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Overlapping territories, drifting bodies in Dionne Brand's Work

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OVERLAPPING TERRITORIES, DRIFTING BODIES

in Dionne Brand's Work

*Poetry is here, just here.
Something wrestling with how we live,
something dangerous, something honest.*
Dionne Brand, *Bread Out of Stone*

*Is poetry a bridge,
I want poetry to help me live,
keep me from despair.
To imagine something different is the task.*
Adrienne Rich, *Listening for Something*

In the documentary film *Listening For Something*, produced out of the National Film Board of Canada in 1996, Trinidadian Canadian poet, writer and filmmaker Dionne Brand engages in an intriguing and compelling conversation with the renowned American feminist poet, Adrienne Rich. Through an intimate close dialogue pervaded with an intense poetic erotics, two women from different generation, race, and class, discuss and confront each other on touching as well as burning questions, such as nationalism, citizenship, belonging, racism, and sexuality. The unfolding of their voices and stories evokes stimulating suggestions and thought-provoking cues to imagine the relationship between body, place and national identity in Canada from a transcultural and gendered perspective.

In her discussion of the idea of the nation, Adrienne Rich refers to Virginia Woolf's famous claim in *Three Guineas*, 'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world' (Brand, 1996a). Rich contests the essentialist undertones of Woolf's

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statement, arguing that such comment poses the danger of excusing women from the responsibility of actively participating in the politics of national communities. By taking responsibility for her location in the United States, Rich understands the impossibility of renouncing her national status wilfully, claiming, therefore, her particular national affiliation and the materiality of her own body. In her essay 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' Rich declares: 'As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely condemning its government or by saying three times "As a woman my country is the whole world"' (1986: 212). Rich claims her belonging to the American nation in order to understand how 'a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create' (1986:212).

Dionne Brand, however, argues that Virginia Woolf might have been right, and that feminist politics should be conceived in terms that reach beyond national paradigms. Brand rejects the concept of the 'nation' as a viable model for community because national forms of unity are predicated upon exclusions, as inclusion in or access to Canadian identity, nationality and citizenship depends on one's relationship to whiteness. As she declares in the documentary film: 'The nation-states we live in are constructed by leaving out' (1996a), thus upsetting the traditional Canadian fiction built around the myths of tolerance and multiculturalism asserted by its nation-state policies. Rich, on the other hand, agrees with Brand in acknowledging the alienation and the fragility of the democratic promise of the Euro-American nations, since 'the democracy that was envisioned was an exclusionary democracy, it was for white males and propertied people and we've certainly known of the exclusion of African Americans' (1996a). In Brand's words, 'One does have a sense that one lives in an American Empire and that no other kinds of voices will be entertained' (1996a).

Brand's rejection of national identity—both Caribbean and North American—comes in response to her exclusion from national imagination. Given her multiple dislocations between two nations, Trinidad and Tobago, and Canada, and given her

liminal location as a woman and as a black lesbian, Brand openly critiques identity politics, offering counternarratives which figure new spaces to inhabit. The notion of the 'counternarratives', as proposed by Homi Bhabha, is produced by those subjects who, by positioning themselves on the margins of the nation—migrants, diasporic people, sexual minorities—provide new models to imagine community differently (see Bhabha, 1994: 139–170). He argues that the nation as narrative strategy continually mediates between the pedagogical time, which objectifies its citizens into a single, stable narrative of history, and the performative time, whereby citizens constantly challenge and reconstruct nationhood. It is precisely this performative time that disseminates and destabilises the hegemonic national narrative's *telos*, the moment that allows for struggle and change. According to Bhabha, the nation as performance highlights a conception of identity not as static or teleological, but rather as dynamic and plural.

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Brand's texts reflect what Peter Hitchcock, drawing on Bhabha's theoretical insights, defines as 'transgressive imagiNation'. Hitchcock proposes this critical concept to explore the way in which a literary text 'exceeds, challenges, demystifies, or transcodes the components of national identity' (2003: 9). Indeed, Brand herself admits in quite incisive tones that she 'write[s] for the people, believing in something other than the nation-state in order to be sane' (1996a). As the geographical boundaries of nations do not reflect her imagined community, Brand's works reveal the unfolding of fluid textual maps which re-chart and re-configure transnational diasporic communities between the Caribbean and Canada, making these very spaces flowing, shifting, where territories overlap and desiring bodies wander adrift.

MAPPING THE CARIBBEAN CANADIAN SPACE AS BODY

There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. As if the door had set up its own reflection. Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between. (Brand, 2001: 20)

In *Listening for Something* the ongoing dialogue between Rich and Brand is intercut with sequences showing both poets reading from their respective poetry while the cam-

era roams across the landscapes of the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean, visually conferring the suggestion of an ongoing diasporic movement. In this poetic streaming of voices, sounds, places, and landscapes, a recurring image emerges: the flowing and ebbing of waves. As Benítez-Rojo suggests, the Caribbean is 'a cultural sea without boundaries, a paradoxical fractal form extending infinitely through a finite world' (1996: 314). The Caribbean is, indeed, imagined as a hybrid erotic space—the constant flux, mediations of places, languages, and cultures, ongoing boundary crossings, 'the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma', 'a repeating island' (Benítez-Rojo, 1996: 314). In this sense, the Caribbean can be considered a heterotopia, in Foucaultian terms, a space where different places and diverse forms of belonging and social relations coexist and conjoin. Carole Boyce Davies conceives of the Caribbean not as a geographical location, but rather as a social and cultural space extending beyond its territorial delimitation. Caribbean space, in her formulation, is seen as a series of diasporic locations and cultural practices; her idea of 'portable identities' between the African American and Caribbean spaces bears witness to the necessary fluidity that members of a specific migrant community must hold in order to act politically in accordance with the demands of place. Davies proposes, in this context, the concept of 'twilight zones', spaces of transformations from one condition /location to another (2005).

The watery imagery of Caribbean culture is reflected even further in the potentially subversive figuration of 'tidalectics' coined by Kamau Brathwaite, of which he writes:

Why is our psychology not dialectical-successfully dialectical-in the way that Western philosophy has assumed people's lives should be, but tidalectic, like our grandmother's-our nanna's-action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one continent / continuum, touching another, and then receding ('reading') from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future (1999: 34).

With the obvious word-play on the terms 'tide' and 'dialectic', Brathwaite conceives of 'tidalectics' as the rejection of Hegelian dialectic. Crucial to the poet's notion is the idea of movement based on ebb and flow, a movement that points to the circular and repetitive, rather than the linear and progressive. Most importantly, this metaphor conveys the idea of space in terms of feminine figuration, like an ancestral female silhouette through which territories overlap and histories and times intertwine. It is a powerful trope to reconfigure geographical borders and Western notions of place, space, belonging, and location from a gendered as well as postcolonial perspective.

Caribbeanness is the conscience of a space. It is a spatial logic of connection, not an integer of geographical location per se. If one of the major problems in the application of Western theory in particular is that it *locates* the margin, Caribbeanness crosses the borders of that fixation. It does not simply imagine a territory, but destabilizes the territoriality of subjecthood (Hitchcock, 2003: 31).

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Caribbeanness, then, can be imagined as a space of exchange that diffracts and recomposes, an amniotic landscape that engenders and regenerates the categories of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity into conceptual geographies which prove to be necessarily liquid, fluid, deterritorialised. In this context, the figuration of tidalectics is useful to articulate a kind of reterritorialisation that foregrounds the complexity of Caribbean Canadian space in the work of Dionne Brand, through her depiction of an embodied queer topography.

The collection of poems *No Language is Neutral* from which Brand reads in her documentary film represents an attempt to theorise the body, sexuality, and belonging beyond the confines and limits of a discursive space which, far from being neutral, is ideologically gendered and raced. Brand's poetic language reveals an ongoing oscillation between two languages, standard English and what Brathwaite defines as 'Nation language' (Brathwaite, 1984). According to Teresa Zackodnik, Dionne Brand 'locates her critique of language not in an attempt

to resurrect or construct a neutral language, nor from a liminal position between standard English and nation language, but in the heteroglossia of both languages, which articulates, even while it determines, her identity as dialogical and dialectical' (1995: 194–210). While I appreciate Zackodnik's analysis of Brand's language as a type of Bakhtinian heteroglossia which commingles different languages, I am uncomfortable with her definition of identity as 'dialectical'. Brand's sense of place and/as self, in fact, seems more likely to be created and defined in terms that go beyond that logic, through the creation of 'another tense', another language with which to express the fluidity of an identity in a constant process of becoming. Brand searches for a language that could express the ephemeral boundaries between bodies and subjectivities, that could give voice to the body and the self in an alternative socio-sexual economy. She finds that language in, and through, the desiring black lesbian body.

I want to wrap myself around you here in this line so
 that you will know something... This
 grace, you see, come as a surprise and nothing till
 now nock on my teeming skull, then, these warm
 watery syllables, a woman's tongue so like a culture...
 language not yet made... I want to kiss you deeply,
 smell, taste the warm water of your mouth as warm as
 your hands. I lucky is grace that gather me up. (Brand, 1990: 36)

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Brand makes an effort to write a 'herstory' and a genealogy for the black lesbian body, a body which is not only inscribed and positioned in different spaces—Trinidad, Toronto—but also marked and written upon by particular regimes of discursive power—neo-colonial, postcolonial. In Trinidad and Tobago, a woman whose sexuality does not conform to 'compulsory heterosexuality' is not allowed to be a citizen; as M. Jacqui Alexander argues: 'Not just (any)body can be a citizen any more, for *some* bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure [...] *these* bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation' (1994: 11). Brand moves the critique to identity politics which rely upon stable and fixed definitions

of subject positions in order to make abject bodies and subjectivities intelligible. Brand traces an imagined genealogy of lesbian identity, giving a queer description of that ancestry in a culture where established lineage holds considerable significance: 'there are saints of this ancestry/too who laugh like jamettes in the/pleasure of their legs and caress their sex in mirrors' (1990: 51).

These lines point to the always already existence of women loving women, as well as its cultural and linguistic value in history. These 'saints' are 'like jamettes', loose women who are not afraid of expressing their sexuality and eroticism openly, representing, thereby, a threat to dominant order and authority. The very notion of jamette reveals the idea of a transgressive identity, a transgressive space, a 'taking space' which also means a 'making space' through the subversion of patriarchal and heterosexist norms (Davies, 1998). In her discussion of black female bodies in the Caribbean space, Carole Boyce Davies argues: 'Island space, women's space are all imagined spaces of absence/presence. Caribbean ocean spaces cover the unfathomable existences, unknown except by the daring, but nevertheless still with their own palpable existences and histories. The ocean is nevertheless a place of escape when island spaces become too confining' (Davies, 1998: 345–346).

Yet, the actual geographical land Brand chooses 'to light on', Canada, proves to be no less unsafe and confining than the land that she has left behind. If in Trinidad and Tobago the black lesbian woman is subdued by the dominant power of language in the context of a 'heteropatriarchal recolonization', in Canada different politics and ideologies-national, multicultural-come into play, which relegate the immigrants to the abject position of 'visible minorities'.¹ As Claire Harris asserts, black women in Canada are 'eternal immigrants forever poised on the verge of not belonging' (1996: 258).

Brand traces a map and a poetics of black Canadian space, 'the tough geography', through and on the lesbian body: 'I trace the pearl of your sweat to morning, turning

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1. On the concept of visible minorities in Canada, see Bannerji, 2000.

as you turn, breasts to breasts mute prose we arc a leaping, and no more may have passed here except also the map to coming home, the tough geography of trenches, quarrels, placards, barricades' (1990: 40). The image of the lovers' bodies meeting in an erotic 'breast to breast' touching is situated in a political context where these bodies struggle for their legitimacy. The sexualised black lesbian body in Brand's writing becomes a discursive site of resistance to the cultural violence and silence into which it has been forcibly cast.

In the collection of poems *Land To Light On*, Brand disrupts the myth of an 'imagined community' defined by precise geographical boundaries inside which citizens find their place:

I'm giving up on land to light on, slowly, it isn't land,
it is the same as fog and mist and figures and lines
and erasable thoughts, it is buildings and governments
and toilets and front door mats and typewriter shops,
cards with your name and clothing that comes undone,
skin that doesn't fasten and spills and shoes. It's paper,
paper, maps. Maps that get wet and rinse out, in my hand
anyway. I'm giving up what was always shifting, mutable
cities' fluorescences, limbs, chalk curdled blackboards
and carbon copies, wrenching water, cunning walls. Books
to set it right. Look. What I know is this. I'm giving up.
No offence. I was never committed. Not ever, to offices.
Or islands, continents, graphs, whole cloth, these sequences.
Or even footsteps. (Brand, 1997: 47)

As these lines highlight, the poet is highly aware of the discursive constructedness of countries' borders, whose performance is constantly reiterated by normative governments, books, and papers. Canadian land is depicted here as an unstable, ever shifting space, where maps that should define and fix its frontiers 'get wet and rinse out', where cities become places of 'transmigrations and transmogrifications' (Brand, 2001: 62).

Brand's overt rejection of nation(alism), her giving up on imagined boundaries, is triggered by her constant facing up to the 'unbearable archaeology' of alienation and abjecthood. This sense of pain and not-belonging is conveyed in these concise lines: 'In this country where islands vanish, bodies submerge,/the heart of darkness in this white roads,/snow at our

throats' (Brand, 1997: 73). The image of black bodies drowning /sinking in the wilderness of white Canadian landscape, where islands fade out, unfolds a veiled topography of racism hiding beneath Canada's myth of tolerance and civility.²

Yet, there is no nostalgia for those vanishing islands. Indeed, Brand's writing offers a clear critique to the diasporic trope of a mythologized 'homeplace'. The memory of the Caribbean of her childhood is, in fact, connected with a heightened awareness of her own dislocation and her fundamental detachment from that place.

the taste of leaving
was already on my tongue...
Here was beauty
and here was nowhere. The smell of hurrying passed
my nostrils with the smell of sea water and fresh fish
wind, there was history which had taught my eyes to
look for escape even beneath the almond leaves fat
as women... (Brand, 1990: 22)

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In her birthplace, the poet already feels alien, a migrant looking 'for escape.' Guaya in Trinidad, is an idealised place in her poems while, at the same time, it is a place where the body feels all the burden and violence of the colonial heritage. Unable to find comfort within the Caribbean of her past or the Canada of her present, the speaker defines her sense of belonging in terms of elsewhere or, as the title of Brand's first novel suggests, in terms of 'another place, not here'. This sentence is evoked for the first time in *No Language is Neutral* as to foreshadow a theme that will become of crucial concern in her poetics:

In another place not here, a woman might touch something between beauty and nowhere, back there and here, might pass hand over hand her own trembling life, but I have tried to imagine a sea not bleeding, a girl's glance full as a verse, a woman growing old and never crying to a radio hissing of a black boy's murder. (1990: 34)

2. On this topic, see also Brand, 1994: 10.

These evocative lines bear witness to the necessity of theorising and configuring a space of living for diasporic and queer subjectivities, a place in excess between 'beauty' and 'nowhere', between here and there. As Susan Friedman has argued, homecoming desire is an embodied visceral longing, a desire felt in the flesh, in the affective body (2004: 1-24). Dionne Brand gives up to the idea of a homeland geographically defined, and searches for her own provisionally imagined 'terra', her own land to light on, elsewhere: hence it follows that the 'nowhere' becomes the 'nowHere', the here and now of the body which turns into a discursive site of belonging and identity. As the following lines suggest: 'your planet is your hands, your house behind your eyebrows' (Brand, 1997: 44). It is precisely the erotic autonomy of the lesbian body that allows for the creation of this inhabitable space.

A woman who looks
 at a woman and says, here, I have found you,
 in this I am blackening in my way. You ripped the world
 raw. It was as if another life exploded in my
 face, brightening, so easily the brow of a wing
 touching the serf, so easily I saw my own body, that
 is my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
 as a place, another life, *terra*. They say this place
 does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
 before. (Brand, 1990: 51)

In the erotic energy of the excess produced by two female desiring bodies looking at each other, the poet is released to another space. She becomes other than herself, (in) another place, 'another life' where she can speak her own language, 'grace'. She represents herself by describing herself as place. This is not a new place, since it has always existed, and is now reconfigured by redesigning its own ideology, history, and language so as to reflect what it has excluded. Brand upsets the dialectical relation between 'beauty' and 'nowhere' by reversing the island/ocean metaphor: the Caribbean sea becomes the no-place that needs to be re-presented and conjured in order to make sense of. The poet assertively glides out on the sea level and creates her own sense-making

through the black lesbian body. She moves from being placed to becoming place.

CARTOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE

*No I do not long, long, slowly for the past.
I am happy it is gone. If I long for it,
It is the hope of it curled like burnt
Paper...If I long for anything
It is shadow I long for, regions of darkness.
(Brand, 1997: 68)*

Brand writes not only a queer genealogy of the body, but also a different mythology of origins, as she assertively declares: 'We stumble on the romance of origins' (1997: 35). The question of belonging in Brand's writing can be analysed from the perspective of Elspeth Probyn who conceives of it as a place of departure, an ongoing process stirred by queer desire. By re-elaborating the notion of Deleuze and Guattari's flexible cartography from a queer perspective, Probyn argues that the concept of belonging must follow that cartographic logic whereby maps overlap, 'it is not a question of looking for an origin, but rather of evaluating *displacements*' (Probyn, 1995: 5). Mapping, or rather, counter-mapping, is a paradigmatic topos in Brand's work which reflects her attempt to propose counter visions of diaspora and identity beyond Western ontology and epistemology. Brand wants to draw new maps that can allow for the complexity of belonging, disarticulating it from questions of origins.

A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging, is one of Brand's texts which presents itself as a kind of overlapping maps, a mixture of incoherent fragments-memoirs, travelogue tales, poems-standing out against a fluid, flexible cartography. The metaphor of the map as 'shifting ground' disrupts the idea of the linearity of movement between fixed, tangible origins and arrivals. According to this new cartographic logic, 'the journey is the destination' (Brand, 2001: 203). As Dionne Brand argues:

My characters [...] can only deliberately misplace directions and misread observations. They can take north for south, west for east [...] They can

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in the end impugn the whole theory of directions. [...] After the Door of No Return, a map was only a set of impossibilities, a set of changing locations. (203, 224)

Brand theorises alternative spaces which destabilise the teleological vision of 'origin/return' (Clifford, 1994: 306) as well as the bounded, rigid paradigms of nation-states. The desire to belong—to an ancestral land, Africa, to the homeland, the Caribbean, to a new diasporic community, Canada—is disrupted through the figuration of drift:

We have no ancestry except the black water and the Door of No Return. They signify space and not land. [...] 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. (Brand, 2001: 61, 118)

In her attempt to trace a 'tidalectics' of queer diasporic space, Brand imagines a cartography of desire moving from territorially situated bodies and languages to deterritorialised identities and drifting bodies. From this perspective, the body can be conceived not so much in terms of location, but rather, in terms of '*loca*-motion' (Probyn 5), a floating body in, and toward what Anne Marie Fortier defines as 'diasporic horizons'; in her words, 'the projection of (queer) belongings and culture within a spatio-temporal horizon defined in terms of multi-locality, cultural diversity, dispersal, and conflict' (2001: 407).

The poetic and evocative undertones of Brand's poetry reverberate in her first novel *In Another Place Not Here*, where the narration oscillates between past and present memories, shifting and undefined spaces and places. As the title of the book suggests, the novel focuses on dislocation in both time and space, as it explores the implications of a doubly diasporic movement and the subsequent postcolonial multiple dislocations involved in the migration of peoples in the second half of the twentieth century from the Caribbean to Canada. The process of 'diasporization,' founded on colonial slavery, the middle passage, and that of re-diasporization from the Caribbean, is represented in the novel through a poetic fluid-

ity between time and space and a non-linear narrative divided between the perspectives of two black immigrant lesbian protagonists, whose voices are registered by the distinctive rhythms of their speech, from Elizete's potent demotic to Verlia's terse idiom. The two protagonists move between hybrid and fluid locations, Toronto, Trinidad, Grenada, St. Lucia, in a deterritorialised diasporic space transgressing national borders. Elizete and Verlia's experiences seem to suggest that the space of 'here' for those living on the margins of the nation, both in the Caribbean and in Canada, is predicated upon an ongoing disjunction and dislocation. The metaphor of drift configures belonging as a provisional psychic space which expresses the very logic of an interval, in the words of Sara Ahmed, 'the passing through of the subject between apparently fixed moments of departure and arrival' (2000: 77).

The very title of the novel, *In Another Place No Here*, poses crucial questions: where is this 'elsewhere' for queer diasporic subjectivities? Is it an utopian space? Or is it an atopic space? It could be guessed that it is certainly a place of imagined pasts, but also of projected futures and unrestrainable desires. An elsewhere discovered maybe, for only brief, but intense moments, in the pleasure and sensuality of the lesbian body. Erotic queer desire revises the heterosexist and patriarchal paradigms of the nation, evoking thereby Audre Lorde's theorisations on the power of the erotic, the erotic as power. Sexuality in Brand's writing is assertively inscribed in the narratives of Caribbean transnationalism.

In the novel Brand contrasts the violence and rigidity of heterosexual relationships by describing the intensity of lesbian desire through liquid imagery, ocean, water, sweat: 'That woman like a drink of cool water [...] I see she. Hot, cool and wet. I sink the machete in my foot, careless, blood blooming in the stalks of cane, a sweet ripe smell wash me faint. With pain. Wash the field, spinning green mile after green mile around she. She, she sweat, sweet like sugar' (Brand, 1996b: 3-4). The very erotic female body becomes an agent of passage, a bridge, an arch between liquid geographies: 'A woman can be a bridge, limber and living, breathless, because she don't

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know where the bridge might lead, she don't need no assurance except the arch and disappearance [...] A woman can be a bridge from these bodies whipping cane. A way to cross over' (Brand, 1996b: 16). The final scene of the novel depicts the image of Verlia leaping from a cliff; the ocean, the site of an ineffable trauma, becomes a psychic territory, a passage toward an imagined elsewhere.

She is flying out to sea and in the emerald she sees the sea, its eyes translucent, its back solid going to some place so old there's no memory of it [...] Her body has fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sigh of lighting left after lighting, a faultless arc to the deep turquoise deep. She doesn't need air. She's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy. (246-7)

The lesbian body as site of becoming-place and belonging is predicated precisely upon the movement of queer desire. This potent figuration echoes the Deleuzian notion of nomad desire as it has been revised by Elizabeth Grosz. Grosz refigures lesbian desire in terms of bodies, pleasures, intensities, beyond the psychoanalytic ontology of lack; from this perspective, desire is no longer conceived of as endless deferment, but rather, as a productive, positive force making rhizomatic connections and entailing ongoing processes of becoming. As Grosz poignantly makes clear in her discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's implications of the notion of becoming,

It is not a question of being (–animal, –woman, –lesbian), of attaining a definite status as a thing, a permanent fixture, not of clinging to, having an identity, but of moving, changing, being swept beyond one singular position into a multiplicity of flows, or what Deleuze and Guattari have described as 'a thousand tiny sexes': to liberate the myriad of flows, to proliferate connections, to intensify. (1995: 184)

Throughout Dionne Brand's literary and filmic production an unfolding of these topics can be envisaged. Indeed, her work reveals a constant movement between the theorisation of an erotics of queer black corporeality to the figuration of bodies as 'desiring machines'. The cartography of desire between the Caribbean and Canada is traced out through

the representation of erotic, sensual, affective bodies, made of flesh, smells, sweats. The black lesbian body is performed as becoming-place, becoming-water, becoming-bridge between spaces and geographies always already fluid and floating.

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