

Western Hegemony in the Multicultural Space of Canada in *What We All Long For*

Dionne Brand's novel *What We All Long For* challenges Canada's identity as a utopia for immigrants and minority groups and brings to light the ordeals of people of different ethnicities in the façade that is multiculturalism. Brand exposes the struggles of racialized characters in everyday-life that are usually turned a blind-eye to, or blanketed over, by the masses who attempt to sweep under the rug any notion of negativity existing in Canadian space. Brand demonstrates the falsity of Canada's multiculturalism through the lives of her characters, particularly the Vu family, and illustrates the overpowering dominance of Western influences. Brand interweaves various symbolic and psychological evidence into her text to support her statement, confronting Canada's position as the "promised land" (Brand 57) for minority groups and ethnic immigrants. The text provides a critical eye in analyzing the multicultural identity of the country, and insightfully reveals the reality for immigrants behind the deceptive front of the mosaic identity. The hybrid, racialized characters of Brand's *What We All Long For* challenges the ideology of multiculturalism and Canada's identity as a melting-pot culture instead of the propagated cultural mosaic. Brand demonstrates the struggle of ethnic characters as they try to maintain their identity in a white-dominant space through Tuyen and her parents, Tuan and Cam, using food as a symbol of their position on their respective cultural spectrum between Vietnamese and Canadian, and confronts the deceit of multiculturalism of first and second-generation immigrants, as well as their unsuccessful attempts to reach actualization on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Regardless of how Canada portrays itself, its pretense of multiculturalism is a hollow promise as the culture subconsciously places its Western influences on a pedestal; Natasha Larissa Sharpe contends that "multiculturalism manages differences and upholds white

hegemony under the guise of civility and tolerance” (Sharpe, 2009). This was demonstrated by the Vu family in the text as they strove to assimilate to become like the societal norm of Toronto: “the desired ineffable nationality: Western” (Brand 59). The evidence is particularly strong in Tuyen, who actively rejects her Vietnamese background around her family and “rebelled against [the Vietnamese language]... [and] at five, she went through a phase of calling herself Tracey because she didn’t like anything Vietnamese” (Dionne 24). Tuyen’s rejection of her Asian heritage stems from her displacement from her culture and her difference from the people and culture around her, leading to “a sense of alienation or isolation until he or she has been accepted or perceives that acceptance within the new culture” (LaFramboise et al., 1993). In her attempt to find her sense of belonging in the foreign culture only she and her brother, Bihn, were born into, Tuyen “[developed] a new cultural identity” (LaFramboise et al., 1993) to achieve comfort in the foreign space.

Tuyen’s attempt at assimilation is further observed through her diet; Brand uses the food as a synecdoche to reflect Tuyen’s desires for social belongingness. Tuyen “develops a dislike for what was called Vietnamese food” (Brand 107), her ethnic food, and grows more attached to Western nourishments, “[her] favourite food [being] potatoes, cooked any style, but mostly just plain boiled with butter” (Brand 107) and milk, “despite the fact that her stomach reacted violently to it” (Brand 107). As “sociologists are compelled to realize that... is not merely a result of individual preference”, but a “cultural affair” (Murcott, 1982), it can be concluded that Tuyen’s choice in food is directly correlated to her longing to fit-in in the Western environment. However, while Tuyen chooses these foreign food items her body violently rejects over the traditional Vietnamese cuisine her parents provide, she gladly eats “the same food [she was] averse to in [her] childhood... revered in Oku’s hands” (Brand 110). This active choice

represents Tuyen's "double-consciousness" (LaFramboise et al., 1993): Brand uses this contrast to showcase Tuyen's "simultaneous awareness of oneself as being a member and an alien of two or more cultures" (LaFramboise et al., 1993). Tuyen's strict preference in food symbolizes her alienation from "regular Canadian life" (Brand 43), and the binging of potatoes and milk is her attempt to correct her cultural discrepancy. Furthermore, as Leach observed that "food is an especially appropriate mediator because when we eat, we establish, in a literal sense, a direct identity between ourselves (culture) and our food (nature)" (31), Tuyen's choice to drink milk, a beverage that is literally and figuratively white as it is consumed regularly by Westerners, symbolizes her continued endeavor to connect with Western culture.

Consequentially, Tuyen's desire to immerse herself in the Western culture is a product of the "[recognition of her] exclusion from public space" (Sharpe, 2009). The "consumption of food provides... a material means for expressing the more abstract significance of... cultural values" (Murcott, 1982), and thus, Tuyen's finicky diet reflects her struggle between her double-consciousness. The Toronto-born Tuyen is actively aware and repulsed by her difference, but unconsciously identifies as Vietnamese: Oku's chicken's feet soup brings her comfort by appealing to the familiarity of her cultural roots in a space outside her familiar Vietnamese setting, satisfying her need to belong. In light of her endeavor to assimilate, Tuyen's lactose intolerance is Brand's reminder of the existing limitations of taking on another identity; regardless of the paradigm shifts Tuyen may undergo mentally, her Vietnamese biology is unchangeable. Tuyen's preference for Western food suggests that the multicultural mosaic identity of Canada "while seeming to celebrate difference, actually keeps Canada's colourful 'other' tiles subordinate to the 'grout' of normalized Canadian whiteness" (Sharpe, 2009).

As a result, Tuyen's hybridity impacted her psychologically, preventing her from achieving self-actualization; her lack of belongingness is a representation of the cultural boundaries experienced by second-generation immigrants, especially within the hybrid space. By being born in Toronto, Tuyen is objectified by her immigrant parents: "they held you... not embrace [you]... with a vicelike but unspoken but vicelike grip of emotional debt" (Brand 54). Tuyen became her parents' "interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life" (Brand 59) "as if [her] umbilical cord were also attached to [Toronto]" (Brand 58). However, while this objectification aided Tuyen's parents in their new life, it stunted Tuyen's ascension on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Tuyen was denied of her "love needs... the hunger for affectionate relations with people in general" (Maslow 380-381) due to her duty to help out at the Saigon Pearl, as having to "report to the restaurant to clean tables or wash dishes... right after school" (Brand 59) limited her interaction with the other public spaces of Toronto. Her parents, who uses Tuyen as a mediator with the city, symbolizes her Vietnamese roots, and is simultaneously the barrier between her and Western culture, and the cause of her "absence of friends" in her childhood (Maslow 381). Tuyen's double-consciousness, in particular her alienation from Western culture, is further reinforced by her family's predominant Vietnamese background in Toronto space, which inhibited Tuyen's love needs, and ultimately led to her decision to distant herself from the Vu estate, "[leaving] the embrace of her family" (Brand 54).

Tuyen's effort to climb Maslow's hierarchy is reflected in her artwork; her *lubaio* symbolizes Tuyen's fragmented actualization. While Tuyen prides herself in the artwork and the various ideas that accompanies the monstrous sculpture, the constantly changing artwork is a symbol for Tuyen herself. As Tuyen interacts with the city, she is affected by its variables, and

uses those experiences to construct the *lubaio*: “bits of wood, the photographs, the longings” (Brand 179) hanging off the structure. “She knew she would find out only once the installation was done” (Brand 244), however, as the *lubaio* is a metaphor for Tuyen, its incompleteness symbolizes her identity under construction. Tuyen fails to showcase her artwork to the public, and as a result, fails to receive “respect or esteem from other people” (Maslow 382); Tuyen cannot reach actualization due to her failure to achieve “the esteem needs” (Maslow 382).

Tuyen’s parents, Tuan and Cam, also fall victim to the cultural melting-pot. As immigrants to the country fleeing Vietnam during the Asian diaspora, the Vu family are generalized to a statistic and labelled with their ethnicity; their entrance into the country was dependent on the “qualification” of their traumatic experiences: “they needed terror, and indeed Tuan and Cam had had that; they needed loss, and Tuan and Cam had that too” (Brand 180). The act of accepting them into the country “simultaneously advocated charitable welcome to foreigners... and, in the very act, represented those others as beneficiaries, rather than full members, of the civil collective” (Coleman 6). The entry process strips Tuan and Cam of their previous prestige and identity, and was categorized as refugees that crossed the oceans as “resistance to communism” (Brand 181); as they “[filled] out the appropriate forms” (Brand 180), the formality is a double-edged sword that validated Tuan and Cam on paper and admitted them into the country, but also the signing away of their previous identity, forcing upon Tuan and Cam the role that was predestined by their newcomer status.

Through Tuan and Cam’s plight, Brand exposes Canada’s double-standard on its ethnic citizens; the country chooses to be selectively multicultural by creating the façade of being immigrant-friendly while relocating the newcomers to the bottom of the social hierarchy. When the Vu’s came to Canada, their previous accomplishments are relinquished, alongside with their

identities; despite Tuan and Cam's previous professions as a civil engineer and doctor respectively, "the authorities would not ratify their professional documents", and the Vu's were forced to work entry-level such as hauling fruit or working as "a manicurist in a beauty salon near Chinatown" (Brand 57). While they are given the opportunity to reclaim their previous occupations, Cam failed the English proficiency exam four times before "she too finally gave up", although her goal was to "take care of Vietnamese patients who couldn't understand English" (Brand 58); Tuan and Cam are unable to continue their success in their professional careers regardless of their experience due to their lack of prowess in the English language. Brand uses the language barrier to demonstrate "in which whiteness, constructed as civilization, modernity, culture, and progress, are kept at the centre of Canadian culture" (Sharpe, 2009). While boasting to be multicultural, Canada refuses immigrants and refugees the ability to continue their life by setting the requirement for languages at a high standard, regardless of the immigrant's experience or targeted audience. As a result, people of "coloured" backgrounds such as Tuan and Cam are forced to "lose part of themselves" during the immigration, and as "'ethnic' immigrants could claim only a qualified and limited version of Canadianness" (Sharpe, 2009), they were rendered to their ethnicity, just as Tuan and Cam finally "saw themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food" (Brand 58).

Unlike Tuyen's dislike for her ethnic food, the majority of Tuan and Cam's staple diet consists of Vietnamese food, "if [not] eating at the Saigon Pearl itself, they ate leftovers from the Saigon Pearl" (Brand 107). Brand's depiction of Tuan and Cam's eating habits is a synecdoche of the majority of immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada: the newcomers are placed at a lower end of the social hierarchy, and Brand uses the leftovers to demonstrate the scarcity of resources and lack of security experienced by new immigrants, despite having an abundance of

experience in their professional lives pre-diaspora. However, since “cultural significance of food and eating focuses on social values” (Murcott 1982), Tuan and Cam not only ate the leftovers of the Saigon Pearl because it provided the family with economic benefits, but also because the food is a reflection of Tuan and Cam’s ties to their Vietnamese roots. As first-generation Vietnamese-Canadian immigrants, Tuan and Cam are more emotionally tied to their homeland than their children, and finds familiarity through their diet as “habits of eating and drinking are invested with significance by the particular culture or sub-culture to which they belong” (Murcott, 1982). Their choice to constantly eat Vietnamese food reflects their nostalgia for their home country, and the ingestion of their ethnic food demonstrates Tuan and Cam’s resistance to Western culture, remaining in touch with their Vietnameseness in the foreign space of Toronto. However, as Murcott suggests that eating habits are directly associated with cultural significance and social values, Tuan and Cam’s eating of the leftovers signifies the fading of traditional values as well as their low social position. The leftover food of the Saigon Pearl symbolizes the absence of Vietnamese culture in the city, forcing Tuan and Cam to need to salvage for pieces of their identity in the foreign home. Tuan and Cam’s endeavor depicts the country’s subconscious belief of “whiteness as the hegemonic centre of Canadian national identity” (Sharpe, 2009).

Tuan and Cam’s restaurant, the Saigon Pearl, is the product their endeavor to create the familiarity of their homeland to the foreign used to fulfil “the esteem needs” (Maslow 381). By imposing their culture in the space of Toronto, Tuan and Cam are able to create the comfort of intimacy by drawing connections to their life pre-diaspora. Brand uses the restaurant as a representation of a safe haven for the Vu’s and a reminiscence of their previous life, contrasting the space of the Saigon Pearl with that of the city. Despite in the defined multicultural space of Toronto, it is only within the Saigon Pearl that Tuan is outside the reaches of white hegemony:

Tuan is able to demonstrate his “engineering skill” that was dismissed by Canadian officials, fitting “thirty people into the tiny squarage of the Saigon Pearl” (Brand 58), symbolizing the fulfilment of his nostalgia. Brand takes this opportunity to exhibit the falsity of multiculturalism: existing within the city did not bring Tuan and Cam belongingness, but through the creation of the restaurant labeling themselves as “Vietnamese food” that brought them “affection and belongingness” (Maslow 380) of the community, as “normal people [came] [to the Saigon Pearl] to eat” (Brand 107). The Saigon Pearl was a big step for Tuan and Cam psychologically, as the duality of the Saigon Pearl also pushed Tuan and Cam towards self-actualization; however, the restaurant cannot bring them actualization as it does not provide a “high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem” (Maslow 381). As Tuan and Cam were forced to change directions professionally, the Saigon Pearl became a scapegoat for their impossible desire “for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom” (Maslow 381) as an engineer or doctor. Within the multicultural city of Toronto, Tuan and Cam only found solace in the space of the Saigon Pearl as “the restaurant became their life” (Brand 58), bringing them partial actualization.

Throughout the course of the novel, the boasted multiculturalism of Canada is dissected, and Canada’s identity as “the promised land” of immigrants is brought under inspection. In the space of Toronto, Brand’s *What We All Long For* brings to light the hardships of ethnic immigrants in a white-dominant society through Tuyen and her parents, and supports Brand’s position of Canada as a melting-pot of culture rather than a mosaic. Brand’s use of food as a representation of the Tuyen and her parents’ respective position on the cultural spectrum further demonstrates the hegemonic white culture that subconsciously forces Tuyen and her parents to assimilate into “regular Canadian life”, despite “never [being] able to join” (Brand 43). Through

their different diets, Brand is able to also exhibit the drastic difference between first and second-generation immigrants, as well as their respective rank on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the incompleteness of actualization of immigrants. Brand's depiction of the Vu family exposes the falsity of Canada's claims to multiculturalism as the national identity, and suggests that despite effort made towards establishing a multicultural identity, there is still an urgent need for improvement for the comfort of ethnic immigrants.

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