

# Beyond the Multiculture: Transnational Toronto in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*

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IN PICO IYER'S 2000 autobiographical travelogue *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*, the Canadian city of Toronto functions as a kind of ideal space of globalization: "The Multiculture," where, as Iyer puts it, there is a possibility, "exhilarating to contemplate, that a city made up of a hundred diasporas could go beyond the cities that we knew" (124). Iyer's version of the city perpetuates the myth of Toronto as the pioneering bastion of successful multiculturalism and globalization. In *The Global Soul*, Toronto is juxtaposed, but crucially never connected, with other nodes of transnational multiculturalism: the Los Angeles airport, Hong Kong, and Atlanta (during the 1996 Summer Olympics) and, in contrast to these various alienating spaces, represents the pinnacle of Iyer's transnational search for a place in which he might feel at home. Arguably, Iyer's version of Toronto hews closely to the city's own official slogan for its 2008 Olympics bid, "Expect the World," and the latest contender for a defining slogan, "Embrace the World."<sup>1</sup> His idealized vision of Toronto is indispensable as a reflection of the dominant narrative of a multicultural Canadian city as the best possible product of the forces of globalization. Iyer further develops this idea by making direct connections between literary representations of and from Toronto, and its status as "the city as anthology" (120).

However, the contradictions and problematic assumptions inherent in Iyer's imagined "Global City," both in the material and the literary sense, are thrown into sharp relief when set against another Toronto-defining text, Dionne Brand's 2005 novel *What We All Long For*. Published just five years after Iyer's exuberant account, Brand's work provides a more problematic and nuanced account of the complexities of Toronto's multi-historical space and people, with their fluid identities and haunted pasts. The imagined spaces of this Canadian

city, as envisioned by Iyer and Brand, are thus central to my discussion of globalization and transnational multiculturalism, and their literary representations; however, Brand's careful evocation of the spaces outside Toronto, and her characters' emotional and material attachments to the city, must also be seen as crucial to her novel. Focusing on Quy, instead of the oft-analyzed Tuyen and her friends in the city, enables us to understand the more complex implications behind the idea of Toronto as a globalized space.

Brand's literary intervention into this popular image of Toronto allows us a way to read this space both through the affective resonances produced by Quy's fraught journey to the city and its political implications for him and others like him. Reading *What We All Long For* this way means seeing it as a global novel that is significantly only partly set in Toronto. Doreen Massey takes this larger perspective in her 2007 book *World City*, maintaining that too much of a focus on the multicultural nature of London will detract from its elite position in the unequal process of globalization. For Massey, "London as a centre of command and orchestration and as, indeed, a focus of migration and a home to an astonishing multiplicity of ethnicities and cultures is a part, and a powerful part, of the same dynamics that produce, elsewhere in other cities, Davis's 'planet of slums'" (9-10). Arguably, while both Iyer and Brand are aware of the cosmopolitanism and globality of Toronto, Brand's literary portrayal of the bleaker undercurrents of a globalized world through Quy challenges more celebratory, insular, and delineated ideas of what it means to call Toronto a "Global City" (Iyer 121), revealing the multi-scalar ways that class and race cut across national borders. Where Massey as a human geographer writes in more general and material terms, Brand in her fiction is able to imagine individual human experience as it negotiates and struggles with these transnational realities. Some of the transnational implications in *What We All Long For* are necessarily incomplete, fragmented, and/or mentioned only in passing, but Brand's interpolation of Quy in the narrative is a sustained examination of how multicultural Toronto is implicated in a distinctively unequal form of globalization.

In many ways, Toronto is an urban space that materializes John Tomlinson's view of globalization as "complex connectivity" (1), "the networking of social relations across large tracts of time-space, causing distant events and powers to penetrate our local experience" (9). Iyer

may be correct in intuiting that Toronto is a location of diasporic and postcolonial realities that are inflected by globalization, and that it is, therefore, central to our understanding of what the possibilities of a “Global City” are. However, his account is unsatisfactory because it fails to go beyond the veneer of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity as a spectacle, a commodity, and a colonial legacy, framed by what Graham Huggan terms Iyer’s “expense-account cosmopolitanism” (16). Iyer’s version of Toronto elides what Simon Gikandi calls “a powerful disjuncture between the global narrative and images [where] . . . another set of narratives and images which do not exactly fit into a theoretical apparatus that seems bent on difference and hybridity” (639). Iyer portrays Toronto as a happy mix of economic and social success, the “most cosmopolitan city on earth,” a city that is “also, statistically, the safest city in North America” (124). This view of Toronto, focusing on apparent successes in multiculturalism and globalization, refuses to envision the darker and more troubling aspects of globalization or the complex interactions of a mixed population. In other words, Iyer’s account of the “global” simply reproduces a spectacle of globalization, a simulacrum of mobility and diversity that attempts but ultimately fails to grapple with the negotiations, repressions, and inequalities inherent in the processes of globalization. Iyer never really probes the everyday life that makes up the contradictions and conjunctures in Toronto, preferring instead to “[spin] through cultures as if [he] were sampling World Music rhythms on a hip-hop record” (124) or engage in “the rite of a cocktail party” (125).

As Mike Featherstone has pointed out in his discussion of Anthony King’s work, theories of globalization are “self-representations of the dominant particular” (69). It is fundamentally important, therefore, to bear in mind Iyer’s position as someone “who necessarily writes from a particular place and within a particular tradition of discourse, which not only endow him with differential power resources to be able to speak, but also to be listened to” (69). Iyer’s version of Toronto also needs to be scrutinized because of his insistence on “an instant kinship with this place where people seemed to speak a language I could understand” (121). In spite of the connection this instant kinship appears to represent, Iyer’s descriptions of racialized bodies performing labour in the service industries of the city reveal a lack of social response or curiosity, even as he marks these Torontonians with the legacy of Empire:

Every day, I'd wake up early, and hand my laundry to the woman from the Caribbean who guarded the front desk of the Hotel Victoria with an upright demeanor worthy of a Beefeater. Then I'd slip around the corner to where two chirpily efficient Chinese girls would have my croissant and tea ready almost before I'd ordered them. I'd stop off in the Mövenpick Marché down the block — run almost entirely by Filipinas (the sisters, perhaps, of the chambermaids in the Victoria) — and buy a copy of the *Globe and Mail*, which nearly always had news on its front page of Beijing. Then, not untypically, an Afghan would fill me in on the politics of Peshawar as I took a cab uptown, consulting an old-fashioned newspaper that (with its Grub Street column and its "Climatology" section) seemed to belong to Edwardian Delhi. (124-25)

All of these people seem defined by their status as members of various former colonies, reduced to the anonymity and flatness of ethno-racial stereotypes and defined by their service-related work. Indeed, one crucial problem with Iyer's "dominant particular" is that he consistently revives the metropole-colony and centre-periphery model. Iyer positions Toronto variously as part of "a land that was shadowed by an empire to the east and an empire to the south" (121), "a friendly and hospitable tabula rasa for the second sons of Empire" (122), an "outpost of Empire" (125), "a place where the different empires (British, American, International) cohabited in a more familiar way" (126), and "a new postmodern Commonwealth, to which Empire could come to atone for some of its sins and . . . to make a kind of peace" (125).

Although Iyer might see "Global Souls" as an ideal part of this multiculturalist vision — "a kind of migratory tribe, able to see things more clearly than those imprisoned in local concerns can, yet losing their identity often as they fall between the cracks" (140) — these are the elite of his narrative, each of whom, like him, resembles "a ventriloquist, an impersonator, or an undercover agent" (140) and seems unwilling to confront local or transnational spatialities and histories. Iyer may believe that "such visions are placed in a more positive light by being set in the context of a whole city made up of such free agents" (140). But these visions fail to take into account the ongoing reality of transnational and local attachments and concerns that are not represented by the Frank Gehrys, Norman Fosters, I.M. Peises, and Rem Koolhaases of the "modern, postnational globe" (144). Indeed, it is difficult ethically to conceive of Iyer's "radical, unideological vision of a city as a kind of

motel room writ large” (145) without considering the ordinary people who work and live in the backrooms of the motel. For Iyer and other like-minded elites, ethnic and racial difference is either treated as irrelevant in a place where “many people . . . come . . . specifically to dissolve nationality” (165) or as a racially diverse spectacle, as evidenced by his consideration of the “second sons of Empire” as a “kind of colorful palimpsest” (146). In short, Iyer seems to posit Toronto as either an outpost of Empire, still looking toward a metropole and the attendant idea of the Commonwealth, with racialized identities and aesthetics that are defined and fetishized by their nationalities, or as a place for the “Global Soul,” a witty “Nowhereand” (145) — “a mongrel, many-headed city — a community of exiles” (164). Iyer constructs a rootless cosmopolitanism that is somehow still primarily based on racialized characters, “a Ukrainian, or a Serbian, or a Taiwanese perspective” (148), and makes little of Toronto’s history as First Nations territory, only mentioning this history dismissively as “this no-man’s-land for various Indian tribes” (120) and vaguely acknowledging the Iroquois legacy of the city’s name.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Iyer’s Toronto, emptied of history and hauntings, Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* neither creates a series of temporary, suspiciously neutral spaces, nor orients its characters primarily by racial and ethnic affiliations. Instead, the novel follows a group of second-generation immigrants as their lives and loves intersect in a city that is aware of the haunted pasts and layered histories lying beneath the exotic and idealistic “colorful palimpsest” that Iyer appreciates. Brand’s characters are negotiating (not ignoring or fetishizing) these complex, often miscegenated inheritances in order to construct and inhabit their own Toronto, which, as Kit Dobson puts it, is “built collectively and from below, across borders, and between communities” (142). Brand’s city is global in the most local sense, as Tuyen, Carla, Jackie, Oku, and their families navigate a multiplicity of attachments, effects of globalization, postcolonial pasts, and postnational lives. This Toronto, as Dobson rightly points out, is “a battleground[,] . . . a space for action and for the creation of a viable sense of self — a space for building culture from below” (180). However, while Dobson’s analysis of the text is an important foundation for my reading of the novel, it is crucial at this point to turn more intently to the undertheorized parallel narrative of Quy, Tuyen’s long-lost brother. This narrative functions as a kind of pessimistic ballast to the novel, and a testament to the darker

side of globalization. Quy's corresponding history and geography of "complex connectivity" are unflinching in their graphic detail about the deprivations of globalization and the compromises made in its name. The novel's final scenes, which see the collision of the two narratives as Quy is left for dead by Carla's brother, Jamal, show with unquestionable finality that there are no real distinctions between the violent acts outside Canada and in Toronto.

Focusing on Quy destabilizes more celebratory narratives of globalization that consciously or unconsciously recreate centre-periphery models. Brand's novel — and, more precisely, the character of Quy — fills out the painful geographies of a globalized world where the inhabitants of Toronto are implicated in darker, transnational, rhizomatic forms of complex connectivity. Naava Smolash and Myka Tucker-Abramson are similarly aware of these transnational implications, highlighting in their reading of the novel the disjunctures and aporia surrounding the character of Quy. Smolash and Tucker-Abramson's interdisciplinary study of the migrant justice movement and literary texts seeks to "call into question the implicit naturalization of citizenship rights as the basis for inclusion in the Canadian literary project" (165). For them, the significance of Quy is manifest in how "all of his roles are bracketed; his right to be here . . . as tenuous and segregated as his role in the narrative" (186). Brand's narrative, they conclude, points to "the contemporary limit of Canadian representation: citizenship status" (187). However, it is perhaps possible to see Quy's narrative not as "tenuous and segregated" but as wholly essential and integrated if we read Toronto not as a strictly demarcated space. What the novel suggests is that the city itself is porous and amorphous, that is, if we are able to see it beyond the seductions of boutique multiculturalism and instead focus on exactly how and why Toronto is deemed transnational.

This is not a centre-periphery model of transnationality, such as that of Iyer, who sees some other metropole as dominating the consciousness of Torontonians. The lives of Tuyen and her friends and family (including Quy) are inflected by a multiplicity of historical and transnational factors. From the Cold War to the contemporary trade in electronics, to human trafficking, to the cynical use of ethnicity as a commodity (Tuyen's civil engineer father and doctor mother set up a Vietnamese restaurant), Brand exposes the uneasy complexities and contradictions involved in living in Toronto while representing it as a space with its

own geographies and histories. While, like Iyer, Brand envisions the possibility of new forms of community in Toronto, she is careful not to racialize or isolate any of her characters, instead pointing toward new and unexpected combinations and complications that can occur in the streets, subways, and other spaces of the city. Dobson notes how the characters “build their communities across borders, rhizomatically connecting to each other without a predetermined logic. They are linked by their desire for inclusivity, and not limited by the discourses that are handed to them” (195). Diana Brydon has further argued for the existence in Brand’s work of “global intimacies” (991), which “enable different forms of imagined communities beyond those associated with the nation-state alone” (991). Her characters’ locally situated lives do indeed reflect the effects of globalization, but, in contrast with Iyer’s version of Toronto, they are nuanced by

how globalization alters the context of meaning construction: how it affects people’s sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place, how it impacts on the shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes, and fears that have developed around locally situated life. . . . the connections between vast systemic transformations, and transformations in our most local and intimate “worlds” of everyday experience. (Tomlinson 20)

Putting Tomlinson in dialogue with Brand’s novel may offer us new ways to consider how “communities are being articulated in the global city” (Dobson 180) and, indeed, how individuals “‘construct’ their identities in social interactions rather than . . . find them in stable social roles and associated subject positions” (Tomlinson 206). Thus, while Tomlinson sees an ideal cosmopolitan as “someone who is able to live — ethically, culturally — *in both the global and the local at the same time*” (195), Brand is aware of the “struggle work” (Butling 70) that this entails. Her characters’ communal life neither effaces the earlier histories and struggles of their parents in, and outside Canada, nor treats Toronto simply as a colonial legacy or a *tabula rasa*.

From her opening chapter, Brand makes clear that the city of Toronto, its inhabitants and physical spaces, are central to the novel’s undertaking. She begins *What We All Long For* by reminding her readers of the inadequacy of Western mapping tools to locate people or places, since even though Toronto “hovers above the forty-third parallel, . . .

that's illusory of course" (1). Instead, Brand returns to the material particularity of the city, the meteorological and physical realities of where Toronto is actually located:

Winters on the other hand, there's nothing vague about them. Winters here are inevitable, sometimes unforgiving. Two years ago, they had to bring the army in to dig the city out from under the snow. The streets were glacial, the electrical wires were brittle, the telephones were useless. The whole city stood still; the trees more than usual. The cars and driveways were obliterated. . . . Nature will do that sort of thing — dump thousands of tons of snow on the city just to say, Don't make too many plans or assumptions, don't get ahead of yourself. (1)

By focusing on the actual lived space of Toronto, Brand powerfully invokes the locality of the city in opposition to its global, Cartesian plotted location. This Toronto is not mappable in any colonial or neocolonial way, yet its locality in the form of its physical space is rooted and powerful. Thoroughfares, conduits, connectivity — all attributes of global and local flows — seem helpless in the face of the Canadian winter, as modernity, communication, and mobility are paralyzed in the streets, as wires and telephones freeze. Temporality itself is altered as the city stands "still," as place literally comes to dominate the passage of time and human "plans or assumptions."

Further investigating the importance of the local, Brand likens Toronto in the spring to the fluidity and flux of "trickling water" (1), pushing the water metaphor from its glacial winter state to its spring thaw and perhaps seeking to move beyond fixed tropes of a Canadian literary nordicity. Brand also introduces another idea of the city as an archaeological site of human detritus and desires, conflating the human and natural landscapes:

Have you ever smelled this city at the beginning of spring? Dead winter circling still, it smells of eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all, longing. Garbage, buried under snowbanks for months, gradually reappears like old habits — plastic bags, pop cans — the alleyways are cluttered in a mess of bottles and old shoes and thrown-away beds. People look as if they're unraveling. They're on their last nerves. They're suddenly eager for human touch. People will walk up to perfect strangers and tell them anything. (1-2)

Brand's Toronto is an attempt at an unedited look at the gritty quotidian of urban spaces. The accumulated smells, sounds, and inchoate yearnings of men and women in the city are initially hidden and then revealed, laid bare "like old habits." Here, Brand also emphasizes the "alleyways," as opposed to the main streets of the city, suggesting that more powerful and corporeal potentialities arise from this set of alternate spaces. Our first introduction to her main characters occurs on the subway, and as D.M.R. Bentley has noted, Brand's "increasingly pronounced emphasis on travel and modes of transit in all their forms — streets, highways, subways, cars, trains, aeroplanes and, of course, ships and boats" (305) is at the expense of references to "imposing buildings and national monuments" (305). This emphasis Bentley sees as an "affirmation of migrancy and liminality as against stasis and national-ity" (305), suggesting the possibility of change and flux in the texture of the local. Brand envisions the subway ultimately as a place that is "the crossroads of the city" (3), apart from "sovereign houses and apartments and rooms" (3). It is a space of commonality and "chance" (4), where "any minute you can crash into someone else's life" (4). In a sense, it is a miniature of what Arjun Appadurai would see as an "ethnoscape" (297), where "the warp" (297) of the stabilities of communities is "everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion" (297).

Immediately, then, in the first few pages of the novel, Toronto as a space becomes an intricate set of shifting tropes that complicate Iyer's idealistic assessment of the city. It is a city situated very much in the geographical and topographical realities of Canada, one where the layers of urban histories and desires can be laid bare by a spring thaw. It is a space in motion that throws up the possibilities of collisions and engagements by its inhabitants, who have come from even further afield. These combinations of lives and loves have more profound implications for the construction of meanings, representations, and, ultimately, culture:

Lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated — women and men all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads. At times they catch themselves in sensational lies, embellishing or avoiding a nasty secret here and there, juggling the lines of causality, and before you know it, it's impossible to tell one thread from another. In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but

it's hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension. (5)

Language is used as a metaphor here to emphasize the complicated layerings of people and events that elude labels and linear storytelling. Pointing out the risk of deception and confabulation simply reinforces the convoluted narratives and lives that make up the city. While Iyer might reduce his cast of characters to their national origins and occupations, Brand refuses to fix her portrayals of characters in accepted categories. Tuyen is of indeterminate "Asian" descent, yet what is more striking is how she is not beautiful in the way of "the pouting corporate beauty on the ad for the shampoo above her head" (2); instead, "she has the beauty a falcon has: watchful, feathered, clawed, and probing" (2). The novel's language plays with Canadian literature's alleged obsession with place and nature, reworking it in the human, urban context. Similarly, the fundamental danger and instability of an individual's identity (beyond race or ethnic belonging) is echoed in Brand's description of Carla, who "might be Italian, southern. She's bony like a mantis in her yellow slick plastic coat, except her mouth has a voluptuousness to it, and her eyes, the long eyelashes weigh them down" (3). The unexpected animal imagery in these descriptions disrupts the reader's perception of stereotypical racial and ethnic traits. Later, Brand revives this sense of the vulnerable corporeality of the city's inhabitants in her description of their racially indistinct "broken bones, broken teeth, broken muscle, saturated livers, ill-fed brains, fatty hearts, and hungry blood" (53) and their emotional struggles with "all of the lives they've hoarded, all the ghosts they've carried, all the inversions they've made for protection, all the scars and marks and records for recognition" (5). The excessive "spillage" (5) of these pasts that Brand sees occurring in the public spaces of the city is similar to what Lily Cho sees as the "messy, discomfiting space" (97) that opens up in the dissonances between diaspora and citizenship, between past and present generations.

While the people of the city are humanized through the complexities of their everyday interactions, the spatial histories of the city are also acknowledged in *What We All Long For*. Where Iyer sees a New World tabula rasa, Brand takes great pains to acknowledge the paradoxical effacement of colonization. All of the ethnic neighbourhoods of Toronto come together uneasily in a landscape of heterogeneity, but they also exist in a spatial and historical debt to the indigenous peoples:

All of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care because that genealogy is wilfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself. They'd only have to look, though, but it could be that what they know hurts them already, and what if they found out something even more damaging? These are people who are used to the earth beneath them shifting, and they all want it to stop — and if that means they must pretend to know nothing, well, that's the sacrifice they make. (4)

Thus, for Brand, “complex connectivity” begins with an acknowledgement of how far back these connections go in time — they form a “genealogy” but also an archaeology of past hurts and compromises. In her sequence of poems “Land to Light On,” she writes, “everywhere you walk on the earth there's harm, / everywhere resounds” (45). In *What We All Long For*, Brand goes even further, acknowledging that immigrant families wilfully forget these territorial connections in the interests of psychological survival. This forgetting, or rather negotiating an attempt at forgetting, returns in the characters' interactions with their families and their pasts. Of particular note are Tuyen's surreptitious investigations into the disappearance of her long-lost brother, where she struggles between following the desires of her contemporary life and navigating the effects of her parents' haunted past.

Marlene Goldman has noted how Brand's “self-conscious references to storytelling, memory and narration underscore that the community [she] has in mind is not predicated on an essentialized past” (26-27); instead, “furnished with Brand's fluid textual maps, readers are . . . encouraged, in the literal and figurative sense, to remember and re-map complicated transnational diasporic communities whose broken histories and transnational connections repeatedly challenge the bounded, progressivist narratives of nation-states” (27). Certainly, the text's constant reworkings and reiterations of how Quy was lost complicate the other characters' memories of the incident. The routes of their immigration to Canada and subsequent integration seem nothing more than a passage through a series of liminal and bureaucratic spaces. Tuan and Cam's “incoherent fights” (64) painfully emphasize the limitations of memory and narrative to fully encompass loss:

“I didn't see . . .”  
 “What is the point?”

"It was the authorities. . . ."

"How long should we have . . ."

"Why didn't I see?"

"It makes no sense to argue. It's done."

"We shouldn't have come."

"Do you remember anything?"

"What life is here, tell me?"

"You write and you write and you write. Do I say no?"

"Why? Why should you? Next time I won't tell you, that's all."

"Quiet." (64)

Their truncated and yet movingly evocative dialogue is overheard by Tuyen and diminished somewhat by her "minimal" (65) understanding of Vietnamese; both form and content underscore the family's misunderstandings, regrets, confusion, and powerlessness. In many ways, Brand makes the story of Quy's loss larger than the reality of Quy himself, as it is "the story that haunted them; the one that made her mother insomniac" (65). Cam becomes obsessed with textual proof in the form of documents, "papers of some kind attesting to identity or place" (63), which she laminates compulsively. These "birth certificates, identity cards, immigration papers, and citizenship papers and cards" (63) are "duplicated tenfold" and proliferated in "cookie jars, vanity drawers, and breadboxes" (63) as she endeavours to retain some control over a tragic incident that she cannot change or forget.

Cam's attempts to find Quy through letter writing seem to be based on a similar impulse to control the story of her loss through words, and seem to act as a substitute for any actual physical return to Vietnam, since she is "terrified of returning to that part of the world herself" (116). Cam's knowledge and use of an alternate form of globalization — "a network of officials, charlatans, magicians, crooks, and other dis-trought parents" (116) — ironically proves to be the most successful in drawing Quy back to the family. Yet, what is more significant is how the family's narrative of their past is adapted to facilitate their immigration in the first place. Brand maps the family's inconsolable loss onto their transnational crossing:

Only when they arrived in Toronto would they fully construct their departure as resistance to communism. That is the story the authorities needed in order to fill out the appropriate forms. They needed terror, and Tuan and Cam had had that too. And

perhaps with this encouragement, this coaxing of their story into a coherent wholeness, they were at least officially comforted that the true horror was not losing their boy but the forces of communism, Vietnam itself, which they were battling. (225)

This particular negotiation suggests the multiple aspects of immigration, reflecting the inextricable and disparate ways that personal tragedies and global factors are intertwined. Their story might now be “officially” a “coherent wholeness,” but Brand presses the point that these larger global events can also serve as anonymous categories for more specific, intimate tragedies. Thus, while Cam and Tuan are able to instrumentalize the loss of Quy and “construct their departure as resistance to communism,” they are never fully able to come to terms with their guilt. This guilt marks their experiences in Toronto, even as they face other obstacles in their new lives. Dobson sees Cam and Tuan’s fate in Toronto as elucidating the remarkably limited nature of multiculturalism: forced to give up their professional identities as civil engineer and doctor, they are “defined by the city” as “the restaurant [becomes] their life” (66). They achieve what Brand calls “a resigned sense” that “they would lose other parts of themselves” (66) and find it easy to “see themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food” (67). While Iyer seems determined to perceive the ethnic food in Toronto as a marker of true diversity, Brand exposes the cultural hypocrisy and contradictions that belie the ethnic restaurant scene; even though “neither Cam nor Tuan cooked very well” (67), “eager Anglos ready to taste the fare of their multicultural city wouldn’t know the differences” (67). And while “national pride and discerning palates” mean that the Vus hire a good cook, their performances of “the right greeting and treatment” (67) to evoke “satisfaction, familiarity, yet not intimacy” (67) remain at the level of the performative, and their success can only be seen as a way of survival in spite of loss and dislocation.

In contrast with her parents’ pathological need to constantly reproduce textual proof and repeat arguments as a means of negotiating their loss, Tuyen seeks to rework the family’s trauma in art and in the stories she tells to her friends. Her efforts at confabulation and aestheticization are not always completely successful but represent potentially productive and unsettling ways of negotiating her family’s diasporic past. She sees important distinctions between what she does and what her father Tuan does in compulsively drawing official buildings in Toronto “as if

he was still what he was” (114); his obsession with “the right weight of objects, the correct angle of alignment for a stable structure” (114) is much like Cam’s own obsession with proper official documents. Tuyen instead seeks to “perfect the fabulous as a practice. A head growing out of a drainpipe, a river flowing through the roof of a house” (115) as a way to understand and contain “the double life, the triple images” (115) and embrace the “unexplainable” (115). Tuyen is not concerned with finding the “the official story” (225) or a single truth, as much as finding “a parallel story, a set of possible stories, an exquisite corpse” (225). Her efforts at this form of translation stem from a childhood of literal translation where both she and her brother Binh are

required to disentangle puzzlement; any idiom or gesture or word . . . as if assuming a new blood had entered their veins; as if their umbilical cords were also attached to this mothering city, and this made [them] not Vietnamese but that desired ineffable nationality: Western. For Tuan and Cam, the children were their interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life. (67)

What arises, then, from a pragmatic necessity becomes tied up in an intimate and familial relationship with the city itself. It is as if Tuan and Cam cede certain parental rights to the city of Toronto, placing Tuyen and Binh in already liminal positions. Thus, Tuyen grows up in the context of multiple meanings, ones that can be lost and gained in translation, and she learns to use this knowledge in “strategic” (67), although crucially *not* “geopolitical” (67), ways. Brand notes how Tuyen’s desires have always been “far more personal” (67), anchoring Tuyen’s motivations in her body and its longings. This reversal of generational roles also invests “such power” (68) in Tuyen and her brother that they become “not only smarter than their biological parents but smarter than the surrogate city — the authorities whose requests and rules they translated for Cam and Tuan” (68). The “libert[ies]” and “deliberate misrepresentation[s]” (68) of their childhood evolve into the canny and sophisticated ways in which they negotiate their lives in the city. Binh “would later finance certain operations in what is called illegal human traffic, but which he saw as the free flow of goods and labour” (68), while Tuyen, “with a little more intellectual rigour, would become a Dadaist, making everything useful useless and vice versa in her chaotic apartment” (68).

In describing Tuyen's art and artistic process, Brand seems conscious of the inadequacies of the medium to honestly express Tuyen's difficult relationships with her family's past and her life in the city. Yet, there is no doubt that Tuyen's work (like Brand's novel, which it arguably represents metonymically) is groundbreaking in its expansiveness and attempted inclusion of the whole city, with its "polyphonic, murmuring" (149), "the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up into a kind of language, yet indescribable" (149). Tuyen's art is an attempt to cut across cultural boundaries with the universal idea of longings; it is also a complex way to "stave off her family — to turn what was misfortune into something else" (149) — although she finds, ironically, that she returns to them "again and again" (149). Perhaps Brand is all too aware of the risks of sliding into a utopian vision and undercuts Tuyen's artistic negotiations of the city with the "hideous" longings that have to be documented as well, "longings about bodies hurt or torn apart or bludgeoned" (158). Tuyen has only "intuited these, perceived them from a stride, a dangling broken bracelet — a rapist's treasure . . . newspaper articles . . . Vass, Kwan, Hyunh, Sivalingam, Shevchenko — those were the names on the page of the dead or the vicious" (158-59). This violence and ugliness, not at all visible in Iyer's vision of the multiculture, return as spectres in Tuyen's art and as real presences in Brand's novel. Most telling of all, though, is how Brand leaves Tuyen's work unfinished, as the city's future is unfixed. Tuyen is aware of the need for "a larger space for the installation," with room for "the old longings of another generation," "twelve video projections, constantly changing, of images and texts of contemporary longing" (308), and, finally, a silent room. Brand plays with the positive and negative possibilities of this incompleteness: Tuyen "still wasn't quite certain what she was making; she knew she would find out only once the installation was done. Then, some grain, some element she had been circling, but had been unable to pin down, would emerge" (308). Tuyen's work, then, stands in for what Dobson has called Brand's most "hopeful" (195) novel to date, and as a project of mapping out a city of global and local desires, it is still crucially incomplete. Brydon has noted how this novel is similar to Brand's other recent work, which acknowledges the "limits of our now global fate" as it "laments a situation in which there are few acceptable choices beyond the poet's craft, her commitment to

language, and her compulsion to respond through all her senses to the world around her” (1002).

Arguably, though, the novel does respond in its own way again through incompleteness — the major effect of the novel’s inclusion of the parallel yet disjointed narrative of Quy. By exposing the underbelly and the casualties of globalization, Brand highlights precisely the crossings, routes, trades, and commodities (objects and humans) that Iyer largely disregards in *The Global Soul*. Certainly, Quy is a “Global Soul” and a cosmopolitan in his rootlessness, but he is one with an acute awareness of the dangers, deceptions, and hurts that come with this lack of belonging and with greater connectivity. While Tuyen’s vision of Toronto may acknowledge its potential for violence, it is still largely a utopian vision of commonality and possibility. Quy, on the other hand, sees that “this is a dangerous city” (309), linking its risks to the instability and therefore dishonesty of identities: “you could be anybody here. That is what first took me when I walked among people on the streets” (309). Quy does not see the city as a collective, as Tuyen does, but as a kind of black hole, and he contemplates the troubling possibility that “it would be easy to disappear here. Who would know?” (309). Yet, Quy’s narrative refuses to disappear in *What We All Long For*; as much as his loss haunts the Vus, his story is also interpolated into Brand’s larger narrative, inserted between the fairly chronological, numbered chapters. Thus, Quy’s experience as the forgotten and yet powerful component of globalization becomes a shadowy narrative that cannot be documented in any systematic way or fixed with any particular identity. His grief at the loss of his parents eventually hardens him, and even though his physiognomy has “the innocence of a child’s” (284), this is compromised by the fact that he no longer recognizes himself and has “managed to change everything except that face,” which is “waiting for its mother and father to come back” (284). Crucially, Quy sees his extensive experience surviving in this alternative global economy extending to life in Toronto. His experience is one that sees him as a part of “a gang, like any conglomerate of businessmen” (284), a “crew of monks, orange-gowned and macerated, we moved like a dust cloud” (284). He perceives that this darker, more troubling side of globalization is everywhere — even if not everyone can see it — like a “dust cloud,” “a web of people . . . laying sticky strings all over the city” (283), who, like him, “know the alleyways that lead to the back doors of Chinatown in this city” (283):

the man living across the street from you could have fought in the Angolan war, he could've killed many people, and there he is sitting in a deck chair with his wife as if nothing happened. . . . That woman whose ass you love when she walks down the street, she could've been tortured in Argentina and the last thing she wants anyone to love is her ass, her genitals were wired with electrodes once. And the taxi driver you strike up a pleasant conversation with could've been her torturer or a torturer of a similar woman in Burma with similar equipment. So if this guy from Angola can sit there in his shorts and tan himself and remember killing people like a youthful prank, like a necessary job, and if the taxi driver can devote himself to sharing pleasantries and directions, thinking of the electrodes he put in a woman's cunt as routine, just trying to get the job done, like driving a cab, well, who am I really? Who the hell am I? (309-10)

Brand here reveals the horror beneath the “doubled, tripled, conjugated” lives, implying the ways in which atrocities in other places can also continue to dwell through the memories and emotional scars of the inhabitants of a global city like Toronto. Quy's awareness of the duplicity of these people and their longings, forgettings, and elisions brings Tuyen's artwork back into visceral, unpleasant, and material contexts. Brand's inclusion of his consciousness in her narrative testifies to her unflinching willingness to tackle the banality of evil, and her implication of everyone in its horrors. As Brydon notes, Brand “negotiates the intimate recognitions that link the ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘she,’ and ‘we’ in global contexts so entangled that no one can any longer claim innocence with any kind of good faith” (992).

In a hellish reversal of centre and periphery, Quy paints an underground black market with “uzis and palm pilots . . . the unofficial refugee trade . . . other residuals and commodities” (284), where “the world came to [them] and [they] ate.” Quy emphasizes that he does not see the value in making things “personal” (285) “political” (285), “principled” (285), or “ideological” (285) — it is, simply, a question of subsistence and survival. Gikandi sees a disjuncture like this as “the identification with globality . . . [as] not ethical but material” (643). Quy rejects effortless idealism or naïveté with a series of rhetorical questions aimed straight at the reader, deflating all possibility of transcendence: “Am I redeemable? Did I have a moment of revelation? Can I turn my life

around? You're better at that. For some of us, the world is never forgiving. And anyway, we don't believe in such things, these ideas of forgiveness, redemption — it's useless" (285). In opposition to his mother's efforts to find him through writing and by hoarding textual proof, Quy rails against the futility of storytelling:

How many times did I have to repeat my own story to some stupid new humanitarian. My words passing like through a sieve. No amount of relating would help. It was always new to them. It got so that to amuse myself, since I was so bored with it, I made minor changes to the tale, or in the end I fantasized wildly. Either way, I was a liar or I was mad. Either way, my listeners went away as if they'd heard nothing. So much for innocence as arbiter of any situation. I never tried to find myself or who I belonged to. The thought made me weak. (288)

Brand swiftly derides and ridicules the good intentions of these kinds of international institutions; their connectivity counts for little when "flows" of humanitarian workers are overwhelmed to the point of inaction by Quy's story. The official network here functions as a "sieve" and is unable to cope with the multiplicity of globalized narratives and tragedies.

Quy's attempts at retelling and retranslating his story also mirror Tuyen's efforts to do so in her art. And perhaps the failure of his confabulations to achieve any real results also casts her efforts in doubt. Brand seems to be challenging the possibility of any easy redemption and restitution through memory, storytelling, and art; Quy seems not to have "the bones to reach [his] hand into another set of lives, feel the sweat of stupid dreams" (283). Quy's story is never told to anyone in the novel, and the violence done to him at the end of the book seems to close down the prospect that he will ever "find someone to tell this story to, and . . . laugh because all [his] predictions and interpretations were wrong" (312). Dobson argues that Quy's "likely death suggests an inability to be reintegrated into life in the city, but it is, of course, also an act of chance" (196) — yet Brand obviously seeks to underline the violence and harm that are both apparent in globalization and the globalized city. Heather Smyth remarks on how Tuyen's art may "translate the fragments of diaspora into beauty, turning personal and unofficial histories into a community's messages to each other. . . . But the legacy of damage represented by Quy, and the evocation of

dismemberment contained in the exquisite corpse or relic, gives . . . the politics of difference a painful edge” (287). I would go beyond a “painful edge” and argue that the final chapter of the novel unflinchingly portrays the inequalities of globalization. These inequalities lead both to Jamal’s obsession with material wealth and objects as symbolized by the “rich motherfuckers . . . [with] great cars to boost in garages off roadways called crescents and drives” (316) in Richmond Hill and to the presence, in the same neighbourhood, of a subaltern, linguistically handicapped Quy, whose final words in the novel are “‘Take the fucking car’ in Vietnamese, but no one understands him” (317). Dobson and other critics may see some final hopefulness in Brand’s choice to add a final paragraph at the end of her novel returning to Carla’s emancipation from her duties to her brother, but this is certainly only a temporary reprieve. The reference to “Tuyen chipping and chiseling away next door” (318) seems to pale in comparison with Jamal’s actions as he beats and kicks Quy “beyond recognition . . . leaving the man half-dead by the road” (317).

Iyer ends his account of Toronto by relating a discussion in the upmarket Bar Italia where he notes how the “talk, as so often in the modern city, was of home and belonging; the simplest questions brought not-so-simple answers” (168). Here, Iyer’s tacit and fleeting acknowledgement of the complexities and, ultimately, failures of the generic concepts of “home and belonging” comes the closest to Brand’s undertaking in *What We All Long For*. Brand has famously written in her memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, that “belonging does not interest [her]” (85), and Goldman notes how, “by tracing the wandering paths and the solitary spaces familiar to those who have been dislocated, Brand’s texts offer a politically charged alternative to the desire for belonging and possession” (24). In addition to moving beyond belonging and possession, *What We All Long For* also provides a nuanced way to consider how, as Dirlik puts it, “the contemporary local is itself a site of invention” and “the present is ultimately the site for the global” (42). Brand’s text investigates precisely how “the boundaries of the local . . . [are] open” (Dirlik 42) and is invested fully in the idea that this local must be mined for all its transnational complexities, and spatial and historical legacies. While Gikandi might caution against texts like Iyer’s where “images and narratives that denote the new global culture are connected to a global structure” (632) and further engage in “the

premature privileging of literary texts . . . as the exemplars of globalization” (632), it is hard to see how he might take issue with Brand’s bleak fiction. Unlike Iyer’s *Global Soul*, Brand refuses any idea of “a transcendental global culture” (Gikandi 632) as her characters continue to wrestle between the ever-shifting boundaries of the local and the transnational.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 2010, the *Toronto Star* and a wide range of advertising and publicity consultants came up with this phrase to describe the city and define a “blueprint” for its future. See Wells.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Sugars makes a similar point in “Worlding the (Postcolonial) Nation,” noting that Iyer’s paean to Toronto is “characteristically effusive, decontextualized and unself-aware” (46). Her fear is that popular accounts like Iyer’s have the tendency to “deterritorialize and disinherit Canadian cultural and historical space” (47).

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