Book Reviews

Imaginary Spaces

In Another Place, Not Here. Dionne Brand. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1996; 247 pages; ISBN 0-394-281-586; $27.95 (cloth).

> *She knew it was possible to leap, it had to be, out of the compulsion of things as you might have met them. She knew that there had to be a way out that wasn't succumbing to apparitions or accepting one's fate. She wants to be awake.*
>
> (Brand 159)

Approaching Dionne Brand's novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, my difficulty in locating the text, in positioning it, was not dissimilar to the title itself: not naming that other place but evoking its possibility. Brand gives us a work of imagination embodied in the particulars of two women, Verlia and Elizete, black women from the islands. She presents us with a work that is fiercely political and poetic.

With *In Another Place, Not Here,* Brand focuses her critical eye on migration, on departure, the inhabiting of space and travel. In her characters' approaches to movement she invites readers to examine the conditions of departure and those of a suitable destination: to ask, how is such a place brought into existence?

In her essay, "A Working Paper On Black Women In Toronto: Gender, Race and Class," Brand alludes to the "psychic map of self sufficiency" as a socialised element of black women, engaged in an ongoing antagonistic relation to male dominance (232). In this work too, colonialism may be viewed in relation to such a "psychic map of self sufficiency," and its effects on migration explored. As Elizete and Verlia move from childhood to consciousness as adults, the ways in which they approach migration hint at how they position themselves and what they can imagine.

The novel opens with images of Elizete. We soon realise that despite Elizete's departure only *after* Verlia's death, there were many locations within her home which she dared not inhabit. As a small child Elizete was warned of one place, "'Never walk here, you will raise the dead and they will follow you home or make you lose your way'. [These are] places where someone was hung, places that didn't need description or writing down" (Brand 42). Elizete had no place to be which was not already occupied by the ghosts of slaves; ghosts found "walking along a deserted track, footfalls, chain dragging late, late" (43). Here the possibility of migration to someplace inhabitable is expressed in the peoples' means of coping with such a presence. Their weary acceptance of the hauntings - these ghosts laying claim to the land was indicative of their being "unable to leave since leaving would suggest a destination and where they had to go was too far and without trace and without maps" (44). This presence of the colonized, of Adela[1] leaves their imaginations failing. Colonialism appears as a force not easily dismissed, as one that dislocates wholly, leaving folks without a way of conceiving some other place.

Ghosts aren't the only colonial remnant in Elizete's childhood. The issue of belonging, not just familially, but as it relates to the land - to the space folks occupy, is equally problematic. Belonging approached from a context of colonialism and forced migration was a value necessarily subverted. Brand's narrator relates, "They were not interested in belonging. It would not suffice. It could not stanch the gushing ocean, it could not bandage the streaming land. They saw with the bloodful clarity of rage." Rather, in lieu of belonging, "the sublime territory of rage" (43) was theirs. This rage opened a space for them to situate themselves in, when the land they were born on provided no such context. This migration in desire, from belonging to rage, provide them a conceptual space for their selves to inhabit. Here, Brand presents colonized folks, out of necessity, replacing paradigms of land and belonging with one that is accessible, one that does not leave them yearning for the erasure of history.

This work is heavy with the weight of

colony lingering upon the characters. Not only in the form of land as the material site of colonialism, but in that other space where history happens: in memory, or collective memory. The lack of agency characterising the colonial process, the act of having been "brought," leaves Elizete's fellow islanders confounded. Leaving is not an option; it is not so simple as going back, as they are in the only space they have ever known. Elizete personally navigates these difficulties in her act of naming. She creates a space for herself in that colonially occupied territory, the girl saying of her own game: "I say to myself, if I say these names for Adela it might bring back she memory of herself and she true name. I also would not feel lonely 'for something I don't remember...since then I make myself determined to love this [place] and never to leave'" (24- 25).

Brand positions Elizete's naming, "thirsty throat, bois cano, blood tree, sick river, red ants, bathac, drought cracked, looking for water " (52) both as an act which verbalises the character's imaginative view of her surroundings, and one which makes space for her within them. Her evoking of this vernacular of the colonized also functions as a specific response to an ancestral history, beginning with Adela, which renounced naming as both an act of despair and resistance to the colonial migration (18). Naming allows Elizete to locate herself someplace other than nowhere [2] in a space which offers a new possibility not available to Adela, that of loving the land.

In Verlia, we find a character surrounded in childhood by a similar apathy, a similar accepting of one's fate which Elizete was subject to; here more tangibly however, colonialism is not imaged as a failure of imagination, but rather as a wound. The debility of the wound that won't heal as atrophy. Grandpa's leg and Verlia's insomnia were described as part of a larger nightmare from which all the people in Verlia's life could not shake themselves, as "hurts [which] had the same look to them" (147). Verlia speaks to this collective consciousness of self destruction (a colonial vestige), in the passage: "It make her mouth spring water, yet she cannot understand why really, only as if she was born into it, like cutting yourself because you are cut or hanging yourself because you fell down a cliff, as if drinking poison will ease poisoning" (147).

The nightmare of colonialism as a collective *psychic* space which resists even physical distance is illustrated by Brand in Verlia's uncle. Despite his migrating to Toronto, that same lurking colonialism, manifested as fatalism or apathy on the island of his birth, has followed him across an ocean. On this new land that familiar presence appears as only further internalised: from sickness to self hatred. Verlia's relatives explain the conditions of inhabiting this new space as "imagin[ing] yourself out of your skin," as invisibility (142). Rather than being unable to inhabit the collective landscape such as it was left after colonialism, Uncle and Auntie Idrisse are left unable to inhabit their own Blackness. This migration is then not one that facilitates self preservation, but rather disrupts the very notion of even having such a self. For all their distance and security, Verlia's family appears not far from where they left, merely inverted.

To truly depart as Verlia had done was both to travel to a different, less haunted physical space, as well as to undergo a migration from the internalisation of colonialism. With her box of news clippings, Verlia sets her eye on a radically new context for the self; she constructs a reality that is possible to imagine herself into. Her clippings of Rosa Parks, Franz Fanon, Fidel Castro and the Black Panthers among others (160-161) provided her with the momentum and language necessary to reframe herself in the context of a culture of resistance. It was this reframing, this departure from her own personal history shrouded in despair, to a newly politicized understanding of herself which makes it such that, upon her rearrival in Toronto it is said of her, "she wants to be the kind of Black girl that is dangerous. Big mouthed and dangerous. That's what she came here for" (157).

In Verlia, Brand gives us distance, she gives us a glimpse of the work of creating viable spaces for the self, previously withheld by colonialism. This act of "post colonial migration" as the travel undertaken by colonized people in search of such spaces suggests' a new way to travel.

Brand's work unsettles. Her subjects, lesbian, black, migrants, activists and workers are the sort usually denied foreground in much literature. Her position, writing from a place close to that of her characters, from a position of marginality, does not afford the privilege of an apolitical world view. *In Another Place, Not Here* is a worthy exploration of the lives of these women as personal and political entities, as folks doing the work of "imagining other ways of navigating [their] collective future." [3]

ENDNOTES

1. The slave name given to the great- great-great grandmother of the woman Elizete was given to.

2. "And when she [Adela] done calculated the heart of this place, that it could not yield to her grief, she decide that this place was not nowhere and is so she call it. Nowhere. She say nothing have no name" (Brand 18).

3. From Adrienne Rich's preface to her *What Is Found Here: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. She situates this idea in terms of a general failure of the American public to do this work.

REFERENCES

Brand, Dionne. *In Another Place, Not Here*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

_____. "A Working Paper on Black Women In Toronto: Gender, Race and Class," *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics*. Ed. Himani Bannerji. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1993.

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Clara Gutsche: La Serie des Couvents / The Convent Series. France Gascon, ed. Montréal: Musée d'art de Joliette, 1998. (Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Musée d'art de Joliette, Musée de la Civilisation and Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery).

The photograph featured on the cover of this issue of *Atlantis*, selected from Clara Gutsche's *La Série des Couvents / The Convent Series*, shows us nuns at play. The image bemuses: four middle-aged women, cloistered within a walled garden, move awkwardly from within the heavy folds of their habits. Each is poised to serve, to smash her ball against the stone wall. This representation of nuns, their living space, the dailyness of their lives, characterizes all the photographs included in the catalogue for Gutsche's series insofar as it reflects back defamiliarizing questions concerning privacy, pleasure, desire, and identity in the secular world: we recognize the game, but are moved to consider the rules.

Gutsche explores in these magnificent and arresting photographs, as she has throughout her thirty-year career in a variety of remarkable photographic projects, "what time has left behind ..." (France Gascon, "Foreword," *La Série des Couvents/The Convent Series*, 15). She explains that her fascination with convents and their inhabitants arose from her experience upon moving, in 1970, from America to Québec, when that latter culture had recently and definitively "'dismissed,'" with remarkable "'vehemence,'" its "'Catholic past'" (quoted in Gascon, 17). On one view, then, *The Convent Series* stands as the return of the repressed. Gutsche addresses Québec's denial of its history by dramatizing cloisters and the women who remain, anonymous and invisible, within them, as the silent heart of Québec's memory. One aspect of Gutsche's achievement lies in the implication that subject formation within the rituals of Catholic obedience has mutated into compliance with contemporary consumerist practices. For in Gutsche's rendering of convents, the material conditions and affective relations of tradition and secularity are not disparate; rather, they converge.

When the artist began this work in the 1980s, she was interested chiefly in exploring the meaning of monastic architectural space. (Fully one-third of the forty-eight photographs in the catalogue do not include people.) As Ingrid Jenkner observes of the series as a whole, an "aura of authority is reinforced by spatial perspectives that evoke the orderly universe of a Renaissance