

“Art-iculating” Affective Citizenship: Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*

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Most critical readings of *What We All Long For* argue that *belonging* in this text is overtly anti-national and that identity is restructured around notions of urban or transcultural affiliation. This paper offers a close reading of the central role art plays in the novel in order to disclose Brand’s nascent interest in the affective dimensions of socio-cultural entanglements and their implication for re-conceiving community and citizenship. Stuart Hall’s concept of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (2002) is read as an attempt to articulate the political significance of conflicting emotions and loyalties in arguments about cosmopolitan belonging. Hall’s observation calls for the recognition of an affective citizenship that is attentive to embodied political subjects who are capable of challenging dominant identity politics on a terrain defined by the emotional registers of the political. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of “critical intimacy” (1999), this essay argues that Brand’s novel draws attention to the role of uncomfortable emotions in redirecting reason, as well as to the role of art in mobilizing affective civic reconnection. Art in Brand’s *What We All Long For* is claimed as a space where affective citizenship can be articulated and practiced.

Keywords: affect; citizenship; cosmopolitanism; belonging; multiculturalism; family

La articulación del desarrollo afectivo de ciudadanía a través del arte en *What We All Long For* de Dionne Brand

Una parte sustancial de la crítica coincide en que el sentido de pertenencia desarrollado en *What We All Long For* va más allá del ámbito nacional, y que la noción de identidad se construye, de forma transcultural, a partir de afiliaciones urbanas. En este artículo estudio el papel central del arte como medio de revelar el interés creciente de Dionne Brand por las dimensiones afectivas de relaciones socio-culturales variadas, así como por sus implicaciones para una nueva visión de las ideas de comunidad y ciudadanía. En este contexto, se interpreta

el concepto de “cosmopolitismo vernáculo,” desarrollado por Stuart Hall (2002), como una forma de articular el significado político de emociones y lealtades en conflicto, en el ámbito del debate sobre la identidad cosmopolita. La propuesta de Hall invita a poner en valor un desarrollo afectivo de la ciudadanía, atento a sujetos públicos capaces de cuestionar las políticas identitarias dominantes en el terreno del registro emocional. Basándome en el ensayo de Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) y en el concepto de “intimidación crítica” desarrollado por Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999), en este trabajo propongo que una parte de la atención de Brand en esta novela se centra en el papel de las emociones incómodas para reconducir las actitudes y en la función del arte para movilizar nuevas conexiones cívico-afectivas. De este modo, el arte en *What We All Long For* se instituye en un espacio desde el que articular y promover la afectividad ciudadana.

Palabras clave: afectividad; ciudadanía; cosmopolitismo; pertenencia; multiculturalidad; familia

I. “VERNACULAR COSMOPOLITANISM”: RETHINKING AFFECT AND POLITICAL BELONGING

In his study *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* Michael Herzfeld claims that “to think affect is to think the social, and nothing is more important right now” (2005, 25). Karin Wahl-Jorgensen has also observed that scholars “have much to gain from taking into consideration the affective elements of citizenship. The paradigm of the ‘rational citizen’ might be neither normatively desirable nor empirically possible” (2006, 199). The growing importance of affective flows in Dionne Brand’s recent work and her burgeoning interest in exploring the complexities of affective citizenship have been noted by Diana Brydon in her essay on “global intimacies” in Brand’s long poem “Inventory” of 2006 (Brydon 2007). According to Brydon, “[‘Inventory’] shifts the terrain from the personal (with its focus on the autonomous individual as separate from others) to the intimate (that is, to the co-constitutions of subjectivity, image, word, and world and to a self developing through relation)” (2007, 997). Yet this turn in Brand’s writing is already prominent in her novel *What We All Long For* (2005), which marks a shift from a clear-cut politics of resistance to a more difficult ethics of recognizing co-option, complicity, interdependency and complexity.

Critics have stressed the importance of the city in *What We All Long For* as an example of “diaspora space,” in other words as “a site of ‘migrancy’ and ‘travel’ which seriously problematises the subject position of the ‘native’ ... [and which] includes the entanglements of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (Brah 1996, 182). However, no substantial critical attention has been paid to the pivotal role attributed to art in the novel as a medium through which group energy—which ties the local to the global—is shifted beyond ethnic loyalties. In his essay on *What We All Long For* Kit Dobson reads Brand’s novel in terms of a “deterritorializing project,” which according to Dobson, “is importantly focused upon urban modes of being that constantly work to elude the dominant” (2006, 90). In Dobson’s interpretation, Brand’s interest in affiliative flows grows out of the self’s need “to remain in motion, pursuing a Deleuzian line of flight in order to escape the domination of contemporary biopolitics, the process through which the body itself becomes subject to legislation and surveillance” (2006, 90). Yet such an interpretation brings to the text prefabricated normative definitions of liberating politics that necessarily fail to do justice to the novel’s nuanced examination of ethical complexity.

Where Dobson’s insistence on “struggle work” aims at a rhizomatic form of resistance against all forms of subjugating alliance (2006, 88), for Franca Bernabei the novel “especially focuses on the children who reject their parents’ ethnic memory and legacy of hardship, duty and binding love” in favour of the “immanent, impersonal and transindividual condition of the city-dweller” (2008, 116-117). Arguing from a similar standpoint Emily Johansen suggests that the novel’s second-generation characters “forge new, territorialized cosmopolitan identities that encompass multiple positionalities but which remain rooted in the physical place of Toronto; these cosmopolitan identities

can be seen in the celebration of Korea's World Cup victory and in the graffiti crew's mural seen in the final pages of the novel, among other moments" (2008, 49). Astrid Fellner also addresses the role of the city in *What We All Long For*, reading it as a "space of cultural translation" (2010, 232). She envisions Toronto as "a contact zone in which the protagonists translate the city's cultural and spatial divisions by creating points of contact that, on the one hand, open up dialogues between different groups of people and, on the other, create silences that point to failed encounters" (232).

Brand's vision in *What We All Long For* is not one of normative fluidity; she does not abjure caring connection and solidarity. A close reading of the role art plays in the novel highlights Brand's growing interest in the importance of affect in refiguring modes of social life and the public sphere. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued in favour of a "critical intimacy" that calls for the deployment of both passion and reason when interpreting the ways in which citizens make sense of political realities (1999, ix-x). Stuart Hall makes a similar claim in his essay "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities" (2002) when he examines the contradictions that attend the difficulty of articulating the meaning of communal identity in the twenty-first century. Hall proposes what he calls a "vernacular cosmopolitanism," in other words, an approach to belonging that is pragmatic as it draws on empirical evidence. "For most of us," Hall argues,

cosmopolitanism has involved and has a continued relationship to our family cultures. You think they are tremendously important, you would not dream of being bound by them any longer, you prize the moment when you left them but you know that as you leave them they continue to support you. They continue to be what you are. You could not be what you are without that struggle both to defend them and to exit from them. So, though this is not a logical political position, it is actually an existential political position we all perfectly well understand. (2002, 30)

Stuart Hall's concept of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" can be read as an attempt to articulate the political significance of conflicting emotions and loyalties in arguments about belonging in a globalized world. Meanings attached to the notion of cosmopolitanism usually place it in opposition to local allegiance or partiality, and in favour of the vast abstraction posited by the word *humanity*. Many contemporary usages of the term have equated it with an un-localized hybridity brought about by globalization (Cheah 2007). Stuart Hall's recasting of cosmopolitanism in terms of an existential, emotional reality stresses the need for a cultural theory that can properly address the experiential, affective dimension of belonging.

The 'existential political position' that hovers between belonging and non-belonging, noted by Hall, is fleshed out in Brand's *What We All Long For*. The young protagonists in this novel are born into families with strong communal understandings of identity, defined by cultural and racial difference. They inherit family histories

of marginalization, oppression or victimization. Yet rather than asserting difference against some particular form of external oppression, the characters in *What We All Long For* are torn between conflicting loyalties towards personal and communal relationships. More precisely, *What We All Long For* recounts events in the lives of four friends—Tuyen, Carla, Oku and Jackie—during the summer of 2002. The narrator follows each character’s consciousness in alternating sequence, often describing overlapping timespans. The story traces the strong friendship that binds Tuyen, Carla, Oku and Jackie and juxtaposes their intimate relationship with the intergenerational conflicts that define their experience of family. Tuyen’s parents are Vietnamese immigrants who are still haunted by the loss of their younger son, Quy, on the night they fled their homeland. Carla loyally carries the memory of her Italian mother, Angie, who committed suicide when Angie’s black father refused to divorce his wife for his Italian lover. Oku’s black parents hope their son will follow their example and lead a prudent and hardworking life. As for Jackie’s black Nova-Scotian parents, they arrived in Toronto during the 1970s and lead inconsequential lives of make-believe, dancing their way through the city’s underground clubs. The poetic narrative moves fluidly between the different points of view of the four main characters. Most importantly, it juxtaposes their sensations, thoughts and dilemmas—which also convey the spirit of Toronto as a contemporary multicultural metropolitan centre—with Quy’s first person rendering of his life story. Quy is Tuyen’s aforementioned lost brother. Orphaned as a child during the war in Vietnam, Quy suffers human cruelty and becomes a scheming monk involved in the illegal transport of refugees, before he finally ends up in Toronto in search of his parents.

In this story postcolonial legacies meet a globalized modernity that appears all too keen to re-inscribe identity boundaries in its desire for structure. In the midst of such affective turmoil, Tuyen’s conceptual art is explored for its capacity to provoke in its audience the existential experience of “vernacular cosmopolitanism.” Tuyen’s installations reflect her own conflicted emotional trajectory: Tuyen embraces her homosexuality and champions the ownership and enjoyment of her own body against familial claims of obligation and modesty. She affirms her sense of authority over the stories which constitute her affective and cognitive makeup. Tuyen recognizes in the expression of her own lesbian desire a force within her own psyche which can defy the immobilizing mind-frame of loss she has inherited by family history. In *What We All Long For* Tuyen’s pursuit of pleasure is not portrayed in terms of an individualist, selfish ethics and politics. Rather, Tuyen channels the energy of her longing into her visionary conceptual art. Tuyen’s installations—portrayed in *What We All Long For* as a work-in-progress—dramatize longing, belonging and dissonance through expressions of affect that invite public response. The final section of this essay argues that Tuyen’s art in *What We All Long For* becomes a vehicle for conveying uncomfortable emotions that inflect our appreciation of vernacular cosmopolitanism and mobilize revisions of citizenship in the global metropolis.

2. THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EMOTION: DISTURBING THE LABELS

In *What We All Long For*, as David Chariandy has observed, the younger characters “encounter their ancestors’ legacies of displacement and disenfranchisement not through official histories or even family tales, but through a doubly unwilling circulation of feeling” (2006, 106). Chariandy further explains that “the second generation, thus, awakens to its diasporic legacy not through conscious communication, but through an unconscious transmission of affect” (106). In her study *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Sara Ahmed has offered a methodology for excavating the active role of emotions in the shaping of personal and collective identities. Ahmed acknowledges the work of Judith Butler—particularly Butler’s study *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997)—as an important source for her thoughts on the performative aspect of emotions: emotions generate their object by repeating past associations, thus attaching subjects to the conditions of their subordination (2004, 12). Ahmed links emotions with the process of bodies “im-pressing” upon each other, coming into contact and inscribing traces of feelings on corporeal surfaces (2004, 6). In *What We All Long For* Brand explores the invidious ways in which the cultural memories of loss acquire almost material texture, impress upon the malleable surface of affiliated diasporic psyches and bodies and are transmuted through art into a force to be reckoned with.

The coming-together, in urban spaces, of disparate embodied histories that seek to build a future upon common territory poses an unprecedented challenge: that of forging a new conception of belonging flexible enough to host dissonance and be refuged by it. “How do you or I collect ourselves each morning?” Brand asked in an interview, “[h]ow do we disturb the deeply troublesome labels that admit no complexity, no range but which come to represent us in the world?” (Brand 2001b, 3). In *What We All Long For* Toronto lives “are doubled, tripled, conjugated—women and men are all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads” (2005, 5). People create for themselves a sense of selfhood by drawing a line of causality through their life stories in the hope of coherently synthesizing the disparate parts of their private histories. Yet the struggle to control and to integrate, to make one’s sense of self whole and autonomous is counteracted by the porousness of identities, the sense of interdependence of bodies, of interpenetration of lives. Despite “all the lives” that people have “hoarded, all the ghosts they’ve carried, all the inversions they’ve made for protection, all the scars and marks and records for recognition,” or indeed because of these, “the whole heterogeneous baggage falls out with each step on the pavement. There’s so much spillage” (2005, 5). The heterogeneity of each individual’s affective experiences cannot be contained. The emotional knots cannot be disentangled or the discrepancies evened out. Spillage is to be expected, revision becomes necessary and emotional excess is a constant challenge. As will become evident in this section of the essay, *What We All Long For* does not fetishize the inchoate through an exaggeration of the emancipatory effects of rhizomatic practices, as argued by Dobson (2006, 100). Rather, affect surfaces in the

way the intensely personal—as experienced in the context of family or friendship—flows out into the social and is transmuted through artistic engagement into a shared desire for social connection and change.

In *What We All Long For* Brand revisits the social and cultural scene of Toronto, which has provided the setting for many of her previous publications. Yet this time the narrator invites the reader to enter the cognitive and affective world of a younger generation of characters, from various ethno-racial backgrounds, who were born in Toronto and feel part of Toronto’s urban landscape. Family is construed as a conflict-ridden zone, where intergenerational differences are prominent and ethical dilemmas strident. Affective spillage and excess both fascinate Dionne Brand as much as the human capacity for self-reflection and agency. In *What We All Long For* the author creates an artistic canvas broad enough to encapsulate the contradictory flows and impulses that inflect human experience. The “raw openness” of the city of Toronto can be sensed in the stream of hybrid identities traversing the city crossroads (2005, 212): “Sikhs in FUBU, Portuguese girls in DKNY, veiled Somali girls in Puma sneakers, Columbian teenagers in tattoos” (213). However, the potential that this unruly ‘raw openness’ represents is counteracted by the badge of belonging that appears to be almost branded upon the diasporic cognitive landscape in a way that harks back to Brand’s ruminations in *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001a).

In this latter work ‘the door of no return’ signifies the physical and psychological space/moment beyond which African people were wrenched from their lands of origin and catapulted as slaves into the New World. This ‘door,’ “a space in the imagination” (2001a, 97), is cast in terms of a paradox. On the one hand, it is a site of trauma, the point beyond which origin and history were relinquished; and on the other hand, it constitutes a point of departure signalling the moment when the creative energies of the Black diaspora were released globally. Thus, the ‘door of no return’ acquires the poignancy of “a passport which, after boarding the plane, [Blacks in the Diaspora] are unable to make disappear by tearing it up and throwing it into the toilet” (2001a, 48). In *What We All Long For* Brand further explores this badge of belonging that shapes diasporic subjects through an insidious cultural politics of emotion bequeathed by parental cultures and family legacies.

For Tuyen, born in Toronto like her elder brother Binh, family and home become equated with stasis, a space suffused with suppressed pain and unspoken, guilt-ridden memories. Tuyen’s parents, Cam and Tuan, lost their youngest son, Quy, on the night they secretly fled Vietnam during the American invasion. Their escape was forever marked by their voyage across the waters of the vast South China Sea and it haunts them throughout their lives. They are psychologically immobilized in that moment of personal tragedy, which acquires the poignancy of a ‘door of no return.’ In their present home in Toronto, Tuyen’s parents are surrounded by objects that are invested with the power to remind them of their past lives and their loss. “There were always in the house the double life, the triple images” the narrator recounts (Brand

2005, 115). Their house resembles a museum of preserved memorabilia dating from a past before Tuyen was born. Tuyen feels suffocated by the stultifying sense of regret that emanates from the very objects that furnish her parents' house. This feeling of regret impresses upon her, reiterating a sense of emotional bondage to a history of victimization. In a scene halfway through the novel Tuyen's friend, Carla, exclaims how 'alike' Tuyen and her brother Binh are. Tuyen ponders the negative implications the word 'alike' has for her:

"Alike"—the word revolted her; it gave her some other unwanted feeling of possession. To be possessed, she thought, not by Binh only but by family, Bo and Mama, Ai and Lam, yes them, and time, the acts that passed in it, the bow, the course of events. (157)

In Tuyen's mind the word 'alike' signifies the proximity of bodies crippled by emotional trauma. *Alikeness* is understood as the condition of bearing the common mark of affective belonging.

As mentioned earlier, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sarah Ahmed traces how feelings circulate, especially in the processes of nation construction, through signs and networks of affective economies that transform particular bodies into objects of hate, fear or disgust. Ahmed clearly states that she associates emotions "not with individuals, and their interior states or character, nor with the quality of objects, but with 'signs' and how they work on and in relation to bodies" (194). It is obvious that such a symbolic account of emotions leaves the pivotal question of agency unaddressed: how can processes of corporeal inculcation be dislocated and transformed through social or material realities? While Ahmed is right to suggest that, often, particular identities are construed through the language of negative emotions, something that is also explored by Brand in *What We All Long For*, Ahmed's proposed theory of how particular emotions exhibit a tendency to "stick" to particular objects or bodies is rather unconvincing (Ahmed 2004, 8). If affects are not determined in advance, if signifiers are mobilized in different ways in different contexts, who, if not the individual, is the agent of innovative reinterpretation of signs? The final section of this essay will approach Tuyen's engagement with art as her own individual way of reinterpreting and redirecting affect, and fighting for an alternative approach to the claims of belonging.

While Tuyen has inherited a sense of loss through family history, for Carla the experience of loss is deeply lodged within the recess of her own memory. Carla's life is structured around her passionate love for her dead mother, Angie (Brand 2005, 37). Her personal loss is further complicated by the racial context in which Angie's death occurred. As an Italian girl who had fallen in love with a black man, Angie had crossed a racial border and had paid with her life: abandoned by her family, and rejected by her black lover and father of her children, Angie committed suicide. It is as if by this

act alone Angie gained her daughter’s uncritical love and life-long dedication. “Loving Angie was a gate, and at every moment she made decisions based on that love, if the gate swung open or closed” (111). Carla judges her personal choices against her love for her mother; she measures her way of life against her loyalty to Angie:

She kept from loving because she loved Angie. She collected nothing like furniture or books because she loved Angie and things would clutter the space between her present self and the self that Angie loved. Carla needed a clear empty path to Angie as a living being. (111)

Possessed by the past, Carla’s emotional life is stifled because of the terrifying energy demanded by her desire to maintain an unadulterated dedication to her mother’s memory. As a child, the narrator informs the reader, Carla had “sculpted her face to passivity” (250). As a young woman she remains aloof and detached. Carla, in fact, feels incapable of desire (52).

Both Carla’s and Tuyen’s inheritance of loss bear strong racial connotations. Blackness, diasporic experience and victimization intertwine in these young characters’ life stories of yearning and disfiguration. In fact, Carla and Tuyen’s cases bring to mind George Elliott Clarke’s criticism of Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*. In his review of *A Map* Clarke challenged Dionne Brand for failing to question her own essentializing politics. Clarke attacked *A Map* for its insistence that “all black people—save, *perhaps*, Africans—are disturbed, disfigured by the experience of slavery and thus yearn for some form of re-collection, although they often sadly ignorant of this need” (2002-2003, 557, italics in original). Furthermore, in her 2004 essay on deterritorialization in Brand’s writing, Marlene Goldman also commented that “at every turn Brand’s fictions express a longing for and, ultimately, a rejection of origins, belonging, and possession, including the potentially beneficial forms of origin, belonging and possession associated with being part of a family and, by extension, a community” (2004, 24). It is thus worth noting that in *What We All Long For* Brand takes a timely step back into self-reflexive scrutiny and critically explores the dangers of conceiving belonging as a synonym of captivity and bondage. In invoking the complex emotional terrain created by family, Dionne Brand invites judgements about what it means to belong. Her project transforms itself from an attempt to recreate the possessiveness of family, historical trauma and race, to that of giving voice to a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” and reconceiving civic connection. In this sense, Brand’s novel *What We All Long For* reflects the trajectory of Tuyen’s creative output. Tuyen explores the possibilities of dissonance and transgressive interpretation through the replica of a *lubaio*—a traditional Chinese sign-post—she starts sculpting, which brings together family photographs, the longings of friends and strangers, and photographic images of the life of common city dwellers. The *lubaio* is eventually re-conceived as part of an installation that seeks to dramatize the feelings of pain and anguish Tuyen associates with family; and finally Tuyen envisions a tripartite installation which would bring the former projects together in an attempt

to represent heterogeneity and community through voices of contemporary Toronto. In this way both the narrative plot and Tuyen's artistic work-in-progress move from inscribing affiliative relationships as a source of captivity to redirecting emotions and re-envisioning citizenship.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001a), Dionne Brand approached representations of the black body as a literal and metaphorical site of captivity (metaphorical in the sense of being shackled by traumatic memory). She focused on the ways in which “[t]he many permutations and inversions of the original captivity reach into the contemporary popular discourse and the common sense” (37). Brand described contemporary “styles of captivity”: fashionable affectations adopted by young people who “give off the essence of danger, of emotions out of control which have to be suppressed, of a violence, if not put under control, which will come down like a flood on the whole of society” (37). In *What We All Long For* Brand further probes the cult of rebel dangerousness as a legacy of diasporic racial history which is worshipped by contemporary black youth, and their subsequent entrapment within its confines. The question of black masculinity preoccupies Oku throughout *What We All Long For*. Oku resists his friends' persistent calls to join them in illegal street “business.” However, as the narrative unfolds it gets increasingly difficult for Oku to avoid their hassling (2005, 164). Oku and Jackie voice Brand's own rejection of the black body's submissiveness to a cultural politics of emotion that seeks to recode the black body's social exclusion through a romantic language that worships outlaw culture. Jackie's mother and father had lived out their fantasies and desires every night in the underground clubs of the city during the eighties. Jackie refuses to repeat her parents' willful surrender to this meek world of make-believe. Oku, in turn, senses the danger of self-entrapment in idealized versions of black criminality. Oku's search for a meaningful identity as a black intellectual brings him against his father, Fitz. Fitz, is a strong man. He believes in the “physical and moral benefits of manly work” (84). He has worked hard all his life in order to sustain his wife and son, something he will not let his family forget. For Fitz “Black” and “intellectual” are incompatible identity categories; they simply do not signify a route that will guarantee survival. Physical survival in the “wilderness” of the white capital was an earlier generation's ultimate goal (87). The quest for happiness, on the other hand, transforms a younger generation's understanding of self-worth. “You happy, Pops?” Oku asks his father one morning:

“Happy!” Fitz was incredulous. “It don't have happy in that! Happy, boy. You think they put you here to be happy! You damn fool. Claire, this boy need to do a good day's work, then he'll understand. Happy, my ass.” (86)

For immigrants and refugees, people who bear the scars of warfare or racial abuse, for those uprooted and those newly landed, achieving some degree of stability is the

ultimate goal. “These are people who are used to the earth beneath them shifting and they all want it to stop” the narrator observes in the opening pages of *What We All Long For* (4). Although immigrants are by definition mobile people, the traumas of personal history condition them to long for stasis. Their children, on the other hand, do not share their parents’ fears. The kinds of ethical dilemmas they perceive dramatize a generational shift from their parents’ preoccupation with the structures of relationship—on which survival depended—towards a growing concern with the quality of relationships, in terms of which personal happiness may be achieved. Oku’s father may use “happiness” as an accusation against his son (86), yet “happiness” also works as a hopeful alternative to the current state of affairs and as an embodiment of a younger generation’s desire for an alternative mode of envisioning possibility.

What We All Long For can be read as Dionne Brand’s exploration of the possibility of “advocating for a different sense of politics” through engagement with the arts (2004, 6). As she explains in an interview with Nuzhat Abbas, such a different kind of politics would value:

... not only the freedom from harm, or the freedom to control. Ultimately politics is about pleasure ... I think Eros is ultimately what we have been fighting for. To express ourselves in the most lustful and pleasurable ways. When you’re fighting for or organizing towards a society that you would want to live in, it surely would be a society which is not just about making rules, but about making life pleasurable, and opening spaces. (2004, 6)

If *What We All Long For* envisions such a society of pleasure and happiness, it is worth reflecting on the central role the novel attributes to artistic engagement as a metaphor and vehicle for change. In a recent online article titled “Politics to Reconnect Communities” political theorist Matthew Flinders poses the following question: “In a time of increasing social anomie and political disengagement, especially amongst the young and the poor, can participatory arts projects provide a way of reconnecting communities?” (2014). Flinders notes the renewed interest in this question exhibited by the British Arts Council, an interest that is manifest in the Council’s recent report and work in progress titled “The Value of Arts and Culture on People and Society” (Flinders 2014). According to Flinders the aim of the research is to trace the links between art and “political reconnection, civic reconnection, or personal reconnection (in terms of personal understanding, confidence and aspiration)” (2014). In *What We All Long For* art is probed for its plasticity and its capacity to provoke within its audience the existential experience of “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” a multiplicity of emotions characterized by contradiction, which defines belonging in the global metropolis. The role of uncomfortable emotions in redirecting political reasoning demands further study, Brand implies. The same goes for the role of art in mobilizing civic, affective reconnection.

3. “ART-ICULATING” AFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP

In Tuyen, Brand has created a female artist who claims her own pleasure as an act of self-defining autonomy. Born in and of the city, Tuyen feels the need to be “openly seduced ... in no way imaginable within the confines of that family story” (2005, 287). Tuyen craves the sense of touch driven by sensuality not obligation. This is poignantly dramatized in the scene where Tuyen’s elder sister Ai threatens to reveal Tuyen’s secret homosexuality to their parents as an act of jealousy against Tuyen’s rebellious pursuit of autonomy (58-59). In this scene Tuyen’s lesbianism is only hinted at, it is never spoken in words; it remains unnameable within the walls of the family home. The physicality of sex is Tuyen’s way of savoring the vigor of life beyond the overwhelming sense of regret which haunts her relationship with her family. Tuyen’s family “did not embrace,” the narrator observes:

They fed you, they clothed you, they fattened you, but they did not embrace. Yet they held you. With duty, with obligation, with honour, with an unspoken but viselike grip of emotional debt. Tuyen wanted no duty. And perhaps that is what she had arrived at. Yet she wanted an embrace so tight, and with such a gathering of scents and touches. She wanted sensuality, not duty. She wanted to be downtown in the heat of it. (61)

Tuyen applies both reason and passion in her critical dissection of the affective bonds that have shaped her and are still affecting her life choices. She openly denounces her family’s inability to ‘embrace,’ to lovingly enfold and accept their offspring’s desire to define their own version of happiness. For Tuyen, affective relations defined by distorted notions of loyalty and ‘emotional debt’ hold younger generations back through an insidious cultural politics of emotion that lays a firm grip on their mind and body in the name of duty, obligation and honor.

Tuyen searches for ways to translate into aesthetic and physical experience the feelings of pain and anguish that catch her unawares every time she finds herself entangled in *family*. She dreams of “mount[ing] an installation of the characteristics of her family, if only she could imagine the science with which to do it”:

It would be a hundred boxes of varying sizes made of a transparent translucent material floating in a room, suspended by no known element. The floor of the room would be water, and she would walk through the room bumping into the boxes, which would not be discernible to the naked eye. As she collided with the boxes, things would fall out, spikes and keys and mouths and voices. (Brand 2005, 126)

Tuyen imagines her installation as a ‘room’ filled with ‘boxes’ made of ‘transparent material.’ Tuyen is concerned with the ways in which space is experienced by people who have inherited traumatic histories of loss. She envisions the floor of the room covered with water, for water connotes her parents’ experience of the Middle Passage.

The ‘transparent translucent’ boxes can be interpreted as signifying the rigid structure of painful memories, which are also invisible to the naked eye and Tuyen imagines herself unwittingly colliding with them as she walks through the room. Spikes fall out, causing her a pain similar to that inflicted on her by her family’s clamoring voices that hark back to repressed histories of loss. The final image of ‘keys and mouths and voices’ (my emphasis) spilling out of memory’s ruptured walls offers a subtle intimation of the brutal scene that marks the end of the novel: Tuyen’s lost brother, Quy, strewn on the pavement outside his parents’ home, beaten almost to death. “His mouth splits open and all the water spills out” (318). This metaphor of spillage associates Quy with the abject, the scattered debris of broken lives which Brand has lamented in her poetry and prose.

In invoking the complex emotional terrain created by family, Tuyen invites visceral judgments about what it means to belong. “New intimacies don’t need to rely on a common origin,” Jenny Burman has observed (2007, 287). “People come into intimate relation on the basis of a shared understanding of displacement and/or emplacement or a shared affective investment in the future of a common dwelling place” (287). Brand’s writing captures the continuum of emotions from individual and bodily to collective and social. *What We All Long For* conveys the urgency that attends rethinking belonging and citizenship through “critical intimacy” (Spivak 1999). Tuyen’s art invites its audience to enter into an intimate, attentive relationship with the particular state of mind dramatized in her work. It demands of the audience to make sense of the relationship between the part and the whole in the work’s aesthetic form. Ostensibly, Tuyen’s creative representation of “vernacular cosmopolitan” belonging does not abjure the claims of loyalty to family, race and a history of loss. These claims remain valid parts of the multidimensional and contradictory affect belonging has become in today’s diasporic metropolis. What is more, Tuyen creates what we may call “participatory art”: her work implicates its audience through physical and sensory experience in the recreation of incommensurable aesthetic emotion. In this way Tuyen’s installation—which eventually blends a variety of textures and techniques including collage, photography, sculpture, reportage and video footage—becomes a vehicle for intimate, affective connections across difference.

The tug and pull of the plethora of voices, emotions and longings that suffuse the heterogeneous space of the city fascinates Tuyen. She starts sculpting a replica of a *lubaio* upon which she plans on inscribing the ‘longings’ of Toronto’s inhabitants: “The city was full of longings and she wanted to make them public,” the narrator explains (Brand 2005, 151). The energy exuded by the power of these longings is metaphorically compared to ‘light.’ “On any given day” the narrator observes, “at any particular corner, on any crossroads, you can find the city’s heterogeneity, like some physical light” (142). This metaphor is repeated in different contexts throughout the novel and counteracts the firm grip that family, race and loss exert on the protagonists. Moving through the city, Tuyen questions random people she comes across about their desires and collects their stories in her “book of longings” (151). Thus, Tuyen’s revised art project acquires

a particularly political and ethical edge. Towards the end of the novel Tuyen envisions her project as a tripartite installation which would bring together the different ideas she has been working on: the ancient *lubaio* which she has been sculpting, the cloth reproduction of her book of voices of the city, photographs of the people she has come across in downtown Toronto and tiny pictures of Quy. Her installation would dramatize both connection and dissonance through a dialogic juxtaposition of expressions of loss and desire that invite public response. For Tuyen, as for Brand, the city's heterogeneity is not only a matter of polyvocality, in the sense posited by Bakhtin's theory of the "heteroglossia" of languages ([1975] 1981). Different histories and traditions do not only exist in an antagonistic, dialogic relationship within the space of the multicultural metropolis. People crash into each other's lives and are transformed by the "jostling and scraping that a city like this does" (Brand 2005, 5). And art provides the literal and metaphorical space where such affective citizenship can be articulated and practiced.

Charles Altieri has argued that when we experience strong aesthetic emotion by virtue of participating in a work of art, "we cannot but want ourselves to make this text part of how we see possibilities for affirming our own capacities within that world" (2001, 54). The local embeddedness of artworks may speak across difference and articulate intimate experiences of the universal. Tuyen's installation brings together family memorabilia, letters and photographs, the longings of friends and strangers, and photographic images of past and irrecoverable moments in the life of common city dwellers. "The *lubaio*, the bits of wood, the photographs, the longings were what she brought to the cave to be handled, and thought about, and made into something she could use to create alternate, unexpected realities, exquisite corpses" (Brand 2005, 224). Tuyen conceives of her art as a process of transmuting the emotions emanating from the odd objects she comes across as she walks the streets of the city, the cravings she picks up from conversations she overhears, and the responses she solicits from strangers she meets. It is worth pointing out that the surrealist techniques of collage and *cadaver exquis* (exquisite corpse) involved the collective piecing together of fragments towards the creation of an art object. The 'exquisite corpse' that Tuyen's *lubaio* represents highlights the communal impulse behind her work. It reminds the audience of the surrealist imperative that art must be the product of collective endeavor and not an individualist pursuit.

Immediately following mention of the 'exquisite corpse' in Brand's text Oku comments on the galvanizing force of Ornette Coleman's jazz music: "different instruments playing in different keys but in another communion ... and all that rushing energy, dozens of themes just rushing together ... See, everything makes sense when you listen to this, right?," Oku exclaims to his friends (228). Through this meta-narratorial incitement Dionne Brand articulates the way that art creates a space where the unscripted and unresolved intuitive responses of the audience-participants create nonlogical linkages between social identifications. In *The Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy noted that "music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be

understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists and language gamers" (1993, 102). Jazz by definition demands improvisation, the ability to construct variations on already existing melodies, rather than to master inherited forms. "There is a contradiction implicit in the art form itself," Ralph Ellison writes in *Shadow and Act* (1964):

For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment ... springs from a contest in which the artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight or improvisation, represents (like the canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and a link in the chain of tradition. (Cited in Gilroy 1993, 79)

Much like the jazz music admired by Oku, Tuyen's art gradually develops into an attempt to give voice to "different instruments playing in different keys" (Brand 2005, 228). Different voices of the city strike discordant notes, yet are woven into Tuyen's conceptual artwork in what furtively takes the shape of a "communion" by the force of "rushing energy" (228). Emotive connections are effected in every direction, "dozens of themes just rushing together," producing the transient sense of belonging (228). Tuyen's art re-mediatizes what Tuyen hears, sees and feels through her contact with the city.

Recent research in cognitive psychology is affirming the importance of the kind of imaginative involvement practiced in the attentive engagement with art for the study of the cognitive processes involved in situated ethical judgement (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Nichols 2006). Indeed, as early as 1996 Mark Turner, after studying the neuroscientific work of Gerald Edelman and Antonio Damasio, suggested in his seminal work *The Literary Mind* that the mind's literary capacity for parable and blended metaphor is able to structure conceptual activity. In *What We All Long For* art is explored as a metaphorical space that blends zones of irreducible difference and allows for the invention of affective mediations and "vernacular cosmopolitanisms." Brand's novel illustrates the ways in which feeling emanates from the intimacy of human bodies outward into family, community, the nation and the world. In this sense "emotions ... might be seen as a form of connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place" (Davidson and Milligan 2004, 524).

Brand's employment of a range of narrative points of view in *What We All Long For* invites readers to enter her literary text in various relations of critical intimacy. Such a strong sense of interpersonal entanglement blends multiple perspectives and potentially creates a new vision of community: a community of affect, a "solidarity of strangers," to quote the title of Jodi Dean's homonymous study (1996). The question of solidarity has become a thorny one in political theory by virtue of the sheer difficulty

of defining belonging at a time when mass and serial mobility challenges any attempt to anchor identities. In her study *The Solidarity of Strangers* Jodi Dean maintains that once the constitution of *we* is understood as communicative process, then “difference can be respected as necessary to solidarity” (1996, 8). In Dean’s words, her study positions “reflective solidarity as the bridge between identity and universality, as the precondition of mutual recognition necessary for claims to universality under pluralist, postmodern conditions” (3). Dean’s aim is to open up conceptions of the collective *we* in ways which initiate a change in our attitude towards boundaries, at a time when many nationalities and nationalists are “seeking to shore up their own boundaries” and theorists are “involved in a politicization of the local that threatens to neglect larger interconnections” (7). Dean’s theoretical work constitutes a significant feminist Habermasian attempt at recasting dialogical subjectivity. Challenging the poststructuralist embrace of fragmentation and the inchoate, Jürgen Habermas sought to salvage human rationality and the values of personal freedom, truthfulness and equality by studying the operations of intersubjective communication. The ideal communicative act, Habermas wrote, “carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld” (1984, 10). The following question, however, arises: why should communication be based only on the rational force of the better argument? Both Habermas’s and Dean’s political philosophy disqualify and bracket out affective response, which in effect constitutes the entire motivational structure of human transaction. Against such interpretations of human solidarity Brand’s novel performs the nonlogical or provisional affective linkages that connect social members, and dramatizes the central role of emotion in political life.

4. CONCLUSION

In the last pages of *What We All Long For* Tuyen revises her initial ideas about the art installation she has been working on. Tuyen envisions her project as three separate rooms which would bring together disparate pieces of her work: the ancient *lubaio* which she has been sculpting, the cloth reproduction of her book of longings, photographs of the people of the city and tiny copies of Quy’s image, all incorporated in a tripartite structure:

In the middle of each room a diaphanous cylindrical curtain, hung from the ceiling, that the audience would enter. At the centre of one cylinder there would be the *lubaio* with all the old longings of another generation. She would do something with the floor here too, perhaps rubble, perhaps sand, water. In another cylinder there would be twelve video projections, constantly changing, of images and texts of contemporary longing. This one

would be celebratory, even with the horrible. Again here the floor, the path, what material? The last cylinder would be empty. The room silent. What for? She still wasn't quite certain what she was making; she knew she would find out only once the installation was done. (Brand 2005, 309)

The three cylindrical curtains resemble the experiment tubes used in scientific laboratories. Tuyen's installation brings together Toronto's heterogeneous voices in an experimental work which conceptualizes difference not in terms of race, culture, gender or class, but in terms of generational affinities. In this way Tuyen, and through her, Dionne Brand, acknowledges the pragmatic effects of a cultural legacy that exercises an affective hold over younger citizens' centrifugal desires to pursue happiness and elude social constraints. One may argue that the three rooms represent Toronto's past, present and future. The roughness of the rubble and the sand is juxtaposed with the fluidity of the video projections. What galvanizes this tripartite structure is the force of human longing. However, the longings can also be 'horrible.' Violence and violent disruption are part of the city's "raw openness" (212). Indeed, Tuyen and her friends "felt the city's violence and its ardour in one emotion" (212). Tuyen imagines the third cylinder in her installation empty, its silence possibly anticipating the future. It is also a silence which challenges the celebratory feeling of borderless possibility conjured in the second cylinder through the constantly changing video projections of visual and textual longings. It is a silence which echoes with the unspeakable histories from which the photographs, images and longings used in Tuyen's installation have been wrenched.

In fact, Brand subtly cautions her reader against the uncritical celebration of art's 'exquisite corpses': she juxtaposes Tuyen's "dadaist and surrealist vision" with Quy's violated body in the novel's closing scenes (Bernabei 2008, 120). "The predominance of body parts as units of an exquisite corpse within the visual arts resonates also for Brand's book," Heather Smyth observes, "given the violence done and the pleasures experienced by bodies in her novel, and the implications her novel holds for our vision of the heterogeneous body politic" (2008, 274). As Smyth points out, the exquisite corpse may invoke both collage and dismemberment. The arbitrary violence suffered by Quy in the closing pages of the novel comes like a punch to the reader's stomach, before the focalizer shifts back to the serenity of the mundane. The final paragraph of the novel offers a close-up of Carla sitting by her window, looking down on a busy Toronto street at people going about their daily routine: "the young man who sold houses, the woman who worked in the abortion clinic, the girl who talked to her dogs as if they were human" (Brand 2005, 319). These lines expose the consumerist, materialist values that global metropolitan centers like Toronto represent. Violent dissonance, harmful atomism and human greed seem to confound Tuyen's search for a way of embracing freedom and pleasure within artistic space shaped by affective connection.

Nevertheless, Brand's final sentence remains hopeful, though pragmatically grounded: "She [Carla] longed to hear Tuyen chipping and chiseling away next door" (319). Different experiences and sensations triggered by art are brought together in this phrase: art as the struggle of a visionary's passion over the concreteness of materiality; the creative process as a sensory experience witnessed through the sound of 'chipping and chiseling'; the artist as a desirable being. Art provokes intimate and concealed aspects of one's sensibility in ways that often refuse to fit into virtuous models of living. Yet by the very act of asking the audience to participate in states that are either too elemental, or too absolute, or too self-absorbed, artistic engagement becomes a participatory event that can have an impact on how and why individuals and citizens are concerned with values of all kinds. According to Brian Massumi, affect, or "*l'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (cited in Brydon 2007, 1001). In *What We All Long For* affective connection is as much the object of literary exploration (as indicated by the novel's title) as the method of registering and restructuring the political. Art is claimed as a space where affective citizenship can be articulated and practiced; finally, art in *What We All Long For* is hailed as a medium flexible enough to dramatize "vernacular cosmopolitanism"; i.e., to host the complex emotional terrain that provisionally connects embodied subjectivities across home, community, nation and the transnational world.

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