

# The Queer Racing of Children in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*

JENNIFER BLAIR

AT THE CONCLUSION of Dionne Brand's latest and much discussed novel *What We All Long For*, Carla, one of the main characters, makes some positive plans for the future just as her brother Jamal commits a brutal beating — one that will likely prevent these plans from ever being realized. This beating is significant for Carla not only because she is the sibling of the main aggressor, but also because Jamal's victim is the brother of her best friend, next-door neighbour, and sometimes lover, Tuyen. When Jamal begins to "beat [Quy] and kick him beyond recognition" (317), Carla is at her apartment, planning to "have parties with Tuyen," to "go to the Roxy Blu" and to "jazz concerts," to "wait in line to hear U2," to "cut her hair," to "check out the open-mike spoken word at Caliban," and to "go with Tuyen to Pope Joan" and "Afrodeasia" where "They'll dance together." This list of imagined future endeavours, many of which have queer or postcolonial affiliations, ends provocatively with, "She'll be seduced by someone." In her words, what Carla's anticipated activities and her capacity to imagine them amount to is a newly realized desire to "live her life" (315).

As the final pages of the novel make clear, Carla's future plans are connected not to some sort of realization of a queer-Caribbean-Italian-Canadian identity (a good old-fashioned "coming out," so to speak). Nor are they the result of a perceived shift toward greater acceptance and understanding in Carla's social environment that makes Carla feel somehow more welcome to enter it as a queer woman with a mixed racial and cultural background. Rather, at this crucial moment of the novel's conclusion, the Carla who has said that she feels "no desire" (52) (despite the fact that she sometimes responds positively to Tuyen's advances) becomes a person who plans to "be seduced by someone" because she no longer feels that she can (or that she must) take responsibility to care for her younger brother. Ever since her mother, Angie, asked five-year-old Carla to "hold the baby" right before she jumped off of their apartment balcony (103), Carla has felt that Jamal is primarily

hers to worry about (even though, after Angie's death, they were both raised by their biological father and his wife in a middle-class neighbourhood). Making plans for the future, deciding to "live her life," is directly connected to Carla's resolution that "She can't hold the baby anymore" (315). However, this burden from which Carla finds herself liberated is not limited to the responsibility of caring for an individual (a baby brother) and the pressure to honour the wishes of another individual (her mother) that is always inevitably part of this responsibility. Carla's newfound perspective at the end of the novel must also be read as the result of a shift in Carla's relationship with the role of the child as a normative figure in the social imaginary of the twenty-first century Canadian urban environment in which she lives. Specifically, Carla's resolution highlights how this child figure, and the imagination of a particular future into which this figure will mature, places certain restrictions upon the childhood experiences and maturation potential of immigrant and racialized children in Canada. While the novel stands in opposition to these restrictions, it does not counter them by arguing for the inclusion of all children in an imagined better future. Instead, Brand's text is invested in the critique of this very assumption that the future can be imagined.

This essay explores *What We All Long For's* attention to temporality through a race-conscious critique of what Lee Edelman has termed "reproductive futurism." In other words, the discussion that follows brings race to bear on a branch of queer theory that has been critiqued for the lack of attention it pays to the intersections between racism and homophobia. If the initial response to Edelman was critical, however, his analysis of the role of the child figure in normalizing time and restricting notions of futurity has since become prevalent in scholarship that crosses the threshold between queer theory and critical race theory. This scholarship makes possible my own project here, which is to initiate an overdue conversation about how race and queerness function together within the normative construction of time in *What We All Long For*. Critics have certainly already noted Brand's emphasis on futurity,<sup>1</sup> yet more remains to be said on the question of what "the future" can mean for characters like Carla and Jamal. With the analytical space opened up by recent critical applications of the "no future" thesis to the issue of race, an assessment of futurity in Brand's novel has become important for its methodological implications as well as its social ones.

## Race and the Future

Edelman argues that the figure of “the Child” serves as a placeholder of identity. This child figure is oriented toward a future that is assumed to be known, and, as such, has the power to limit the possibilities for the political realm to become other than itself (i.e., other than that which categorizes people and subsequently excludes those who meet certain categorical criteria). As Edelman explains, “the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought,” in the sense that “politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (*No Future* 2-3). This orientation toward a future that is desirable, and therefore apparently knowable, forecloses upon the possibility that these efforts can successfully produce a greater amount of inclusivity in the future, even when that possibility is the very premise upon which this desire for the future takes place.

Applying this critique of reproductive futurism to Brand’s work is somewhat contentious since Edelman has been criticized for his lack of attention to race. For those concerned with queer theory’s apparent reluctance to embrace intersectionality, such as Jose Muñoz, Edelman belongs to a set of “gay white male scholars who imagine sexuality as a discrete category that can be abstracted and isolated from other antagonisms in the social, which include race and gender” (Muñoz 826, n. 1). Another criticism of the “no future” thesis is that Edelman’s theory and its promotion of “self-dissolution” can “only be undertaken from a position of relative security” and that, therefore, it remains unworkable for “deprivileged subjects — some women, racially and ethnically marked individuals, and those who lead economically precarious lives” (Ruti 116). While these critiques have played an important role in shaping queer theory in the wake of Edelman’s *No Future*, they also risk reinserting the very structures at which the emphasis on negativity in queer politics takes aim. Consequently, they miss an opportunity to respond to texts such as *What We All Long For*, which highlights the necessity of a theory of childhood associated with negativity for an analysis of its “precarious” and “deprivileged” characters like Jamal

— and also like the other little brother of the novel, Quy — who are uncannily childish beyond their years.

Perhaps the most valuable benefit of the critique of reproductive futurism to *What We All Long For* is this critique's refusal to entertain any suggestion that Carla's decision to "live her life" signals a positive development in her character at the end of the novel. In its wording, Carla's decision resonates with Judith Butler's notion of "livability,"<sup>2</sup> which describes the circumstances by which subjects (and Butler is particularly interested in minoritized queer subjects) are able to "enter into the political field" (29). Notably, for Butler, "livability" is achieved through an "aging process" where "aging" does not mean to grow up into a prescribed form of maturity but rather to grow into the other, into the unknown, "to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go" and "embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human" (35). Criticism on Brand's novel, in large part, has focused on this political potential of letting go of one's "anchor." Kit Dobson, for example, applies Marlene Goldman's claim that Brand's earlier writing connotes a "politics of drifting" to *What We All Long For*, extending this argument further by insisting that Brand's "liberated notion of selfhood risks becoming reinscribed by a placid sense of globalism if analysis fails to note that deterritorialization and drifting need to be ongoing processes" (181).<sup>3</sup> Dobson's particular insistence that the deterritorialization effected by this drifting process be a "continual project" is crucial to my own discussion here because it marks the point where Carla's decision to "live her life" departs from Butler's notion of livability (181). In fact, much like recent scholarship that critiques Butler specifically for her ultimate adherence to a "*developmental* model of political subjectivity" (Berlant 181), despite her alternative take on "aging," Dobson's emphasis on the "ongoing" wards off a consideration of drifting as a temporary condition, as merely one segment of a process that will eventually result in some sort of mature subject, or society. In the case of Carla, it seems especially crucial to acquire such an interpretive resilience in the face of whatever readerly tendency there might be to understand the ending as a sign that Carla has resolved her childhood dilemmas (and the tendency to lament the possibility that Jamal's violence will destroy this supposedly positive turn in Carla's future outlook).<sup>4</sup> To take this a step further, if Carla's decision is a queer one, it might even be likened more to a failure than to a success, insofar as failure, according to Judith Halberstam,

“allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (*Queer Art* 3). In what sense might Carla’s decision express and subvert the disciplinary measures to which her own development was subject? How might her decision be understood to fail at least as much as to succeed?

As the above discussion indicates, queer theory’s continued applications and reconfigurations of the “no future” thesis reach far beyond the shortcomings of Edelman’s *No Future* while maintaining a critical insistence upon negativity, destruction, and anti-progressive models of human subjectivity in relation to time. The analysis that follows draws specifically from recent scholarship by Katherine Bond Stockton and Valerie Rohy that explores the usefulness of anachronism and other alternative temporalities for contemporary intersectional politics. In *What We All Long For*, alternative conceptions of time appear in several forms, from the characters’ own embodiments of time as they leave (or refuse to leave) childhood behind, to the recurrence of anachronistic figures (specifically the ghost and the baby-faced adult), to the ending with its compellingly negative representation of the future of the novel’s youth.

### “So Childish”

The figure of the child is, in fact, an obsession of several of the characters in the novel. On average, every fourteen pages, someone calls someone else “childish” or admits to feeling that way, beginning with Tuyen’s complaint that her brother is “so childish” (12) and continuing on so that all of the novel’s main characters have the term applied to them at least once. The charge seems in some ways fitting: these characters, ages twenty-three to twenty-five, steal liquor and money from their parents, and they worry over the extent to which they desire their parents’ “approval” (14, 257). Now that their official childhood years have passed, they refuse to strive for the “regular” work- and family-related goals of proper adulthood. Tuyen is an artist who lives partly off her family’s money, which she is sometimes given and sometimes takes; Oku is a graduate school drop-out who lives at home and uses his student loan for spending money; Jackie runs a second-hand clothing shop in a transitional downtown neighbourhood; and Carla is a bike courier. None of these characters entertains thoughts of career advancement,

marriage, property ownership, or parenthood — not even as a vague hope, or fear, for the future.

The four characters have been friends since their school days when they were “spectators to the white kids in the class” (20). With this phrase, *What We All Long For* foregrounds Stockton’s recent argument that historically “children as an *idea* are likely to be both white and middle-class” (31). To borrow further from Stockton, “the child queered by colour” (32) in this novel seems intended to grow up into a racialized straightness, which, of course, this child can never totally assume. The child raced as other-than-white, then, becomes the hero of a narrative of social improvement in which its development must display the success of Canada’s efforts to promote social equality. Within this narrative, this exemplar child’s progress through time stands as an indicator that immigrants and immigrant families can be “successful” — that is, successful according to Canada’s measure, and thus, of course, never part of, let alone equal to, the political body that takes this measure.

Even Tuyen seems to subscribe to this narrative of immigrant improvement when she assesses her brother Quy: “Yes,” she reasons, “of course there were stories of refugees made good no matter what the circumstances.” But she immediately recants this with, “God. What did she mean, *made good*? That was so weak” (300). Tuyen’s initially unconscious articulation of this assumption that refugees need to be “made good” echoes discourse surrounding late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century immigration in Canada, which makes continual use of the trope of temporal progress. As Daniel Coleman explains, “The discourse of Canada’s maturity continues to this day to be premised upon the extension of civil treatment to non-White strangers” (209). This “allegory of maturation,” or what, in a similar argument, Donna Pennee terms the “rhetoric of maturity,” is readily apparent in such Citizenship and Immigration Canada publications as *Planning Now for Canada’s Future* and *Growing Together: A Backgrounder on Immigration and Citizenship* (Coleman 209; Pennee 91). From the perspective of these documents, the future looks positive if it forecasts social and economic gains accomplished by those who are new to Canada (and therefore gains from which Canada’s economy also benefits) and negative if it projects economic downturns and other such factors (factors which then become arguments for reducing immigration levels). Peter S. Li critiques the “benchmarks” by which the Canadian government measures immi-

grant “success,” arguing that “despite the policy objective of defining integration as a two-way street that requires the accommodation and adaptation on the part of immigrants as well as Canadian society, it is immigrants and not Canadian society or institutions that are seen as needing to change” (52). In other words, Canadian public policy still affirms the existence of a Canadian norm to which newcomers will adapt, and its use of terms like “growth” to reference this adaptation suggests that this assimilation is natural and inevitable.

Also relevant in the context of Brand’s novel is the fact that government publications on immigration contain several photographs of children; in fact, in the two pamphlets referenced above, the photographs are almost exclusively of children. The benchmarks for these children adhere quite closely to a normative temporal trajectory of life events.<sup>5</sup> Canadian studies on the “progress” of second-generation immigrants use a normative model of temporal advancement to measure the success of immigrant “integration.” A case in point is the 2007 study of Canadian second-generation children of immigrants by Jeffrey Reitz and Rupa Banerjee. While David Chariandy emphasizes this study’s analysis of the extent to which young second-generation Canadians feel like they belong (see “The Fiction”), also significant is that the study sought to account for the “slower integration of visible minorities” into Canadian society, as compared to the apparently faster integration of white immigrants (Reitz and Banerjee 522). In a similar vein, Nicholas Keung’s article on Reitz and Banerjee’s findings considers the apparently abnormal speed at which immigrant women become wives and mothers when it suggests that the reason second-generation women were making more money than second-generation men on average at the time of this study “could be attributed to [the women’s] access to better-paying jobs in major urban centres, as well as their delayed marriage and childbirth.” The study and the responses to it confirm that the immigrant experience in Canada is considered knowable and evaluable by the measurement of the second-generation’s accomplishments of pre-established goals along a concordantly pre-established timeline.

Efforts to make immigrant experience better over time may be necessary and important, but what constitutes “better” also requires some rethinking.<sup>6</sup> When Tuyen resorts to stereotypes of immigrant improvement, she exhibits her internalization of this particular future-as-progress concept that the Canadian social body harbours for immi-

grants. Note as well that, according to Tuyen, this mentality is perpetuated through “stories,” where the progressive temporal convention of a narrative-based genre maintains the stereotype, even when the person calling to mind these stories has little faith in their content. In this respect, Tuyen’s critique of “stories of refugees made good” echoes Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley’s argument about the arc of narratives that get told about queer children. “How the story is conveyed,” Bruhm and Hurley write, “carries the moral weight of creating the statistically ‘normal’ child” (x). In a similar vein, Rohy has pointed out in her study of the temporal convention of evolutionary theory ascribed to race and queerness that literature “introduces its own time lines” in part through “the conventions of narrative form” (xii). Interestingly, Quy expresses his own contempt for this form when he ends his opening first-person narration in the book with the curiously repetitive “What happened next? What happened next happened” (10). Even though Quy does know what happened next at this point in his narrative (because he is describing experiences from his past), his answer makes it clear that the “next” of temporal progression supersedes even the content of that “next.” But at the same time, when Quy was a young child refugee (as he is in this first segment of his story that he recalls to readers) he would not have known what was going to happen next, and so his response here also reproduces for his readers this sense of unknowing. As in the case of queer children in Stockton’s analysis, Quy was “growing toward a question mark” (3). But this phrase might best apply not to Quy, who lived in a diasporic Asia where the future was unknowable for many people, but rather to the other characters in the novel who saw that their peers felt they knew to some extent what they were “growing” toward, and were persistently conscious of the fact that, as racialized youths of immigrant parents, they were never going to be fully part of this future of white children. As Chariandy aptly argues, the

disaffection and alienation of the youths in the novel would appear to stem not from their ‘ethnic incompatibility’ with dominant society, but from their belief (quite likely borne from the crush of everyday experience) that they eternally will be regarded, in their country of birth, as outsiders. (“The Fiction” 825)

The distinction Chariandy makes rests on the word “eternally,” suggesting that it is the factor of time, and change through time which



they are refused, that affects the lives of these characters, and not the issue of their difference and “incompatibility” alone. All in all, through *What We All Long For*, Brand offers a response not just to the question of how second-generation immigrants are faring in Toronto, but also to the following questions that Stockton poses about the function that race plays within the conventions of heterosexual temporality: “how does innocence, our default designation for children, cause its own violence?” and, “how do children of color display that their inclusion in ‘the future of our children’ is partial, even brutal?” (5).

### The Ghost and the Baby Face

Carla’s brother Jamal is someone whose own acts of violence stem from this brutality of being refused complete inclusion in the Canadian narrative of growth. This is represented in the fact that Jamal remains childlike even though he is legally an adult. According to Oku, Jamal is “a young black man-child who’s fucked just like the rest of us” (48). Carla laments that even though Jamal is eighteen, he cannot “take care of himself yet,” so that she has “to look out for him as one would a baby with a baby’s recklessness” (29). She is also concerned that, for Jamal, everything is “immediate . . . everything in the moment” (32). To return to Edelman, if the child figure functions as the placeholder of the future and of the future continuation of existing (i.e., inequitable) social structures, then Jamal embodies this childishness where it does not belong (because Jamal is eighteen) but also where it *does* belong in the sense that he is the figure who is not allowed to grow up. The fact that he is childlike reaffirms the conventions of this figure but in such a way as to expose this convention for its racial discrepancies and ultimately render it disturbing because it showcases the necessary subversion of temporality as being also at the heart of the experience of the child who is racialized as non-white. Insofar as Jamal’s actions determine the ending of the novel, it is important to note the extent to which this ending has to do with a particular sort of child in Carla’s life, one who has remained a child — a “baby,” in fact — even as he approaches his twenties.

Jamal’s baby-like features and habits make him an anachronistic figure, and so it is fitting that the other figure associated with him — that of the ghost — is similarly a figure of temporal asynchrony. Jamal is given the name “ghost” in prison, and he imprints this name on his physical body in the form of the rough figure of a “G” branded

under his left shoulder. This association with ghostliness redoubles the uncanny asynchrony already established by the childishness that Jamal cannot shake off or surpass. It also makes him a fitting example of Stockton's "child queered by innocence" (one so innocent that adults are disconcerted by it), who maintains "a telling kind of ghostliness [about his] growth" (6). At the same time, Jamal is also an example of Stockton's "child queered by colour," one who, as in Blake's poem "The Little Black Boy," is barred from the privilege of being innocent even when he is a child (32). Through Jamal, Brand plays with the racialized nature of this innocence/experience dichotomy. Jamal embodies the paradox that he could never be an innocent boy or an experienced adult because of his race, so that upon reaching eighteen, he appears naive, and his experience is connected with guilt and crime, and seemingly far removed from wisdom and maturity.

Perhaps it is the case with Brand, as Winfried Siemerling has suggested, that "the younger generation" in *What We All Long For* "seems to define itself largely by seeking to exorcize what she calls [in *A Map to the Door of No Return*] 'the ghost of old cities'" (Brand, *A Map* 110; Siemerling 111). Chariandy also points out that this "diasporic haunting and, indeed, violent return of the untold legacies of the elsewhere past can be found throughout the novel." He suggests that this haunting occurs "most significantly in the actions and identity of Jamal, a black youth caught up in violent and self-destructive criminal activities, who very tellingly brags that others fearfully refer to him as 'ghost'" ("The Fiction" 826). Yet, Jamal-as-ghost is not entirely a figure of the "old" or the "past" that haunts the present; rather his ghostliness represents that which is impossible to know about him, his unknowability that is the result of his being subject to racialization. "Race," as Grace Kyungwon Hong has recently argued, "is one of the names for what has been rendered unknown and unknowable through the very claim of totalizing knowledge" (35). It is "a kind of ghost: almost inarticulable, always slipping away. It is almost always misrecognized as something more solid, something more knowable"<sup>7</sup> (38). For Hong, the figure of the ghost expresses how race is neither that which was defined by the oppressor nor that which our present systems of knowledge can purport to discover. In this context, it is worth noting that Carla has trouble with Jamal's new signifier. "Ghost my ass," she thinks to herself, "His ghostliness didn't stop the police from finding him" (37). What the police

“find” when they apprehend Jamal is what they are looking for — in Hong’s terms the “more solid” and “more knowable” stereotype of the violent black male Toronto youth. By contrast, Jamal’s ghostliness can be taken to signify that which cannot be known.

Jamal is not the only childlike ghost in the story. Tuyen’s brother Quy, who was separated from his parents on their journey from Vietnam to Canada, and who remains in Asia until he is an adult, is “the ghost in [Tuyen’s] childhood” (266). Of course, as a memory, he is permanently a child in his family’s eyes, but even when he returns, Tuyen notes that his face is “the face of a boy, a baby, innocent and expectant. There was something wrong about it. It didn’t go with the rest of his body” (208); it “was like an angel or a ghost or a child” (224). Not only is Quy left behind in Vietnam, but he is left behind in time as well. Although she is suspicious of it, Tuyen finds herself “drawn to the babyhood of the face against the body springy as violence” (227). As Edelman argues, just as the negation of the child figure, or the assumption of that queerness against which the social identifies, has the power to exceed even that role of being the supporting opposite of the identifiable and coherent social body, here Quy’s baby face persists in defiance of his own experiences, and his own history. Several years later, he is still the child his parents remember — but this embodiment must be external to the line of conventional temporal progress: in other words, what’s so interesting about this image is that it both satisfies and subverts the idealization of the child. Even Quy does not recognize his own face in the mirror — he says, “I’ve managed to change everything except that face” (284). Even though his “body has done everything hurtful,” his “face keeps hanging on” (284). Heather Smyth has commented on the fact that Quy’s “body and face do not match” and has argued that this incongruity “makes him a composite exquisite corpse, mirroring the violence done to his own and others’ bodies in his presence” (287). She goes on to point out that “Quy’s life-threatening beating by Jamal (perhaps his death) at the moment of his reunion with his parents suggests that he is incommensurable: he represents the loss or sacrifice of what is left behind in diaspora, but also perhaps the absence of what cannot be carried forward” (287). The irony is that while Quy’s physiognomy does not qualify him as “grown-up,” his youth and early adulthood spent working for smugglers and traffickers in Asia — all that “is left behind

in diaspora” — in fact make him much more “experienced” than those who do live according to this ideal of being grown-up.

The critical discussion surrounding the political significance of the ghost-as-anachronism posits that ghosts challenge the convention of temporal progression and the social structures that this convention serves to maintain. But Rohy complicates this discussion by questioning the viability of anachronism for intersectional politics. Rohy historicizes the parallels between the notion of temporal progress (and regression) issued by scientific racism on the one hand, and the sexologists on the other. The latter, as Rohy shows, theorized homosexuality along the same conventions of evolutionary progress that informed scientific racism:

Theories of queer backwardness conceived what we now call homophobia in the image of racist discourses, particularly those concerned with Africans and African Americans, who were the paradigmatic figures for racial alterity in the U.S. national imaginary and most closely linked with temporal rhetoric. Adopting concepts from evolutionary science, such theories . . . construed same-sex desire as a regression both in individual development (to immature stages of life) and in human history (to primitive societies or vanished cultures). (ix-x)

On the topic of the potential for temporal asynchronies to subvert this convention-affirming parallel between race and homosexuality, however, Rohy writes that “Anachronism is not merely the necessary other of straight time; it is always inside normative temporality” and, moreover, that “the anachronism assigned to blackness and queerness is in fact not external, but internal to and constitutive of the white, heterosexual norm” (xv). Rohy’s assessment here gives some pause to my analysis of Brand’s novel thus far. The examples of the persistence of childlike characters in the novel, Tuyen’s critique of the social demand that refugees be “made good,” and, finally, the novel’s two childlike ghost characters, should not automatically qualify as politically subversive. In many respects, Brand’s temporal asynchronies function to make the convention more identifiable, but they do not go further to exceed or resist it. If the child figure is meant to be the confirmation that existing social structures will persist into the future, then the childlike figures of Brand’s novel express the illogic of this belief by depicting the bodies of children that have uncannily persisted into the future (rather than

having grown up). Quy and Jamal show up the paradox of “the children are the future” thinking by looking like children (babies, in fact) despite their own best efforts to age. The effect of this paradox is that their childishness reads as anachronistic, and in so doing, it shows the child/adult spectrum, which is also the innocence/experience spectrum, to be a racist and homophobic social convention. In fact, it is in the context of this temporal structure ascribed to identity, and the progressions from innocence to experience it permits, that this novel makes its most striking political intervention. Through and beyond these representations of asynchronic, ghostly children, the most compelling resistance to reproductive futurism that Brand mounts in this novel has to do with this question of the knowability of the future that informs the novel’s ending.

### The End

Jamal-as-ghost and Quy-as-ghost demonstrate how the embodied display of innocence occurring somehow outside of its proper time exposes the racialized aspects of the temporal conventions of childhood and “growing up,” and also points toward the unknowability of race in the present critical moment. This ghostly disruption of time also affects the events surrounding Carla’s decision to live her life at the conclusion of the novel. While Carla seems somewhat invested in the future as the novel draws to a close, in fact, her positioning and the perspective she assumes when the novel concludes can also be read as an extension of *What We All Long For*’s critique of reproductive futurism.

Diana Brydon has argued that the ending disrupts any investment in futurity the novel otherwise seems to uphold. Rather than “move from loss to restoration,” she writes, “Brand’s novel snatches the moment away just when it seems within her characters’ grasp” (106). In Brydon’s reading, the novel “ends with Carla awaiting Tuyen’s return, not yet informed of her brother Jamal’s violent attack on Quy” (105). For Brydon, Carla’s knowledge of Jamal’s actions is decided, and decided in the negative. Brydon goes on to describe the ending as follows:

The lost opportunities of this ending (for Quy and his “family” and for Jamal and his) are followed by a flashback to Carla, unaware of this pending disaster or her own part in it. This turn of events may seem to deny Carla’s hopes for the future, yet by ending the book

with Carla rather than Quy, Brand implies that while the past cannot be redeemed, the future may still be made anew. (106)

These comments open up a series of questions regarding the extent to which Carla and/or the novel is invested in futurity, and also the extent to which Carla is, in fact, unaware of her brother's actions. In the final pages of the novel, Jamal severely beats, and perhaps even murders Quy: ghost beats ghost, baby kills baby face. But the ending does not isolate Jamal and Quy to their own scene of violence, nor is Carla necessarily unaware of Jamal's actions. First of all, Carla admits that her father would never lend Jamal his Audi, and so she knows that her brother is already getting into trouble again. Even more importantly, there is a lingering possibility that Carla does have some awareness of Jamal's actions in the sense that the series of events that ends in the beating seems to be narrated from Carla's perspective. Immediately after Carla lists the activities that the decision to "live her life" will involve, the narration continues in a new paragraph that begins with the phrase "It won't matter that Jamal left Carla's place, cruised up Weston Road" (315) and goes on from there to relay Jamal's beating of Quy, before returning to Carla again, who is alone in her apartment, longing to hear Tuyen working on her installation. The ambiguity of the narrative perspective here means that it is not clear when we leave Carla's point of view for that of the omniscient narrator who follows Jamal, and when we return. As a result, how much Carla knows and does not know is not confirmed for readers. Therefore, the phrase "it won't matter" does not come from a discernable source — at least this source is not initially discernable. Carla, readers will likely conclude, once having learned about the beating, will not end up having parties and going out to places with Tuyen. So it can be assumed that it is not Carla deciding that "it won't matter." Indeed, if we are to believe that she has not been "informed" of Jamal's actions, perhaps all Carla knows is that Jamal is likely to get into more trouble, and that in divesting herself of any remaining sense of responsibility she has for him (deciding that she does not have to "hold the baby" anymore), she is finally free to pursue a fuller social life and also her potentially queer sexuality. However, since the narrative perspective has just been in Carla's thoughts, it is impossible not to at least begin this paragraph that describes the beating without assuming that the declaration "it won't matter" comes from Carla. While it is not logical to conclude that Carla could know where Jamal is going, readers

need to relocate their identification of the novel's narrative perspective (and do so mid-sentence) in order to apply this logic to the events that ensue. In this way, it is the future of the text that determines the logic of the "it won't matter" statement.

The point here is that the novel plays with the very issue of knowability precisely at the moment that it posits the identification of a possibility of the "livable" as either an investment in the future or a rejection of it (or perhaps both). Whichever perspective the statement "it won't matter" comes from, what reader would believe that this beating is not going to have an effect on Carla's plans, and especially Carla and Tuyen's budding romantic relationship? Does the novel challenge us to deny the significance of the future even as Carla would seem to affirm it by making plans for things she's going to do? At this point, Brand seems less to grant Carla some sort of sense of promise than to test the durability of her readers' investment in futurity by challenging them to maintain this investment beyond all logical reason. Here, readers find themselves at the "limit point of knowledge" on multiple counts, caught unaware in Edelman's preferred territory, "the locus of negativity," where that which is unknowable — in this case, the actions of the ghosts of race and diaspora and the effects these actions will have on the future — displaces the uncomplicated affirmation of the future ("Antagonism" 822).

### The Longings of Children

If what I have argued for so far is a recognition of the fact that Carla's decision to "live her life," and the ending of the novel as a whole, is based on Carla's link to Jamal, and therefore to the political significance of Jamal's arrested development, what I would like to raise by way of conclusion is the possibility of reading Carla as a child figure as well. After all, Carla has also felt the same impossibility of growing up in Toronto where "up" means to join a heterosexual- and white-dominant mainstream. This perpetual barring from the world of adulthood, this permanent delay enforced upon her own aging process by virtue of being racialized, is, of course, compounded by the fact that she loses her mother at such a young age. Throughout the novel, Carla is constantly haunted by her own child self, through which she remembers and mourns her mother. She even goes to visit the apartment building where she and her mother lived and remarks that doing so makes her

feel “childish” (109). In fact, much of Carla’s presence in the novel takes place in the form of flashbacks to her childhood.

If Carla is a child, then her longing upon which the novel ends — its last sentence is “She longed to hear Tuyen chipping and chiselling away next door” (318) — should not necessarily be read as an articulation of her sense of the promise of the future. Stockton argues that children’s longings are particularly removed from our capacity to know and understand them. She goes so far as to suggest that “perhaps we stay focused on safeguarding children because we fear them. Perhaps we are threatened by the spectre of their longings that are maddeningly, palpably opaque” (126). The adult world, the political realm, uses the child as its foundational figure upon which to confirm both the inevitable existence of the future and its own capacity to know what this future entails. But the irony is that this very child figure upon which the political depends thrusts a wrench into the concept of the determinable future when it comes to desire. Children’s desires are withheld from the adult’s capacity to know them. In other words, it is one thing for adults to desire something they call a future and to base this notion on the child, but there still remains the fact that children, those who cannot begin to know or understand this adult future, desire anyway. In this light, Carla’s longing is not a “coming out” into a queer identity and into the public sphere as a result of the assumption of this identity. Instead, her longing can be considered to have issued from the perspective of the child that we as adults, as knowers, as critical thinkers, can never access. This is the desiring child that stands not for the affirmable future but for our inability to know “what happens next” or what will come to constitute the human and the political realm in this “next.” When storytelling, according to Bruhm and Hurley, “removes the queer child from its present desires and projects it into a future where those desires will not have been,” Carla’s persistent childishness serves to resist this narrative progression and thereby safeguard Carla’s longing, a longing that is queer, at least in part, by virtue of this persistence (xxx). Clearly this condition of unknowing also precludes the possibility of determining — and, therefore, placing limits upon — types of people, including types determined by racial categories, and the imagination of futures reserved on behalf of these types of people. The ending of this novel is maddeningly opaque, and this opaqueness, its distinction from the political, is the site of *What We All Long For*’s most volatile politics.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many thanks to Aparna Mishra Tarc and to the anonymous reviewers for their generous and insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In his review of *What We All Long For*, David Chariandy applauds the novel for offering “precisely what so many of us have longed to see both uncompromisingly and beautifully represented: a youthful lifetime of feeling different, and a future for feeling differently” (107). Diana Brydon has commented that Brand only “finds *limited hope for the future* through remapping emotional geographies and the subjectivities of the men and women who negotiate them” (95; emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Butler develops her theory of “livability” as part of her call for queer activists and theorists “to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some” (8).

<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Heather Smyth has highlighted the significance of “provisionality” in the novel (275) as part of her argument that *What We All Long For* “offers a vocabulary and a poetics for how differences and alliances can crosscut foundational identity categories in unexpected ways” and that, ultimately, “Brand offers a vision of a politics of difference that may help us imagine our way out of the limits of multicultural discourse” (274).

<sup>4</sup> According to Lauren Berlant, “the Butlerian progressive subject dismantles her pathological sense of defensive sovereignty or sovereign indifference on behalf of a healthy non-sovereign identification with those populations that need to be included in communities of compassion in order to gain access to the machineries of justice” (182). Brand’s depictions of Carla in relation to her mother, and also in relation to the justice system (the occasions when she visits her brother in jail, for example), would benefit from a substantiated analysis informed by Berlant’s attentions to the relationship between infantile attachments and “attachments to regimes of justice” in *Cruel Optimism* (184).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the introduction to *Inheriting the City: Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, which points out that “different groups organize their lives in markedly different ways in terms of timing and sequencing major decisions in the transition to adulthood. They vary in when they leave home, finish their education, begin full time employment, find spouses or partners, and have children” (18). While *Inheriting the City* is an American publication, what is interesting here is the attention its authors pay to time and sequence as factors in the measure of second-generation immigrant experience.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Judith Halberstam’s critique of the supposedly ideal trajectory from childhood to adulthood might be useful to apply to the Canadian government’s assessment of immigration’s successes and failures. Halberstam writes, “in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (*In a Queer 4*).

<sup>7</sup> Hong builds her analysis in part from Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. See also Jasbir Puar’s discussion of race, temporality, and sexuality in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, which also draws from Gordon’s work.

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