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"A yellow mote of sand dreams in the polyp's eye …"

On Intertextuality and the Formation of "New Narratives" in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit der Verwendung von Intertexten und kulturellen Artefakten in What We All Long For *(2005) und mit der Frage, wie durch den Einsatz von Intertextualität eine Ablösung veralteter – oft weißer, männlicher, heterosexueller – Kulturdiskurse erfolgt. Intertexte sind von entscheidender Bedeutung für die literarische Analyse der Hauptfiguren: Tuyens Kunst scheint inspiriert zu sein durch die Konzeptkunst von Fluxus und vor allem durch die revolutionären Installationen Yoko Onos. Okus „Word!" verweist einerseits auf die jahrhundertealte Tradition schwarzer Musik in Nordamerika und andererseits auf die kanadische und internationale Dub-Poetry-Kultur.*

Abstract

This essay is concerned with intertextuality and the use of cultural artifacts in Dionne Brand's What We All Long For *(2005), aiming to analyze how Brand achieves a shift of focus from white, male, heterosexual cultural discourses towards multicultural, female and homosexual ones. Intertextual references are of central importance in Brand's novel, both as structural devices and as a means to characterize the main protagonists: Tuyen's art is reminiscent of Fluxus and Yoko Ono's installation art. Oku's "Word!" is contextualized into centuries of black North American music as well as the Canadian and international spoken-word art of dub poetry.*

Résumé

Le présent article se penche sur l'utilisation d'intertextes et d'artéfacts culturels dans What We All Long For *(2005) et sur la façon dont l'emploi de l'intertextualité peut supplanter des discours culturels désuets, souvent issus de milieux blancs, masculins et hétérosexuels. Les intertextes jouent un rôle essentiel dans l'analyse littéraire des personnages principaux: l'art de Tuyen semble s'inspirer de l'art conceptuel de Fluxus et des instructions et installations révolutionnaires de Yoko Ono. Le « Word ! » de Oku, quant à lui, renvoie d'une part à la tradition séculaire de la musique noire d'Amérique du Nord et d'autre part à la culture canadienne et internationale de la* dub poetry.

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Introduction

> I’ve always wanted to write about the emergent city [and] about interactions among people in that city, how it works, what happens. I think the city is a source of incredible energy. I‘m not saying, that it‘s always positive energy but I love that and I want to describe that. (Dionne Brand, qtd. in Lake/Holtz 2007, 33)

In her 2005 novel *What We All Long For* Dionne Brand invites the reader to roam the streets and sociocultural settings of one of those major sources of energy within the – still young – 21st century: Toronto. An insight into the city’s past cultural space – the white, often Eurocentric ‘Good’ – is offered, while the public realm is shown in its process of “colourizing beautifully” (Brand 1994a, 77) and in its vigorous shift towards a heterogeneity that allows for an optimistic outlook on the multi-directional future of the metropolis. Through the focal points of a culturally, racially and sexually diverse set of characters the reader can indeed watch a city emerge.

Dionne Brand’s ambitions are, and always have been, centering on the emancipation from a restrictive white cultural canon, which, not such a long time ago, was overwhelming in its presence, not just in literature but also in music, in visual arts, and in all kinds of media. This is where Brand sets out to demonstrate that this canon, though greatly marketable, was never actually representative for Canadian society and especially not for Toronto. To illustrate the insufficiency of former white cultural canons in their dissociation from non-white[1] canons, Smaro Kamboureli explains that the subtitle of her anthology of Canadian literature contains “one word too many”: the title *Canadian Multicultural Literature* is not to be read as presenting multicultural literature as one peripheral fraction of Canadian literature in an otherwise white canon, when in fact multicultural literature constitutes that Canadian canon (Kamboureli 1996, 1). She says:

> My selection of contributors was intended to reflect, in part, a counterreading of what we have come to call mainstream and minority literatures in Canada. Multicultural literature is not minority writing, for it does not raise issues that are of minor interest to Canadians. Nor is it, by any standard, of lesser quality than the established literary tradition. Its thematic concerns are of such a diverse range that they show the binary structure of ‘centre’ and ‘margins’, which has for so long informed discussions of Canadian literature, to be a paradigm of the history of political and cultural affairs in Canada. (Kamboureli 1996, 3)

1 The term ‘non-white’, here, shall be used in accordance with Dionne Brand’s own explanation of it – acknowledging its inadequacy to describe the individual experiences of all the groups designated thus (Brand/Bhaggiyadatta 1986, iii).

These lines may also suit as a good description of the struggle Dionne Brand has been involved in ever since her first entry into the realm of the Torontonian black community: the struggle against the racist marginalization of Canada's black population or of any group that might be labeled 'minority' on the grounds of race, origin, gender or sexuality. It is a work against 'exoticizing' which she has pursued in her poetry, her fiction, her essayistic oeuvre, and in her documentaries, whether written or in film. The high-handed conceit that sometimes lies in naming a group, a literature, an art form 'ethnic'[2] is opposed in *What We All Long For*, as in all of Brand's other texts, by showing and analyzing the lives of the people who might be labeled thus by a white and, in tendency, Eurocentric culture.

What We All Long For breaks open any form of categorization by showing us the personal development of the main characters – and the development of the city along with them. It contextualizes the characters into a young, heterogeneous, urban culture by contrasting them against the histories of their families – against the members of the previous generations, that is, who could not benefit in the same way from the multiplicity of the city. The characters' childhood and adolescence is set in a post-colonial educational system that holds nothing for them (19).[3] Tuyen, Oku, Carla, Jackie and their generation set out to form a culture of their own, while at the same time they are contextualized into a partly diasporic, tidalectic,[4] non-white culture that has been around, and influential, for decades – in the case of music even for centuries – although marketwise and politically pushed to the periphery by WASP culture.

The text achieves this cultural contextualization through an overwhelming amount of intertextuality[5] that is inserted maybe not so much on the grounds of post-structuralist thought. Rather, the references in the text go to show that the high amount of shared cultural experience that tends to be included automatically into the literatures of whites – on the assumption: 'everybody will recognize this' – is equally present in the literatures of the marginalized groups. Because they are inserted so subtly into the sweeping dynamic of the plot, intertextual references in

2 Because it implicitly subordinates all the groups labeled 'ethnic' to the one group deeming itself 'major' or 'normal' – western, whatever that again might be, and white.

3 All page numbers, unless otherwise noted, refer to: Dionne Brand, 2008 (2005), *What We All Long For*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books.

4 Kamau Brathwaite coined this term (tide – dialect) to describe movement in Caribbean peoples' languages and the switching between codes in his poetry. Tidalectic movement embraces optimistic aspects of diasporic movement – all the positive choice that lies in mobility – as well as the racial oppression which caused it in the first place (cf. Reckin 2003). Dionne Brand says: "I move as the world moves as I move in it. I try to keep change as a thing I must do – so you don't step into comfortableness about your work or the world" (qtd. in Lake/Holtz 2007, 33).

5 Inter*text*, here, does not exclusively reference literary productions; it also applies to the cultural *text*ure that includes all kinds of art forms and media, such as music, painting, photography etc.

What We All Long For might easily be missed at first glance and yet exactly those references are essential constituents for the text's complexity. They set the characters' fictional lives on the ground of an actual culture; they make sure that the characters cannot be so easily waved away as random, single examples.

Brathwaite's *Coral* as a central metaphor in *What We All Long For*

Throughout her career as a writer and cultural critic, Dionne Brand has always been influenced by and reacting to the works of other distinguished artists and intellectuals as for example Kamau Brathwaite, who is not just one of the most important writers in the Caribbean literary canon; his poetry is also a major ingredient to Brand's personal canon,[6] not only due to tidalectic language in it but because of the interweaving and connective quality that pervades Brathwaite's complete oeuvre:

> [L]ayering is emblematic of Brathwaite's work; not only does he combine aspects of different cultures – Caribbean, African, Amerindian, American – but he also combines different discourses – literary, historical, sociological – to create mosaic writings in poetry and prose. (Josephs 2003, 2)

In *What We All Long For* Brand creates a similar kind of mosaic, and so it is somewhat consistent to find a line from Brathwaite's poem "Coral"[7] to function as a central idea in the text:

> A yellow mote of sand dreams in the polyp's eye;
> The coral needs this pain.
> The poet Kamau Brathwaite wrote this. It could be this city's mantra. It could escape and mingle with the amplifying city, especially on Mondays.
> A yellow mote of sand dreams in the polyp's eye;
> The coral needs this pain. (54)

By repeating the verse lines in succession to the interpolation of the narrator's comment on Brathwaite, they indeed bear the rhythm of a mantra, of song. This paper also quotes them in the title because they seem like a key to the structure

6 Brand says that she thought Brathwaite had never yielded to the Eurocentrism of the postcolonial Caribbean authorities and the British and U.S. market, while she felt that many other authors of his generation – as V. S. Naipaul, for instance – had (Butling 2005, 68).

7 "Coral" first appeared in: Edward Brathwaite, 1969, *Islands*, London: Oxford University Press, 75-77; this edition shall be quoted in the following. *Islands* is part of the *Arrivants* trilogy: cf. Kamau Brathwaite, 1973, *The Arrivants: Rights of Passage. Masks. Islands*, New York: Oxford University Press.

of the story in *What We All Long For*: A grain of sand causes pain in a polyp, and thus forces it to move, to change and to grow – not by removing the grain, for that would be impossible, but by inclusion of that grain. The growth of every individual polyp, then, will result in the growth of the coral on which they live. The coral is indeed dependent on the individual pain that every polyp feels in order to achieve collective growth. In the passage quoted above the ocean imagery of Brathwaite's is applied to living in "the current[s] of the city" (42). Toronto is compared to a growing coral, driven by the moving masses of people living and working on its surface, that are, in turn, also driven by something, some grain – individual pain.

While first giving an impression of Toronto's work- and street life by zooming in on the masses of nameless people, the fifth chapter of *What We All Long For* is then continued by exemplifying the grain-polyp-coral-linkage: Tuyen's grain – the story of her family – is related. It is no coincidence that the quotation from "Coral" is inserted into a chapter circling around Tuyen, for she is, in a way, the central character of the book. The other main characters, however, as well as most of the minor characters, also react to some disturbance, an individual grain, in their lives which causes them to develop. The characters are in transition, always working towards the next versions of themselves and, along with them, the urban setting changes as well.

Tuyen, Oku, Carla and Jackie are part of the first generation of young adults which creates Toronto's new culture, the culture of that city "that's never happened before" (Brand 2002, 11). Tuyen, Carla and Oku were "[…] born in the city from people born elsewhere" (20). In a way, this also applies to Jackie: while she is a child of Toronto, her parents are basically 'immigrants' from Nova Scotia. The friendship between Tuyen, Carla, Jackie and Oku roots in their childhood days "of opposition to the state of things" (19); they move between two worlds – the system of their parents and the system of WASP dominated culture – and they need to oppose both in order to find a third system: their own.

> They're not immigrants so they're not grateful for the marginal existence they're afforded. […] They talk one language in the classroom and another at home; they think their mothers dupes for slugging it out in hospitals and nursing homes. They see weakness in that and in the promise of making it. (Brand 1994b, 101)

> There was an assumption among them that their families were boring and uninteresting and a general pain, and best kept hidden […]. Only once in a while did they sigh in resignation to some ridiculous request from their families to fit in and stop making trouble.
> 'Yes, Ma. I'll get a blonde wig and fit in all right!' Tuyen once yelled at her mother. […]. (19)

All four of the main characters Tuyen, Carla, Oku and Jackie feel the 'mote of sand' in their lives which, in a language that is exclusively their own, they dismiss with "Anyways!" (19). Jackie, however, stands apart from the other three since she is not "soul searching" (13) to the same extent.[8] She is a crucial figure nevertheless, because one of her functions in the text lies with reflecting on the historical Canadian racism, that has nothing to do with the immigration waves from the Caribbean and elsewhere, and that was glossed over by a white society in Canada and in Toronto the 'Good' that prided itself of not tolerating racism.[9]

The plot around Oku, Carla and Tuyen, on the other hand, is structured in comparable ways: they all have to include a 'mote of sand' into their lives, some disturbance or trauma, which they flee from. Automatisms of denial protect Tuyen from her family's trauma – Tuyen's lost brother; they protect Carla from the terrible loss of her mother which will inevitably lead to a second loss – the loss of Jamal, Carla's brother; and they protect Oku from the fear of having to face the one task unavoidable for him: emancipating from what it potentially means to be a young black male in a metropolis of racialized masculinity stereotype. Contrary to these strategies of evasion, the three characters make use of their very individual modes of reflection: Oku creates poetry and tunes his emotions in the rhythms of jazz; Carla makes use of speed, physical and psychic motion – restlessness. The most stunning mode of reflection, however, can be found in Tuyen's world of art, because she does not only analyze her own life by it; she creates a panoramic view across life in the city – a view across urban space in general as well as the specific swirl of Toronto in its transition towards a new 'world in a city'.

Tuyen's *lubaio* and the mediation of the camera's eye

> Make a wish
> Write it down on a piece of paper
> Fold it and tie it around a branch of a Wish Tree
> Ask your friends to do the same
> Keep wishing
> Until the branches are covered with wishes (Ono 1996)

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8 There are also structural hints for this standing apart: Jackie is given less space in the text. She is not part of the introductory image of the "free" (3) young people Tuyen, Carla and Oku on the subway train; neither is she part of the key scene of dancing to *The Jungle is a Skyscraper* (228-234). She also does not participate in the "Word!"-sequences (16, 210-212), which are essential in the text.

9 Brand's work documents how racism pervaded the nation during the 1980s: "Most people, if asked what a typical Canadian looked like, would conjure up the image of a white man or woman. It is important to study why and how we conjure up that image. […] While it takes less than one generation for a white immigrant to become Canadian, two centuries of Black settlement is still not incorporated into the image of Canada. […] Canada does not generally see itself as a racist society. It has left that reputation to its neighbor to the south" (Brand/Bhaggiyadatta 1986, 2-4).

> 'I'm making a fucking *lubaio* […] because I am not interested in the idea of life, death, fertility, hope, or anything, and because Dali's *Reclining Woman Wearing a Chemise* looks like a dead slaughtered doll, and I can see preying eagles, broken arrows, and jazz musicians in Jackson Pollock, and because I believe that Man Ray and Duchamp were lovers. […] And because there's some ancient Chinese-Vietnamese shit that's my shit and I'm taking it. Okay? […] So my installation is to reclaim …'
> […] she explained the plan to make a pulley with a seat so that she could move up and down the *lubaio*, engraving and encrusting figures and signs. At the planned installation, which would be her most ambitious, she would have the audience post messages on the *lubaio*. Messages to the city. (16-17)

The lines quoted above and summed up by Oku with "Word!" (16) probably show best why Tuyen's role in the text is so special: these are the opening pages to the story and Tuyen is given space to explain the subject of her art, her program, which, at the same time, could be seen as the program of the whole novel. On the plot level, we learn of Tuyen's resolve to reject an antiquated white art market and culture that thinks in terms of binary oppositions and labels, such as "[…] life, death, fertility, hope […]" (16). On the structural level, she gets introduced as the main reflecting figure of the story as we witness her planning of her art. On the meta-textual layer we find Tuyen's creation of a new culture supported by an accumulation of intertextual references, which, one might argue, exhibit Dionne Brand's own politics too: one could find feminism in the critique of Dali's sexism;[10] non-white cultures, First Nation tribes and black musicians, are conjured up via the allusion to the multiplicity in Pollock's style of painting; hetero-normativity in historiography is criticized by speculating about a possible love affair between two male icons in twentieth century art.[11]

10 Additionally, Dali's fame as the one major representative of surrealism in painting is questioned by contrasting him to the feminist surrealist Remedios Varo, who is quoted repeatedly in the text; and the fact that Varo's art has to be "discovered" by Tuyen (115), instead of being equally accessible as Dali's, here again exemplifies the form of canon revision that runs through the body of the text: revision from white to non-white, male to female, heterosexual to homosexual.

11 Each of these allusions that spread across the body of the text potentially trigger a whole chain of associations themselves. To give just one example, the connecting of the two suppressed groups (black and native) to Pollock's art, is instantly reminiscent of Patti Smith's aggressive hymn against labeling and 'othering' – "Rock'n'Roll Nigger": "[…] Jimi Hendrix was a nigger/ Jesus Christ and grandma too/ Jackson Pollock was a nigger/ niggerniggernigger-niggerniggerniggernigger!" (Smith 1978). From there, again, one could follow Dionne Brand's reflections on the usurpation of black culture by white media: she calls Elvis Presley a "culture-vulture" and Jimi Hendrix a "lost brother" (Brand 1994a, 70).

In the very beginning, Tuyen is thus presented as the main reflecting character and she is a mediator, a translator in many ways.[12] She, just like her brother Binh, serves as an interpreter for her parents, not only language-wise but also culture-wise:[13] "For Tuan and Cam, the children were their interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life" (67). Tuyen automatically assumes that function since she and Binh are native Torontonians and their "umbilical cords [are] also attached to this mothering city" through which their identity is construed as "Western" (67). The image of the city as mothering anthropoid (cf. Augustine 1991) is indeed important here, for it is this mother of "polyphonic murmuring" (149) that teaches Tuyen to move sovereignly between worlds that are of solid outlines and fixed in their oppositions, while she and her generation constitute the 'fluxus' in between – which is really where the future of the city lies.[14] While Tuyen's disposition to grasp and reflect is nurtured by the city's heterogeneity and the masses of thought-material it provides, it is triggered by her 'grain of sand' which is to be found in her family's trauma: the loss of Quy. This fierce disturbance, the loss of the brother she never knew, is what inevitably leads her on to becoming an artist:

> Her eyes took in every human experience as an installation,[15] her lids affecting the shuttering mechanism of a camera. […]
> When she closed her eyes at night, she herself saw Quy floating away. So Tuyen kept clicking. She kept looking at what wasn't being seen, as her brother must have been unseen […]. (206)

12 This idea again corresponds with Kamau Brathwaite's intermediate politics of translation and transcription (Collins 2003, 2).

13 Tuyen does not only explain 'western' Toronto life to her parents; it also works the other way round: her work consists in "uncomfortable moments of explaining her parents to the world" (227).

14 'Fluxus' here denotes mobility and change; additionally it is the name of a post-dadaist art movement that started a revolution on the international art market in the late 1950s and early 60s – a form of art that Tuyen's own artistic concepts seem to be modeled upon. Ken Friedman assorts twelve features to the Fluxus program: "[…] globalism, the unity of art and life, intermedia, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, presence in time and musicality […]" (Friedman 1998, ix) to which one might add a great deal of satirical humor. One of the pioneering artists in Fluxus was and still is Yoko Ono, who today seems to be more famous for being John Lennon's widow; which of course again might be seen as typical of a western, white, male cultural discourse – a discourse that Dionne Brand criticizes.

15 Ono says: "Everything you do in life is an event" (Johnstone 2005, colour section). While the cultural backgrounds and biographies of Yoko Ono and her fictional heir Tuyen are not necessarily comparable, their art concepts certainly are. Also, Yoko Ono has always collaborated with other artists – Angela Davis and Ornette Coleman among them, both of whom Dionne Brand quotes as an inspiration for her own work.

In the end, Tuyen's camera becomes a mediation-tool as this time she has to translate something to herself – the fact that she cannot avoid her "yellow mote of sand" (Brathwaite 1969a, 75) any longer:

> Tuyen snapped this series of shots, her shock translated into the mechanical clicking of the shutter. Her camera almost slipped from her hand when she saw the man's face. […] She suddenly realized that she had been holding on so tightly to the camera that her fingers hurt. […] She had been carrying the camera like a delicate glass prism in which she had captured a stunning red bird. (208-209)

It is remarkable here, that only after Tuyen has looked at her grain of sand through her very specific mode of reflection – art, the camera's eye – she is beginning to grasp it and to accept the possibility of having to include it.

Isabel Carrera Suárez has called Tuyen a "[…] bridge-building figure who aspires to a deeper reading of the town and works at the intersection of the public and the personal, the nexus between both that cities represent" (Carrera Suárez 2008, 195). This indeed seems to be Tuyen's most important function in the text; and she becomes an interpreter in that sense too. She is, however, not only translating between the private space and the public space. Her art represents the in-between of cultures, codes, temporal structures such as generations; it questions the idea of human identity as being something fixed. Her art takes on the never ending task of recording the multiplicity of the city, without of course pinning it down or trying to categorize it – the impossibility of conservation indeed being reflected upon ironically in her bubble wrap installation "Traveller" (64).

Due to her childhood obligation of translating Tuyen has become a "[…] Dadaist, making everything useful useless and vice versa in her chaotic apartment" (68). Conceptually, her art is reminiscent of Fluxus and especially of Yoko Ono's installations. In the beginning of this chapter Ono's *Wish Tree* project is quoted and Tuyen's combination of her *lubaio* with the "book of longings" (151) seems to be modeled upon a *Wish Tree* or maybe even upon Ono's *Imagine Peace Tower*, which represents a collection of all the wishes from the tree installations:

> Yoko Ono: I'm keeping all the wishes from all the countries, although I never read any of them. […]
> Hans Ulrich Obrist: It's a growing archive?
> Yoko Ono: It's not an archive. I'll tell you what's going to happen: every piece of paper has a wish on it, I don't read it, and all of them will be put in one big tower of a sculpture, like a totem. It will be a very powerful sculpture … a tower which contains wishes of the people of the world of our time. (cf. Obrist 2002)

Ono's art is paralleled in Tuyen's installations:

> Tuyen's studio apartment was a mess of wood rails and tree stumps, twigs and rope, debris, really, which she had picked up walking along the beaches, and lumber she'd bought, all of which she was making into a great figure, a *lubaio*, which, when she was finished, she said, would fill the entire studio apartment from ceiling to floor. (14)
> […] this is what she thought her art was about – the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up to a kind of language, yet indescribable. (149)
> "[…] I'm going to fill it with every longing in the city. […] Maybe the *lubaio* is a relic, maybe I'll use it as a contrast." (158)

Another example might be found in Ono's *fluxbox* items,[16] which are echoed in Tuyen's imaginary family-box installation:

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

It is interesting, here, to note how the images of water, flowing and invisibility are inserted, for this is exactly what lies aground the idea of Fluxus, the name of which already is the antithesis to stasis and refers to mobility, to flowing water. The art movement of Fluxus was working against a white Eurocentric art tradition[17] that was structured around institutions – around authoritative interpretation and conservation of an artwork that was finished and static. Fluxus circled around the process of making art, using ready-made objects in installations in order to create "[…] alternate, unexpected realities, exquisite corpses" (224), as Tuyen would think of them.[18]

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16 As are reviewed for example in: Iles (1999, 62); Rothfuss (2000, 130). One exciting box item is *A Box of Smile* (1967-1997) – a square box that has a mirror for its bottom surface. Upon being opened by the viewer, it reflects the startled smile of the viewer – thus imitating the shutter of a camera. If the other sides and the lid of the box consist of polished metal, it shows a never ending number of reflections of the viewer's face, which could stand for the many facets of a personality – facets that are indeed not "discernible to the naked eye" (126) as long as the box remains shut.

17 "PURGE THE WORLD OF EUROPANISM!" as the *Manifesto* would call it (Maciunas 1963).

18 A compelling introductory overview on Fluxus can be found, for example, in Higgins (2002). Tuyen's "exquisite corpses" (224) also refer back to an early form of ready-made, the *cadavre exquis* of early twentieth century Surrealism, as Heather Smyth shows (2008, 285).

Tuyen's main function in the text is in the artistic reflection about the heterogeneity of life in the city; she is "[…] always in the middle of observing it" (142) and so it is not surprising to find her close her story with an artistic vision, just like she has opened it with one:

> […] In the middle of each room a diaphanous cylindrical curtain, hung from the ceiling, that the audience could enter. At the centre of one cylinder would be the *lubaio* with all the old longings of another generation. She would do something with the floor here too, perhaps rubble, perhaps sand, water. In another cylinder there would be twelve video projections, constantly changing, of images and texts of contemporary longing. This one would be celebratory, even with the horrible. Again here the floor, the path, what material? The last cylinder would be empty, the room silent. What for? She still wasn't quite certain what she was making; she knew she would find out only once the installation was done. Then, some grain, some element she had been circling, but had been unable to pin down, would emerge. (308)

Tuyen thus analyzes the past, the parental generation; she gives an insight into the present multimedia based heterogeneity that defies stasis and she provides a curious outlook into a future, that is waiting to be filled or that is, much rather, open towards all possible directions (154). Finally she refers back to the "city's mantra" (53): the grain of sand that causes the polyp to change – which here can also be read as a dark foreshadowing of the catastrophic encounter between Jamal and Quy, that, some way or other, is going to bring about painful change for all the characters in *What We All Long For*.

"Word!" – Oku's "jota of doubt"

> One of them has a camera, she's Asian, […] and you want to look at her, she's beautiful in a strange way. Not the pouting corporate beauty on the ad for shampoo above her head, she has the beauty a falcon has: watchful, feathered, clawed, and probing. Another one's a young black man; he's carrying a drum in a duffel bag. He's trying to find space for it on the floor, and he's getting annoyed looks all around. (2-3)

Before the reader even gets to know their names, both Tuyen and Oku are introduced in a way that already foreshadows their functions in the text: Tuyen carries her camera and she is characterized as an observer, while her womanhood is set apart from traditional North American standards of beauty by contrasting her to the possibly Caucasian model on the ad. Oku's introduction is maybe even more striking, because it seems to provide the perfect description of the issues that Oku has to deal with throughout the plot: while readers learn about Tuyen's

camera before they know she is Asian, Oku, in contrast, is instantly perceived as a young black man. He carries a drum – a reference to his individual artistic modes of reflection: music and poetry – and he is trying to find space for it, in defiance of the irritation of others.

There are several 'grains of sand' for Oku: he could be considered a representative for the young black male population in the city, and at the same time he is representative for the emancipation from stereotypes and role-induced behavior that is assorted to young black men, paradoxically, by both themselves and the WASP society, though, obviously, to very different effects. He also has to come to terms with the "man thing" (46) in order to gain control – power of decision. He has to find a balance between independence from his father and solidarity with him; and he has to find a way towards Jackie, who is, in a way, his central "yellow mote" (Brathwaite 1969a, 75) causing him to move, causing him to revise his adaptions to convention and to develop as a person.

Just like Tuyen, Oku at first feels the impulse to deny his 'mote of sand': he envies his father for his self-containment (88) and he wishes the single-mindedness of the Rastafarian could be his (170) – but that is precisely not who and what Oku is and might be. Very much to the contrary: Oku's special talent, and indeed his special function in the text, lies in his capability to "think his way out of his box" (166). It is exactly through his "jota of doubt" (88) that Oku gradually gains access to a world in which, other than his father or Kwesi and the 'jungle' boys, he can "crack into the full register of [himself]" (164). Oku's "jota of doubt" (88), then, accounts for his very individual mode of reflection: while Tuyen primarily responds to images, Oku's art is about auditory phenomena – language, spoken words, music, rhythm. Two contemplative tools are especially important for Oku: his constant reception and circulation of a discography of Jazz, which is partly a cultural heritage passed on by his father Fitz; and, on the other hand, his own active creation of "Word!", his poetry that might turn out to be an energizer to his future and that parallels Tuyen's art in its function to create the new 'coral' – the future version of Toronto's culture.

Oku "never [thinks] of himself as stupid, only with Jackie" (184). The reason for that might be found in the fact that Jackie has long left behind cliché-strewn discourses of race and gender, while Oku is still partially subjected to them. As long as Oku is lost for words – the right words – he tries to communicate through Jazz and his choice is quite interesting: while the instrumental pieces by all the legendary male songwriters in Jazz indeed perfectly express the range of his emotions, from love and tenderness to complete insecurity and peril, Oku refrains from playing Billie Holiday because "he couldn't play Billie Holiday without bawling his eyes out" (184). While tears appear to be an almost natural response to the melancholic quality of Holiday's voice in many of her listeners, in Oku's case this could also be construed as irony, since quite a number of the songs famously performed by Holiday describe relationships between men and women that must

be the opposite of what Jackie envisions for herself: a system of dominant, unreliable and sometimes violent men, and subservient, dependent women who accept any amount of personal sacrifice, is – though sometimes satirically mocked – often romanticized in Billie Holiday's music; and that kind of destructive nostalgia is exactly what Oku needs to leave behind. He knows he can only 'unlock' Jackie through use of the right words: "There was some specific thing he had to say, and then the two of them would fall into place" (165). Words, for Oku, are keys: "It was like a series of locks: when particular words were said, each lock fell open" (165). Thus, Oku needs to emancipate from speaking "[…] the lamest line, the most insipid words in the black vernacular, the most overused" (81); and in the end he indeed does achieve that emancipation through his continual empathic, poetic and musical analysis of Jackie, which leads him to follow the emotional traces of her childhood through Alexandra Park.

While the creation of poetry is central to Oku's transition from "innocence" (73) to becoming an equal to Jackie in the storyline, it is also significant for the intertextual web that informs the text of *What We All Long For*. The "Word!"-sequences (16, 210-212) as well as the ironic scene of protest against globalization (205) are reminiscent of Caribbean-originated and presently Toronto-based Dub Poetry. When Oku chants his verse in the middle of the protest and gets arrested for it, he does exactly what a Dub Poet might do. Also, though it might of course turn out to be a coincidence, it is quite interesting to note that Oku shares his name with the Jamaican Dub legend Oku Onuora,[19] and that he is hiding out from 'Kwesi' (232) – as in Linton Kwesi Johnson, London. That possibility taken into consideration, intertextual references here again award a special significance to a character in the text: Oku represents the cultural future of his generation through poetry. He indeed becomes a "Revalueshanary" as Johnson's piece *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* (Johnson 2006, 67) might label him: not singly the phonetics of the Caribbean demotic but also the spelling is important here, for Oku is not only a 'revolutionary' – his task is, literally, to 'revalue' old WASP and old masculinity discourses and create new ones. In conclusion to this, it might be allowed to quote Brathwaite here once more, whose poem *Negus* reads:

> I
> must be given words to refashion futures […]
> it is not enough

19 Onuora, in turn, also holds intertextuality as a central principle in his lyrics, as can be seen for example in *Reflection in Red* in which he picks up a Song of Peter Tosh's – *Equal Rights* – and transforms it into a revolutionary chant, ready to be shouted by the protesting masses: "Dere cannot be any peace, no peace, / until dere's equal rights, equal rights, / equal rights / an / justice-tice-tice-tice-tice-tice-tice-tice!" (Onuora 1984); for some of his poetry in print compare for example: Paula Burnett (ed.), 1986, *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, London: Penguin.

> to be pause, to be hole
> to be void, to be silent
> to be semicolon, to be semicolony; […]
> fill me with words
> and I will blind your God. (Brathwaite 1969b, 67)

Conclusion: "making new narratives" in the jungle that is a skyscraper

> I only draw attention here to the dominant discourse on culture in Canada. Its response to criticism from people of colour, women, lesbians and gays and progressives has been to try to assimilate a few voices into the discourse without overturning it fundamentally. Yet more vibrant possibilities exist in the multitude of voices now emerging in this country. These voices see the imagination as transformative, as leading out of the pessimism of colonial discourse, as making new narratives. (Brand 1994c, 168)

In what feels like a sad symbolical reinforcement of all the obstacles that white colonialism and Canadian immigration policy have set in his way, Tuan, in his insomniac hours, is "[…] drawing all the buildings in the city as if he had built them" (113). His daughter Tuyen, on the other hand, allows a "head [to grow] out of a drainpipe [and] a river [to flow] through the roof of a house" (115)[20] – a contrast that is symptomatic for the difference between the generations in *What We All Long For*. While Cam and Tuan, Fitz and Claire and Jackie's parents have adapted to being left out of Toronto's cultural nucleus and maybe indeed have come "to see themselves the way the city [sees] them" (67), their children, in a striking emancipation from both the "seaweed" of their families' histories (20) and the remains of colonialism in Toronto's social structure, create the future of the 'coral's' culture[21] – a perfect impression of which is conveyed in the key passage of

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20 Cf. Ono's *ARCHITECTURE PIECES* (Ono 1964).

21 The characters' creation of a new culture, one might argue, is contrasted to the art of Reiner-Maria, who probably does not share Rilke's name accidentally, and whose music sounds like "Ministry, Throbbing Gristle and Skinny Puppy" (45). The classic rock-star aesthetics of left-wing band Ministry might stand for the past white dominance in U.S. popular culture and Throbbing Gristle, who indeed do not make it especially hard for critics to label them "Nazi boy[s]" (48) and girls, might here be an allegory for Europe's not "dying" but basically *dead* pop cultural "poetics" (134). However, it is maybe Vancouver-based industrial band Skinny Puppy that is at the center of focus here: musically avant-garde, a genuinely Canadian cultural good, politically on the left and green, Skinny Puppy, in the 1980s and 90s worked their way through hard questions such as racism, economic slavery, human trafficking and the capitalist exploitation of the planet. They were creating art against marginalization, but even so: their art is shown to be no longer sufficient in *What We All Long For*, because it roots in a white system of speaking-*about* – a system that deems itself capable of universally significant interpretation, of which 'Nazi-boy's' planet tattoo (100) might be an ironic reminder. In

dancing to Ornette Coleman's *The Jungle Is A Skyscraper*. Tuyen's and Carla's apartments supply precious space for a complex atonal orchestra of youth and creativity:[22]

> "[…] different instruments playing in different keys but in another communion, right, and all that rushing energy, dozens of themes just rushing together. See everything makes sense when you listen to this, right?" […]
> "Every horn is alone, but they're together, crashing" (228-229)

Additionally, the title of the song contains the idea of the city as a part of nature, as something growing and changing: It is not the skyscraper that bears likeness to the wildness of a jungle, it is the jungle that can best be described comparing it to the natural, breathing multiplicity of an urban structure – a skyscraper. The idea that the city is a part of nature, something alive, questions the idea of the city as something given by an authority; urban space is produced by those who live in it, the coral is shaped by the polyps – it is not the polyps who adapt to an ever-unchanging, fixed coral.

In her above quoted essay of the striking title *Whose Gaze and Who Speaks for Whom* Dionne Brand describes her vision of the new cultural voices capable of creating 'new narratives' for Canada; – and Brand is one of those voices herself. As Magdalene Redekop puts it:

> It could be argued that those stories are most powerfully Canadian that can somehow resonate with the plurality of voices and stories, evoking the layers upon layers of yet to be discovered revised history. (Redekop 2004, 269)

Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* resonates with exactly those of Toronto's voices that have formerly been ignored and Tuyen's art indeed "[…] is to reclaim …" (17) histories that had been left unwritten, that had been made "willfully untraceable" (4). But on every Torontonian – and Canadian – corner there are invisible boxes to be found which contain histories that want to be told, and that will be told as Tuyen and her generation open them up, make them visible.

> The floor of the room would be water, and she would walk through the room bumping into the boxes, which would not be discernible to the

contrast to that, speaking-*from*, a system of listening to the voices of the marginalized themselves, is where the future lies.

22 Tuyen's and Carla's inspiring "places of refuge" (23) are reminiscent of Ono's Chambers Street series and her cold-water apartment in New York that created a similar space for cultural revolution (cf. Munroe 2000, 20).

> naked eye. As she collided with the boxes, things would fall out, spikes and keys and mouths and voices. (126)

Maybe the spikes, here, could be read as an allusion to E.J. Pratt's poem *Towards the Last Spike,* which he intended to function as a national epos. Pratt tried to construct a Canadian founding myth around the construction of the trans-Canadian railroad – a white founding myth that completely ignored the presence and significance of Chinese workers (Redekop 2004, 268), who might in this context be seen as representative for all the other marginalized groups too. Pratt had not accidentally forgotten the Chinese voices, he had deliberately written them out of the national narrative. Now, with "[…] the millennium […] come and gone" (210), it is for Tuyen, Oku, Carla and Jackie to write themselves back in, or better, to make "new narratives" (Brand 1994c, 168). Their "Word[s]!" (16, 210-212) are "keys", their "mouths" speak, their "voices" are heard (126) as they shout *oh pil-seung* Korea (209, 214), Vietnam, Caribbean Islands, Italy and most of all Toronto.

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