

Book Review

Dabydeen, Cyril. (2017). *My Undiscovered Country: Short Stories*. Ontario: Mosaic Press. ISBN: 978-77161-282-1

There are maps to the Door of No Return. The physical door. They are well worn, gone over by cartographer after cartographer...But to the Door of No Return which is illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora there are no maps. This door is not mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is also perhaps a psychic destination. Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There is as it says no way in; no return.

(Brand, 2001, p. 1)

According to Cranny-Francis et al. (2003), identity “enables people to discuss their common experiences of the world with others whom they regard as like them; that is, others who share what they see as crucial features of their social positioning” (p. 33). This allows people to negotiate and recognize their positioning to their surroundings, and was a tool that privileged and authorized European, colonial identity over the colonized “other”. Ethnicity, to literary scholar Sollors (1995), involved contrast. It rested on “antitheses, on negativity, or on... ‘dissociative’ character” (1995, p. 288), and ethnic identity became a mechanism during colonialism to justify difference. In colonial discourse and literature, difference connoted a removal from European practice, therefore it marked the perceived “other” as subordinate (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). For post-colonial writers, identity is complicated. Their histories yield lessons to “double conscious” (Gilroy, 1993) identities in which they occupy the space between the European colonizer’s and their ethnic identities. Due to the contestation of this in-between space, post-colonial writers use ethnicity as a means to decolonize text and offer, what Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) term, a counter-discursive strategy to colonial literature and identity. But the in-between also creates diasporic identities. As a poststructuralist feminist scholar, ethnicity and difference are key terms to understanding diasporic literature in which storytelling becomes an anti-colonial tool.

Cyril Dabydeen teaches creative writing at the University of Ottawa and is a former poet laureate of Ottawa as well. Called the “short story master” (Curry, 2017), *My Undiscovered Country* is Dabydeen’s eighth collection of fictional short stories, and this volume centres around his life as an immigrant from Guyana and the Caribbean, interspersed with the urban landscape of Canada - particularly Ottawa. This collection compliments well with post-colonial texts, like Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* and Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* - texts that are grounded in particular diasporic contexts and that engage in storied approaches to understanding identity.

The book draws attention, through stories that focus on place, identity, and longing, to a simple but highly contested question in contemporary Canadian contexts: who is Canadian, what does this mean, and who defines this? This question requires a cross-cultural analysis of which

Dabydeen's stories supply. Dabydeen's narratives, therefore, mix fantasy and reality, ethnicity with culture, and ancestral, tropical roots with cold, Canadian urban landscape. His narrative reflects, in other words, a diasporic psychological map between his tropical and Canadian identity. In an interview with Stanford (as cited in *Canadian Literature*, n.d.), Dabydeen discussed his writing process as:

I work with an image, mostly: something that comes to the mind or which touches one's feeling, or what I might have seen, or something I might recall. With the latter I tend to go back into memory. Memory is the mother of the imagination, the mother of the Muses, as has been said.

The way that Dabydeen contextualizes imagery with memory is important here. In pointing to memory, he grounds his text firmly in the ongoing work of diasporic literature and identity - the commingling of social, cultural, and colonial contexts in understanding one's place and future. In utilizing a storytelling approach, Dabydeen creates imagery, narratively and metaphorically, that confronts his diasporic condition. His characters are deep and psychologically complex, conflicting and not conflicting with the natural and human environments encompassing them. Through first-person narration, the reader is allowed to delve deeply into them, while simultaneously being given the tools to explore for ourselves who we truly are and what Canadian identity means to us. For Dabydeen literature is undiscovered country (Mosaic Press, 2018) and his text works as an unmarked map, inviting the reader to connect their lived experiences with the book's content - and Dabydeen himself.

To do so, Dabydeen organizes the text into three parts. The parts map Dabydeen's journey as a Canadian immigrant in Ottawa, back to his Indian, then Caribbean-South American roots. This organization maps the structural and cultural dynamics of interrelationships and interconnectedness among the three parts within the contexts of answering what makes someone a Canadian. Within these three sections, the book is organized into fifteen chapters. The first four chapters focus on the metaphor of Ottawa as a symbol of multiculturalism and ethnic/cultural harmony. Chapters five through fifteen concentrate on Indian culture, education and prejudice within other cultures, alongside metaphors of hot, sticky landscape. The sections exemplify how prejudice and racism can dictate politics, giving the reader complex narratives with characters that must contemplate what constitutes civilized and uncivilized Canadian behavior in a country where "refugees and immigrants were taking over... You know, everything's about minorities these days" (Dabydeen, 2017, p. 8). The narratives, and the mingling of tropical and temperate settings, highlight that landscape is not a neutral concept but is itself a mechanism through which cultural translation is enacted to construct place and enforce power relationships. Landscapes, like the tropical and temperate, are products of social, political and economic forces. They serve to enforce a particular worldview while intentionally omitting what it interprets as a threat to itself or what it considers to be wrong. Natural places are inextricably connected to the way a particular worldview is produced and the way that it precedes to construct its society, and interact with the natural world around it, a process that is always dynamic and fluid. Dabydeen's text draws attention to his connection to his ancestral, natural places - Canada and India, Caribbean-South America - and the particular worldviews that are inscribed on those places. Each landscape inscribes particular identities onto the characters, and reflect the complicated lens of Canadian identity and what "constitutes" this.

Dabydeen's text exemplifies that place and identity are complicated not only by race, class, gender, immigration, settlement, and diaspora, but also by increasing placelessness and transience. Through a critical, pedagogical, and cultural lens, Dabydeen's text contributes to diasporic Canadian literature and with questions of identity and longing that plague most contemporary conversations of Canadian identity - particularly amidst the increasingly racialized violence in the global community dictating who belongs and who gets to define this. The book engages the reader with questions of racism, prejudice, equality, multiculturalism, and ethnicity within Canadian society while also providing a creative, storytelling approach to intimate and enhanced experiences to place and identity. In suggesting the complexity of diasporic identity, Dabydeen highlights Canada's multiculturalism while also drawing awareness to issues of diversity and inclusion within this multicultural society. *My Undiscovered Country* is a prominent book for readers interested in post-colonial literature, literary criticism, critical race theory, and cultural studies. It offers genuinely interesting stories that look intimately and vulnerably at Indian, Caribbean-South American identity, and Canadian identity. The juxtaposition reveals synergies and tensions within content, format, and concepts important to diaspora and post-colonial literature by highlighting that place and identity are intertwined. They are simultaneously produced when people begin the process of translating where they live, shaping the natural environment and in turn shaping themselves by their environments. Dabydeen's text, in essence, provides a juxtaposition that reveals the tensions and converges when looking at place, longing, and identity to answer the overarching question: what does it mean to be Canadian?

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