Migration. Can it be called migration? There is a sense of return in migrations – as with birds or butterflies or deer or fish. Those returns which are lodged indelibly, unconsciously, instinctively in the mind. (Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return 24)

Origins. A city is not a place of origins. It is a place of transmigrations and transmogrifications. Cities collect people, stray and lost and deliberate arrivants. (Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return 62)

This essay takes its title in part from Dionne Brand’s collection of poetry Land to Light On (1997). In the title sequence of the poems the narrator declares that she is giving up on land to light on. The narrator of the poem states:

I don’t want no fucking country, here
or there and all the way back, I don’t like it, none of it,
easy as that… . (48)

The refusal of country is also a quite specific refusal of forms of history that bind to original and imagined homelands. The unspoken of “all the way back” signals Mother Africa as central to a chain of refusals. However, it is safe to say from reading the entire volume of poems that the narrator does not give up on responsibility to and from nation-states, nor from history, and that, therefore, the narrator is intent on the ethicality of human relationships. Instead, the refusal of nation, of country if you will, and specific articulations of history is premised upon an analysis of nations as spaces of tremendous human troubles, especially when national claims are at stake and history is addressed as a kind of bind that can blind one to continued injustices. In this regard, Brand attempts to articulate an internationalist stance infused with what Bruce Robbins would call “global feeling.”

In the final section of the volume titled “Every Chapter of the World,” Brand writes of the upheavals of late capitalism and the intensified global traffic of finance, war,
propaganda and the terror that has been wrought on human beings across the globe. In this regard, in terms of resisting the troubling sides of nations, nation-states, nationalisms and history, Brand articulates a diaspora consciousness and sensibility. This particular diasporic sensibility does not pay allegiance to an original homeland. It signals a connection to another geographic space, but that geography is a political geography related, in various resistances and responses, to an internationalist ethic and solidarity that refuses current transnational capital’s organization of our lives.

The poems of Land to Light On roam the globe, finding too few places where the ethical and responsible poet, and by extension human being, might take a rest or reprieve. It is often, in fact, within some notion of the ethical that many choose refusal of nation and nation-state as the only responsible response to the world we live in. In such a regard, I want to read for the spaces and places of an ethical diasporic criticism in two of Brand’s other works: a novel, At The Full And Change Of The Moon (1999), and a collection of essays, A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging (2001). In each of these works, I want to read for a refusal of nation and nation-state that is infused with a transnational or diasporic sensibility and ethic of care; and, simultaneously, a desire to make reparation with numerous imaginary homelands. Finally, I want to suggest that Brand’s project is not a pessimistic one but rather a project that provokes us to rethink the terms of belonging from merely those of a multicultural recognition to those of an ethic of hospitality.

In this essay, the work of the ethical is crucial in making sense of the ways in which Brand’s writing occupies a pivotal place in diasporic, multicultural and post-colonial conversations. Throughout this essay, the ethical is invoked both to signal the different moral and political stances it appears difficult to take in the post-1989 world and, simultaneously, to stake the claim for taking a stance concerning questions of justice without simplifying what might be at stake in any given claim. Thus the ethical and the political lie together in an effort to memorialize the past, fashion a future, engage in practices that might approach the realm of justice and forgiveness and thus, in Jacques Derrida’s terms, fashion a “democracy to come” (On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness 55). To conceive of the ethical without the political is to unhinge the very difficult but necessary question of what justice might look like. As we know, justice is always a work in progress that can only be made sense of by those who understand themselves to be on the receiving end of it, thus making the attempt for its accomplishment always a question or an unfinished project. In this essay, I move towards the notion of hospitality as the source for a possible utterance of justice. Hospitality might require us to think the ethico-political as a relation of ongoing negotiations and desires of the unfinished project of achieving justice.

To make sense of Brand’s writing, one must situate it between a series of social, political and cultural movements of the 1960s and after – the continuing impact of transatlantic slavery in the lives of black people in the Americas and Canadian