Introduction

With the city central to her narrative, Dionne Brand’s novel What We All Long For (2005) opens with an evocative description of Toronto:

THIS CITY HOVERS above the forty-third parallel; that’s illusory of course. Winters on the other hand, there’s nothing vague about them. Winters here are inevitable, sometimes unforgiving. […] 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. (Brand 1)

What We All Long For is a novel that offers a portrayal of modern day Canadian urban life. The text carefully ponders the multiracial color and polyphonic sound of the urban realities of Toronto. Brand, as one reviewer has put it, “makes the emotion of longing tangible. She lifts it into the air so we can see what we’re feeling. But she also tells a compelling story of characters immersed in the Toronto cityscape” (Turner n.p.). What We All Long For is a story about identity; it is a tale of longing and loss in a cosmopolitan city. No other writer, critics have agreed, has presented such a powerful and richly textured portrait of present-day Toronto. Rinaldo Walcott, for instance, writes in The Globe and Mail: “every great city has its literary moments, and contemporary Toronto has been longing for one. We can now say with certainty that we no longer have to long for a novel that speaks this city’s uniqueness: Dionne Brand has given us exactly that.”

Toronto, as another critic has observed, “is alive with everyone’s stories, interactions and longings, and Brand’s characters do not only live in the city, they are of and in love with Toronto” (Thorpe 57).

Clearly though, What We All Long For is not only about a particular Canadian city. More generally, Toronto refers to any late modern metropolitan city, a space of “commodity phantasmagoria” (Chisholm, Queer 49) and cosmopolitanism, in which multicultural life is troubled by diasporic haunting, which, in turn, gives rise to feelings of longing. What We All Long For accentuates a complex dialectic between social exclusions in Canada and

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the careful attempts of its characters to identify what they long for despite their sense of alienation and dislocation. This story of four young Torontonians is a powerfully metaphorical text because Brand manages to translate the energy of urban Toronto into a transcultural poetics of the city. Glimpses of the city provide detailed insight into urban life: the daily cultural mix of Kensington Market, the rain-soaked celebrations of the world cup in Korea Town, different means of transportation, such as the streetcar, the subway, the bicycle and the car. All of these images come together in dialectical Benjaminian fashion, creating a transcultural space that is characterized by fragmentation, dislocation and the various contradictions of urban experience.

In the following analysis, I will look at Brand’s transcultural poetics, paying attention to the multiple ways in which this Caribbean-Canadian writer captures the diverse experiences of living on the different borders of identity in Toronto – be they national, cultural, ethnic/racial or sexual. The text, I want to argue, offers a queer representation of urban space, constituting what Dianne Chisholm calls a “queer constellation” of metropolitan writings. Toronto is rendered as a space of cultural translation, a contact zone in which the protagonists translate the city’s cultural and spatial divisions by creating points of contact that, on the one hand, open up dialogues between different groups of people and, on the other, create silences that point to failed encounters. I also want to investigate the feminist environmental ethics and politics that are inherent in Brand’s construction of a queer subjectivity, pointing out in what ways Brand redefines the notion of community as bonds and allegiances that nest identities within larger global and social structures of involvement.

**Born in the City from People Born Elsewhere**

Like any other modern city, Toronto is a place of masses of humanity and inhumanity, an imagined place that constitutes an “imagined environment” (Donald n.p.) that cannot be conceived in its totality. Any person’s experience of a city, one could argue, is bound to remain partial to a fragment of the city. Emphasizing the multiplicity of the city, Brand’s novel is a fragmented narrative that offers different viewpoints of Toronto. It creates an urban

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2 A black, lesbian feminist, Dionne Brand was born in Trinidad in 1953 and immigrated to Toronto at the age of seventeen where in the 1970s she was part of the black and feminist liberation movements. Well-known for her award-winning poetry and fiction, she has also published non-fiction, which includes “a collection of oral histories about the struggles of people of colour in Toronto, a history of black women, and an autobiographical meditation on Blackness in the Diaspora” (Goldman 95). For more biographical information on Dionne Brand, see also <http://www.nwpassages.com/bios/brand.asp> (accessed 7 July 2010). In 2009, Brand became Toronto’s third poet laureate.

3 See Chisholm’s *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (2004).
borderland region that emerges at the intersection of transnational flows of people. The text follows the overlapping stories of a close circle of young adults. The protagonists are second-generation immigrants who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. There are Caribbean-Canadian, Portuguese-Canadian, Vietnamese-Canadian, and Africadian characters who feel estranged from their cultural roots. All characters suffer from traumatic memories, from family trauma that is part of what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory,” which characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (22)

Brand’s characters are haunted by their families’ stories but they are also united by their rejection of their parents’ past, which is a distant past of “other houses, other landscapes, other skies, other trees” (Brand 20). Tuyen, for instance, is the daughter of Vietnamese parents who have never recovered from losing one of their children in the rush to board a boat out of Vietnam in the 1970s. Their only son Quy was separated from his parents and ended up in a Malaysian refugee camp, where he grew up as an orphan. His sister Tuyen, who was born after her brother’s disappearance, now tries to make sense of her family history and her identity through her work as an avant-garde artist. She moves to a chaotic apartment in downtown Toronto and uses her history and, above all, the city, as the subject of her installation art. She is in love with her best friend and neighbor Carla, a biracial bicycle courier, who is also troubled by her family history.

Carla is still reeling from the loss of her mother to suicide eighteen years earlier and must now deal with her brother Jamal’s acts of delinquency. Because Carla and Tuyen are both negotiating difficult relationships with their brothers, they are emotionally so strained that any developing eroticism between them is complicated. Carla arduously traverses the city on her bicycle; bike riding not only energizes her body and soul but also constitutes a way of making sense of the city and her position in it. With a Portuguese mother and a black Caribbean father, Carla is not “phenotypically black” (Brand 106) and could easily “disappear into this white world” (Brand 106), but out of respect for her mother, whose family disinherited her after she

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4 The term Africadian was coined by George Elliott Clarke in order to refer to Blacks who settled in the maritime provinces of Canada in the eighteenth century. See Clarke 3-23. See also Rosenthal 231.

5 Tuyen’s family were so-called “Vietnamese boat people.” For more information see the online exhibition “Leaving Vietnam” at <http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/cultur/vietnam/vilea01e.shtml> (accessed 27 July 2010).
started to date a black man, she chooses to identify as a visibly different minority.

The third protagonist is Oku, a jazz-loving poet who, unbeknownst to his Jamaican-born parents, has dropped out of university and is in constant conflict with his father. He is also tormented by his unrequited love for Jackie, a black woman who runs a clothing shop on Queen Street West but prefers to date a white man. Jackie, the fourth protagonist, also feels alienated from her parents. Each of these characters in the novel felt as if they inhabited two countries — their parents’ and their own — when they sat dutifully at their kitchen tables being regaled with how life used to be “back home” [...] Each left home in the morning as if making a long journey, untangling themselves from the seaweed of other shores wrapped around their parents. Breaking their doorways, they left the sleepwalk of their mothers and fathers and ran across the unobserved borders of the city, sliding across ice to arrive at their own birthplace — the city. They were born in the city from people born elsewhere. (Brand 20)

Linked together through their “unspoken collaboration on distancing themselves as far as possible from the unreasonableness, the ignorance, the secrets, and the madness of their parents” (Brand 19), the young protagonists of What We All Long For are characterized “by transcending spatial and ethnic boundaries and by forging new cultural practices that no longer follow the ‘roots/routes’ of ethnic belonging” (Rosenthal 232).

There is a fifth main character, Quy, the child who Tuyen’s parents lost in Vietnam. Unlike the other protagonists, his story is a first-person narrative, which is graphically set apart from the other chapters as they lack numbering and fail to appear in full justification. The chapters in which Quy’s voice appears are at odds with the rest of the book, pointing to his extreme marginalized position. Quy is representative of the many refugees who did not make it out of Vietnam. Crucially, his chapters are headed by his name and the descriptions of how the young boy survived in various refugee camps, then moved into the Thai underworld, and finally made it to Toronto on his own. The lost boy is thereby given a voice in this novel, and his appearance at the end of the text triggers a crescendo, which also brings together the story’s fragments in a shocking culmination point.

“Queer Constellations”

By presenting the consequences of diaspora on the lives of second-generation immigrants in metropolitan Toronto, What We All Long For constitutes an experiment in urban realism. It shows how the protagonists’ lives are tangled with the city and how they become “defined by the city” (Brand 66). In rendering different urban practices of claiming space, such as the diverse forms of flâneries of Carla and the artistic techniques of graffiti and montage
in the creative work of Tuyen, the novel carves out a queer urban space. According to Dianne Chisholm, a queer space demarcates a practice, production, and performance of space beyond just the mere habitation of built and fixed structures. Against the domination of space by abstract constructs of urban planning and the implantation of technologies of social surveillance, queer space designates an appropriation of space for bodily, especially sexual, pleasure. (Chisholm, *Queer* 10)

By questioning coherent narratives of nationhood and remaining skeptical of celebratory accounts of Canadian multiculturalism, Brand offers an alternative story of (be-)longing. Tracing the “wandering paths and the solitary spaces familiar to those who have been dislocated” (Goldman, “Mapping” 14), Brand offers fluid textual maps of the city that critically expose the “city’s mobilizing, yet spellbinding and anesthetizing, phantasmagoria” (Chisholm, *Queer* 31). Brand’s characters strategically lose themselves in space, the “space of city memory” (Chisholm, “City” 197), and they use the city in order to express their longings for a new era that recognizes the paradoxes of metropolitan (post)modernity. Longing for a queer space, the characters give voice to their stories, which are incoherent and fragmented narratives of dislocation, non-belonging, and queer sexuality. Employing strategies for appropriating space, the characters traverse and criss-cross the city, and they navigate their ways through capitalism’s power grid. Their queer interrogations of space entail a blasting apart of the city’s narrative of progress and constitute a reassembling of the fragments of collective history into dialectical images that encapsulate the diverse stories of deterritorializations.

Jean-Ulrick Désert has elaborated on these deconstructive strategies of appropriations of queer city space:

> Queer space crosses, engages, and transgresses social, spiritual, and aesthetic locations, all of which is articulated in the realm of the public/private, the built/unbuilt environments. [...] A queer space is an activated zone made proprietary by the occupant or flâneur, the wanderer. It is at once private and public. [...] Our cities and landscapes double as queer spaces. [...] the square, the streets, the civic centers, the malls, the highways are the place of fortuitous encounters and juxtapositions. It is a place in which our sensibilities are tested; it is the place of “show.” The public space is the space of romance, seen as landscape, alleys and cafés. The public space is the space of power in the form of corporations or factories. It is the (blue, white, or pink collar) ghetto of the everyday. This fluid and wholly unstructured space allows, in its publicity, a variety of readings, re-

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6 My definition of the term queer relies on David Halperin’s view that “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (62). If we regard “queerness” as a position and not as a non-identity, then the vagueness inherent in the term “queer” turns out to be its biggest strength. As Lee Edelman has it, the indeterminacy, transformability, and elasticity of the concept of queer suggests an understanding of queerness as a continuum or “a zone of possibilities” (114).
readings, and misreadings, given the observer’s individual propensities toward power, mystery, and how these desires fold into the passive space of Eros [...] a space where desire intertwines with visceral sensibility, in the space of the everyday. (20-22)

In its reliance on a transcultural poetics, What We All Long For draws on Walter Benjamin’s method of dialectical imaging in order to visualize their spatial practices. Infusing Benjamin’s theories on city writings with a queer postcolonial agenda, Brand offers what Chisholm calls “queer constellations,” that is “dialectical images of (queer) city/space as represented through a variety of optical and perceptual devices” (Chisholm, Queer 10). In doing so, Brand clearly relies on her sensibilities as a poet. Her lyrical prose functions as “a technology of perception with which to grasp metropolitan contemporaneity” (Chisholm, “Paris” 156). Seeing the city in dialectical images, Brand’s novel, for instance, records “flâneries in Benjaminian space” (Chisholm, “Paris” 161).

Most prominently, it is Carla, who moves through the city. Although Carla is a bicycle courier, she sometimes is also a walker:

It was Monday, and sometimes she liked to take Monday off just to go in the opposite direction of the world hustling past her with its Monday morning anxieties. [...] Monday was the day of mistakes, which is also why she was glad to be off the road, her bicycle weaving in and out of traffic, trying to negotiate opening car doors and being squeezed at right turns. Mondays, she preferred to walk. (Brand 41)

Flânerie, as Chisholm puts it, “is a primary documentary technique for queer interrogations of urban space” (Queer 46). Carla’s city walks are, however, different. While the classic flâneur is a “figure of bourgeois disaffection, a type of social drop-out who strolls the streets of the industrial capital against the accelerating flow of commercial traffic” (Chisholm, “Paris” 162), Carla is a female biracial flâneuse who can only afford to stroll through the city on Mondays. As she states,

Carla loved these Mondays the way she loved snowstorms. The way these two things stopped the world. A city hemmed in by snow was a beautiful thing to her. Cars buried in the streets, people bewildered as they should be, aimless and...

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7 For a detailed discussion of the character of Carla as a flâneuse, see Rosenthal 237-40. Interestingly, Rosenthal reads the figure of Carla as a “past-postmodern” flâneuse (235). In her article, Rosenthal, however, does not make a distinction between Carla’s walks and her bike rides. While I also interpret Carla’s practice of biking as a form of wandering that evokes the concept of flânerie, I want to make a case for biking as the novel’s preferred concept of spatial practice because it seems the more fitting concept for an anti-neoliberal, working-class stance that the novel clearly endorses.

8 Originally, flânerie is a form of strolling that was an “urban art form, a leisure habit, made famous by dandies, such as the poet Baudelaire, not the healthy exercise of strolling or walking, spazieren, prescribed by doctors as a means to ward off melancholy” (Hanssen 3).
directionless as they really are. Snowstorms stopped the pretense of order and civilization. (Brand 105)

Snowstorms constitute positive disturbing forces and are elements of nature that allow for Carla’s counter-strategic spatial practices. Despite all premonitions by weathermen and her friends, Carla “would turn and turn in the blizzard and be lost, walk with it, walk against it, driving her feet through the thick gathering wall of it” (Brand 105). Carla’s Monday walks not only evoke the concept of the flâneur, but they also echo Michel de Certeau’s notion of “walking the city.” According to de Certeau, “to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103). In Brand’s novel, as Caroline Rosenthal has observed, “this experience of ‘lacking a place’ is related to the multiple displacements of subjects in the Diaspora and to how the younger generation embraces the ‘placeless place’ of the city as the end of traceable origins” (239). Clearly, the “placeless place” is a queer urban space, a space of indeterminacy that has the potential of turning into Edelman’s “zone of possibility” (114).

Brand’s story, however, does not only focus on Carla. Tuyen also engages in a project of queer investigations and possible transformations of urban space. Her work as an installation artist stands out as an attempt to represent the “polyphonic, murmuring” (Brand 149) of the city and is in itself representative of Brand’s construction of queer constellations. For her project, Tuyen engages in ethnographic work and asks customers who enter her brother Binh’s electronics store one specific question: “What do you long for?” Her hope is to capture the multifarious longings of the city and to attach them to a huge installation figure that fills her apartment and starts to outgrow it. This “lubiao” (Brand 16, emphasis in the original), as Tuyen calls it, collects the elliptical answers she receives. As Tuyen describes her installation project:

“You know those fake carved posts they’ve put in the middle of the road down on Spadina? In Chinatown? Well, they’re kitch down there, but they’re supposed to be signposts. Like long ago people would pin messages against the government and shit like that on them. So my installation is to reclaim ... Of course, regular electric posts already have notices on them like flyers and stuff ... Well, I still have to think it all through, but ...”

Breaking off, she explained the plan to make a pulley with a seat so that she could move up and down the lubiao, engraving and encrusting figures and signs. At the planned installation, which was to be her most ambitious, she would have the audience post messages on the lubiao. Messages to the city. (Brand 16-17, emphases and ellipses in the original)

Tuyen’s installation is a spatial practice, capturing the art of dialectical imaging by presenting an image of the past that carries the desires of the past generations into the present. It represents the queer space of the city and the space of city history – the history of dislocation, of non-belonging, of fragmentation, of queer sexuality – in montage. Collecting quotations, this
installation represents statements which are not incorporated into official history or which are lost in the fragmentation of perception that characterizes urban experiences. As a monstrous piece of art that is out of place in Tuyen’s apartment, the lubiao signifies the transcultural queer poetics of the novel itself.

Of Bikes and Cars

Apart from pedestrian urban practices and creative art work that aim at transforming the urban environment, Brand’s constellations of queer city-space also entail images of means of transportation that serve as powerful connecting devices of cultural translation. Crucially then, means of transportation become means of translation. References to urban transportation already dominate the beginning of the novel. The first chapter frames the diverse stories and images that the book contains. The main characters are described as riding the Bloor-Danforth subway as it “rumbles across the bridge over the Humber River” (Brand 2). Brand invokes the riding of public transit as a device to catalogue the astonishing diversity of the city. More importantly though, means of transportation are important as they allow for cross-town voyages of people. They connect spaces, creating points of contact in a dialogue that also includes what Sherry Simon calls “zones of silence” (9), areas where translations break down, where encounters fail and hostility and violence break out. These two divergent points of contact that constitute the challenges of urbanity are symbolized in the text by two different means of transportation – the bicycle and the car.

In particular, I want to argue, that it is the bicycle that functions as a powerful symbol of cultural translation. It constitutes a vehicle that cuts across multiple borderlines, exposing the city’s fragments as areas of discontinuity in which something new is created, culturally and economically. Carla’s job as a bicycle courier clearly points to her role as a cultural translator. In her acts of translation, she mediates between her brother and her father and tries to make sense of her life and the totality of the city. She is longing for a coherent sense of self by exploring different areas of the city on her bicycle. Like Tuyen, she serves as the link between the generation of the parents and their children. Tuyen functions as a translator as well. When growing up, Tuyen was considered a mediator by her parents: “For Tuan and Cam, the children were their interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life” (Brand 67). Crucially, neither parents in the novel are depicted as holding on to a nostalgic view of their home countries. Their ethnic origins are also not seen as obstacles to integration in Canada. Instead – much to their children’s criticism – they offer “endorsements both of a sanitized ethnic heritage and an uncritical consumerist lifestyle” (Chariandy 104). They are shown to favor mainstream neo-liberal ideologies, which the children vehemently oppose. The alienation
of the young generation in the novel, as David Chariandy has put it, “has little to do with the ‘foreign’ traditions and manners that they have either rejected or adapted towards their own ends, but with the plain and apparently non-negotiable fact of being instantly read, in their country of birth, as racial minority ‘others’” (106). Their alienation, one might add, also roots in their endorsement of an anti-neoliberal and environmentally friendly politics.

Most strikingly, however, alienation stems from feelings that remain unexpressed between parents and children. Tuyen’s parents consider themselves “newly rich” (Brand 54). They never openly talk about the traumatic experience of having lost their son. Tuyen only finds out about her lost brother through a photograph, a letter and uncanny emotions such as the “strange outbursts and crying” of her parents (Brand 226). As the narrator explains: “She not so much overheard as sensed, since her own understanding of Vietnamese was deliberately minimal” (Brand 65). Tuyen and her friends “encounter their ancestors’ legacies of displacement and disenfranchisement not through official histories or even family tales, but through a doubly unwilled circulation of feeling” (Chariandy 106). In Brand’s novel, “the second generation thus awakens to its diasporic legacy not through conscious communication, but through an unconscious transmission of affect” (Chariandy 106).

It is the task of the children to translate this level of affect to a politics of communication that allows for agency. While Tuyen translates loss and absence into her art, Carla consciously uses her bike as an outlet for her problems. Reveling in the city’s “raw openness” (Brand 212), Carla uses the street because, like her friends, she sees “the street outside, its chaos, as [her] only hope” (Brand 212). As a bicycle messenger, Carla translates Toronto, trying to make sense of urban life and conveying the feelings of the young generation to the reader. In her descriptions of the city, Toronto figures as a site of the transmission of affect, a contact zone whose contact is made possible through the practice of bike riding. Describing the entire city like a body, the narrator sums up Carla’s bike rides in the following way:

The muscles of highway and streets met down at the lake. All along the underpasses graffiti marred the concrete girders. She recognized the tags. The kids who lived across the alleyway from her apartment were graffiti artists. […] she loved the city. She loved riding through the neck of it, the triangulating girders now possessed by the graffiti crew. She loved the feeling of weight and balance it gave her. (Brand 32)

As Rosenthal puts it: “While space is […] used to externalize a character’s emotional geography in What We All Long For, Brand also employs Carla’s bike rides, which lead her into abandoned and residual spaces, to highlight the resourceful and imaginative quality of liminal spaces in the city” (238). Carla views her bicycle as a vehicle for re-organizing space, as her only
means to transmit affect. This act of translation is personal and cultural. Crucially though, translation here is not seen as a mail-service that delivers culture from one distant site to another but as the source of culture “at home,” on site. Culture is born in translation, that is, in relationships of exchange, resistance, or interpretation. (Simon 17, emphasis in the original)

Translation makes something visible which otherwise is hidden and can constitute a tool that helps to shed light on the spaces of differences that emerge in cultural contact. Conceptualized as a process rather than as a product, it can become an important tool for analyzing cultural contact (cf. Simon 17). In What We All Long For, the protagonists’ projects of translation highlight “zones of silences,” focusing on affective encounters in which translation breaks down and difference is revealed most visibly.

As an environmentally friendly means of transport, the bike stands for an alternative vehicle that through the translation of bodily action and energy into locomotion allows for the transmission of culture. Translation, as Sherry Simon reminds us, “includes direction or vectorality (always including the ‘from’ and the ‘to’ of cultural interactions)” (17). Biking emphasizes movement and is an urban practice that, as the novel suggests, is a more fitting metaphor in the mapping of queer spaces in the urban environment than the practice of walking. Riding a bicycle is dangerous, precarious, and often at odds with cars. Usually, bicycles have to share space with cars; they function in a liminal space between pedestrians and cars, existing in a non-space but, crucially, creating space between objects. Carla’s practice of biking can therefore be considered a form of *flânerie* with a difference: it is cause-related, constituting an economic necessity, but it goes against the neo-liberal North American car culture. It is a counter-strategic practice because it reinscribes space by allowing the character to forge links and connections between different spaces and elements of the city.

Juxtaposed to the bike is the car, which is rendered as a powerful symbol of destruction in Brand’s novel. Crucially, men drive cars in this book: Carla’s father owns a black Audi and Tyen’s brother Binh a Beamer X5. Like bikes, cars stand for translation practices, but while the bike constitutes a peaceful, ecologically safe means of translation that advocates dialogue, the car is an aggressive symbol that stands for excessive contact and cultural

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9 Benjamin has famously argued that translation is less about transmitting a message than it is about revealing differences. Interpretative translation, following Benjamin, stands like a wall before the original language; literal translation, by contrast, functions like an arcade. As he famously explained in “The Task of the Translator”: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade” (“Task of the Translator” 79).
‘Translating Toronto on a Bicycle’

interpenetration. While Carla tries to make sense of the world by riding her bike, her brother, Jamal, is obsessed with cars; in fact, he is a car jacker. As the narrator describes Jamal’s relation to the city:

Jamal didn’t see the city as she did. His life was in his skin, in his mouth, in his eyes, in the closest physical encounters. He operated only on his senses as far as Carla was concerned. But she saw the city as a set of obstacles to be crossed and circled, avoided and let pass. He saw it as something to get tangled in. (Brand 32)

Jamal would rather live on the streets than go to school and deal with parents at home. Jamal, as we learn, is in trouble all the time and his sister has to bail him out of jail. In the concluding chapter that brings together the story’s fragments, Tuyen’s long-lost brother Quy is about to return home, but, crucially, the re-union is interrupted by brutal violence. On the last pages of the novel, the narrator describes Quy as he is waiting in the car just before he goes into his parents’ house to re-united with them. At this point Jamal is out of jail and together with a friend happens to come to precisely this rich neighborhood where Tuyen’s parents live. He approaches Quy in the car and then attacks him. As the narrator describes this scene:

He [Quy] realizes that they want the car, and he says, “Take the fucking car,” in Vietnamese, but no one understands him. So they beat him and kick him beyond recognition and Jamal jumps in the silver Beamer X5 and his friend takes the Audi and they drive away, leaving the man half-dead by the road. (Brand 318)

The book ends with this unexpected twist that simultaneously connects and tears apart fragmented families. Where the bike tried to connect fractured identities of people and their stories by crossing, circling, avoiding and letting pass the obstacles and elements of the city, the car violently interrupts this process. At this point of collision of boundaries, the wounds of displacement are painfully opened up again. The novel quietly ends with the image of the parents running towards their long-lost son, and Carla waiting at home, longing to listen to Tuyen work on her installation project. The zone of silence that is created through unsuccessful translation at the end of the novel, however, opens up a new space: it constitutes an awakening to a new sense of longing. The novel thus concludes by hinging on the cusp of cultural translation: the zone of silence that arises out of failed encounters speaks the language of desire, expressing a yearning for a renewed attempt at the transformation of urban environment.

Conclusion

As I have shown, What We All Long For is a fragmented narrative that interweaves stories of survival, humor, failure, and brutal violence. It is a multi-voiced novel that renders the “city’s heterogeneity” (Brand 142) and the “polyphonic murmurings” (Brand 149) of cosmopolitan space in which
different people meet and also clash. It captures the various intersecting stories the city can barely contain.

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. (Brand 5)

The text is centered around the many contradictions “of an inherently globalized world and focuses on Toronto as a typically cosmopolitan city” (Goulart Almeida 10). Brand manages to transform hegemonic spatial and temporal paradigms into what Rinaldo Walcott has called Brand’s “diaspora sensibilities” (Walcott 46). She remaps Toronto’s cityspace in order to “announce and articulate a black presence that signals defiance, survival and renewal” (Walcott 45). Brand’s politics is a transcultural poetics fused with environmental ethics and a queer agenda, which, to quote Paul Gilroy, goes against the “simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness” (123). As What We All Long For chronicles the everyday lives of four young urban, diasporic subjects, the city figures as a cultural space in which the traumatic histories of social expulsion and cultural displacement are being negotiated and transformed. As a city of longing, Toronto becomes an urban space of desire that is filled with diasporic haunting. Through cultural translation, it becomes a site of dialogue as well as a space of failed encounters that result in hostility. The city is a queer space that dwells on an understanding of cultures as transient and as such is at odds with dominant paradigms; it does not offer any closure but continues to hinge on the edge. Giving rise to a transcultural narrative that refuses to solve conflicts, it constitutes a space where the past both succeeds and fails to be translated into the future.

Part of this point is taken from Marlene Goldman. For more information on Brand’s mapping of urban space and, in particular, the role of haunting in the production of space in Brand’s works, see Goldman’s “Spirit Possession and the Transformation of Space in the Fiction of Dionne Brand.”
Works Cited


