

BENEATH THE GLOSSY VENEER, THIS ISSUE OF NOVEMBRE SHEDS
ITS SILK FOR SOIL, BURROWING DEEP INTO THE UNDERBELLY OF THE
LITERARY WITH A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT FROM...

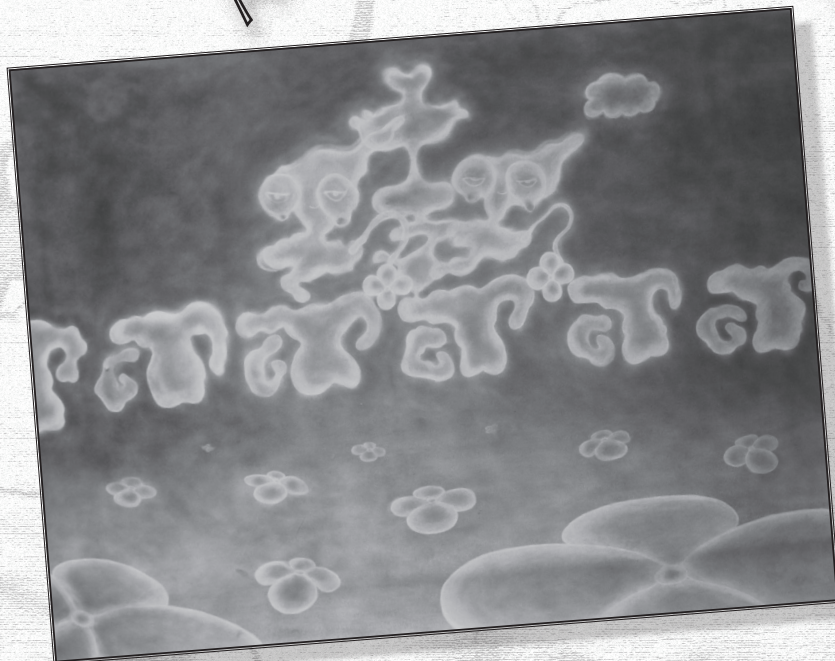
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MCKENZIE WARK
CACONRAD
SOPHIA GIOVANNITTI
FARIHA RÓISÍN
OLUWATOBILOBA AJAYI

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A RECIPROCAL MAPPING EXERCISE



Through the work of Dionne Brand, Oluwatobiloba Ajayi writes about longing for and belonging to land and the physical and psychic consequences of colonial mapping.

**WORDS BY OLUWATOBILOBA AJAYI
ILLUSTRATION BY ISABEL CAVENECIA**

It is the land I know that I wish to write about.

It is almost square-like, except imagine all the edges have been turned inwards.
But more so on the right side than the left,
and picture a diagonal slice from the easternmost corner
to the centre of its southern
fringe.

Of course, the cut is not a clean one; it never is—account for the Gulf,
for the insistent nudge of the ocean, the lacy edge
of the
river branches,

and tilt the form towards the right so it appears to lean:
eager to share her weight with her neighbour.

Now insist this shape into being, codify it, crystallise it, trace its lines and make it true.
Make it a dream, make it both home and country, and call it *Nigeria*.

"I stepped into the cool opening of the Door of No Return. My feet landed where my thoughts were."

What does it mean that the very notion of belonging somewhere, to something, is caught and held in theory—stuck between the real and imagined? Nigeria did not exist as it does today until Lord Lugard unified its southern and northern colonies in 1914. Its map is inherently abstract, born from a series of projections that flatten and make whole what can not be consolidated. In her book *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand excavates the psychic consequences of one's longing for land. While the movement of people across the Middle Passage marks a physical gash at the heart of the Black diaspora, Brand pays greater attention to the psychological wake of that rupture. *The Door of No Return* references physical doors across slave castles on the West African seaboard, through which enslaved people were forced onto boats. Brand ponders not these physical sites, but the elusive space of origin, "which is illuminated in the consciousness of blacks in the diaspora." Of which she asserts, there are no maps.

Perhaps these aren't maps as we commonly understand them. *A Map to the Door of No Return* betrays the constraints of language in attempting to map a mental landscape plagued by absence and haunted by death. Maps have a deceptive neutrality. For them to work, we have to admit their visual authority: their purport to represent the truth of a space or a nation. Many have died from this senselessness. To legitimise a nation through the demarcation of territorial boundaries is a tragedy. The act of mapping is an improvisatory one, but this improvisation can not mask its violence. A collection of tribes and nations, turned British colony; now a country I call my own. Maps encode hurt and I am complicit.

Language and maps, weapons of imperialism, are senseless, yet this map makes the most sense to me. Its familiarity is comforting, and its crisp borders give me something to grip on to. Amidst the absurdity of my diasporic baggage, and the space that I inhabit at any given moment, maps are a constant. My map gives me a place to return to, to dwell in, and to dream from and around. It is a shape through which I begin to make sense of myself. The map is proof of my ability to belong somewhere, a starting ground from which to self-actualise. I feel its traces in my body, and its truth is salient in my mind, despite me also knowing its essential untruth—the shadow of the door.

"One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives...All human effort seems to emanate from this door. How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling."

I cling to Brand because I recognise, in her, my distrust of and pining for a map. Brand unearths mapping as a way-finding tool: a bridge between the physicality of our lived experience and our mindscapes. I did not ask to exist within a contradiction, but mirroring Brand, the drawing of my own map provides a potential remedy to my diasporic complex, a way of "surviving abstraction through abstraction," to borrow the words of Torkwase Dyson. But in what way was I originally abstracted?

"Why is all geography irony?"

Nigeria did not exist as it does today until Lord Lugard unified its southern and northern colonies in 1914. The British enforced its borders on the tribes in an attempt at homogenisation.

*"A shape, by the way,
which obscures its own multiplicity."*

I often wander through what it would have been like then: when the country existed on the map but not in the mind. When did the mind catch up to the map? How far does the mind elude the map? Were we still full of promise then? I often wonder into terra incognita.

I write because I long to be brought into being, to feel a future before it arrives; this first map was similarly aspirational. The calcification of a perceived truth into form is foundational to the practices of cartography, but despite this map, I still long for a site that gives sight, a ground that grounds.

Tracing the geographies of the mind, Dionne Brand recounts longings that have spanned multiple generations. She evokes the pace of memory in her structuring of language through numbered and named interludes, creating textual archipelagos for the reader to manoeuvre across. Derek Wallcott is referenced alongside Brand's grandfather, Aimé Césaire, Toni Morrison, and V.S. Naipaul. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, memory is sedimentary; it gathers in layers over and above time allowing us to hold memories that aren't our own and long for memories that don't exist. I pull from the minds of my mother and father whose hands have shaped my life, as well as my grandfather who I never met and Zora Neale Hurston who I only meet on the page. These memories deposit, forming sticky sweet clusters of nostalgia, yearning and pain that cake into earth. One hundred and forty-six years ago, I knew of the imperial force of Ibadan, Ibadan's attempts to force a new kingdom with it as the political head, and the Ekiti-Parapo War. Now I only know Ibadan, where my grandpa lives and my father grew up.

"There is a way that land defeats you, just the sum of it."

Any map I realise must centre Black women. In all my desperate attempts to try and understand how we, Black women, take up space, I have been met with a senselessness that is paralysing. Each of our geographic lineages are so nuanced and widespread that to conduct a mapping is senseless. The multitude of ways we have found liberation, and felt marginalised, is senseless. Our mutuality of lived experience is both senseless and sensible. My efforts to understand ourselves in relation to one another has caused me to feel frustrated with the essence of a diaspora. I can not wrap my head around it, around its scope.

But there are some things I can understand. I understand the theoretical offering of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge as the site of formation of Blackness. I understand Emanuel Admassu when he says that, "the moment you cross that line, you become Black." I can understand how the threshold of the ridge is a conceptual pivot of the Black diaspora: how different geographies precipitate different ways of understanding our blackness. I suppose some maps only gesture towards what can not be mapped: the abundance of us. These maps operate as "unexpected architectures of ambivalent longing," where a "ragged mirage of histories comes into a momentary realisation."

There is always a negotiation between the physical and the mental, one struggles to draw near the other and neither is to be trusted in full. Thinking from Black necessitates a shifting of boundaries around the psychical and the somatic. What is space when your country isn't your own, your land continues to be amputated and emptied out, and when the environment conspires against your vitality? When you inhabit invisibility, space becomes lodged in the mind rather than experienced in the body. A Trinidadian Canadian Black lesbian feminist, Dionne Brand muses on her conflicting feelings of dislocation and placelessness, part in poetry and part in prose. Her writing is shapeless, contradictory, and wayward in that it refuses the illogic that thinks coloniality into space. Similarly, a map of my diaspora must resound on multiple registers. It must hold place and placelessness at the same time and account for the spatial conditions of my Blackness and my womanness.



"I have no centre which domesticates the periphery."

Brand argues that there is no map to the door of no return, but she makes one. It is another kind of mapmaking: a recovery of space through portals of self-realisation that evade the entitled logic of that first map. Mapping in her image allows me to make connections between things that aren't immediately apparent and to dream and realise beyond what I think I know. I find these gentler maps—these cartographic offerings, these attempts to make sense of space and place and geography—in the expressions of my friends, the shrewd conclusions of my sister, and in the Black women writers, artists, and thinkers who offer up their lives so that I might make sense of my own.

Whilst I long for maps that aren't declarative, I'm invested in their truth-making potential. Brand diligently plots her narrative, realising a mycelium of spatial relationships as a potential salve to the fictive expanse of Blackness. *A Map to the Door of No Return* resists its own thresholds, existing in my psyche as a vessel, or a mould, that sustains a cavity into which I am poured, held, and find form through. But in these vessels still there are holes, holes from which I will inevitably leak and then have to make sense of myself anew, again. You can, and I often do, open the book anywhere and sink into its generosity. Brand is never quite coming *from* and heading *towards*, but remaking time and space in her dexterous image. She remains an anchor for me.

