

# STUCK ON THE THRESHOLD: UNSETTLING SILENCES AND LOST VOICES IN *A MAP TO THE DOOR OF NO RETURN: NOTES TO BELONGING*, BY DIONNE BRAND, AND IN *SORRY*, BY GAIL JONES

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## RESUMO

Ao cruzar uma porta, tem-se um passado e uma direção a seguir. Mas o sujeito híbrido pode sentir-se aprisionado, incapaz de cruzar a soleira. Nem aqui ou lá. Como possuir uma história que nunca será contada, dividindo uma voz que foi silenciada para sempre? Esta angústia pode ser encontrada em *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001), de Dionne Brand, e em *Sorry* (2007), de Gail Jones. Ambas as obras abordam, através da não-ficção e ficção respectivamente, a natureza da identidade e pertencimento em um mundo pós-colonial e culturalmente diverso. Este trabalho explora a construção das noções de identidade e pertencimento em *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* e *Sorry*, a partir de um referencial teórico que inclui Shohat (2006), Spivak (2003), Gilroy (2000), Hutcheon (1988), Hall (2006), entre outros.

**Palavras-chave:** pós-colonialismos, hibridismo, escritas autobiográficas, ruptura, identidade.

## ABSTRACT

When one crosses a door, they have a past and are heading somewhere. But when one is a hybrid, one may feel trapped, as if stuck on a threshold that cannot be crossed. Neither here nor there. As if having a story/history that will never be told, sharing a voice that was silenced forever. This anguish can be found both in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001), by Dionne Brand, and in *Sorry* (2007), by Gail Jones. Hyphenated people share a silence that will never be broken, a feeling of belonging and non-belonging, of living in eternal “in-between” worlds, with a rupture in history whose blanks cannot be filled in. This research explores the building of the notions of identity and belonging in the works previously mentioned, with theoretical support that includes Shohat (2006), Spivak (2003), Gilroy (2000), Hutcheon (1988), Hall (2006), among others.

**Keywords:** post-colonialisms, hybridism, autobiographical writing, rupture, identity.

When a person crosses a door, they have a past and are heading somewhere. But when one is a hybrid, one may feel trapped, as if stuck on a threshold that cannot be crossed. Neither here nor there. As if having a story/history that will never be told, sharing a voice that was silenced forever. This anguish can be found both in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001), by Dionne Brand, and in *Sorry* (2007), by Gail Jones. Hyphenated people share a silence that will never be broken, a feeling of belonging and non-belonging, of living in eternal “in-between” worlds, with a rupture in history whose blanks cannot be filled in. In this sense, both works brilliantly explore the nature of identity and belonging in a postcolonial and culturally diverse world, focusing on the postcolonial heritages of hybrid identities and its silences and/or voices, on people deprived of personal history but that share an anonymous and collective history at the same time. In a way, unfolding the building of a partial understanding of history and personal history, through the autobiographical voices on both books, based on their postcolonial aspects thus exploring the construction of identity, hybridism, the “rupture in history and rupture in the quality of being” (BRAND, 2001. p.4). Through both works, these ruptures pose a real place of formation of identity and Dionne Brand and Gail Jones defy hegemonic discourse to broaden concepts of origin, identity, home and nation.

On the one hand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* by Dionne Brand is a non-fiction work that refers to the quest for identity and belonging in a culturally immense and diverse world. The book flirts with cartography and narratives of childhood, African ancestry, journeys, histories, philosophies and literature, drawing the shifting borders of belonging, nation, home and identity itself. The book travels across the Canadian landscape, even though, Dionne Brand takes the reader beyond, to a place in imagination and also a gap in history, the in-between territory that multiple hybrid people

live on a daily basis. It can be a challenge to assign only one specific literary genre to *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, mostly because Brand travels through memory, history, and criticism along with other genres. The author questions belonging as a personal dilemma and collective issue. The book is composed of sections with different sizes and content that can be related to the fragmentary and non-unitary way of which identity is formed. Throughout Brand's travels inserted in the book, she explores the colonial and post-colonial relations evoked by the places she is visiting in a geography of imperial heritage. About the author, suffice to say that Dionne Brand was born in Guayaguayare, Trinidad and Tobago and immigrated to Canada to attend university. She is an awarded writer, scholar, and social activist. She was also the founding member and editor of *Our Lives*, Canada's first black women's newspaper.

On the other hand, *Sorry*, by Gail Jones, is a work of fiction that deals with Australia's "stolen generation", the uncountable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children plucked from their families for decades in the name of forcible assimilation. This hideous practice took place for about a hundred years, from circa 1869 with the establishment of the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which allowed the Governor to order the removal of any child to a reformatory or industrial school, until 1969, when all states had finally repealed the legislation allowing for the removal of Aboriginal children (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT, 2015). *Sorry* is narrated by Perdita Keene, daughter of English immigrants, and it starts with the telling of her father's murder and the imprisonment of Mary, an Aboriginal girl taken from a convent to take care of Perdita during her mother's hospitalization, as the perpetrator. The circumstances of the crime and aspects of Perdita's life are revealed little by little throughout the novel, while the protagonist recovers her memories. Perdita looks back to her early childhood

before and after the Second World War, at the same time that she talks about her family, their relation and the relation with Aboriginal people. Perdita's father, Nicholas, was a resentful anthropologist working in the field, aiding the State with the "governance of the natives". Her mother, Stella, was a frustrated and unbalanced woman with lost dreams who married for convenience and sought refuge in Shakespeare's works. As for the author, Gail Jones is an Australian writer and scholar, also an award winner and her fiction has been translated into nine languages.

Thus, post-colonial theory is an umbrella term that covers different critical approaches in a deconstruction and reconstruction of Western institutions and the multiple and varied effects of colonialism worldwide. Post-colonial theory deals with the multiple and varied effects of colonization on cultures and societies, and involves discussions about migration, resistance, slavery, representation, race, gender, place, identity and responses to the master discourses of imperial Europe such as "history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being" (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2004, p. 2). However, the prefix "post" may be a source of intense debate amongst critics, as the single understanding of "post" as a chronological positioning may be reductionist and "might seem to suggest a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power" (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2004, p. 1). So, "post-colonialism" should not be understood as "after-colonialism" or "after-independence", as it can be said that all post-colonial societies are still subjected to the consequences of colonial relations or under the influence of neo-colonial relations since those situations were not solved with independence. It can be said that post-colonialism is not a periodization based on timetables but that it poses as a shift on the viewpoint, a repositioning of narratives and

perspectives amongst colonized and colonizer, understanding that the relation between them has never operated in a purely binary way. So, under the post-colonial umbrella, there are not just simple binary oppositions, like black colonized vs. white colonizers; Third World vs. the West, but an overlapping of different “manifestations of colonial power including those in settler colonies” (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2004, p.200). So, it is important to avoid any attempt of totalization of post-colonial relations and its consequences. And it is also fundamental to take into account that the colonial experience, as much as the post-colonial one, cannot be universalized, especially because each nation and culture went through different processes of colonization with different outcomes. Thus, it is important to consider that post-colonial practices are not homogeneous and have to be dealt with differently, taking into consideration their antecedents and consequences.

Nevertheless, as Stuart Hall would state that identity is a process of becoming rather than being (HALL, 2006, p.4), the identity inside rupture is permeated by the silences and ruptures as much as by the hegemonic discourse, even when the hegemonic discourse is present as an antagonized notion. Hence, in a world where identity is formed within representation, within discourse (HALL, 2006, p. 4), one may say that not being fully represented is a denial of a complete identity. The identity of subjects within these ruptures becomes fluid, in a continuous movement of shifting perspective. Thus, Hall, in his introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity* (HALL; DU GAY, 2011, p.1), states that many disciplinary areas are working with the deconstruction of the notion of “an integral, originary and unified identity”. In a way, identity may be commonly understood as formed also through identification and recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics, but this construction is fragmented and even interrupted when dealing

with postcolonial subjects, for the idea of identity being built based on origins is rejected at the expense of an identity in constant formation. In this sense, Dionne Brand appears to see identity as a permanent shaping, as “all origins are arbitrary” and “they are essentially coercive and indifferent” (BRAND, 2001, p. 64). Brand also states her rejection in relation not just to origins but to what she calls its mirror, which is “the sense of origin used by the powerless to contest power in a society” (BRAND, 2001, p. 69).

What is more, the unsettling silences throughout Jones’s work may provoke uneasiness in the reader. By not telling the stories of the Aboriginals and not giving voice to the untold stories, Jones seems not only to emphasize the silenced voices over the years but to denounce the place that was denied to these people in history. Their story cannot be entirely told, only half reconstructed, sewn in a patchwork-like piece of history. Even with the reports about the “Stolen Generation” and all the work that has been done to shed light on the events, one may affirm that it is impossible to rebuild history. In this sense, history is composed also of ruptures, forced dislocation and silences, and the result is a partial understanding of history. As Édouard Glissant said in his *Caribbean Discourse*, historical consciousness of displaced people cannot be accounted for as happened with, for example, European peoples, “who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history [...], but came together in the context of shock, contradiction, painful negation, and explosive forces” (1999, p. 61-62).

In addition, a text has no closed meaning; the aesthetic effect is built when the text gets in touch with the reader’s knowledge of the world (ISER, 1999, p. 21-22). Thus, considering the multiple effects of post-colonial experience, to fill in the gaps within Gail Jones’s work may lead the reader to get in touch with its own silences within history. The silences are embraced and filled in different ways by each reader according to one’s

personal viewpoint. *Sorry's* voiceless stories may be mirrored by other post-colonial cultures, not only the Aboriginal or Australian one. For example, the canonical history of Brazil starts with the arrival of the colonizers, silencing centuries of native history and knowledge. As Manuela Carneiro da Cunha said in *Índios no Brasil: História, Direitos e Cidadania*, the knowledge of native Brazilian history has progressed considering that, nowadays, the extension of what is unknown is understood, and the case studies available are just fragments of a knowledge that allows us to imagine but, not exactly, fill in the blanks of a bigger framework (2012, p. 11). This movement toward a “filling in” of the gaps makes a creative approach necessary (GLISSANT, 1999, p. 61-62), and both Jones and Brand succeed in this endeavor. The autobiographical feature in both works helps to depict or to highlight the gaps in history and in the formation of post-colonial identities.

Hence, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue in their book *Reading Autobiography* (2010) that autobiographical narratives offer subjective “truths” rather than “facts”, and when life narrators write to explore a certain theme, period or event, in a way, they are making “history” (2010, p. 10). To consider that memory is also a rewriting of the past permeated by how the events were experienced, in a juxtaposition of facts and emotions, is to consider that all autobiographical texts contain a negotiation between events and personal responses to them. In *Sorry*, Perdita's memories are clouded by the traumatic event of her father's murder. So, the recalling and recreating of her past involve a struggle with what was buried by trauma to make meaning out of painful experiences. In addition, the fact that Perdita starts to stutter after the trauma is a way of representing the suppression of her voice and her inability to defend Mary and the Aboriginal People. Her recollections tailor in her own story the historical silences of Aboriginal lives that would be forever untold, for they cannot be recollected, and are as much buried in

trauma as Perdita is. Moreover, Aboriginal silenced voices are even more unheard than interrupted as Perdita's voice: "what remains is broken as my speech once was" (2007, p. 224). Thus, it would be impossible to recover the whole history of the "Stolen Generation"; in this sense, literature may give voice to historical gaps or may denounce the existence of these uncomfortable silences that are a painful and important part of Australian history. In an analogical perspective, Australia may be seen as another Perdita, trying to reassemble her memory devastated by pain. Jones uses the blanks in Perdita's memory not to fill in the gaps in history, but to denounce them. Because there are memories that cannot be recovered, differently from Perdita, who is only able to build a future by recovering her past, cultures have to move on without this privilege of having the blanks filled in, for the gaps are part of their history.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, the function of memory is self-reflexive; it can be seen as an exploration of the very state of becoming. Thus, "experience", mediated through memory and language, is an interpretation of the past and of people's own place in a culturally and historically specific present (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 24). Since "all origins are arbitrary" (BRAND, 2001, p. 64), as an autoethnographer, when Brand employs autobiographical discourse to assert cultural difference, subjectivity and the formation of identity and origin, she is, at the same time, challenging the hegemonic discourses of identity and self. Brand's book works as a piece of resistance and transgression, pushing the boundaries of imperialist discourse toward a revaluation of notions such as nation, culture and identity. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* portrays the complicated juxtapositions of belonging and non-belonging that escapes the homogenizing culture. At the same time, Brand denies the narrow definitions of identity and culture manufactured by hegemonic discourses and



values the multiplicity embedded in identity. As readers often understand autobiographical voices as telling unified stories narrated by coherent selves, Dionne Brand and Gail Jones demolish this misconception by providing fragmented memories of fragmented selves within a multifaceted environment.

In opposition to traditional narrative models that tend to reinforce the master narratives of patriarchal imperialism, Gail Jones uses a nonunitary narration (MCCREA, 2012, p. 3) to tell the coming of age of an unwanted girl raised by her self-centered immigrant parents in desolated lands. The love and affection that Perdita lacks at home is found in her friendship with deaf-mute Billy, son of the Keene's neighbors, and amongst the Aborigines, so disdained and abused by her father, like her friend Mary, who takes the blame for the murder of Perdita's father although Perdita was the real perpetrator of the crime, psychologically blocking the events right after they occurred. The revelation that Perdita is the real killer happens in a fragmentary way, as the character takes years to overcome the traumatic events, meanwhile gathering the pieces of her own story. In order to have a future, Perdita has to reassemble her past. As she figures out that she is the real killer, not her mother or Mary, she attempts to free Mary by taking the blame, what she can only do with the testimony of her mother, who knew the whole truth the entire time. Her mother denies the help, saying that "what's done cannot be undone" (JONES, 2007, p. 213). Later on, when Perdita visits Mary, she does not apologize. She does not apologize for Mary's unfair imprisonment, her forceful removal from her own place, the concealment of the fact that Mary is innocent but paying for a crime Perdita had committed. A single word left unsaid "sorry", an apology hefted by lack of courage (JONES, 2007, p. 216). In a way, one may say that Stella and Perdita's behavior mirrored

that of the Australian government that refused to come forward to apologize for over a century of wrongdoing toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In addition, the reason why Mary assumed the guilt over the crime remains blurred; it is clear that she is the real victim of the story. Removed from her family, raised away from her own people, constantly abused by Perdita's father, all these factors make the Aboriginal girl the real victim. However, the focus of the novel relies on the young female settler as the traumatized subject, highlighting the voiceless place occupied by subaltern subjects (HERRERO, 2011, p. 286). As part of the "Stolen Generation", Mary has no history; she is part of the rupture in history that *Sorry* painfully underlines while casting light on what is constantly buried in shadows, the silenced voices. These broken relations in Jones's book project an allegory of Aboriginal children plucked from their families, deposed of all origin and native culture, raised by strangers in forcible assimilation. *Sorry*, in order to be fully appreciated, must be problematized and placed within social and historical contexts of the "Stolen Generations" in Australia, considering all the damage and deep trauma caused by the forcible removal. The question "*How long a time lies in one little word?*" (JONES, 2007, p. 216, author's emphasis) captures the approximately twenty-nine years that lie between the end of the forcible removals and the first National Sorry Day, held only on 26 May 1998. Jones's political allegory stresses the importance of public regret about past wrongs that does not pose as a solution but as a place to start (HERRERO, 2011, p. 293).

Furthermore, *Sorry* and *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* may be placed side by side, taking into account that they are labeled under different literary genres, fiction and non-fiction respectively, for they dive into the fluidity of belonging using autobiographical features. The approximations between different but closely

related works were foreseen by Brand as a continuous possibility, as she states that “writing is, after all, an open conversation. Works find each other. They live in the same world. The narrative of race is embedded in all narratives” (BRAND, 2001, p. 128). As previously mentioned, memory is also part fiction and fiction may be understood as the construction of a version of reality, as one may see as the case in *Sorry*. In this sense, both works could be considered as what Linda Hutcheon would characterize in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* as “historiographic metafiction”, for both books are intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically claim to historical events and personages, incorporating “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” as ground for a “rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 5). Through autobiographical voices, Jones and Brand meet in the territory of displacement and Diaspora, fragmented identities and post-colonial theory to broaden the concepts of identity, belonging and origin.

Notwithstanding, one of the themes in *Sorry* explored by Jones is the “possibilities and impossibilities of mapping individuals' experience in terms of their geographic, temporal and cultural dimensions” (ROUGHLEY, 2007, p. 58). In addition, on the matter of ethnicity and race, *Sorry* also remarks the imposition of whiteness not only upon aboriginal people but also strongly upon those hybrid daughters and sons of colonization. A forced rupture from where there is no possible return and in many cases, an institutionalized rupture supported by the government. The colonial movement to erase cultures or to replace them, the almost complete annihilation of identity and the forceful assimilation of hegemonic culture and discourse can be seen in Jones's work, as it is described in Mary's removal from her family:

[...] then someone from the Government, seeing her pale skin, seized her from her mother and took her to Balgo Mission. [...] Mary was six years old when she was taken away. Mission fellas noticed that she as unusually smart, so later, two years later, she was sent down south, to an orphanage in the city called Sister Clare's. To learn to be a whitefella, she said, to learn all them whitefella ways (JONES, 2007. p. 67).

In the same way that Gail Jones's *Sorry* dives into themes such as displacement, belonging, identity and peoples in Diaspora, Dionne Brand goes a little further by not clinging to narrowing concepts of home and nation. She demonstrates the impossibility of return, how origins may be manufactured, and how people in Diaspora live in-between:

Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old world for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings (BRAND, 2001, p. 5).

As the alleged origin is denied, an unsolvable rupture marks the identity of hyphenated people. Identity constructed in gaps of history, in-between silences, in opposition to homogenizing culture makes the impact of Black Diaspora continuous, especially because there is not a single origin, a nation to refer to or a specific place to return. So, the continuous feeling of non-belonging and being trapped in-between has a continuous impact on people. With her book, Brand deconstructs the notion of belonging by posing the concept of "drifting". Instead of hanging onto the narrowing concepts of nation and home, Brand uses the imagery of water and ships at the sea to state what she

calls “the trick of the door”, which is to cross the door and to land where the thoughts are. She proposes a fluidity of belonging, at the same time she explores the space in-between as a radical challenge to conventional notions of subjectivity, geography and chronology (GOLDMAN, 2004, p. 15). Brand states that, differently from their ancestors, who “had a sense of origins”, people in Black Diaspora have no “immediate sense of belonging, only drift” (2001, p. 118). Moreover, there would always be a complex juxtaposition of belonging, non-belonging and intrabelonging, that would keep hyphenated and post-colonial subjects always threatening canonical concepts of selfhood.

Additionally, the dialect of place and displacement is always a postcolonial feature in former colonies, no matter if it was created by intervention, by a process of settlement or a mixture of the two. The non-belonging faced in Black Diaspora is, at the same time, slightly different from and a lot similar to native peoples’ sense of non-belonging. No matter how this rupture of identity came to be, the alienation of the self-image is pervaded by a concern of origin and authenticity. As for the relationship between self and place, in the construction of identity, it may have been eroded by “dislocation” and “cultural denigration” (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 2004, p. 9). Natives carry a feeling of displacement inside their own original lands; they were deprived of history and origin and do not have a place to return to, for they never left. This reinforces Brand’s arguments of a broader conceptualization of land and geography, for it is not the lack of having a specific land to return to that drives the feeling of in-betweenness or non-belonging. Besides, the concept of “drifting” poses the figure of the ship at the sea as a metaphor, as Brand says that “one is misled when one looks at the sails and majesty of

tall ships instead of their cargo” (2001, p. 85). This way, it is not the physical geography that constitutes identity, but the possibilities and impossibilities of personal experience.

To summarize, displaced people, people in Diaspora may carry the feeling of non-belonging and in-betweenness, for their identity is constructed in a fragmentary way by culture, history and also by the ruptures in history. These ruptures represent a real place for landing, a place of becoming who they are. As identity is built within discourse, the silences embedded in history are a part of post-colonial discourse that cannot be ignored in the formation of identity and rebuilding of personal story. In this sense, *Sorry* (2007) by Gail Jones and *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) by Dionne Brand depict the “rupture in history and rupture in the quality of being” (BRAND, 2001. p. 4) that compose the post-colonial persona. As they denounce the gaps in history by not filling in the blanks, they challenge hegemonic discourses and broaden, instead of narrowing, the concepts of nation, home, memory, origin and identity. As Dionne Brand said, “all artists are involved in their time” (2001, p. 30), and so they are. Especially taking into consideration that Jones’s and Brand’s works are labeled under different genres, fiction and non-fiction respectively, they both explore the fluidity of belonging using autobiographical features. As fiction is a representation of a version of reality and memory is fictionalized by emotion, both books merge under the unsettling silences and lost voices throughout history; they cannot tell the lost stories, but they may well make their presence felt and their silence loudly heard.

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