

"The Being Together of Strangers": Dionne Brand's Politics of Difference and the Limits of Multicultural Discourse

Heather Smyth

Volume 33, Number 1, 2008

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl33_1art14

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Smyth, H. (2008). "The Being Together of Strangers": Dionne Brand's Politics of Difference and the Limits of Multicultural Discourse. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(1), 272–290.

“The Being Together of Strangers”: Dionne Brand’s Politics of Difference and the Limits of Multicultural Discourse

HEATHER SMYTH

no voyage is seamless. Nothing in a city is discrete.
A city is all interpolation. — Brand, *Thirsty* 37

THE FIELD OF CANADIAN LITERATURE has undergone great changes in recent decades, as demonstrated by new forms of interdisciplinarity as well as shifts in the critical methodologies brought to bear on its study. The framework of the nation has long held a privileged and perhaps intuitive place in the study of Canadian literature, yet it has opened up to other frameworks such as postcolonialism, diaspora studies, and the study of globalization. Indigenous, racialized, and diasporic writers and critics have long challenged the circumscription of “the national” as a frame for cultural and political identifications within Canadian space. Rinaldo Walcott, for example, points out that black Canadian cultural works are “not merely national products” but also “occupy the space of the in-between, vacillating between national borders and diasporic desires, ambitions and disappointments” (*Black* xii). These shifts can also be seen in the collection *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, which investigates “the place of Canada in theories and practices of nationalism, postnationalism, and postcolonialism” (Moss vi). More recently, the TransCanada project has addressed the ways that Canadian literature as “a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies” has “assumed transnational and global currency” (Kamboureli vii)¹. Kamboureli argues that “if the state posits Canada as an imagined community, CanLit is both firmly entangled with this national imaginary and capable of resisting it” (viii). In her contribution to the proceedings of the first TransCanada conference, Diana Brydon similarly argues that “the very concept of national literatures is the product of a particu-

lar time and place,” and suggests “CanLit” is shifting to “postnational, transnational, and globalized contexts” (“Metamorphoses” 5-6).

These shifts within the field of Canadian literature, orienting it towards diasporic or postcolonial studies, are crucial for bringing to the discipline an examination of heterogeneity, displacement, and cultural mobility: in other words, these critical practices focus on “difference.” At the same time, we must attend to the ways that the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism — a national discourse — may still shape the terms within which we speak of difference in Canada. Discourses of Canadian multiculturalism are framed by the idea that diversity in Canada means cultural diversity, or more specifically, ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity.² Diasporic and postcolonial Canadian studies have retained this understanding of difference, and have not yet provided Canadian criticism with a space for close engagement with the ways that diverse social struggles and identifications shape the space of difference in Canada, not limited to race and ethnicity but including gender and sexual difference as well.³ In part, it may be that the concept of citizenship still frames our understanding of how we are subjects within and beyond the nation-state. Kamboureli’s articulation of the shifts in the discipline of Canadian literature attests to this: “Since the national, multicultural, and postcolonial idioms are affected by globalization in ways that make it imperative we confront how citizenship, in its different configurations, is controlled and performed today, it [is] important to make citizenship one of the operative terms in our proposed investigation of CanLit” (xiii). However, we have not yet found ways to imagine citizenship routed through gendered and queer subjectivities. Susan Gingell has pointed to the need to interrogate postcolonial reading practices through feminist and queer theories, and suggests we “[bring] into critical partnerships the various liberationist projects of those working for greater equity in many contexts” (109). The newly imagined field of Canadian literary studies — diasporic, transnational, postcolonial — needs reading models that can respond to the broader dynamics of difference in Canadian space. The organizing principles of these “liberationist projects” themselves may offer a solution: coalition and affinity group dynamics can provide new critical models for speaking about difference in Canadian culture that can address the fine tension between solidarity and incommensurability, and the ways social differences intersect. Dionne Brand’s novel *What We All Long For* (2005)

is exemplary in this respect, and offers a vocabulary and poetics for how differences and alliances can crosscut foundational identity categories in unexpected ways. By situating her narrative explicitly in cosmopolitan urban rather than national space, and by exploring a variety of dynamics foregrounding community and identification, Brand offers a vision of a politics of difference that may help us imagine our way out of the limits of multicultural discourse.

The directions from which I will pursue this question come together under several terms: accident, affinity, and collage. Brand's recent work, especially *Thirsty* (2002), *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), and *What We All Long For*, demonstrates a growing articulation of the nature of cosmopolitan cities as places for interpersonal accidents: unscripted, yet profoundly historical, accidental encounters between strangers in a city. Lives lived in what might be considered separate orbits — for instance, one path that leads a refugee from war to exile, and another path that is marked by gendered violence — cross into each other. In *Thirsty*, the speaker describes the intimate anonymity of “the city / that’s never happened before”:

you can breathe if you find air,
 this roiling, this weight of bodies,
 as if we need each other to breathe, to bring
 it into sense, and well, in that we are merciless. (11)

The city is not idealized: it is the “feral amnesia of us all” (24) and its gods are “Glass, money, goods” (37). Yet in the crossroads of a city one might “look into any face here” and “fall into its particular need” (42): “What holds poetry together in this city, what holds me together, is the knowledge that I cannot resist seeing; what holds me is the real look of things. If I see someone I see the ghost of them, the air around them, and where they’ve been. If I see the city I see its living ghostliness” (*Map* 100). Apart from the profoundly humane and often quite beautiful forms this takes in Brand’s imagining of cities, this vision of the crossing of orbits and individual stories also lends us a model for heterogeneity that is an alternative to multiculturalism. Most importantly for my concerns here, it is a heterogeneity that crosscuts many vectors of social identification and experience (including ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, class, and age) and is situated spatially in an urban locality. The stories and bodies and histories that collide in cities are simultan-

eously unique, personal and affective, and also situated within myriad social and political struggles that exceed the boundaries of the nation.

The accidents of encounters within cities also take more structured form through these social and political struggles via direct political action. Here, the organizing principle of political affinity groups is another means for imagining alternatives to multiculturalism. At the same time as the global shapes the local through the migratory paths that converge in cities, the local confronts the global — or specifically, the globalizing of capitalism — through the new social movements and anti-globalization protests that gain collective strength through coalitions of affinity groups. Brand's novel briefly invokes the 2001 Summit of the Americas protests, but the effects of this articulation of coalition work resonate throughout the novel. What links the new social movements with the accidental encounters of cities is provisionality: affinity groups work together only as long as the vectors of their struggles intersect, and the threads that connect them will metamorphose over time. Coalition is not about trying to incorporate difference into unity, as Canadian multiculturalism arguably attempts,⁴ but about the difficult work of working together: as Brand attests, "I understand not wanting to get lost in a coalition because a coalition is not a home, it's a room where you come to negotiate" (Wanyeki et al. 21). Strangers in Brand's Toronto pass through each other's lives briefly, marking the shared spaces of their experiences and then moving on.

This leads to the final term of my cluster, "collage." Tuyen's art echoes Surrealism and she uses the materials of the city to "create alternate, unexpected realities, exquisite corpses" (Brand, *What* 224). The final section of this paper will discuss how the Surrealist practice of exquisite corpse — a multi-artist drawing collage — offers Brand's novel a unique way to imagine the relationship between parts and whole of a collectivity, and an alternative to nation-based multicultural ideology. The predominance of body parts as units of an exquisite corpse within the visual arts resonates also for Brand's book, given the violence done to and pleasures experienced by bodies in her novel, and the implications her novel holds for our vision of the heterogeneous body politic.

This examination of Brand's novel will contribute to and reorient recent criticism of her work, which has offered valuable explorations of mobility and a focus on diasporic and transnational spaces. Ellen Quigley, for instance, argues that *In Another Place, Not Here* eschews

identity politics and “link[s] the deregulated flow [of mobile subjectivities] to multiple political movements” (66), while Marlene Goldman identifies an “aesthetics and politics of drifting” (22) in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and *A Map to the Door of No Return*, in which “drifting” offers a model for identities and “decentred, transnational connections” outside the nation-state (26). Furthering Goldman’s thesis, Kit Dobson argues that Brand’s characters in *What We All Long For* must pursue a politics of drifting to avoid “reterritorialization” by the forces of globalization: “Theirs is an urban space that is connected to global modes of living before it is connected to discourses of the nation” (97). This change of scale from the national to the global and local may foster new kinds of alliances: as Diana Brydon argues, *What We All Long For* offers, in the space of Toronto, a “different kind of identification” (“A Place” 6) that illustrates Hardt and Negri’s vision of the multitude as “not unified but . . . plural and multiple” (qtd. in Brydon “A Place” 7). Brydon pursues this analysis of globalization in a study of Brand’s *Inventory*, where she asserts that Brand’s work has always been attentive to the local/global intersection: “Brand’s social poetics derives from the cultural traditions of the black Atlantic in dialogue with black Marxisms and global anti-racist, social justice and environmental activism. It has never been simply nation-based” (“Global” 993). My argument here will draw from these insights about mobile identities within transnational spaces, and will build on them to offer a sustained examination of Brand’s politics of difference. *What We All Long For* shows how the articulation of difference that has traditionally been routed, in Canadian criticism, through the lens of national multiculturalism and ethnicity, can be linked instead to a coalition of political struggles that have global scope yet are embedded in, and identify with, local urban space.⁵

If the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism relies upon an understanding of “difference” that sees racial and ethnic identities as fixed, historical, and discrete categories, then the multicultural model cannot imagine the shifting of identifications back and forth across these categories, or of identifications refracted through other categories that are just as pertinent to the exercise of cultural citizenship. Iris Marion Young points out, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, that “the logic of identity denies or represses difference” (98). Within the logic of identity, she argues, “difference” comes to mean “absolutely other” in a

binary opposition, instead of the myriad relationships of similarity and difference that are available when two things are compared (99). Young suggests that the “politics of difference,” on the other hand, “aims for an understanding of group difference as indeed ambiguous, relational, shifting, without clear borders. . . . Difference now comes to mean not otherness, exclusive opposition, but specificity, variation, heterogeneity” (171). Young’s understanding of the politics of difference is congruent with a contemporary emphasis on “identification” as well as “identity”: although “identity” has conventionally suggested a defining property of an individual or group, “identification” gestures to the ways we commit ourselves by our actions and beliefs to social engagements and struggles, irrespective of the group identity to which we “belong.” This is part of a politics of affinity, which Young defines as “the manner of sharing assumptions, affective bonding, and networking that recognizably differentiates groups from one another, but not according to some common nature. The salience of a particular person’s group affinities may shift according to the social situation or according to changes in his or her life” (172).

This understanding of difference helps articulate how identifications can shift and bind subjects together provisionally to work towards shared projects, and can also explain how the urge towards a common Canadian community within multiculturalism could limit variations from a central norm. Young, in fact, suggests that “the ideal of community exemplifies the logic of identity” and therefore exclusion, for it “entails a denial of difference and a desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity” (227-29). She offers instead “an ideal of city life as a vision of social relations affirming group difference . . . [;] as an openness to unassimilated otherness” (227). For Young, “city life” is “a form of social relations . . . [defined by] the being together of strangers” (237). In the theoretically ideal city, Young claims, differences do not need to be overcome for the sake of unity, mutual understanding is not requisite, and strangers can remain opaque to each other. The links between groups are established by affinity, “but the borders will be undecidable, and there will be much overlap and intermingling” (247).

Research on the role of cities in globalization supports this sense that cosmopolitan urban space offers a critical site for the formation of new and divergent subjectivities. As Homi K. Bhabha notes, “it is

to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation . . . [;] in the West, and increasingly elsewhere, it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out” (169-70).⁶ Subnational spaces are increasingly serving as illustrations of collective cultural fusion, for “the city marks the most intense points of transnational collisions of culture and demography produced by globalizing change” (Keith 4). These collisions produce heterogeneity: “The city is a difference machine” (Isin 49). Saskia Sassen explains that “the *national* as a container of social process and power is cracked enabling the emergence of a geography of politics and civics that links subnational spaces. Cities are foremost in this new geography” (72-73). A global civil society is shaped at the grassroots by the daily conditions that link people’s lives in cities, in the “microspaces of daily life” (Sassen 72). In the urban environment of dissent and coalition, as demonstrated in Dionne Brand’s novel, “Street-level politics [can] make possible the formation of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system” (Sassen 76, 78). These “new types of political subjects,” I argue here, can be shaped by identifications that crosscut the axes of defined social identities.

The framework of the city is predominant in *What We All Long For*, from its first sentence to its final paragraph. The novel centres on the friendships and half-hidden histories of four friends, Tuyen, Carla, Oku, and Jackie. All four have been born in Toronto to parents who migrated from other places and brought with them their histories of loss and hope: Tuyen’s parents are Vietnamese refugees who lost a son during their flight; Carla’s mother was Italian-Canadian and her father immigrated from Jamaica; Oku’s parents are from the Caribbean; and Jackie’s parents’ move from Halifax is both figured as a shift from *within* the African diaspora and also marked by the same hopes and all-or-nothing investment as a move between countries. The migratory paths that led their parents to Toronto may fit within multicultural narratives of optimism, upward mobility, or gratefulness — upon their arrival, they find these narratives waiting for them and scripting them, as Tuyen’s parents Cam and Tuan do: they become “defined by the city,” “lose other parts of themselves,” and begin to “see themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food,” despite their professional, but unrecognized, certifications (*What* 66-67). But the second generation

that Tuyen, Carla, Oku, and Jackie represent refuses national narratives of diasporic enclosure or “regular Canadian life,” for they recognize that they are not “the required race” for the latter, and “simply [fail] to see this as a possible way of being in the world” (47). Rather, they invent social identities for themselves based on the framework of the city: they “[run] 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” (20).

This shift from a national to a local, urban framework for multiculturalism and community formation offers a unique dynamic. The city, Brand makes clear, is a place where intimacy collides with anonymity, and where heterogeneity takes shape through the non-logical crosscutting of peoples’ lives. “Anonymity is the big lie of a city,” the narrator points out: people leave their “sovereign houses” and lives and “enter the crossroads of the city” where their aloneness is disrupted by their encounters with strangers and strange others (3). In spring especially, people “unravel” and “will walk up to perfect strangers and tell them anything” (2). This unravelling of the sovereign self takes on a larger, web-like form in the city as crossroads: “People turn into other people imperceptibly, unconsciously . . . [;] all 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 — the whole heterogeneous baggage falls out” (5). The word “ghosts” effectively captures the intimate yet historical vectors of the paths that lead city dwellers to each other, and that tangle their stories until “it’s impossible to tell one thread from another” (5). And their paths cross and stories interweave because of “chance”: “They think they’re safe, but they know they’re not. Any minute you can crash into someone else’s life, and if you’re lucky, it’s good, it’s like walking on light” (4).

Brand makes it clear that cities can be sites for more isolated enclosures of difference: the mapping of the city into ethnic neighbourhoods is one example of this. Yet *What We All Long For* offers a vision of heterogeneity that encompasses more than the ethnic diversity imagined within multiculturalism. Each of the four friends has “the feeling of living in two dimensions, the look of being on the brink, at the doorway listening for everything” (20). This describes not just their second generation status, living between their parents’ original homes and histories and their own birthplace. It also offers insight into the multiple ways these

characters exist outside of mainstream scripts. Brand makes it clear that the condition of exile is not unique to those who are cultural migrants within multiculturalism: there are other ways to be excluded from citizenship. The racism, homophobia, and economic risk experienced by the main characters make them metaphorical migrants, and make, for instance, the Pope Joan lesbian bar function for Tuyen like a comforting neighbourhood, where “all that couldn’t be lived outside was lived in here. . . . Any woman could drop her necessary defences to the city, put her legs up on a stool, and drift” (268). The main characters of Brand’s novel shape themselves through multiple experiences of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and gender identity. Official multiculturalism may not have the means to address these intersecting modes of difference, but through the city of Toronto, Brand offers an alternative model.

Three moments in the novel illustrate Brand’s vision for thinking through difference outside the national framework of ethnic identification. When Oku cooks a meal for his friends, the scene is full of signifiers of heterogeneity, coalition, and cosmopolitanism. The meal is made from ingredients on hand or gained by barter, suggesting provisionality; the group eating the meal is diverse yet linked through affinity and friendship; and it includes the graffiti crew, who are “fluent” and “stealthy” anarchic artists, whose art establishes a “critical presence” against “the dying poetics of the anglicized city” (134). Anarchy and affinity are here linked with culture, but differently from the “monoculture” of the bordered ethnicities of their parents’ generation. Urban graffiti, Michael Keith suggests, “makes multicultural visible” and “constructs an audience of strangers” (Keith 136, 142): “The unruly spaces of the city disrupt the cartography of the neatly mapped and segregated ethnic mosaic. Space simultaneously mediates creolisation and marks difference” (151). Oku’s cooking similarly eschews monoculture: what he makes is “vast and cosmopolitan” (Brand, *What* 132), and it bridges the training in cooking he has gained from their parents. His cosmopolitan combination of food cultures helps to heal Tuyen and Carla from their childhood experiences of “navigating different and sometimes opposed worlds” in which “food was the dead giveaway” (130). His hybrid cooking, in other words, resolves their experiences of discomfort in multiple settings, whether this be “mainstream” Canada (for which they are not the “required race”), or diasporic communities, in which Carla does not

fit just one, and where Tuyen cannot immerse herself because of her artistic sensibilities and lesbian identity.

The other two examples that Brand offers for thinking through difference outside of multiculturalism — the World Cup and the anti-globalization demonstrations — reveal the ways that local urban identifications can bypass the nation-state to reach for the global sphere. During the World Cup celebrations on the street, ethnicities and national affiliations are invoked and strengthened, at the same time as the celebrations offer a means for imagining identifications and loyalties that cross over ethnic or national borders. Brand writes, “Resurgent identities are lifted and dashed. Small neighbourhoods that seemed at least slightly reconciled break into sovereign bodies” (203). The identities available, though, are relational and shifting, and not necessarily tied to country of origin. When Tuyen hears a television announcer say about the winning Korean team and its Torontonians supporters, “I didn’t know we had a Korea Town in the city,” she thinks, “You fuckers live as if we don’t live here” (204). Here, the “we” of the announcer and the “you” and “we” of Tuyen’s rejoinder line up not with ethnic origin but rather with positions of racial and economic privilege and with Tuyen’s shared identification with the diasporic Korean community: “She wasn’t Korean, of course, but World Cup made her feel that way. No Vietnamese team had made it, so today she was Korean” (204).

Jenny Burman offers insight into the ways cities can enable multiple kinds of identification that are not limited by ethnic origin. She argues that cosmopolitan cities illustrate Svetlana Boym’s articulation of “diasporic intimacy,” which explains “strategies of finding a feeling to substitute for ‘home’”: “New intimacies don’t need to rely on a common origin — people come into intimate relation on the basis of a shared understanding of displacement and/or emplacement or a shared affective investment in the future of a common dwelling place” (Burman, “Absence” 287). The second-generation characters in *What We All Long For* are not seeking a substitute for “home,” but are seeking, and realizing, the intimate contact with others that shapes shared identifications and investment in a diasporic space like Toronto. Burman points out that the “changing social field affects all city residents, not only those who identify as transmigrant or displaced” (282). Burman’s definition of “diasporic city” as the “coming into relation with other city residents and their multiple affiliations” (282) brings to mind Avtar Brah’s useful

definition of “diaspora space.” Brah’s definition is particularly flexible and powerful for its reach beyond migration/ethnicity as determining factors in national diversity. She defines “diaspora space” as “a site of ‘migrancy’ and ‘travel’ which seriously problematises the subject position of the ‘native’ . . . [and which] includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put.’” Brah also argues that “diaspora space” “concerns the historically variable forms of *relationality* within and between diasporic formations . . . [and] centres on the *configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*” (182-83). This means that Tuyen’s gender identification, for example, can be explained by “diaspora space” not merely in a metaphorical fashion (that is, that lesbianism functions *like* migrancy in this novel) but rather as a relational subject position that both fits within and exceeds her parents’ migrant Vietnamese community — that “differentiate” it “internally” — and that thereby marks the ways differences and affiliations intersect in a space like Toronto. Moreover, the chosen affiliations of Tuyen’s friendship group create new genealogies that challenge the way diasporic theory can be underwritten by narratives of heterosexual reproduction of ethnicity and descent.

The novel goes further in its realization that the World Cup celebration in Toronto displays these multiple affiliations. After witnessing the emotional power of the celebration’s takeover of the streets, Oku, Carla, and Tuyen speculate on the meaning of the day. Oku declaims, “this city better be ready, this shit is coming down, check it. Days like this are a warning. A promise” (210). The celebrations flowing through the streets are reclamations of the city’s space by marginalized groups and demonstrations of longing and dissent. These groups’ national affiliations bypass the framework of the Canadian nation-state to tie them globally to countries of origin, and yet many in the crowd shift their affective investment to support each succeeding winning national team. This image suggests that the group energy tying the local to the global is not generated solely by ethnic loyalties; rather, its import has much wider implications. Carla makes this clear when she notes that “days like this” make her realize that her mother was also a “border crosser,” and that she “tried to step across the border of who she was and who she might be. They wouldn’t let her. She didn’t believe it herself so she stepped across into a whole other country” (212). Carla uses the metaphor of migration between countries to describe her mother’s suicide,

which underscores the narrative of multiculturalism that frames her mother's actual migration as well as the border crossing of her interracial relationship with Carla's father, but also opens it up to another application. This has the effect of widening the scope of the language of migrancy in this novel and of drawing attention to the multiple and intimate affiliations that mark the space of difference of the city. That such transformations could entail violence, or violent disruption of the status quo, is accepted by the three friends as part of the pattern they are witnessing: "they believed in it, this living. Its raw openness. They saw the street outside, its chaos, as their only hope. They felt the city's violence and its ardour in one emotion" (212).

The friends' vision of what difference and change could mean in city space is illustrated further in a third scene in the novel, embedded within the World Cup episode. Tuyen, in the middle of people "spinning on emotion" during World Cup and the crowds' reclamation of public space, remembers when she and Oku attended the anti-globalization demonstrations at the 2001 Summit of the Americas meetings in Quebec. They went there "trying to find something tingling on the skin, something where their blood rushed to their heads and they felt alive" (205). Oku joins the black anarchists, shouts poetry to the crowds, and is arrested; Tuyen photographically documents moments of the protest for future installations, looking for "what wasn't being seen" (206).

What counts with this brief episode, I believe, is not necessarily whether Brand advocates anti-globalization demonstrations as a solution to the violence of global capitalism. Rather, in the context of the novel's larger project of imagining a politics of difference outside of multiculturalism, the anti-globalization demonstrations raise the issue of a politics of affinity that joins diverse local struggles to the global sphere, bypassing the nation-state. Richard Day characterizes the anti-globalization movement as an example of the "newest social movements," which he describes as "those direct-action oriented elements within the anti-globalization movement . . . which are neither revolutionary nor reformist, but seek to block, resist and render redundant both corporate *and* state power in local, national and transnational contexts" ("From Hegemony" 733). In other words, they are centred in grassroots direct action rather than demands for state intervention. As such, Day argues, they exhibit anarchist tendencies and a logic of affinity, and therefore "desire to create alternatives to state and corpor-

ate forms of social organization,” and wish to enable “the emergence of new forms of subjectivity” and “new forms of community” (740). The city becomes a flashpoint in the overlapping of the local and global, and a new urban citizenship is formed under the banner of what Henri Lefebvre called “right to the city” (158). The anti-globalization protest invoked in Brand’s novel functions, at the very least, then, as an example of a coalitional or affinity-based politics that can imagine difference anarchically — that is, outside nation-state parameters — and imagine “new forms of subjectivity” and “new forms of community.”⁷ That this is so seems to me supported by the ways Tuyen’s portraits of the demonstration function: her photograph of “the declensions of Oku’s body being dragged to the van” as he is arrested recalls her parents watching her brother Quy drifting away from them during their refugee flight (206). Carla views the picture of Oku and is reminded “of the dream of her mother climbing onto a chair” to throw herself over her apartment balcony (206). The links between these intuitive responses to the portrait are intimate and web-like: they bind the different stories of the novel, and symbolize in narrative form the nonlogical or provisional linkages between social identifications and struggles that make up affinity group organization.

The final example of a city-based politics of difference centres on Tuyen’s art. That her work is focused on and represents the city and its heterogeneity is clear: “she would turn around and find frames filled in with the life of the city. . . . On any given day, on any particular corner, on any crossroads, you can find the city’s heterogeneity, like some physical light” (142). For her, the incandescence of the city lies in its heterogeneity: “it’s polyphonic, murmuring. This is what always filled Tuyen with hope, this is what she thought her art was about — the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up into a kind of language, yet indescribable” (149). Her *lubaio* installation will take these collected longings and “make them public” (151): she models it on the Chinese signposts where people “pin messages against the government,” whereas in this case the audience will “post messages . . . to the city” — the element of dissent, it is implied, remains (17). The collage-like installation, as yet unfinished, may be composed of three rooms with “diaphanous cylindrical curtain[s]” featuring the carved railway tie *lubaio*, videos, photographs, and the city’s longings written on cloth (307-08). Tuyen is inspired by Surrealism,

and through this connection we are given her metaphor for what she creates: “The *lubaio*, the bits of wood, the photographs, the longings were what she brought to the cave to be handled, and thought about, and made into something she could use to create alternate, unexpected realities, exquisite corpses” (224). Exquisite corpse, or *cadavre exquis*, in Surrealist practice involves the random collective piecing together of parts of images into an art object.⁸ It is adapted from a parlour game in which a sheet of paper is passed around a roomful of people, each adding a word without access to the full text (Rubin 278). What results, in its translation to the field of visual art, is a collage made of associational and fragmented images, often of body parts. The techniques of both collage and exquisite corpse function to demonstrate relationship through metaphor. They are “highly flexible means of representation and transformation” that involve the “conjunction of seemingly disparate elements” (Grant 273, 297). William S. Rubin cites Max Ernst on the virtues of Surrealist collage, of which *cadavre exquis* is an example: it is “a meeting of two [or more] distant realities on a plane foreign to them both” and a “culture of systematic displacement and its effects” (Rubin 95). The representational power of collage for diasporic artists in particular is articulated by Kobena Mercer in a study of African American artist Romare Bearden, where he argues that collage expresses “the hyphenated character of diaspora identities”: “In semiotic terms, the formal principle of collage and montage lies in the purposive selection of signifying elements, found or taken from disparate sources, that are combined in unexpected juxtapositions to create something new that exists as an independent form in its own right. . . . [They] articulat[e] an anti-essentialist understanding of black identity” (126). Through collage, Mercer argues, “we can glimpse a critically cosmopolitan counter-tradition that flows from the condition of ‘double consciousness’ that differentiates diaspora life” (132). J. Michael Dash similarly attributes to Surrealist practices the ability to represent dynamics of difference: “The constant and restless negotiation of dense, specific, resistant space is central to the idea of a poetics of creolization, which is not about hybrid syntheses, but about inventing routes between zones of irreducible difference” (105; qtd. in Richardson 83).

Brand’s invocation of *cadavre exquis* and Surrealist collage through Tuyen’s installations, then, can illustrate an individual or a community’s diasporic experience: Tuyen suggests that next to the official story of

their migration that Cam and Tuan told the Canadian authorities, their other personal reasons for leaving and the trauma represented by their photographs of the young Quy “told another, a parallel story, a set of possible stories, an exquisite corpse” (*What* 225). But more than this, it can also illustrate the relational dynamics of community and difference in local/global Toronto. The exquisite corpse of Tuyen’s *lubaio* demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the body politic and its paradoxical relationships built along many irreducible axes. What joins the parts together may be, like Surrealist creations and exquisite corpses, arbitrary, irrational, or “marvelous” (Grant 271), “exploiting the mystique of accident” (Rubin 278), as demonstrated by the collisions of life histories and the politics of difference in Brand’s city. The “metaphoric displacement” (Rubin 278) of Surrealism strengthens the sense that Tuyen’s heterogeneous city is shaped around web-like crossroads. The collective — but not undifferentiated — nature of the endeavour also highlights the communal impulse of Tuyen’s work, for the exquisite corpse acts out the Surrealist imperative that “poetry must be made by all and not by one” (Lautréamont qtd. in Rubin 278). To bolster and flesh out this connection, one need only note that immediately following Brand’s invocation of the exquisite corpse, Oku, Carla, and Tuyen listen to Ornette Coleman’s jazz piece “The Jungle is a Skyscraper,” and in its “dissonance” Oku hears “different instruments playing in different keys but in another communion,” and Tuyen hears that “Every horn is alone, but they’re together, crashing” (228-29). That the “crashing” or accidents result in a beautiful dissonance and “communion” — and “alternate, unexpected realities” (224) — articulates succinctly the ways that the city in *What We All Long For* permits a space for the unscripted and unresolved crosscutting of differences.

The image of the exquisite corpse, though, does function ambivalently in Brand’s novel. In the same way that the dissonance and dissenting energy of the heterogeneous city street during World Cup or the anti-globalization protests can be both euphoric and violent, the exquisite corpse can invoke both collage and dismemberment. When Tuyen tells Carla that the *lubaio* might be a “relic” (158), it calls forth the holiness of memory and longing, and the “veneration” of a “precious or valuable thing” (“Relic”). The longings of the city — everything from a wish for “better knees” or more wives, to feeling “safe, like when I was a child” (*What* 150-51) — are the murmurings that weave together to make the

city hum with the stories of the lives and migrations that have led people there. But the longings can also be “hideous” memories of “bodies hurt or torn apart or bludgeoned” (158): the body made of parts in an exquisite corpse could just as easily evoke that figure’s tearing apart, or the scattered body parts of a saint. A relic is also “that which remains or is left behind,” the “residue” “of a nation or people” (“Relic”). Quy, her lost brother, is the “precious” (*What* 6) thing that is left behind, and for whom his parents unceasingly long. His body and spirit have undergone unspeakable violence. That his body and face do not match — his face has “the innocence of a child’s,” but he says, “my body looked older than my face” (284) — makes him a composite exquisite corpse, mirroring the violence done to his own and others’ bodies in his presence. 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 or incorporated into “another communion” (228). He haunts his family as he haunts the novel, interrupting the numbered chapters with his unnumbered first person soliloquies. His encounter with his own kin may be, like the accidental intimacies of cities, “some stranger coincidence, this one perhaps love” (310). Tuyen’s new, if wary, sense of affinity with him articulates the city’s “being together of strangers”: “Of course it was her brother Quy. Of course it wasn’t. What difference would it make? This man had arrived in their orbit, and he was therefore theirs” (298). Yet Quy plans to “take [them] for everything [they’ve] got” (310). If cosmopolitan cities can reach towards utopias of difference and affinity, they can also produce what Erik Swyngedouw names “forlorn dystopias where difference becomes expressed and experienced as exclusion, domination or repression” (138). Tuyen’s *lubaio* may translate the fragments of diaspora into beauty, turning personal and unofficial histories into a community’s messages to each other. It may give concrete form to the particularized local political struggles that reach past the national framework to insert themselves into the global. But the legacy of damage represented by Quy, and the evocation of dismemberment contained in the exquisite corpse or relic, gives to Brand’s exploration of the politics of difference a painful edge.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I gratefully acknowledge the support of a UW/SSHRC seed grant that funded the research for this paper.

NOTES

¹The TransCanada project is an Institute housed at the University of Guelph, created by Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki, which has fostered public forums, workshops, and conferences.

²The Preamble to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act states, "the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society" (6). Augie Fleras points out that the Canadian state has a "self-proclaimed right to define what differences count, what counts as difference" (10). Sneja Gunew argues that "multiculturalism is often perceived as a coded way to indicate racialized differences" (16).

³In her introduction to a special issue of *Topia* focused on diasporic and transnational studies in Canada, Jenny Burman points out that "In Canada, work in transnational and diaspora studies deals with a set of circumstances made distinct by official multiculturalism policy; colonization and the ensuing co-presence of Anglophone, francophone and First Nations Canadians; and specific immigration patterns and racialization policies" ("Diasporic" 7).

⁴See, for example, Augie Fleras' assessment that "Multiculturalism is fundamentally about Canada-building: That is, to create a coherent and prosperous Canada by incorporating diversity as legitimate and integral without undermining the interconnectedness of the whole or distinctiveness of the parts in the process" (10). Richard Day also proposes that "the reality of Canadian diversity is symbiotically dependent upon [a] fantasy of unity" (*Multiculturalism* 9).

⁵I read Rinaldo Walcott's "Against Institution" after writing this essay, and I was interested to note that he also marks an "urgent need for a return to the collective" via "creole solidarity," and points to the presence of "everyday" or "popular multiculturalism" in Brand's *What We All Long For*, attributing the term to Himani Bannerji. See Walcott, "Against" 19-22; Bannerji 5.

⁶I thank Pamela Mansutti for drawing my attention to this Bhabha quotation.

⁷I speculate that Brand chose to focus her novel on these twentysomething youths and emerging social movements precisely to allow an exploration of the forms of social dissent and optimistic vision available in the post-9/11 political environment.

⁸I am grateful to Allen Finn for alerting me to the connection between Surrealism and "exquisite corpse."

WORKS CITED

- Bannerji, Himani. *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' P, 2000.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of The Modern Nation." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 139-70.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2001.
- . *Thirsty*. Toronto: McClelland, 2002.
- . *What We All Long For*. Toronto: Knopf, 2005.
- Brydon, Diana. "Dionne Brand's Global Intimacies: Practising Affective Citizenship." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76.3 (2007): 990-1006.
- . "A Place on the Map of the World: Locating Hope in Shani Mootoo's *He Drown She in the Sea* and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*." *MaComère* 8 (2007): 94-111.
- . "Metamorphoses of a Discipline: Rethinking Canadian Literature Within Institutional Contexts." Kamboureli and Miki 1-16.
- Burman, Jenny. "Absence, 'Removal,' and Everyday Life in the Diasporic City." *Space and Culture* 9.3 (2006): 279-93.
- . "Diasporic Pasts and Futures: Transnational Cultural Studies in Canada." Introduction. *Topia* 17 (2007): 5-10.
- Canada. Dept. of Multiculturalism and Citizenship. *The Canadian Multiculturalism Act: A Guide for Canadians*. Ottawa: Communications Branch, 1990.
- Dash, J. Michael. "Caraïbe Fantôme: The Play of Difference in the Francophone Caribbean." *Yale French Studies* 103 (2003): 93-105.
- Day, Richard J.F. "From Hegemony to Affinity." *Cultural Studies* 18.5 (2004): 716-48.
- . *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.
- Dobson, Kit. "'Struggle Work': Global and Urban Citizenship in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31.2 (2006): 88-104.
- Fleras, Augie. "Multiculturalism as Critical Discourse: Contesting Modernity." *Canadian Issues* (2002): 9-11.
- Gingell, Susan. "The Absence of Seaming, Or How I Almost Despair of Dancing: How Postcolonial are Canada's Literary Institutions and Critical Practices?" Moss 97-110.
- Goldman, Marlene. "Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand." *Canadian Literature* 182 (2004): 13-28.
- Grant, Kim. *Surrealism and the Visual Arts: Theory and Reception*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Gunew, Sneja. *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Inin, Egin. *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. Preface. Kamboureli and Miki vii-xv.
- Kamboureli, Smaro, and Roy Miki, eds. *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007.
- Keith, Michael. *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Lefebvre, Henri. "The Right to the City." *Writings on Cities*. Trans. and comp. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. 147-59.
- Mercer, Kobena. "Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen." *Cosmopolitan*

- Modernisms*. Ed. Kobena Mercer. London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Cambridge: MIT P, 2005. 124-45.
- Moss, Laura. Preface. Moss, ed. v-viii.
- , ed. *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003.
- Quigley, Ellen. "Picking the deadlock of legitimacy: Dionne Brand's 'noise like the world cracking.'" *Canadian Literature* 186 (2005): 48-67.
- Richardson, Michael. "Surrealism Faced with Cultural Difference." Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* 68-85.
- "Relic." Def. 1a, 1c, 3a. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.
- Rubin, William S. *Dada and Surrealist Art*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1968.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Cities in a World Economy*. 3rd ed. London: Sage, 2006.
- Swyngedouw, Erik. "Exit 'Post' — The Making of 'Glocal' Urban Modernities." *Future City*. Ed. Stephen Read, Jürgen Rosemann, and Job van Eldijk. New York: Spon, 2005. 125-44.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. "Against Institution: Established Law, Custom, or Purpose." Kamboureli and Miki 17-23.
- . *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. Toronto: Insomniac, 1997.
- Wanyeki, Lynne, Nikola Maria de Marin, and Charmaine Perkins. "Interview with Dionne Brand: Owning the Language." *Kinesis* (1993): 20-21.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990.