As disciplines and genres necessarily exist within current linguistic

¹ I refer to *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* as *Map* throughout this article.

² It should be noted that genre is a racialized, as much as it is a formal, categorization, whose application is inextricable from imperial ideologies (Huggan and Tiffin 15). See for example Tope Folarin's recent article, "Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction?".

and epistemic regimes, adherence to them requires reproducing their a priori racist and anthropocentric conception of the human (Wynter 270). *Map*, instead, refuses categorization by genre in both its content and structure, undermining typical classifications intent, above all, in drawing a clear line between fact and fiction (Johnson 151).

The Door of No Return, *Map*'s central object/metaphor, exists like the text as a whole in multiple, even contradictory modes. The Door of No Return refers to both the forts along the coast of West Africa used for, as well as to the historical rupture caused by, the transatlantic slave trade (Saul 62). A historical, ontological, and geological break, the Door of No Return is, as Brand writes in *Map*, "real and metaphoric," standing ajar between the past and present, between Africa and the Black diaspora, between *Map*'s central questions and the answers it seeks (18). Its "impossibility" illuminates the insufficiency of dominant epistemologies in the face of the world we inhabit and its histories, which has been termed the "(Post-)Colonial Anthropocene" (Brand 32; Premoli 9).

As Ian Baucom has argued, the imaginaries of the Black Atlantic and of the Anthropocene meet along the Ghanaian coast, the historical and metaphysical site of the Door of No Return (85). Indeed, each potential dating of the Anthropocene's origin tells a story rooted in the displacement, enslavement, and genocide of African and Indigenous peoples, implying that colonialism and the Anthropocene are, at their core, the same event (Yusoff 30, 44, 47; cf. Wynter 305). The Anthropocene, then, can only be understood as "a project initiated and executed through anti-Blackness" (Yusoff 62). This clarifies the long legacy in Postcolonial and Black Studies of theorizing and applying ecocritical frameworks, before and beyond the discipline's explicit academic entrenchment.³ Yet, or therefore, the discursive and material "production of the Anthropocene is predicated on Whiteness as the color of universality" (Yusoff 52). "Repudiat[ing] the structures of thought and material arrangements that brought the Anthropocene into being" and overcoming their division of the human from the natural requires a different way of knowing, one which engages with colonialism and anti-Blackness as fundamental to the modern world (Yusoff 62; Mbembe 26). Mbembe argues that this new way of knowing must be a "pluriversity," "a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity" and which, unlike the colonial provincialism of Enlightenment universalism, may actually produce truly universal knowledge (19). Tiffany Lethabo King suggests that these pluriversal epistemologies may only be created through Black fungibility, "the capacity of Blackness for unfettered exchangeability and transformation[...] an open-ended analytic accounting for both Black abjection and Black

³ In their expansive *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out that there is a "long history of ecological concern in postcolonial criticism" (3). For this reason, some contemporary scholars of the Anthropocene, such as Kathryn Yusoff, ground their arguments in a century of Black diaspora scholarship, building on the work of Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, among others (9). Others have analyzed the ecocritical themes and theoretical contributions already present in foundational Postcolonial Studies texts, such as W.E.B. Du Bois' *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) or the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (Claborn; Schaeffer; see also *MELUS* vol. 34 no. 2, "The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism").

pursuits of life in the midst of subjection” (1023). Unsettling colonial epistemologies in this way escapes Enlightenment “humanist baggage,” opening the possibility of thinking the Anthropocene without reproducing it and forming “new geographies of Black freedom” (1023, 1037).

What is the content of these colonial epistemologies that undergird the Anthropocene? Mbembe describes “Western epistemic traditions” as those which “claim detachment of the known from the knower,” a tradition which “attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production” and normalizes and excuses colonial relations. Resting on assumptions of Cartesian duality which separate reason from the bodily, these epistemic traditions imagine subjects able to produce objective and universal knowledge (9). As Sylvia Wynter argues, this epistemology rests on definitions of the human as Man. White men, who created Man in their image, assign themselves reason as well as its attendant right to define the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, revealing that epistemology is always already ontology (287-88). Reason is made oppositional to the natural and irrational, which is projected onto Man’s self-defined other, epitomized by African and Black diasporic subjects (296, 301).⁴ Wynter reveals, then, that binaries such as mind/body and nature/culture not only reflect and promote an anthropocentric worldview but, in the first instance, map raced and gendered differences onto bodies and space, tethering legitimate knowledge production to whiteness. In order to unsettle these colonial ways of knowing, *Map*, like Wynter’s *Argument*, “struggles to think/articulate itself outside the terms of the disciplinary discourses of our present epistemological order” and to construct something new in its place (331).

Sharlee Cranston-Reimer has argued that *Map* rejects colonial mapping practices, focussing on structure in order to call for a change, not only in *what* we know, but also in *how* we know it (94-95). I take this call as my starting point for thinking through *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the epistemological frameworks it challenges and constructs. I argue that in *Map*, Brand concurrently theorizes anti-colonial epistemologies and writes within them, a multi-level practice that is possible, in part, because *Map* acts as both a work of literature and of literary analysis. It references a plethora of scholars and writers, presents assorted archival materials, and collects what Erica Johnson has termed a “neo-archive” of “fiction that creates history in the face of its absence” (157). Brand repeatedly provides the conclusions that I and other scholars have drawn from her work after the passage in question, or in another part of the book entirely. In this way, she is able to play a role in defining the meanings and interpretations of *Map* and dismantle traditional binaries of fiction/theory and object/subject. Brand, then, is author, character, and critic.⁵ Indeed, *Map*

⁴ King argues that Blackness is not only made analogous to nature here, but indeed that “Black women (and men) *become* nature to fill in the conceptual gap” generated by this colonial projection (1028; emphasis added).

⁵ In this article, I refer to the character Brand in *Map* as the narrator, in order to avoid oversimplifying the question of genre and implying that *Map* is definitively a work of autobiography or memoir in opposition to

leaves me with the enduring sense that it already, with elegance and precision, makes all the arguments I might write about it. My method in this paper, then, is recursive and reiterative, using the collections of secondary literature gathered around *Map* (including the body of work Brand cites in it), as well as *Map* itself, to guide my analysis. This method is both an effort to work within *Map*'s epistemic framework as well as a requirement of writing about such a multimodal text. My recursive analysis is driven not by the desire to discover what has been there all along in an infinite search for the new, but rather the joy and generativity of re-reading, recapitulating, reading together, and interpreting from a fragmentary pastiche (cf. Brand 43-44, 99, 189). Notably, I read *Map*, necessarily and explicitly, from within our contemporary age of multiple and overlapping crises, which, as Wynter argues, all derive from "our present biocentric ethnoclass genre of the human," Man (317).

In addition to Cranston-Reimer's structural argument, this paper works alongside two materialist readings of *Map*, which pay particular attention to the matter of water and books, respectively. The first of these, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," takes up Brand's work as an imaginative archive of the queer Black Atlantic, which she uses to argue for the importance of approaching both history and metaphor materially in order to understand the Black diaspora and its fundamental relationship to queerness (193, 212; cf. Georgis). The second is the book chapter "Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the Antiblackness of the Book as an Object," in which Beth McCoy and Jasmine Montgomery use a materialist reading of *Map* to grapple with the tension between omnipresent anti-Blackness and Black agency in print culture. They argue that *Map*'s paratext, particularly its peritext of numbering that trails off and repeats and titles that reappear and rarely predict the text they demarcate, prevent the reader from gaining control over or reading cohesion out of the book.⁶ This paratext performs the book-as-object's poles of "virtuosity or despair"/"virtuosity and despair," its simultaneous ontological anti-Blackness and space for Black resistance, poles which reflect those of the Door of No Return (Brand qtd. in McCoy and Montgomery 132; McCoy and Montgomery 136–37).

I take up Tinsley's call to focus on the materiality of history in the first section of this article, in which I argue that *Map* rewrites temporal and spatial norms, positing that space and time are interwoven and non-linear, and that history is an embodied experience physically in the present. In the second section, I turn to *Map*'s treatment of maps—material metaphors for space—as categorically indistinct from literature. Dissolving knowledge categories challenges the colonial privileging of those labeled scientific, a determination which depends, as explicated above, more on the producer's identity than on the method, and

other categories of writing. This choice, however, may elide the complexity of the multiple and overlapping roles Brand holds in relation to *Map*.

⁶ This form is partially mirrored in Lynne Huffer's "Respite: 12 Anthropocene Fragments," whose self-presentation as "autocollage" presents another generic potential for *Map*.

demonstrates the embodied, and so subjective, nature of all knowledge. To further this argument, Brand develops what I term a theory of situated readership, which proposes that meaning-making is reliant on the embodied and subjective experience of reading and materiality of the text. The multipolarity of maps and/as literature, like the Door of No Return, demands a pluriversal epistemic system reliant on contradiction and multiplicity (19; cf. Yusoff 27). Overall, I will argue that *A Map to the Door of No Return* unsettles the epistemologies which undergird the (Post-)Colonial Anthropocene, instead positing and practicing a different way of knowing in which temporality and spatiality are interwoven and recursive, knowledge is embodied and imaginative, and binary categorization is replaced by multipolarity and multiplicity.

Past as Present

Diasporic Space/Time

A Map to the Door of No Return begins with memories of the narrator's childhood in Guayaguayare, a town in Trinidad. On the corner of a small island looking out onto the ocean, Brand presents Guaya as seemingly outside of time and global events. The radio is the only "door to 'over there,' it is the door to being in the world [...] The world kept coming. We listened. Year in, year out" (14-15). But this sense of being outside of history and the consequences of world events is immediately undercut by the method of transmission, the BBC. All the news is filtered through a British perspective, as is schooling, which extends to cultural lessons in "the proper use of everything" (15). The ongoing legacy of British colonialism is visible everywhere, from the ubiquity of Christianity to the family members spread out over the former empire. The narrator learns early on that "one is born into history, one isn't born into a void," as those who benefit from violent histories and "live on the cumulative hurt of others" like to pretend (82). Though the narrator's childhood is steeped in history, this has been obscured in order to obfuscate the mechanisms of ongoing colonialism. If Guaya appears outside of history, this is only the timelessness of the (post)colony, whose subjection to cultural and economic imperialism remain unchanged even as the BBC reports move forward in time. But if the town on the small island at first appears peripheral, Brand repositions it as "the centre of the world," lying between the Americas, Europe, and Africa (74). The narrator's childhood in and around the multiple, ongoing, and contradictory spaces and times of the Middle Passage shows her that diasporic subjects live in a recursive time, in which past, present, future, the *here* and the *there* cannot be extricated from one another, and that history is something that is continuously lived out. Time and space, as Baucom has also argued, do not pass, but rather accumulate, double back, and recur (81). *Map* demonstrates this accumulation through both its content and structure, showing that the embodied nature of history after the Middle Passage recursively intertwines space and time with themselves and one another.

A teleological understanding of history views the present as the only possible end point of the single truth of the past, a linear chain of cause and effect which forecloses the possibility of alternative futures. However, breaks in the archive from violence in the past, and present, release specters, which disrupt historical continuity and lead to displaced temporalities. In her article “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman theorizes these breaks in the context of the Middle Passage. To try and say something about its victims within our current epistemic paradigms requires accepting that they enter history through the writing of their captors, rapists, or murderers, if at all (2). Hartman instead proposes engaging with this past through “critical fabulation,” a struggle between historian and archive that does not hold to the traditional rules of historical knowledge production but rather throws them into crisis. Though critical fabulation cannot provide closure, and will inevitably fail at recovering lives subjected to the double violence of the Middle Passage and its archive, by engaging explicitly with the past in the present it opens the possibility of a future that is different, and freer (“Venus in Two Acts” 11-12). In order to grapple with this historical double violence, Viviane Saleh-Hanna re-conceptualizes Jacques Derrida’s hauntology as “Black Feminist Hauntology.” Saleh-Hanna reads Derrida’s claim that there are no origins—including of concepts such as being and time—not implicated in our ongoing interpretations of them through Toni Morrison’s rememory (13). Rememory, as theorized in *Beloved* (1987), is a “structural remembrance transcending individual or time-segregated acts,” the intergenerational and embodied fallouts of violent pasts whose specters, residing in bodies and institutions, are materially in the present (16, 19). Black Feminist Hauntology highlights the impossibility and violence of dominant temporal and bodily understandings, white supremacist tautologies and binaries, and an understanding of history as only in the past. It serves as an “exorcising framework” which enables deeper critiques of colonial relationships through engagement with the contradictions and obfuscations it produces (6). The haunting, intergenerational nature of this history, then, requires an alternative epistemic approach which disrupts linear conceptions of time and space.

For Brand, Blackness in the diaspora is itself a specter of the past, haunting the present as a reminder both of the violence of history and its ongoing ramifications. “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” (25). This being sandwiched between history creates what Christina Sharpe has called “trans*Atlantic time [...] an oceanic time that does not pass, a time in which the past and present verge” (128). The Black Atlantic, the threshold of the Door of No Return in all its modalities, is haunted by Brand’s marooned of the diaspora, those lost in or by the Middle Passage (Tinsley 208). The Black diaspora insists that history inhabits a recursive temporality, and is full of bodies, and that these temporalities and embodiments can only be understood in relation to one another.

The Door of No Return has warped not only time, but also space. In the diaspora, “one is caught in the few feet in between” the Door and its reflection, or the ship (30). “The frame of the doorway” is isomorphic to the entire world; it is “the only space of true existence”

(30). The water it opens onto, “the first thing in [the narrator’s] imagination,” both connects and separates her from the Door; in this way, the ocean becomes origin, history, and primordial metaphor (6). This “figurative fluidity” of Brand’s writing, mirroring her narrator’s earliest memories, aligns with Tinsley’s call to engage with water, history, and metaphor in their materiality, creating a recursive oceanic space as well as time (211). The Middle Passage, then, was not only “a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography” (5). It refracts time and space, and these are now both cyclical and recursive. For example, the narrator finds London familiar, though she has never been there before. She recognizes it from other cities, former colonies, which the British built on the same model, collapsing them all into a single place (77). The streets are the same, as are the tragedies. In Australia, she sees a play about “Aboriginal children taken away from their parents and communities and subjected to the terrors of abuse and displacement. Just like at home in Canada. The similarities don’t end there” (79). Race, racism, and history reverberate through the space/time of the colonized world, the world in which colonization took place, distorting usual geographies. In the Black diaspora, “every space you occupy is public space, that is, space which is definable by everyone,” merging the signifiers of body and place as their meanings are colonized and reflecting King’s understanding of “Blackness as space-in-the-making” (Brand 50; King 1024). For this reason, Brand’s intervention in colonial epistemologies must also disrupt geography, forcing the “White Geologies” of the Anthropocene to buckle and transmute (Yusoff 27).

Map’s structure makes the same argument as its content; that is to say, that space/time is recursive rather than linear. The Door of No Return haunts the book in the same way that the history of the Middle Passage haunts the present. It appears in the text when it is expected, and when it is not; it takes different forms, whether as a physicality, a metaphor, a spiritual presence, a fissure, a unifying experience, an ontological transformation, or a psychological manifestation (18-19, 24, 35, 48, 61, 72, 88, 93, 96, 118, 121, 223-224). Return to the Door is impossible, so the Door itself keeps returning. The Door of No Return, like water, is in its haunting metaphor, history, and place all at once; a co-incident disrupting the spatial configurations which separate language from geography and epistemology from ontology. Repetition and parataxis in general are key elements of *Map*. Headings, such as ‘maps,’ images, such as water, metaphors, quotes, themes, and authors reappear throughout. In addition to their typical functions of imparting importance and altering meaning, repetition and parataxis in *Map* mirror, describe, and work within the recursive temporalities and geographies of diaspora. *Map’s* unusual peritext “disorients and thwarts readerly efforts to build up enough momentum to pass the threshold to numeric, narrative, or thematic coalescence” (McCoy and Montgomery 137). Its repetitions and discontinuities undermine conceptions of time and space as linear, distinct, or progressive. That *Map’s* peritext is presented as natural and without explanation is both an argument that current dominant epistemologies are insufficient and a practical reflection of writing under a different set of terms. In both form and content, then, Brand theorizes the cyclical

temporalities and spatialities of diaspora, as well as the accumulating, multiscalar time of the Anthropocene, while also writing in accordance with this state.

The Invasion of Grenada and Embodied History

Map's depictions of the invasion of Grenada and its impact on the narrator align with and further argue for an understanding of history as embodied and recursive, but not inevitable. Brand writes about Grenada in two sub-sections, both of which begin with the narrator sitting in a café in Canada with a friend, and end with her asking “Marlene, did we, ah, did you go crazy after? Did you have trouble with life?” (156). The second sub-section also includes an answer: “Yes,’ she says” (169). The repeated introductory and closing sentences in subsequent sub-sections show that the narrator, haunted by her experiences in revolutionary Grenada, lives in a cyclical temporality tying the past to the present, Grenada to Canada. She has gone “crazy” both in her individual experiences of trauma and in the sense that for her, temporality and spatiality do not align with how these are expected to normatively flow, or stay put, instead repeating and spilling over into one another in the present.

In revolutionary Grenada, the narrator hears about the American invasion on the radio. Unlike her childhood experiences in Trinidad, her new home country in the Caribbean has been violently pulled into the narrative of Western history for challenging the colonial capitalist status quo, or as a playground for the United States to make an anti-communist point in the context of the Cold War. The story of the narrator’s experience of the coup is repeated at least four times in a row, each time with different, sometimes contradictory, details. The narrator always wakes up ill on October 19. The only year mentioned is 1999, shortly before *Map's* publication. The day is sometimes a Tuesday, and other times, a Friday, and it may have been the day of the invasion, or the day of the coup (155-169). Brand’s retelling, with its contradictory or absent time markers, operates within the temporality of traumatic memory, in which time is looped and, residing within the rupture between past and present, one is possessed by history (Batiste 127). By presenting the story of the invasion of Grenada as repeated, changing, and of the present, Brand mirrors the rememory-reminiscent structures of traumatic memory, and argues that due to the traumas of colonialism this is also how history and time function.

In these retellings, the narrator is an embodied subject in history, as shown through her quotidian yet indelibly remembered illness. The invasion of Grenada has a bodily impact, as she “grow[s] thinner and thinner with nervousness” and learns the instinct to crack and bow under sounds of bombing and gunfire (156, 168). At the same time, witnessing these traumatic events provokes an out of body experience, in which the narrator loses her sense of self and subjectivity.

What happens if you stand in a moment like this? Your own body must die, too, I suppose. Even if you do not know. Aren’t we all implicated in each other? In any

moment like this we must die, too. I was that body draping the cliff. I left myself on the cliff and I stood on the balcony with Marlene spilling a glass of water forever. (166)

Watching the shooting after the American invasion, a traumatic event both for the narrator herself and within the historiography of Black diasporic freedom projects, the narrator feels that some part of her has also died, and some part of her has remained standing on the balcony, although some part of her is also sitting in a café in Canada. These are all coterminous and co-locational, and demonstrate that, while the past is in the present, the present is also in the past. The spatial and temporal recursions of history create both an inter-subjective and de-subjectified experience, but one that is highly corporeal, both embodied and out of body. The events of the past are materially in the present, then, not least in the bodies of those who experienced that past or its reverberations, collapsing the distinction between human and natural history (cf. Baucom 91).

Map's repetitive and sometimes conflicting retellings of the US invasion of Grenada include the embodied and affective valences of history; the space for ambiguity and working through traumatic memory; and a recursive, rather than linear, temporality of an occurrence whose impacts, both personal and global, are still ongoing. The narrator explains that she went to revolutionary Grenada because she “wanted to be free [...] wanted to feel as if history was not destiny” (168). Although the narrator is unable to alter the outcome of the invasion, Brand, in writing about Grenada in this way, can free history from an endless repetition. By describing the emotions on the island, which began as hope and celebration, she demonstrates that the outcome of the invasion was not predestined, and, in telling a different story each time, Brand writes different ways it could have happened, opening the possibility that history need not be destiny. Without eliding the violence of the invasion and coup as they in fact took place, by retelling them in the cyclical temporality of traumatic memory, Brand can present an (incomplete) working through of them on her own terms, and show that they are still an integral part of the present. In both form and content, *Map* as a whole approaches history in this way, figuring it along different temporalities and spatialities which converge, repeat, and change in bodies. Unlike colonialism’s “negation of time,” which forecloses the possibility of change, *Map* utilizes a plurality of temporalities, conditioning the possibility of alternative futures (Mbembe 13). In so doing, Brand writes (within) an epistemology through which it is possible to consider and bring together vastly different temporal scales, and from which new relations of geologic subjectivity rooted in Black liberation can be imagined and realized (Baucom 16; Yusoff 70).

Maps as Literature

Cartography and Destabilizing Knowledge Categories

Already from its front cover, *Map* defines itself as a map. It leads to the Door of No Return, which is both a physical location and a metaphor. The book-as-map is also a collection of *Notes to Belonging*, as the full title reads. Maps and literature, directions and metaphor,

routes and writing and identity begin to bleed together. By treating maps as literature and poetry as cartography, Brand argues that knowledge production is always subjective and imaginative. In so doing, she destabilizes colonial hierarchies of knowledge that place the scientific over the imaginative, and therefore also the white and masculine, assumed to have scientific imaginations, over the Black and feminine, assumed to have imaginative science (cf. Mbembe 18). By demonstrating that knowledge's purported universality is in fact fundamentally gendered and raced, and arguing that all knowledge production is a subjective process, Brand demonstrates the materiality of knowledge; that is to say that epistemology is always already ontology. Through her historiography of cartography and theory of situated readership, Brand shows that all knowledge is embodied and imaginative, rejecting categorizations of knowledge production, the possibility of objectivity, and their associated epistemic hierarchies.

Maps, as traditionally defined, are supposedly scientific and objective. Yet, Brand cites a number of examples of map-making within the Christian-Western scientific tradition in order to show that these have always been creative products of their authors' situated imaginations. This historiography of cartography begins in *Map's* first subsection titled 'maps,' which details the migrations of the rufous hummingbird. This unsettles, first, what the reader thinks they may know about what it means to call something a map. Additionally, by noting that the hummingbird's flight cannot be explained by physics, and that it seems to simply have an innate knowledge of its 5,000 mile path, Brand further troubles the assumed primacy of Western science and posits that the most natural of maps is, in some sense, also spiritual (6). In the second 'maps' section, Brand cites the *Cosmas Indicopleustes Topographia Christiana*, which claimed that the world was shaped like Moses' tabernacle and surrounded by holy rivers, another example of a map informed by religion and spirituality rather than geography (12). Similarly, she describes an older Babylonian map, which represented the earth as a perfect circle surrounded by mythical hazards (16). Later, the ancient Romans drew their maps as itineraries, so their depictions depended on their goals, and left out anyplace that was not in their travel plan (142). These examples show that early maps within the (appropriated) Western canon have always been imaginative, reflecting the beliefs and goals of their drawers. Or, put more succinctly, it has always been true that "the map is in your head" (117).

This was also the case for colonial maps, which drew on the religious and intellectual traditions Brand cites. Hiob Ludolf, the German known as the founder of Ethiopian Studies, never actually stepped foot in the country himself. Nevertheless, he drew a map of it based on stories from missionaries, which the German academy accepted as authoritative (18). In this way, he created the space he purported to describe, at least from the perspective of Europeans (cf. Stewart 524). Similarly, the description of the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic that was accepted by Europeans at the time, and taught in places where colonization shaped education, was heavily mythological, describing the water as treacherous and never-ending (85). This description owes more to the colonizer's psychology and fear of the unknown than

any naval fact. “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” (17). Though descriptions such as “deep” and “dark” reflect figments of colonizers’ fearful imaginations, these ‘explorers’ and their maps were labeled scientific and rational, and therefore, within the hierarchical system of knowledge that prioritized these, more intelligent and closer to truth. Wynter describes this as an “ethno-geography,” in which a society’s moral and political organization are projected onto phenomena, naturalizing, confirming, and reproducing the set of assumptions regarded as “objective truths” from which the exploration began (271-72). In this case, the assumed superiority of European epistemologies as well as anthropocentrism are projected onto the landscape, whose mapping reconfirms the (rational) superiority of the Human over its both human and non-human others. Geography, then, is defined, and so to an extent created, through the psychology of white men, to the exclusion of other inputs, whether human or environmental.

Brand points out the subjectivity inherent in Western mapping practices not to say that these are wrong—though their claim to representational fidelity is often tenuous—but rather to point out that their product is the subjective output of a particular cartographer, their beliefs, fears, and sources of knowledge. These maps describe not only, or even primarily, a certain geography, but rather a situated history (cf. Hartman *Lose Your Mother* 9). Colonial maps are violent, but not because they are subjective as such; rather, it is because they inscribe as natural truth the racist imaginations of which they are a product. The physical sciences arose out of a paradigm shift in European understandings which concurrently legitimated the expropriation, enslavement, and purported sub-humanity of Indigenous and African peoples, and (post-)colonial cartography engraves racial difference and hierarchy into the landscape, obfuscating the human origins of race and racism (Wynter 304-305). *Map*, then, does not discredit cartography for being non-objective, but rather rejects objectivity as neither possible nor desirable. Brand exposes objectivity and science as categories that create a hierarchy of knowledge based on who is producing it rather than the quality of the knowledge itself. Instead of arguing that those whose knowledge has been devalued within contemporary hierarchies can also practice objectivity and science, Brand rejects these as discrete categories, embracing pluriversal modes of knowledge production and dismantling colonial epistemologies rather than trying to find a place within them for those they disenfranchise (cf. Yusoff 26).

Later in *Map*, Brand expands her historiography of cartography to include a broader tradition of maps. She cites the portolan, a written description of a place rather than an image (52). There is the rihla, which is an account of a pilgrimage, and so a religious and spiritual document, in addition to a description of space (86). Finally, there is the oral ruttier, or poetry which offers navigational guidance. Brand follows this with her own “Ruttier for the Marooned in the Diaspora” (212-13). Placing this poem after her historiography of cartography and alternative forms of mapping allows Brand to present it as a map, belonging

in a category with and of equal value to other maps. As she learns from Ludolph's example, "in order to draw a map only the skill of listening may be necessary. And the mystery of interpretation" (18). Brand's Ruttier is the culmination of her attempt to listen to and interpret the many experiences of diaspora, and place them in a form that will guide those who are navigating its terrain. It is also the culmination of other works of literature listed under the 'map' heading, including Aimé Césaire's poetry and a passage from the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano on freeing himself from slavery (170, 182). Though critically fabulated, Brand emphasizes that her map-making methodology is no different than that practiced within the Western academic tradition, as her narrator has worked "like Ludolf" with intuition, fragments, and intergenerational knowledge (19). Through her historiography of cartography, then, Brand argues and writes as though maps are literature, and literature is a map, and that this is equally true if obfuscated for all instances of cartography. In so doing, she unsettles the divide between the sciences and humanities, a face of the nature/culture divide which structures and follows from biocentric understandings of the Human (Wynter 270; cf. Baucom 26).

Map's Theory of Situated Readership

In *Map*, Brand proposes a theory of situated readership, demonstrating the embodied nature of all knowledge production and distribution. This intervention becomes necessary because if maps, deeply entwined with colonialism, are literature, then literature is also complicit in the racialization of space and the projection of non-humanity upon this "space of Otherness" (Wynter 315; cf. Razack). Books, as McCoy and Montgomery argue, contain poles of both virtuosity and despair, or anti-Blackness and liberation; in this way, they are metaphors for the Door of No Return, or Hartman's critically fabulated history, or King's Black fungibility. As with many other seeming contradictions, Brand artfully argues and enacts both sides concurrently. *Map's* theory of situated readership demonstrates that, like history and cartography, reading and indeed all meaning making are embodied and subjective processes, necessitating an epistemology which embraces multi-polarity, contradiction, and multiplicity.

Map proposes that the embodied experience of reading and the materiality of the book, as well as the subjectivity and past experiences with which a book is approached, are integral to processes of meaning-making, what I term a theory of situated readership. When the narrator reads J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, her physical location on an airplane impacts the way she analyzes the novels in dialogue with one another. Because "you have a lot of time to think, going to Australia," the narrator has the time to read these two books and let their ideas ricochet off one another (132). She uses the airplane's flight around the world as a metaphor for people's handling of race, an analogy sparked by her situation (133). The narrator's questions of the texts are inspired by her past, for example her uncle's lessons from her childhood. It may be an obvious point that we can only work with what we know, but Brand highlights the reality that we are both assisted and

limited by our experiences, which offer frameworks for understanding and comparison. Perhaps this is why “race exposes allegory” (134). The universal breaks down under the weight of specific situated experience. Again, *Map* does not present the impossibility of singular universal knowledge as a problem: it is precisely the narrator’s specific, situated experience of reading these books on a plane to Australia in the context of who she is and what she knows about the world that allows her to produce such a complex and generative reading of the two texts.

Just as the situated reader impacts how a book is read, books and reading also impact the physical existence of the reader. The narrator’s fretfulness in her attempts to sleep on the plane, precipitated by the uncomfortable seats, is “amplified by Coetzee’s dread” (131). The relationship is cyclical, where the narrator’s location shapes her ability to read and make meaning of these novels, and the reading of them then shapes her experience on the airplane. This is possible because the books, both in their physicality and content, are located within the same time and place as the reader. Brand places *Disgrace*’s events on the plane alongside her narrator, who can see Morrison’s *Paradise*, on the other hand, “on the horizon” (130, 128). “Sydney is ahead of me and behind me are hours of vertigo and restless sleep which I’ve left in two books” (134). Here, ahead and behind are both temporal and spatial markers, and the behind resides in the books, which become reminders of both what they said but also where the reader was, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, when the books were read. Indeed, they are re-written in each moment a reader apprehends them (Brand 58). One implication of Brand’s theory of situated readership, then, is that books are affectively and historically charged objects, that is to say they can transmit knowledge not only via their text, but also through a historiography of readers’ material experiences with them.

This is further emphasized in the narrator’s description of the first book she remembers reading as a child. *The Black Napoleon* is introduced through a thick description of its physical properties: the pages, color, smell, font, missing cover, location in her grandmother’s drawer, and the items that surrounded it (183). “What led me to this book, then,” the narrator explains, “were my senses,” as well as her uncle’s admonitions not to touch it (185). It was the narrator as a sensing body, and the book as an object, that brought them together, demonstrating that knowledge production presupposes embodiment and is conditioned by the material. *The Black Napoleon* had intellectual, emotional, and physical impacts on the narrator (186). She describes it as introducing her to the Door’s twin poles of anti-Blackness and liberation. “The book was a mirror and an ocean,” showing the narrator who she was, where she came from, and the ways in which these are and will always be steeped in violence and the unknowable (187). In describing *The Black Napoleon* as an ocean, Brand not only evokes the Middle Passage and its violently suppressed archive, but also, as Tinsley argues, highlights the materiality of both history and metaphor (197). It is like the water which connects Haiti with Trinidad with Grenada on both physical and metaphorical-historical levels. This description emphasizes, once again, that books transmit

meaning in part through their materiality, as well as the multiple and overlapping time scales of historical knowledge, from the human to the geologic.

The *Black Napoleon*, along with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, symbolize for the narrator the processes of maturation, identity formation, and coming to love literature. The two books, in their materiality, “become[...] the exterior double for what is already inside [her], for the historical trace that its material emergence has left in [her] body” (Singh 40). Brand describes the new meanings the books create in their encounter with one another as refraction, when waves move through a substance and are bent and combined in new ways (191). Here, the reader's body is the substance which alters the books and their meaning, alone and in combination. Again, this is a mirrored process, and what happens to the books through the reader also happens to the reader, who is “flung apart,” “disintegrated,” and “abstracted” through the prism of a book (191). These metaphors for the experience of situated reading, drawn from wave mechanics, are complemented by a description of maps as a play of light and shadow between bodies, highlighting the embodied nature of knowledge production (135). Bringing together these descriptions of reading and maps drawn from the natural sciences with the physical needs of the body, Brand writes that “[t]hese two books gave [the narrator] a refractory hunger. Their register and compass led [her] to all other books” (191). This language demonstrates that not only is literature a map, but also that curiosity is embodied, and physics is a metaphor.

Maps may be canonically colonial, and books ontologically anti-Black, but Brand manipulates them within these violent traditions in order to make them do something else. As she writes, “all this stems from having to discern whether one is being asked to dance or whether one is being ordered to conjugate a verb in another language” (134). On the one hand, there is the physical, joyful, and creative; on the other, the intellectual, demanding, rote. But, “to read is to traverse the limnal space between laughter and spelling, between syntax and dancing” (126). Maps as literature, and literature as map, transgress these binaries and blot out the line between them, and, in their insistence on the situated and creative roots of all knowledge, democratize genre, knowledge production, and the people involved in these. Through these theories, presented within, structuring, and analyzing the piece of literature which they also compose, Brand insists that science is a creative practice, and creativity, a scientific art. This undermines the colonial order which would differentiate objectivity from subjectivity, reason from nature, and knowing from being, dehierarchizing methods of meaning-making and demonstrating that all knowledge is the product of subjective and embodied experience (cf. Ortega-Aponte 311-12). In so doing, Brand not only breaks down traditional oppositions between knowledge categories, but also makes space for pluriversal ways of thinking that allow for multiple and even contradictory truths.

Map's theory of situated readership, like its emphasis on the embodied nature of history and the cartographic essence of poetry, demonstrate the materiality of knowledge and processes of meaning making. In writing these not only as material, but also as polymorphic, Brand rejects “[t]he organization and categorization of matter [which] enact racialization” and lead

to the “formation of extractable territories and subjects” (Yusoff 78). Instead, starting from the multimodality and multipolarity of the Door of No Return—and the objects which echo it—Brand moves towards a pluriversal epistemic framework that is able to support ideas beyond the conditions under which it was created. As she writes,

perhaps it’s not such a paradox after all. Though the meanings are always slipping. This dreary door which I’ve been thinking about, though its effects are unremitting, does not claim the human being unremittingly. All that emanates from it is not dread but also creativity. (42)

The very multipolarity, multimodality, and contradictions inherent in the Door of No Return, as well as in *Map*, is what undergirds its liberatory potential, the pole of virtuosity whose presence then recursively reanimates the conditions for its existence. Rather than an unremitting claim to the human, as Man, the Door exposes slippages in contemporary onto-epistemologies, dissolving pre-conceived notions of who we are and how we know. The creativity, inseparable from the dread, emanating from and demanded by the Door is the foundation for anti-colonial epistemologies, which do not simply reproduce the (Post-)Colonial Anthropocene under which they were constructed. Discourses on categorization, temporality, and liberation are constantly making and remaking the world (Baucom 102). In collapsing the mind/body and human/non-human binaries, Brand’s alternative epistemology creates the potential for different relationships across their boundaries, which may allow for a new relationship to the earth not rooted in anthropocentrism and anti-Blackness (cf. Yusoff 62).

Conclusion: A New Cognitive Schema

“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” (qtd. in Brand 16). This quote, from David Turnbull’s 1989 *Maps Are Territories: Science is an Atlas*, is repeated in various combinations and fragments throughout *Map*. It is a fitting refrain, first because, like *Map*, Turnbull’s book is a creative and genre-bending intervention into established assumptions about mapping, objectivity, colonialism, and knowledge. It also reflects *Map*’s multiple roles as not only a map, but also a framework for new ways of thinking, and a practical example of a text written from within this framework. From within colonial epistemologies, it is impossible to formulate the Anthropocene without reproducing it, or the history and present of the Black diaspora without minimizing either the omnipresence of racism or the potential for resistance and Black agency. Instead, *Map* theorizes, is, and writes under a new cognitive schema; one which does not reify linearity, objectivity, and binary categorization, but rather operates under a recursive space/time and an imaginative, embodied, and polymorphic understanding of knowledge.

The multiplicity and multipolarity engendered by the Door of No Return, the originary site for imaginaries of the Black diaspora as well as the Anthropocene, require not only new

epistemologies, but also new ways of understanding relationships, belonging, and solidarity across shifting terrains of the Human. *Map's* proposed pluriversal knowledge and end to the overrepresentation of Man necessitate an embrace of multiplicity in communities, identities, and activism as well, allowing for new forms of coalition building across difference (Mbembe 19; Wynter 260). So, Brand provides not only an epistemic intervention, but also a connected one into how we can be in relation with others (72). This demonstrates that shifting our epistemology also changes who we are and how we may live in and struggle to alter the world with one another “in an age of crisis.” In *Map*, Brand charts out new ways of knowing, being, and relating in the world; a pluriversal epistemology which is able to recognize the unalterable violence inflicted under the regime of the Human as Man and at the same time imagine a future, or even a present, that is different. Not only that, she provides a map for others to do the same.

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