Black Time: (Re)Mapping and Memory

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Abstract

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History is a composition of events comprised of memories as a way to make decipherable the past; however, dominant (white) notions of time seek to make history (which exists in and out of time) linear. Many black creators push against this notion. Memoir is a genre that allows us to uncover new truths about ourselves, the past, the world, and more through the organization and examination of memories and archives. Black writers, artists, and thinkers such as Christina Sharpe, Dionne Brand, and Titus Kaphar, among others, have created work that consciously engages with existing archives, as well as creating new ones. Their works (re)think, (re)image, and (re)map our histories in ways that acknowledge the aftermath of slavery while offering new stories, insights, and resolutions that seek to move toward Black liberation.

Black Time: (Re)Mapping and Memory

Introduction

My mother has this story about my great aunt, Twilla. For a few years during my undergrad, aunt Twilla, then 96 years old, lived alone at her home in New Jersey. She was a feisty woman who always was searching for a way to tell her stories. People in my family are always trying to tell stories. Eventually, she moved in with my mom and dad in Grand Rapids, Michigan (and later Albany, New York) once her Dementia had gotten bad enough that she couldn't be alone by herself anymore. When the weather was nice, my mother—who stayed at home to take care of Twilla during the day—would set her up outside on the from porch outlooking the small pond behind their apartment building. We could expect to hear the same stories dozens of times in a day, as if she was a record playing over and over. When there were moments of clarity in this looping, we couldn't help but notice. My mother tells me that she went out to smoke a cigarette and sit with Twilla on the porch one afternoon. They sat in silence at first; Twilla, when she wasn't talking, often picked at her fingers in a way that looked like she was knitting something only she could see. She turned to my mothers and said, "Look at all of them marching." My mother looked around before asking, "Who?" And Twilla said that she could see her dead family members marching in processions out of the pond and toward them.

When my mother tells this story, it is always in jest, highlighting how outlandish Twilla and her stories were. Now, there is a lot of material in the family archive to justify this read of my mother's. But I can't help but be taken by this story my mother shares of her. The fracturing of what is accepted as the present reality by ghosts of her past. It seems too perfect a fluke that these ancestors apparated in front of my great aunt from the water. After all, the story of all

African American's cannot be separated from our crossing of water, our drowning in water, our continued treading of water. I do not know who these ancestors were that Twilla saw, but I do believe she saw them.

Part of my ignorance about who these ghosts could be comes from the continued erasure and deemphasis of our lived experiences. Stories of Black life hasn't been documented and held with the same level of importance in the archives that many historians and peoples in the nation draw from to construct the narrative of "America." Much of our ancestor's lives remain only in records of their servitude, their forceful crossing of borders, their body's monetary worth to white folks. To be black in America can often ask for us to imagine what exists outside of the frames of traditional documents, to breathe the life back into the dehumanization of our lives. It was not until I began writing creative nonfiction in my early twenties that I realized the dissatisfaction that came with trying to linearly map out my life-experiences on the page. While it isn't a profound idea to say that our past experiences effect the ways we navigate our lives in the present, I do believe that for African Americans, understanding our history and current positionalities becomes more complicated because of the immense impact that slavery has on every aspect of the infrastructure (literal and metaphorical) in the United States.

I have always been someone that processes my experiences slowly. I turn things over in my head endlessly trying to think of every possible avenue and outcome. Writing provides me an escape from the thought-prison of my mind and forces me to conceptualize concretely what I am thinking and feeling in a way that is digestible for someone else to understand. This thought-mapping is the very essence of creative nonfiction for me. How we map out our route suggests a lot about our worldview, our lives, and much more. Give a group of people the same information and I guarantee each person will map it out differently. My current writing, however, has pushed

me to think more about the maps I've drawn in my writing and how these constructions have shaped me as a Black man.

Essaying has always been a mode of challenging one's conceptions of the self and the world. Through the mapping of memory on the page, essayists attempt to make life decipherable. The classic definition of "essay" is derived from the French word, "essai," meaning a "trial." Merriam-Webster defines an essay as, "an attempt; effort" ("Essay"). Essay writing, and further, memoir, is a gateway to liberation for black folks; through of utilizing personal memory, collective memory, repurposed archival documents, and more, black artists are attempting to understand our lives and envisioning pathways of liberation for black peoples around the world. There is a difference, to me, between "autobiography" and "memoir." Autobiography has a destination in mind with a goal to tell the reader who someone is—the emphasized investigation in autobiography is the who and what. For memoir, the investigation more often exists in the "why am/is/are?"

The blurring of the personal, the collective, the political, and visual, are all aspects being utilized by black creators to problematize current archives in addition to unpacking the complicated nature of our personal lives and black experience at large. Christina Sharpe in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* provides a framework for black people to (re)think and (re)see current archival material and personal histories to uncover new details. She argues that black people exist in the literal and metaphorical "wake" left behind by the slave ships crossing the middle passage and proposes a new praxis that seeks to move us toward black liberation which she calls, "wake work." The ideas that Sharpe presents are being utilized throughout many works written by black writers and artists.

Titus Kaphar, a black painter from Detroit, seeks to reclaim and bring to the forefront black experiences and contributions that are often overlooked in history by deemphasizing white bodies in traditional portraiture and emphasizing black bodies that are often left in the margins. In his painting "Shifting the Gaze," we see Kaphar implementing techniques of redaction in classical European portraiture as a way to refocus the gaze onto black bodies in the background. Dionne Brand in her memoir *Map to the Door of No Return* shows the complicated, often fragmented realities at play for black people when trying to understand and document a family history that has been lost. Brand attempts to map out the uncovering of her family history through a nonlinear memoir about belonging that utilizes experimental forms such as fragmentation, segmentation, and more. Sarah M. Broom's recent memoir, *The Yellow House*, unravels the complicated and expansive history of her family's lives in New Orleans East and especially their differing relationships to the yellow house that her and her siblings grew up in and left behind. Broom's work on the surface moves linearly through time, but upon closer inspection *The Yellow House* utilizes mapping, archival photographs and documents, memoir, and journalism.

Through these creative works by black artists and thinkers, I seek to understand how creative nonfiction, specifically memoir, is being utilized to move toward black liberation. I need to know: how are black people creating memoiristic work that pushes against white supremacist modes of knowing to (re)map, (re)see, and (re)think how we engage with archives that acknowledge the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman) while presenting new stories, information, praxis, and resolutions that work toward black liberation.

Black Time and Wake Work

Sharpe starts her book with this line, "I wasn't there when my sister died" (Sharpe 1). The first chapter of *In the Wake* is as much memoir as it is a laying of the groundwork for the theoretical framework she explores in the following chapters. Sharpe details the numerous instances of death that happened in her family while she was away from them writing her book. She utilizes her family history to uncover the precarity at play for most black people in this country today due to the aftermath of slavery. However, Sharpe makes a point to acknowledge that black life isn't *only* this and to leave it as such would be to fall into the trap of how the archive has been documenting black life in this country—as being synonymous with travesty, weakness, and inequity. She showcases how her family, despite the subjection they faced, were able to bring beauty into their homes and find lives worth living. Sharpe argues that this conscious living—this wakefulness—is an act that moves toward black liberation: "it was with this sense of wakefulness as consciousness that most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation" (Sharpe 5).

Near the beginning of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* Christina Sharpe declares, "in the wake, the past that is not the past reappears, always to rupture the present" (Sharpe 9. Sharpe creates a theoretical framework about black being that she calls, "the wake." Her argument utilizes imagery of the Middle Passage, specifically the slave ships and the wake they leave behind, to explore what she calls the "singularity" of slavery. An event, that she believes cannot be looked at as existing in the past but instead an event that exists out of linear ideas around time, one that is anagrammatic and influencing all aspects of black existence in the present.

A good example of this that Sharpe also points to exists in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The main character, Sethe, explains to her daughter, Denver, the idea of "rememory." During a conversation about one of the early moments of the supernatural presence of her dead daughter Beloved, Sethe says, "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Somethings just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world…I mean even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there" (Morrison 45). What Sethe is trying to convey to her daughter is that there are some experiences, specifically traumas, that exist out of time and that they can be experienced by people who weren't originally part of the experience. One thing to remember about *Beloved* is that Sethe must confront the experiences she had in 'the past' in order to move forward in her present. It is only once she acknowledges that these experiences still are living in the now that she is able to overcome or move beyond them.

By pushing against white notions of time that seek to place slavery as an event in the past the we have moved beyond, I felt a door had opened for me in how I engaged with my positionality as a black writer today. I had already been writing nonlinearly, but I hadn't thought about how black folks exist in a liminal space that is constantly forcing us to engage and acknowledge that, in fact, we have not moved beyond slavery and we are still grappling with its ripples today. Growing up, in history classes I was taught about slavery, the civil war, the freeing of the slaves when the north "won." The ways in which the country communicated black history created a paradox for me in grappling with how I navigate the world as a black man. The ideas that slavery is something that happened and has now been solved only begets questions such as:

how does a country move beyond an event like slavery? How is my life currently affected by the aftermath of slavery? What was lost, destroyed, or left undocumented as a result of the enslavement of black bodies? Trying to find resolution to the effects of slavery by perceiving it as something we've left behind, I find to be a debilitating thought process. Sharpe's text helps me envision what I call a "black time" that acknowledges and embodies the impossibility of finding black liberation solely through linear modes of thinking and instead seeks to re-interrogate and create new archives that fill in the absences of black experience into the narrative of America. A key component of this involves expressing the personal accounts of black people, whether that be through memoir, artwork, or something else.

When I say the "past" I am thinking of the past in how the Oxford Dictionary describes it, "the history of a person or place" ("Past"). The keywords to consider are "history" "person or place" which implies subjectivity. In other words, when I say the past, this term is somewhat fungible, bending and breaking depending on whoever is interacting with it. Why is this? One may argue that we go about our lives collectively agreeing upon what the past is all of the time, and I do not argue against this, but as I stated above and in the definition, "past" signifies the act of construction, what I/You/We consider to be the past is modular and can change depending on what details are focused on and slotted in to create an acceptable "history" for a majority.

In this way, I view the "past" as a utility that constructs a "history." The Oxford Dictionary definition of "history" is, "the whole series of past events connected with a particular person or thing" ("History"). We use the past as a way to construct a timeline—to map out events—about an event so that we are able to understand it, reference it, and learn from it. It becomes a conglomerate of memories, placed linearly, as a way to have a story of an event. The past then, is closely tied to memory. If the past is the mode that we use in order to construct

timelines or history, then our memories (public and private) are the building blocks we utilize as evidence in these timelines and histories. Memory in relation to diasporic existence often exists within and out of time. What I mean by this is that due to the various traumas that people from the African diaspora have faced (specifically slavery in the context of this paper) we are constantly reminded that the past exists in the present, that trauma can be generational, and that in turn, memory is a singularity—a rip in time and space—something that can be experienced without having experienced it firsthand.

This idea of memories existing out of time speaks to my conception of "Black Time." By acknowledging that past experiences are not things that we walk away from, but instead, events that still have influence and agency in the present, we are then allowing ourselves the capacity to begin doing the work of liberating ourselves from white supremacy and antiblack infrastructures because it acknowledges that our current moment is an artifact created and changed through what happened before. Another way to understand this would be that often, Eurocentric perspectives on time and progress often look at growth as iterative, meaning that the newest version is not only the best version, but also is created through the repetition of a clearly defined sequence of events. More simply, a Eurocentric idea of progress is based around constructing linear timelines that grow and change only through adding atop of existing framework. Sharpe says explicitly that this framework the United States is building upon is held up by antiblack and racist infrastructure.

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While *In the Wake* isn't memoir—the subsequent chapters have less of a personal essayistic bent to them—Sharpe's starting in the personal embodies the very liberative qualities memoir can have. Grounding her personal realities into her theoretical ones provides a framework for others

to see themselves and their own experiences differently. If writing essays is about an attempt to understand, and memoir is utilizing distinct memories as a means to map out and comprehend a life, then Sharpe is utilizing her personal history to offer the reader questions. She stresses this point later on in the chapter:

> "I include the personal here to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery…Like Hartman I include the personal here, 'to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction' " (Sharpe 8).

When I think about my own creative nonfiction work, one thing that is always on my mind is how telling my own stories of growing up upper-middleclass as a black boy opens the door for other black boys from similar upbringings to see themselves. For any writer, memoir has the capacity to bring to the forefront lives that are outside of the margins, but when you are a writer of color or a underrepresented community, there is an added pressure (and opportunity) to allow readers to feel seen. I don't expect to see myself in literature, in fact, I expect not to. Maybe part of the reason I even started writing was because of this absence. When Sharpe quotes Saidiya Hartman's idea about countering abstraction, I believe Hartman is saying that black lives are being abstracted when we only allow them to be presented as that subjugated, violated, debilitated and downtrodden. These are abstractions and simplifications of what life for black peoples can be.

Sharpe's concept of "wake work" is what propelled me to re-interrogate the narrative I had constructed about myself and my life. While Black people live within the wake, a

positionality that is often entrenched in trauma and violence, Sharpe also points us to realize that being conscious of this positionality is an opportunity to "produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake" (Sharpe 11). By pushing myself to (re)see and conceptualize the life I lived, I began work on a new project that interrogated more directly my upbringing in white suburbia, masculinity and learned toxicity, sexuality, and the coming of age in how I understand my racial identity.

To See Anew: "Shifting the Gaze" with Titus Kaphar

Titus Kaphar is a painter from Kalamazoo, Michigan, who's work explores the reexamination, or the shifting of the viewer's gaze, on history and current events as a way to bring to the forefront black experiences often placed in the background. "Shifting the Gaze" is a riff on Dutch painter, Frans Hal's painting *Family Group in Landscape*, which features an affluent white family in puritanical clothing against a prairie-like backdrop. Behind them their black slave boy stands sternly, colored in a fashion that makes him easy to miss amongst the browns and dark greens of

the natural landscape. In fact, the black boy is emphasized less, even, than the family dog who's lustrous hair glimmers in the sunlight.

I Kaphar's painting in the Brooklyn Art Museum. I waited in line for my turn to buy my tickets; behind me a white family bickered in French before trying to cut in front of me when the next cashier was ready. *Excuse me* I said. As if I had appeared from the ether, the woman looked back at me bewildered and apologized. In the past, I might have let this microagression happen, but this year, I've found ways to advocate for myself more, to take up the space I deserve. It wasn't a busy day in the museum, I don't believe I was hard to miss, but when you come from a position of power and privilege like this white woman does, it's not surprising that she found it so easy to erase the black body that stood in front of her for five minutes before she made her move.

After I bought my ticket, the first exhibit I found was called *One: Titus Kaphar*. I entered the space and was met by his painting, "Shifting the Gaze," which gained mass acclaim after he performed a redaction, or as he called it, an "amendment" to the canvas during a TedTalk called "Can art amend history?" Near the end of the TedTalk, he reveals the portrait

without any white paint applied to it and proceeds to paint over the family, creating the composition above. As he's painting he says to the audience, "The oil that you saw me just put inside of this paint is linseed oil. It becomes transparent over time, so eventually what's going to happen is these faces will emerge a little bit. What I'm trying to do, what I'm trying to show you, is how to shift your gaze just slightly, just momentarily… I'm not saying erase it. We can't erase this history. It's real. We have to know it" (Kaphar). This work moves away from colonizer mentalities that emphasize destruction as a means for progress. Instead, Kaphar is pushing our gaze to see other narratives while still acknowledging stories that have dominated the cultural zeitgeist.

If I believed in God, I would say that finding this painting moments after what happened in the ticket line was divine intervention. Kaphar's work is in conversation with black thinkers like Christina Sharpe, Dionne Brand, and Saidiya Hartman. Specifically, his redaction of the white family in the portrait allows us to see it anew, emphasizing the black boy in the painting. While some viewers will reach this stage of questioning in the original painting: what's happening with that black boy? It's interesting that he is placed in the background. Why was he included at all? Etc. This redaction is an example of Sharpe's "wake work." Kaphar is consciously engaging with the archive and putting his own personal perspective in conversation with what already exists. A key aspect for Kaphar is that we aren't performing erasure of history, instead, we are refocusing our gaze to see narratives of black life that are left undocumented.

> "Painting is a visual language where everything in the painting is meaningful, is important. It's coded. But sometimes, because of the compositional structure, because of compositional hierarchy, it's hard to see other things…There's more written about dogs in art history than there are about this other character here. Historically speaking, in

> research on these kinds of paintings, I can find out more about the lace that the woman is wearing in this painting -- the manufacturer of the lace -- than I can about this character here, about his dreams, about his hopes, about what he wanted out of life" (Kapar, TedTalk).

I've found that more and more, contemporary memoirs, especially those written by people of color, are incorporating visual components into the narrative. What Kaphar states above about painting, I believe can be extended to all visual mediums. At the heart of all art is language in the broad sense. When we create works with the intention of putting them out into the world, we are entering into a dialogue, and all conversation needs cues to communicate ideas. For marginalized communities, the narratives that are communicated through visual, as well as written art, have long been controlled by white creators. Part of including visual interest in memoir might be to simply utilize another component to heighten a story, but there are greater stakes for us. Part of including photographs, documents, artwork, etc. in memoir is to fight against abstraction, as Hartman states. It is an issue of sight and feeling seen. Including these documents give black people more to work with in understanding their backgrounds and experiences—to see ourselves as multifaceted and complicated in the American story. Kaphar interrogates some older works because that is all we have, but through redactions there is more to be seen, "I paint and I sculpt, often borrowing from the historical canon, and then alter the work in some way. I cut, crumple, shroud, shred, stitch, tar, twist, bind, erase, break, tear and turn the paintings and sculptures I create, reconfiguring them into works that nod to hidden narratives and begin to reveal unspoken truths about the nature of history" (Kaphar, TedTalk).

Krista Tippett, the host of acclaimed podcast, *On Being,* describes Kaphar as, "[a painter] who is collapsing timelines on canvas" (Tippet). When we write memoir—attempt to understand

our lived experiences in a new way—we are collapsing timelines to see things differently. Kaphar's own personal journey with his artwork reflects this. When an art history professor decided to skip over the black people and painting section, Kaphar had to begin finding that history on his own. He tells Tippett about this journey, "it became very clear to me that if I wanted to know that history, I was going to have to seek it out on my own. I had to sort of manipulate what I had and work with what I had to create a narrative that I didn't see or hear" (Kaphar, On Being).

In Kaphar's painting, "Origin of Inheritance" from 2018, he presents us with another 18th century style familial portrait. Against a blue sky, we see the silhouettes of a man and a woman, but they are not depicted like shadows. Instead, their form is filled in by the face of a black man whose gaze addresses the viewer directly. Hung next to the painting is a rudimentary wooden

box containing the crumpled-up bodies of the two white figures that Kaphar has redacted from the composition. The eyes of the white couple address the viewer as well. As the title of the painting suggests, here Kaphar is challenging the viewer to think about the narratives that are constructed around inheritance in this country. He is asking the viewer what did they inherit? But also, *why* did they inherit this? By redacting the white figures, we see what is beneath them, the enslaved black bodies that their families built their fortunes upon. These moments of collapse that Kaphar presents in his work speak to my conceptions of "Black Time" which seeks to rethink, reframe, and re-see history and the details that are chosen to construct dominant narratives. A key detail here is that Kaphar isn't erasing details, the white figures are still within this composition. Instead, he is constructing new ways of experiencing histories, he is presenting counternarratives which put our nuanced histories into conversation. Redaction, as opposed to erasure, always suggests that there is more lurking beneath the surface.

I once was told that all forms of creative nonfiction are a manipulation. This statement can be viewed as a negative, exploitative judgement of the medium, but it can also point to a liberative pathway as well. As stated earlier, Sharpe's concept of "the wake" is one that presents a duality. On one hand, for black folks, living within the wake is a traumatic existence because of the antiblack infrastructures through which our country is built. However, by consciously acknowledging this, black people have the opportunity to imagine an otherwise. Through the personal, the political—activism—can be found. Tippett follows up by asking about this moment in history class for Kaphar, "is then when you started painting?" (Tippett), to which he replies, "I think people would say that's when the work got political. I say that's when the work got personal" (Tippett). To create memoir, we are *always* embodying a mode of redaction (in how we emphasize, deemphasize, and erase details of our lives in a attempt to understand, work

through, or dramatize a memory) and annotation (in how our interiority ruminates through or provides commentary on the events unfolding on the page).

> "If we understand portraiture to be both the "art of creating portraits" (image and text) and 'graphic and detailed description,' how might we understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black public image-making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures?" (Sharpe 115)

Kaphar's work is important for black writers because he is, visually, imaging an otherwise by interrogating the documents that exist within the archive. Sharpe speaks to this too, "I am thinking here, ushering here, into the gap, Black annotation together with Black redaction, not as opposites, but as trans*verse *and* coextensive ways to imagine otherwise" (Sharpe 115). Memoir is as much an imaginative, often fictive, genre as it is one grounded in "truth" and "facts." For most black folks, finding the truth means pushing against white notions of truth which often only acknowledge what is traditionally documented. But what do we do when our documentation has been taken from us, erased, and ignored? Kaphar's artwork is answering those questions. The coupling of the visual and the written medium is a natural progression of the imaginative work, of expanding the margins, seeing beyond the margins, and leaving the margins behind.

Experimental form: Memoir as Map

Sometimes, the employing of alternative forms will speak to the concerns we're interested in much better than writing through them in more traditional means. Dionne Brand's book *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* is steeped within these sentiments. *Door* is a hard book to categorize. It is as much a book of theory as it is a memoir told in segments. What is

clear is that Brand is interested in experimenting with form in order to elucidate hidden narratives. While I argue that all history is the mapping out of memories to create narratives, and in turn, creative nonfiction is an attempt to understand ideas and experiences through mapping them out on the page, Brand's book attempts to reveal the fraught nature of mapping, of searching for origins, of belonging.

The opening section of *Door,* "A Circumstantial Account of a State of Things," points to the key conflict Brand is working toward. Brand starts with her constant pestering of her grandfather about the origins of their family. She says, "My grandfather said he knew what people we came from. I reeled off all the names I knew. Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandingo? He said no to all of them, saying her would know it if he heard it. I was thirteen. I was anxious for him to remember" (Brand 3). The question Brand hopes to answer is where her family came from, a question that all black people must grapple with as we navigate life. She goes on to talk about her search through the archives to find the names she knew, to no avail. This starting point isn't arbitrary, Brand is setting up key conflicts around Black peoples' relationship to the archive, which I discussed through Christina Sharpe's theories.

This lack of knowing—this unknowing—from her grandfather was a major sticking point for her growing up: "the moment between my grandfather and I several decades ago revealed a tear in the world. A steady answer would have mended this fault line quickly…It was a rupture in history, a rupture I quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography" (Brand 4-5). Usually we look to maps as devices to help us reach a destination, and in turn we often expect they will give us clear directions to find our destination in the most efficient, and logical way. However, it cannot be left unsaid that historically white colonizers have utilized

maps as weapons to redraw borders on lands they have stolen after decimating Indigenous communities throughout North America.

In Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's essay, "What Western Education Didn't Teach Me," she details a project she worked on to create documentation for a landuse atlas with the Anishinaabeg reserve community of Long Lake #58—specifically their Elders—and a white professor at Lakehead University, Paul Driben,. Simpson's initial sentiments on the genesis of the project was apprehension. Landuse documentation was a popular movement for white policymakers, she says. On the project she writes: "The idea was that if we documented on paper the ways that we use the land, policy-makers would then use the information to minimize the impacts of development on our lands and ways of life" (Simpson). The mapping involved in this project was led by the tribe Elders, and Simpson notes specifically the types of things that with documented on their maps: "I wrote down on large topographical maps every place name for every beach, bay, peninsula, and island they could remember—hundreds and hundreds of names. We marked down all of their traplines, and the ones before that and the ones before that…We marked down birthplaces and graves. We marked down places where stories happened…We also recorded pain" (Simpson). Most of these details would not be considered as important when looked at through white notions of history and documentation. An implication that I draw from Simpson's essay is similar to that of Morrison's *Beloved.* For the Nishnaabeg people their maps contain more than what is seen in our present physical world. There is an emphasis on community, stories, origins, and people. The "legend" of a map is a tool used to make decipherable the various markers on a map, it seems to me that a Nishnaabeg map emphasizes the importance of legend-making and how our personal mythologies are, in fact, singularities existing in our world in and out of time. The emphasis on this map that the Nishnaabeg Elders

created is the same as what I've suggested about memoir's capacity for liberation. Simpson writes, "The overlays showed decade after decade of loss. They showed the why," and "Standing at the foot of a map of loss is clarity" (Simpsons). Their map was about *why* things are as opposed to *what*.

But what happens when we do not even know where we are trying to go, where we came from? For many black people, trying to navigate toward our origins may feel like being blindfolded, dropped in the middle of the desert, and asked to navigate back home. Brand's book is an exploration of her familial origins, but also what origins and the mapping of them mean for black diasporic being. She goes on to say, "I am interested in exploring this creation place—the Door of No Return, a place emptied of beginnings—as a site of belonging or unbelonging" (Brand 6). *Door,* much like *In the Wake,* could easily have been a strictly theoretical text. Both Brand and Sharpe have more than enough material outside of their personal lives to work through the topics they are exploring, but Brand leans into her personal narratives to guide the reader on this journey toward belonging.

I don't think it a mistake that the subtitle of the book is "notes to belonging," the "to" suggesting a journey instead of an understanding. Brand's book seems to be more interested in problematizing the ways in which westernized archival work, in relation to history-making, displaces people of color. A white notion of time might find belonging by pinpointing one's origin, but Brand's book shows clearly that when an origin cannot be found through documental means feeling like you "belong" becomes a lot harder. At the heart of the work is Brand's *attempts* to find belonging through the discovery of familial origin. Contradiction rings throughout the entirety of the text. Brand is attempting to map out the history of her family's (and black people at large) enslavement heading through the Middle Passage to North America

but within the same book she also states, “too much has been made of origins. All origins are arbitrary. This is not to say that they are not also nurturing, but they are essentially coercive and indifferent” (Brand 64). One of memoir’s strengths as a device is its ability to steep the reader in the ambiguities of personal experience by showing the pitfalls that occur when trying to narrate one’s life. Brand’s resistance to giving beginnings and endings, I believe to be a form of liberation. White notions of power have hinged upon origins, whether it be to emphasize a lineage or the absence of one—we’ve all heard a white man say how he’s pulled himself up by his bootstraps—to create and justify actions. It makes sense that black folks, too, would yearn to create these timelines—these histories—as a way to incorporate ourselves into the conversation. But what if we didn’t? Brand is arguing that Black liberation is found through the resisting of these sentiments about time, “too much has been made of origins. And so, if I reject this notion of origins I have also to reject its mirror, which is the sense of origins used by the powerless to contest power in a society” (Brand 69). What if, instead, we created new ways of working through origins that acknowledges the out-of-placeness we feel?

I believe Brand has a created a work that attempts to display the paradoxes of mapping out origins. *Door* is experimental in its shapelessness. I could argue that it has the DNA of a segmented essay, but it’s more than that. There are sections that reappear like, “Maps,” which finds Brand documenting the evolution and usage of maps throughout history or “Water,” where Brand grapples with black folks’ relationship to water, the coupling of slavery, water, and motion. But there are also sections that show Brand’s journaling; other sections show letters she’s written and received; there are historical accounts of sailors and journeymen seeking new worlds. It seems that whenever the book begins to steer into linearity that Brand introduces a new element or brings an old one back to the surface in a new way.

In a section called, “Captive and Inhabited,” Brand weaves a complex web of narratives together through numbered sequences. In section one, she places the reader into a moment of colonizers enslaving Africans, she writes, “[they were] Already inhabiting them as extensions of themselves with a curious dissociation which gave them the ability to harm them as well…these captive bodies represent parts of their own bodies that they wish to rationalize or make mechanical or inhuman as to perform the task of exploitation of resources or acquisition of territory” (Brand 30-31). She then jumps through time to a Henry Louis Gates documentary where he goes to Africa and interviews prominent families in the Kumasi trading center whose ancestors enslaved Africans. As the sections build, Brand moves the reader back and forth through time using an assortment of letters, quotes, television interviews, and personal experience. In this section, like Kaphar, she too is collapsing timelines to show how white supremacists code black bodies—utilizing examples from enslaved Africans to Shaquille O’Neal—through emphasizing and deemphasizing details to justify their actions.

In another section titled, “More Maps,” we see Brand break the form of the “map” sections which primarily focused on historical accounting of maps, and instead, uses the section to tell a personal anecdote about her grandfather and his mapping of language when speaking to her and other grandchildren. Moments like these are where I see the allure of creative nonfiction and how experimenting with non-traditional delivery of narrative is effective. But this isn’t simply an act of writerly style. By placing her grandfather’s narrative within the sections about maps, she is making a political choice that destabilizes white notions of time by placing his personal experience at the same importance as “factual” documentation. When the writer allows the reader to see the murk that exists when writing about one’s life, we are able to relate more.

Brand's skepticism toward making the landscapes of life decipherable is represented both in her ruminations on the page, but also through its form. It is easy to forget that a map is only useful when there is something one is trying to find or document. We use maps differently depending on what are intent is, and through the shapelessness of Brand's book the reader is given the agency to create their own through lines utilizing Brand's personal journey about understanding her familial origins as the gateway. The moment that struck me most in the book was her ideas around superimposition. Early in the book Brand writes about her experience traveling to Africa during her search and looking at the map of the continent displayed on the airplane seat in front of her. She writes, "like all maps, the one on the screen makes the land below seem understandable, as if on could sum up its vastness, its differentiations in a glance, as if one could touch it, hold all its ideas in two hands" (Brand 89). Brand is working against white notions of time by presenting an alternative that acknowledges the multiplicity of history and questions iterative thinking that continues to push people of colors' narratives outside the margins. This early moment in the book allows her to set up an incredibly powerful moment later on involving a Salish woman entering a bus and asking for directions:

> "This road along which the bus travels may have been a path hundreds of years ago. This jutting of land through which this path travels has lost its true name…That woman (the Salish woman) asking directions might have known these names several hundred years ago. Today when she enters the bus she is lost. She looks into the face of another, a man who surely must be lost, too, but who knows the way newly mapped, superimposed on this piece of land; she asks this man the way and sits down. The man driving the bus is driving across a path which is only the latest redrawing of old paths…He is a driver of lost paths. And here he is telling the Salish woman where to go" (Brand 215).

I find this moment so powerful because it brings to the surface the problems around optics in relation to history and the archive. Brand's book looks at the complications that exist for black folks, as well as, Indigenous peoples in America because of the country's erasure and deemphasis of documenting and including our histories in the archive. This scene is effective because it concretely grapples with what people in power emphasize as important to create certain narratives. Part of the anxiety with any memoiristic project, to me, is the realization that our stories always start much earlier than we want to acknowledge. The infrastructures that exist before our birth aren't just existing in the past, they have very real implications on our present.

However, the writing of our stories on Native land is also a form of superimposition that cannot be ignored. Brand's book nods to Indigenous Peoples' history in relation to the land, but it's also important to make clear that she and other Black writers in North America are mapping our stories on the land that has been taken from Indigenous people. A great paradox for people of the Black diaspora in the Americas is that through the act of colonization, we too, are documenting our stories on land that is not ours. One way of tackling this dilemma, however, is not only making a nod to Indigenous peoples' presence in our work but carving out space for their stories to be represent alongside ours.

Brand seems to suggest that for the Salish woman, the narratives that were mapped out before her have dislodged her from a connection to the land. While on one level, I find that Brand expertly places this anecdote to showcase ideas around the re-mapping of land that disconnect us from our relationship to it. This section also highlights an issue of optics that all memoirists face when constructing these memory maps. In order to make this assessment about the Salish woman, Brand most place her into a symbolic position to highlight her point. She doesn't know this woman and doesn't converse with her, so her reading of the interaction is an

assumption. Brand writes declaratively that the Salish woman "is lost." But how does Brand know this? And what exactly does she mean by "lost"? This points to a problem when she loses her personal voice and subjectivity of the persona she created in her vignettes. She could have written, "she seemed lost" or "I imagine that she felt lost," and this moment would have opened the door for insight into Brand's positionality in the moment. Instead, this feels a bit like a stutter in Brand's rumination, one that highlights a white gaze and hierarchical perspective on certain ways to "know" a landscape.

Of course, there are many ways to "know" and historically white supremacy has only allowed for certain ways to be held with authority. Late in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's essay she writes about what the Nishnaabeg people hold inside them:

"I think about the maps those Elders carried in their bodies as two-dimensional representations of the networks they live and their parents and grandparents lived. I think about the maps my generation carries in our heads or maybe in our phones. I think about the networks the next generation will carry in their bodies" (Simpson). *A Map to the Door of No Return* complicates ideas about the ways in which we should engage with origin making but utilizing a form that cannot be fit into a box. Brand's book in its construction is messy, just like her search—and any Black persons' search—for her familial history was. She says, "to travel without a map, to travel without a way. They did, long ago. That misdirection became the way. After the Door of No Return, a map was only a set of impossibilities, a set of changing locations. A map then, is only a life of conversations about a forgotten list of irretrievable selves" (Brand 224). Brand ends her book by submerging the reader in the murk and instead pushes us to think of this not as a defeat, but as a triumph.

A memory collective in Sarah M Broom's *The Yellow House*

When I was sixteen years old, the house that I grew up in in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was foreclosed. My father had lost his job and we couldn't afford to live in our house anymore. When this all came to light, it didn't mean all that much to me. I was young, naïve, and worried about other things. We moved into a condo down the street from Orchard Hills, the ritzy suburb I grew up in. When foreclosure went into full effect, the bank gave my parents a thirty-day deadline to get any of our remaining belongings out of the house. This all happened fast. How does one move over a decade's worth of living in a month? What do you take? What do you leave behind? So much was left behind: Christmas ornaments accumulated over my parents and my siblings' lives; a good portion of my parents wedding photos and other family photo albums, to name two. They are probably in a ditch somewhere or covered in dusty in a second-hand store. It's said that our dreams take place in the house we have the biggest emotional connection to. 4441 Canterwood Drive. I can walk through every inch of the building in my mind, practically flop into any of the beds in the four bedrooms. The last time I went to the house, my father and I drove over in hopes of getting a few last-minute things from the basement. The front door that was not our front door anymore had an intimidatingly large padlock on it. My father picked it up for a moment, studying it as if he were to uncover the code, and then let it fall, knocking against the door. We never did get what we left behind; to be honest, I can not even fathom what we left behind.

Sarah M. Broom's memoir *The Yellow House* attempts to unpack the houses we families build and what we leave behind. It is as much a personal memoir as it is a journalistic accounting of what came before her. Just as Dionne Brand attempts to map out the ways in which we plot our origins, Broom submerges herself in the ideas expressed about Black Time and the resistance

of linearity above by narrating the lives of her family, herself, and the house which holds the memories of a collective unit of people.

Broom's book is split up into four sections called "Movements[s]," tells the story of a Yellow House, that wasn't always yellow, and her families varied connections with it. Documentation is often centered around optics—what we choose to see, what we deemphasize *to* see—so it makes sense that *Yellow House* starts with "Map," a short prologue that navigates the reader through Broom's childhood neighborhood to the titular yellow house. The opening paragraph speaks to how optics changes what is seen, land that looked one way becomes something else:

> "From high up, fifteen thousand feet above, where the aerial photographs are taken, 4121 Wilson Avenue, the address I know best, is a miniscule point, a scab of green. In satellite images shot from higher still, my former street dissolves into the toe of Louisiana's boot. From this vantage point, our address, now mite size, would appear to sit in the Gulf of Mexico. Distance lends perspective, but it can also shade, misinterpret. From these great heights, my brother Carl would not be seen" (Broom 3).

This was a striking way to me for Broom to start her memoir. It communicates the vantages through which we gaze have major influences on what we see and, so too, is true about memoir. Broom also includes a quote by Peter Turchi on the preceding page, "to learn how to read any map is to be indoctrinated into the mapmaker's culture," (Broom 2). In a way, when we write memoir, we are always trying to indoctrinate our readers into the map we are drawing, the journey we are asking them to join us on. A key conflict that is setup in this section, however, is that which one doesn't want to be seen. Broom's mother, despite loving the house that she bought and raised her twelve children in (largely alone), was always worried about people seeing

the ways they lived " by bringing you here, to the Yellow House, I have gone against my learnings. *You know this house not all that comfortable for other people,* my mother was always saying," (Broom 9). I think all writers of creative nonfiction face pressures around exposing one's self and especially one's family. How I remember an event will inherently be different than how someone else will, even a family member. Despite growing up under the same room, we all are living atop very different foundations. "Before it was the Yellow House, the only house I knew, it was a green house, the house my eleven siblings knew" (Broom 9). Broom leans into this, using her difference in how things went down with her family as a strength, this comes all the way down to the color of the titular house.

The first "movement" of the book titled, "The World Before Me," explores just that, the lives of Broom's family members before she was born. Chapter 1 starts, "In the world before me, the world into which I was born and the world to which I belong, my grandmother, my mother's mother was born…" (Broom 14). At first glance, it might seem strange to start your memoir with the story of your grandmother, in fact, of the first 100 pages of *Yellow House* Broom does not exist, and the first person pronoun "I," often paramount to any memoir, is used sparingly, and almost always to posit a question for the reader or Broom herself to highlight an absence, a lack of sight, an absence of knowing.

Our archive, by white standards, is much smaller, a positionality decided through their hegemony. But there are many ways to know, and imagination is one of them. "The World Before Me," unfolds much like a work of fiction or a biography. Broom writes of the exploits of her grandmother, Lolo, and later her mother, Ivory Mae, as if they are characters in a novel. This is a strength of the book, it brings her family to life through vivid detail and scene work, but this too, speaks to Broom's personal narrative. What Broom chooses to focus on implies there are

other details left out, no matter how extensive she interviewed and documented for this book (she utilized over 10 years of recorded interviews to recreate some of these moments for the page), she, too, is creating an archive of a family history. And isn't this act of imagination, one of the beauties of creative nonfiction? This act of construction through self-examination allows us to create an otherwise or even to push against powers that erase our narratives with an, "actually."

The first collection of essays that I worked on detailed a road trip I took in 2015 for a podcast I created with friends. A large amount of the important experiences I had on that trip were recorded. I had an archive of audio to work with that I was able to tap into when writing about any of the people I met during that month. While engrossed in this project, the archive started as a place of reassurance and discovery, but quickly transformed into a debilitating governance. I felt that I couldn't imagine an elsewhere because I had documentation of what was said. This isn't to say that I wished to make-up things for better material, but at the time, I couldn't see beyond the margins these documents drew out for me. In this sense, the archive became a well I was drowning in. I'd forgotten one of the most liberative aspect that memoir provides us—the dissonance between factual truth and emotional truth. It is through these emotional truths that we find ourselves out of time, forming connections we might not see when looking at the "facts." How we feel—it's easy to forget—is a fact too. The second chapter of Movement two titled, "Origins," it starts with ideas that speak toward this, "In the story told to me and in the story I tell of myself, my father dying and my being born are the same line. I am born; my father dies" (Broom 104). Broom's book couldn't function without these proclamations of construction, of map making.

Broom also utilizes photographs, another act of presenting documentation that might be absent from the archive. In Movement three titled, "Water," Broom places the reader in the

moments right before, during, and after for her various family members' lives during Hurricane Katrina. Sections are broken up by the names of her siblings and detail the moment-to-moments struggles that her family went through as the waters engulfed New Orleans and Broom's mind because of her guilt of being away from New Orleans by this point in time. Chapter two "Survive" shows on the page the concurrence of experiences happening for her family. If this Movement were a map, it would be emulating the exact imagery Broom starts her memoir out interrogating: optics. The reader zooms in on each individual before zooming out, moving to another point on the map, and zooming back in. What I find affecting about this section is that Broom is using her imagination and her work through interviewing to portray these stories, in turn, these too are personal narratives and say something about her and her perspective on the world.

In chapter five of Movement three, "Trace" the house takes on the weight of the metaphor Broom has been crafting for the last 200 pages. It is within this chapter that Broom embodies the house, "this is how you, Sarah, wanted it," and Broom replies, "you, House, are nothing but a crack—you are wide open and showing. You tell on yourself" (Broom 226). This moment wouldn't work if Broom hadn't spend the majority of the book showing the reader what the house was before her, in addition to what the house is with her. Broom's shame about the house as it degrades over time culminates in this moment of personification. It moves the reader toward the ideas of the "houses" we construct and what happens to us when they fall apart. The degradation of the house sheds a new perspective on it for Broom, so too did my moving away from the recorded archive I had used for the essays I was working on. Chapter six "Erase," brings me back to *Beloved* and Morrison's ideas around rememory. The chapter starts with Ivory Mae, Broom's mother, telling her that the Yellow House has been demolished. Ivory Mae says

through the phone, “look like nothing was ever there,” but both Broom and the reader know that there is, even in the house’s absence, something there. On the following page, Broom includes a photograph of the siding from the Yellow House that has partially fallen off to reveal the original green paint beneath. This is a physical manifestation of difference for Broom who’s siblings remember the house as green instead of yellow.

Broom’s memoir ends in a similar fashion to how it starts. In chapter nine of Movement four, “Cutting Grass,” we return to optics. The property the Yellow House uses to reside upon is overgrown and in need of cutting. Broom and her brother Carl go to the property to do some yard work. “We were cutting grass for the look of it, making a small blot of pretty in a world of ugly,” She says. “From high up above where the survey pictures are taken, this would not show. But standing on the ground, *we* knew” (Broom 361). We return to the idea of maps, albeit implicitly, and how the distances through which we view our landscapes—both physical, metaphorical, emotional—change what can be seen while bringing to the surface our connectedness:

> “And, too the land could be taken away from us for any and for no reason—American History 101—so we wanted to avoid appearing on the long indecipherable list of blighted properties in the newspaper, an entire page of small dots that were actually names and addresses, so tiny that if you were standing two feet away and throwing a dart the point would not, could not, land on a single name” (Broom 361).

For Black folks, what can and is seen is often controlled through powers not our own, our narratives are so easily placed within the margins set by others. Broom acknowledges this while also subtly cueing the reader into how this collective narrative she’s creating is a form to resist this act of erasure.

Conclusion

The genesis of my thesis work spawned from writing my essay, “The Only Black Man in Medina, North Dakota,” a piece I wrote about in an attempt to understand the fear I felt camping with friends as the only black man in a small North Dakotan town. I began the work of interrogating the generational difference I felt in relation to race compared to my parents who dealt with explicit racism everyday of their lives growing up. I realize that pinpointing this moment in time as the catalyst for my racial awakening is falling into some of the pitfalls I am pushing against in this essay—this burgeoning had been in motion in a variety of forms much before this moment—but I do place this experience as an important exercise in re-examining the person I thought I was and the narrative I had constructed about who I am and where I came from. Through this work, I’ve had to “amend” or redact some aspects of my life as a way to see things I’ve deemphasized.

Growing up as a Black kid in an affluent white suburb in the Midwest forced me to become an expert at overlooking things. There were a number of experiences that, in retrospect, I realize now were damaging to me and the formation of my identity as a Black man. I’ve written about the lack of representation in books and other media reflecting my experiences growing up. This isn’t to say that I haven’t been able to find connection with other (often white) peoples’ stories, in fact, I think it is true for all Black kids growing up that we are actively asked, if not forced, to find identification in stories that don’t represent our experiences. Reflecting on my life through my work today has forced me to think beyond the simple mapping of ideas on the page, but to also think about overlays, how if I superimpose information on top of one experience, I bring to the surface ideas that weren’t in view before. When I think about “Black Time” what I’m drawn to is that the linear thinking that may work for many white folks in constructing narratives about their lives, about their origins, about how they belong, doesn’t work for me.

What does work for me is decoupling myself from these notions and seeing my experiences as living singularities that are always active in the presents I'm navigating today.

Reading about the lives of others, especially Black people, has been a humbling, comforting, saddening, and especially, liberating, experience for me. Creative nonfiction has the power to shed light on experiences that for some may feel they are going through alone. For Black people, these stories are even more important because our stories have historically been erased, censored, white-washed, and stolen from the cultural archives we draw from. Part of the reason I write is because of my need to work through my experiences on the page, but another reason comes back to the ideas of gaze, of sight and being seen. Writing about my own experiences has been a way for me to connect to other young people, especially Black people, within the various communities I navigate through in ways that I might not be able to otherwise.

Recently, Prince Shakur, a fellow Black writer and friend of mine, sent me an email with an essay he wrote that involved him imagining himself at age twenty-one meeting his father who'd been absent—now deceased—for his entire life. He constructed scenes in which his father and him fought over his absence, and what he missed out on. He told me that all of the scenes, including the moments with his "friends" in the essay were made-up. They felt so real to me, I was floored. The imaginative work that Prince is doing though *is* real, and for Black folks, sometimes our imagination is all that we have to make sense of the lives we live. There is a moment in the essay where he says that one of the best ways we can love people is to share our reality with each other. I believe that this gets to the heart of what writing memoir can do, especially for Black people. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* came to me at the perfect time in my life. It destroyed construction I'd created about how I viewed Blackness, but more importantly, it challenged me to think more critically about how I *see* and what I am missing when I leave my

gaze unchallenged. Memoir is always a genre that is governed by what our gaze draws our readers to see and not see. Sharpe pushed me to think about how the “personal” and “political” are two sides of the same coin.

Saidiya Hartman, a writer who is constantly looking beyond the margins that white historians have set says about her work what I believe all of these Black writers and thinkers are doing, “I observe that narrative may be the only available form of redress for the monumental crime that was the transatlantic slave trade and the terror of enslavement and racism. That’s a long way of saying that the stories we tell or the songs we sing or the wealth of immaterial resources are all that we can count on” (Seimsen). For Black people whose stories have often been left out of the archive, part of our job is doing the imaginative work of breathing life into our ancestors’ lives when traditional forms of documentation have left them to only exist within narratives of tragedy, powerlessness, and trauma. Through this, I believe we move resolutely toward a form of Black liberation.

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