

GHOSTS OF SEGREGATION



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AMERICAN RACISM, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

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DOORS

“When you travel everything goes with you, even the things you do not know. They travel; they take up space; they remain the things you do not know; they become the things you will never know.”

—DIONNE BRAND, *A MAP TO THE DOOR OF NO RETURN*

In 2020, I wrote and directed a short film about one of my family’s traditions, hog killing (boucherie). The film was inspired by five photographs from my grandmother’s archive, each of them showing my uncles and cousins dressing, or trimming meat from, a hog that they had killed one Sunday in January 1994. While doing research for the film, I tried to trace my family lineage back as far as I could. I did not get far. I learned that my great-great-grandfather had lived in a small town in Alabama as long ago as 1868, but that was almost all I could find about him, the only other thing being a story about how he’d had to flee Alabama for killing some number of white men who had broken into the home he’d made with his wife and children. The same year that I wrote and shot the film, eighty-nine-year-old E. W. Higginbotham, a Black man living in Memphis, passed away. I’d met him at a program that I MC’d in 2018. The program was a prelude to the unveiling of a historic marker for E. W.’s father, Elwood, a twenty-eight-year-old Black man who was lynched in Lafayette County, Mississippi, in 1935 after shooting a white planter

who had broken into the home he’d made with his wife Melissa and three children. In “Doors,” I reflect on the place where these two stories—the story of a search through the archive for my family, and the story of the echoing impact of Elwood’s lynching on the Higginbotham family—meet. That meeting place is a rupture, a rupture in the stories that my family and the Higginbotham family can tell about themselves, a rupture in the geographies that help give us a sense of who we are. Writer and university professor Dionne Brand calls this rupture the Door of No Return.

It is the middle of a Saturday toward the end of the pandemic summer—day two of filming and hot as hell. I am sitting at an open-front desk under sun, maples, and oaks on the place that my people came from, land in North Mississippi that they bought stolen; it was Chickasaw first. Like it was when they first arrived, everything around me is hill country, wide and abundant, but the two-room building behind me is a sliver of a thing.

Today, the wood-frame building is used for storage—my ninety-nine-year-old great-aunt and two cousins live in a house beside it—but back when my people first built it, it was home. And there is something about its door. Through the camera lens, it appears behind me, just over my left shoulder. You will see it and know: it is not how it used to be. The woodwork is loose and discolored, part of the bottom is missing, and a latch hangs where a doorknob should be. I see it and feel: a steady, swelling, something that I cannot put away.

“How we got here?” I say into the camera, reading the opening words of an essay I’d written as lines from the essay scroll up the makeshift teleprompter positioned just above the lens. I know people will wonder why I say it this way—why I didn’t just say “how did we get here”—but I say it this way still.

Earlier in the year, the Southern Foodways Alliance asked me to produce a digital storytelling project about food and the future. Inspired by some

Polaroids from my grandmother’s archive and the Afrofuturist writing of Octavia Butler, I decided to write about my family and the past, how we were farmers who planted and gardeners who picked. How we were women who canned and baked. How we were kids who shucked and shelled. How we are still here—on the place in north Mississippi—five generations later. I didn’t know it at the time, but I’d written a story about doors.

To a lot of folks, doors symbolize possibility. They represent movement from one place to a better one, from where you are to where you are going. A protagonist discovers a hidden door that opens to a world of adventure. Small doors open to large rooms and Wonderland. Even when doors do not function how they should, we assume that they can eventually. Locked doors will open and allow us to pass through—or we can kick through them ourselves—

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MURDER SITE OF SAMMY YOUNGE

Tuskegee, Alabama

Twenty-one-year-old Tuskegee Institute student activist Samuel Younge, Jr., spent January 3, 1966, registering Black voters in Macon County, Alabama. He stopped at a nearby Standard Oil gas station to use the restroom. The white attendant, sixty-eight-year-old Marvin Segrest, directed him to the “colored” restroom, an outhouse in the back. When Younge said he wanted to use the regular public restroom, Segrest threatened to shoot him. Younge reported Segrest to the police, then returned to the gas station and told Segrest the police were coming. The two men argued, and Segrest shot Younge in the head, killing him. Segrest was indicted for second-degree murder and tried later that year. An all-white jury acquitted him on December 8, 1966.

and if we do and discover something unwanted, we can always turn back.

For African-descended people living across the diaspora, doors have functioned differently. Rather than movement and possibility, they represent a type of drifting exile, a rupture in things that shouldn't have open places, like family lineages and notions of who We are. This is the idea I found myself thinking through in my first read of writer and university professor Dionne Brand's memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return*. "All of those castles," she writes, referring to the ports that were the last thing that so many African people saw before being forced onto slave ships making the treacherous two-month voyage across the Atlantic. "[T]heir strong doors . . . have collected in the imagination as the Door of No Return . . . the place where our ancestors departed one world for another."

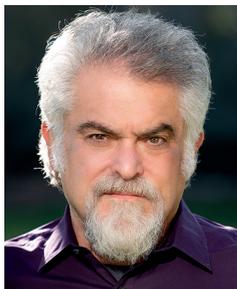
The Door of No Return refers, literally, to the strong doors of the ports and castles along the shorelines of Central and West Africa. It is the Atlantic Ocean, as visible from Elmina in Ghana as from Richmond and Point Comfort a world away (**Looking Toward Africa; Point Comfort, Virginia, Page 115**). It is the Middle Passage itself: the estimated 35,000 ships that made the voyage, the 12.5 million African people that were bound and chained in the ships' holds below, the 2 million people who died on the way, the everyone-of-the-ones-who-lived being made into someone they were not when they arrived. Somebody becomes "Mary," an eighteen-year-old field hand. Someone else is called "Harriet," twenty-one and a field hand too. "John Wilkinson" was the number-one dining-room servant. The person they called "Friday" they also called "slightly ruptured."

The Door is a metaphor too. To pass through the Door of No Return was to lose your name, after having lost your language, after having lost your homeland, after having lost control of your own body. It was to lose the possibility of recovery too; you can't go back, and even if you do, as Saidiya Hartman chronicles in much of her work, it isn't the same.

"Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandingo?" Brand remembers trying to help her grandfather remember "what people" they had come from, which tribe and what name connected him, her, and their Caribbean family to "the Continent," as some Black folks call Africa. At thirteen years old, Brand thought the yearning to remember was about language. "Having no way of finding other names," she writes, "I could only repeat the ones I knew, asking him if he was sure it wasn't Yoruba, how about Ashanti?" The yearning was about a type of language, but not necessarily the language of origins and belonging. Rather, the language of historical and geographic continuity. What story am I able to tell about myself, and us? Where is the rest of our history? Brand asked and asked, and her grandfather promised he would remember but never did.

"A small space opened in me," Brand writes, reflecting on the disappointment that came with her grandfather's not knowing, which she knew was hers too, by birthright. She called the small space a rupture, a "rupture in history . . . a rupture of geography," like traveling somewhere that is not there with only half the directions you need in the first place. "Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing . . . an inexplicable space," writes Brand. "Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space" with "no such immediate sense of belonging, only of drift."

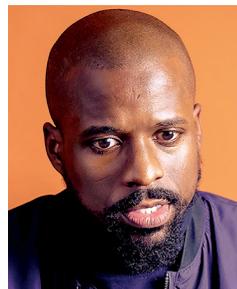
ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Richard Frishman's photographs explore how the built environment reveals our cultural histories. In 2021, Frishman was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for photography. His current documentary project, *Ghosts of Segregation*, explores the vestiges of racial oppression in the landscape of the United States.

Frishman's photography is included in a wide range of collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, and the OAS Art Museum of the Americas. His work has garnered numerous awards, including the 2019 Review Santa Fe Curator's Choice Award (juror: Makeda Best), the 2019 PhotoNOLA Portfolio Award, two Sony World Photography Awards (2018), a Communication Arts Photography Award (2018), and a Photo District News Photo Annual Award (2018). In 1983, he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in feature photography.

He lectures around the United States about the intersection of the designed environment, history, and social issues.



Zaire Love

B. Brian Foster is a writer, storyteller, and sociologist from Shannon, Mississippi. He earned his PhD in sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and currently works as an associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. His award-winning book *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black* chronicles Black community life and blues tourism in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Brian has also directed two award-winning short films and written for *Bitter Southerner*, CNN, Delish.com, *Esquire*, the Ford Foundation, *Veranda* magazine, and *The Washington Post*, among others.

Also by B. Brian Foster

I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life



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