

Longing for Belonging: Transculturality and Identity in Two North American Novels

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Abstract

The concepts of transculturality and cultural hybridity describe the process of two or more cultures coinciding in a space, whether that be an individual's psyche, a city, or an entire nation. These concepts explain how, when cultures encounter one another, a cultural genesis occurs. Within North American literature (USA and Canada), a plethora of novels depict the immigrant or refugee experience, showing their characters grappling with the challenges of learning a new culture and creating a sense of home. This paper employs the lens of transculturality and cultural hybridity to better understand how the characters in two novels come to represent (or not) transcultural individuals as they cope with the sociocultural challenges of a transcultural experience.

Keywords: identity, transculturality, immigrant, cultural hybridity, belonging

The notion of culture, by its very definition, is difficult to define. Its presence is unequivocally felt, its results certainly witnessed, and its manifestations unquestionably perceived, but it is nevertheless something that remains amorphous, nebulous, even ambiguous. Unlike in the hard sciences where microscopic organisms or the force of gravity or oxygen molecules are studied and equally as intangible to the layman's naked eye, culture is a human construct. It is what defines, in part, who we are; yet many remain oblivious to its effects. Culture plays a pivotal role in the creation of a personal identity for the human psyche and, when combined with personality and idiosyncrasy, results in the human experience. Within literature and the arts, culture is something that has been examined from numerous perspectives. Recently, the intermingling of cultures has come under the lens of the scholar, critic, and artist alike, and it is to this occurrence that we will now turn. In order to explore this further, two novels will be analyzed: Cristina Henriquez's 2014 novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* and Dionne Brand's 2005 novel *What We All Long For*.

The Book of Unknown Americans follows the lives of two immigrant families in Delaware in the United States. The Riveras have recently immigrated to the United States from Mexico looking for care and special education for their daughter, Maribel, who suffered a serious head injury a few months prior. The Toros, whom the Riveras meet because they live in the same apartment building, are from Panama and have been in the United States for years, yet still foster faint hopes of one day returning home. Much of the novel is about integrating into American society and the difficulties that come along with such a task. The narrative focuses on the shared experiences of the Riveras and the Toros, in addition to the numerous other immigrants from Central and South America who are their neighbors. Mayor, the Toros' youngest son, and Maribel eventually develop a relationship which becomes key to the plot of the narrative. Relationships are an essential theme in the novel in general, including the relationship one has to a sense of home. For the Toros and the Riveras, creating a sense of belonging proves a much more challenging task than they had envisioned.

Relationships, identity, and belonging also take centerstage in *What We All Long For*. The novel takes place in Toronto and centers on the interwoven stories of four friends: Tuyen, an artist whose parents came to Canada as refugees from Vietnam; Carla, Tuyen's best friend and love interest who struggles with her brother's delinquency and her mother's suicide; Jackie, who owns a clothing-store and whose parents came to Toronto from Nova Scotia looking to start anew; and Oku, a black graduate student in literature and an amateur poet who is hopelessly in love with Jackie and whose overbearing immigrant father complicates his life. The narrative is told through alternating perspectives of these four characters, and through their experiences Brand

demonstrates the struggles of identity and belonging within the urban Canadian landscape of today. One thread that all four share is their conflictual family ties. For one reason or another, they all seek to distance themselves from their families. It is this struggle in common that brought them together as friends: they were able to forget about their troubled relationships when they were together.

The city of Toronto is a living, breathing character in *What We All Long For*. It is the space within which the identity renegotiation and restructuring takes place for the characters in Brand's novel. Sylvia Langwald describes Toronto in *What We All Long For* as a 'glocal' space, or "as a crossroads of intercultural encounters that impacts on identification and family cohesion" (Langwald 124). Langwald makes use of the term glocal, originally a business and management term and a mix of 'global' and 'local', in her analysis of the spatial relationship Toronto has with the individuals in the novel. Brand harkens to this notion in the opening chapter: "But at any crossroads there are permutations of existence. People turn into other people imperceptibly, unconsciously, right here in the grumbling train" (Brand 5). The mixing of the local and the global blur the lines of identity and space, creating a mixture of many individuals. Indeed, the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch also sees transculturality as "able to cover both global and local, universalistic and particularistic aspects..." (Welsch). Later on, Tuyen considers to herself "Yes, that was the beauty of this city, it's polyphonic, murmuring" (Brand 149). Brand presents Toronto to the reader as a city in the midst of cultural renegotiation itself, even hybridization of cultures within the urban sphere, a place where "there are Eritrean accountants, Colombian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with

Jamaican accents...” (Brand 5). Langwald studies this notion of a multicultural Toronto, but focuses on the second-generation experience, which all four characters in the novel represent. She contends it is within the second-generation experience that the ‘glocal’ truly takes shape (Langwald 124).

The characters in both novels, to varying degrees, represent transcultural or hybrid individuals. Transculturality and hybridity have been defined and redefined over the years and several interpretations of the concepts will be used to better understand the characters and their situations. However, one of the first instances where transculturality is examined was by Welsch in his text “Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today.” He challenges the traditional model of culture as a singular force, opting instead for the term transculturality, which he defines as “a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures” (Welsch). He contends that “cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other” and that modern cultures “are in general characterized by hybridization” (Welsch). On the macro-level, Welsch’s conclusion of cultures as inherently hybrid is paramount to the contextualization of these two novels. Between both novels, the reader encounters American, Canadian, Mexican, Panamanian, Vietnamese, Jamaican, and Italian cultures, among others. In framing my analysis, it is essential to keep in mind that culture in the two narratives is portrayed not as a singular creation but instead as a naturally hybrid occurrence, in accordance with Welsch’s conclusions. Brand echoes this sentiment when she writes “they all...felt as if they inhabited two countries – their parents’ and their own” (Brand 20).

However, human experience is paramount to understanding identity and belonging, thus the individual characters of the novels are the objects of curiosity. Welsh and other scholars, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Néstor García Canclini, have also examined transculturality and hybridity on the individual level. Welsh on the one hand makes the distinction between civic and cultural identity, arguing that they are not one in the same. He underscores the importance of crossing over cultural boundaries, literally and figurately (Welsh). Anzaldúa similarly fashioned the term *mestiza consciousness* to designate a “consciousness of the Borderlands”, or those individuals who are “a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (Anzaldúa 208). Canclini also nods to the transculturality of the individual, stating that “often hybridization emerges from individual and collective creativity” (Canclini xxvii). In short, the role of the hybrid individual in crossing cultural borders and establishing a new identity is supreme. Welsh concurs: “Wherever an individual is cast by differing cultural interests, the linking of such transcultural components with one another becomes a specific task in identity-forming” (Welsh). The characters within these two novels are examples of these hybrid border travelers. Their experiences within the pages exhibit how identities are formed, reexamined, shattered, and reconstructed.

Tuyen in *What We All Long For* is an excellent example of a hybrid individual, or more specifically as the inheritor of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness*. Tuyen’s family struggles are particularly poignant throughout the narrative. Her parents lost their youngest son, Quy, as they were boarding the boats to take them away from Vietnam. He was separated from them in the crowd and her parents have dedicated their lives to finding him again. Tuyen, her other brother Binh, and her two sisters grew up in Quy’s

shadow, their parents always thinking about how to find him again. Her mother spends her days desperately composing letters in broken English, sending them with hefty money attachments to private detectives and missing persons organizations across the world. Tuyen also worked in her parents' restaurant, but loathed it. This, combined with her family's obscured apathy towards her as the youngest child, created a desire to throw off her cultural heritage, move to downtown Toronto, and pursue her dream as an artist. In the novel, the narrator explains that Tuyen "rebelled against the language, refusing to speak it. At five she went through a phase of calling herself Tracey because she didn't like anything Vietnamese. She used to sit at the cash register, her legs hanging from a stool, reprimanding people older than she to speak English" (Brand 21).

From a young age, we see Tuyen struggling with her cultural identity. Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space also accurately defines Tuyen's shift of identity for a more neutral ground. In Bhabha's words, the Third Space "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha 157). Bhabha favors this Third Space as a locale where cultural hybridity can take place. He emphasizes the importance of language for culture, and because of Tuyen's rejection of the Vietnamese language as the carrier of her cultural heritage, she is moving into that Third Space where she can renegotiate her cultural identity anew. Indeed, Tuyen was forced to act as a sort of linguistic and cultural translator for her parents as she was growing up. Tuyen and her brother Binh "were required to disentangle puzzlement; any idiom or gesture or word, they were counted on to translate...the children were their interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life" (Brand 67). For her parents, Tuyen and her brother were

“that desired and ineffable nationality: Western” (Brand 67). These passages exemplify how Tuyen and her brother straddle the borders of cultures in terms of their relationship to the Vietnamese language. According to Bhabha, “the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation” (Bhabha 156). By being a part of both cultures, Tuyen and Binh contribute to this displacing of the Western nation – in this case, Canada.

In addition to being a resident of Bhabha’s Third Space, Tuyen also exemplifies characteristics of Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness, as mentioned above. Her depiction of la mestiza’s experience as “a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” mirrors Tuyen’s thoughts. Standing in her family’s restaurant’s kitchen, Tuyen “felt a sense of comfort and contradiction. What was that unease? she wondered. Why had she wanted as far back as she could remember to ‘not be them’? Not be Vietnamese” (Brand 69). Anzaldúa explains: “the counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant...Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority – outer as well as inner – it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination” (Anzaldúa 209). Tuyen’s ultimate goal in life has always been this liberation from cultural domination. She did not want to be defined by her family’s cultural heritage and all the emotions of injury, defeat, and sadness at the loss of her parents’ first son which accompanied it.

Tuyen’s art is a means through which she can reexamine her cultural heritage and define the borders of her identity. She uses it “to stave off her family – to turn what was misfortune into something else” (Brand 149). Harkening to Bhabha’s Third Space, Anzaldúa has this to say about the new consciousness: “That third element is a new

consciousness – a mestiza consciousness – and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Anzaldúa 210). Tuyen’s most important “creative motion” is her *lubiao*, a massive wooden and metal structure she is building in her apartment. In the latter part of the narrative, she invokes the titular phrase and asks strangers on the streets of Toronto ‘What do you long for?’ She collects these longings en masse and incorporates them into her art and hangs them from the *lubiao*. Tuyen’s search for the longings in others demonstrates her sliding into the mestiza consciousness, where she can break down “each new paradigm” of culture’s falsely unitary frontiers. Her collection of longings contributes to the manifestation of the new collective mestiza consciousness, eliminating the highlighted differences between people in favor of the paradigm of a shared human experience. The *lubiao* is a physical manifestation of the symbolic collective consciousness of the human psyche. Cultural identity is stripped away for a simply human identity, one where our needs are refracted through others and where similarities trump difference. Bhabha necessitates this breaking down of neat cultural barriers when he states: “the Third Space...challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force...kept alive by the national tradition of the People” (Bhabha 156). Relatedly, Tuyen considers her art “the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up into a kind of language, yet indescribable” (Brand 149).

Tuyen’s cultural identity is muted through her art. She uses it as a means to dissociate herself with her family struggles and, consequently, with the identity her family had placed on her since birth. In essence, art creates a medium through which she

can enter into Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, where the goal "is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (Anzaldúa 210). Tuyen embodies this new consciousness. Anzaldúa states that "the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldúa 209). Langwald emphasizes Toronto's "transitoriness and changeability" and the fact that it is "...polyphonic, international, fragmented, and contradictory" (Langwald 125). It is for these very reasons that Tuyen loves Toronto. She frequents its bars, its art scenes, its shops and events. She chooses to enter this space of ambiguity and ambivalence as a means to recreate herself vis-à-vis the preconstructed identity her culture and family heritage had decided to impose upon her.

In *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Mayor Toro also experiences issues of establishing his personal identity, grappling with his family's cultural heritage and pressures to uphold socio-cultural norms from Panama. For instance, Mayor lives in the shadow of his older brother, Enrique, who is a star soccer player. Mayor, in contrast, doesn't have much talent for it. It is a source of constant personal torment for him, exemplified when he, albeit humorously, reflects "Enrique might have been the next Pelé, but I wasn't even in the same galaxy as Madonna" (Henriquez 16-7). He becomes so discouraged that he stops going to practice, yet lies to his father about it, whose only hope for Mayor is to measure up to Enrique in his ability to play soccer. Mayor's comparison between Pelé, a Brazilian soccer star, and the American pop icon Madonna demonstrates his cultural hybridity. He is able to peer across the gap of cultures and draw an entertaining comparison regarding upholding cultural stereotypes intrinsically linked with

identity, such as the false notion that all boys from Central and South America must be good at soccer, or that all Americans love Madonna. Enrique as the older brother, on the other hand, spent considerably more time growing up in Panama and consequently comes to represent for Mayor what his parents value in a child. Although Celia and Rafael Toro love their sons equally, their approach to their relationship with Mayor in the novel is expressed as dually parental bewilderment and hopefulness: they are not quite sure what to do with Mayor, but hope that it will work out in the end. There is a type of cultural disjoint presented here, wherein the parents as members of the home culture are unsure of their actions in regards to a child who has grown up entirely in the context of the new culture.

That being said, Mayor is in a stage of life that is different than Tuyen's; as a teenager still in high school and living at home, he is at much less liberty to break away and establish his identity anew. Regardless, Mayor reflects on this struggle throughout the book. Due to being the child of Hispanic immigrants, he is unfortunately subject to discrimination and bullying at school, getting nicknames such as "Major Pollo" and "Major Pan in the Ass" – 'Pan' short for Panamanian (Henriquez 15). At another point, a boy is harassing Mayor and quips "My dad says all you people are from Mexico" (Henriquez 69). In divergence from Tuyen's experience, Mayor is presented as a victim of cultural oppression from society. Mayor's relationship with his family is a positive one, or at least not one entirely stressed by cultural baggage. In opposition to Tuyen's choice of defining herself negatively as not Vietnamese, Mayor questions how to define himself as both American and Panamanian. Tuyen comes to represent detachment from her home culture, whereas Mayor embodies attachment to two cultures at once.

However, there is one characteristic that Mayor and Tuyen share: the mestiza collective consciousness. Anzaldúa states that the mestiza “can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence” (Anzaldúa 209). For Mayor, the arrival of Maribel into his life is this jarring experience. It is not painful, yet it is emotional – it is the first time he has ever fallen in love. After he fends off another student who is sexually harassing Maribel in the apartment parking lot, Mayor reflects that afterwards, “...something between Maribel and me changed. I felt this weird protectiveness over her...” (Henriquez 74). Anzaldúa’s argument that this change takes place subconsciously explains Mayor’s inability to describe the feeling (Anzaldúa 209). For his identity formation, these newfound feelings of protectiveness and guidance for Maribel demonstrate his bridging of the cultural gap of the ‘local helping the newcomer.’ For instance, he speaks to Maribel in Spanish, yet teaches her about American holidays and pop culture. He is acting as a cultural translator for Maribel, which in turn is helping him to define his biculturality as both American and Panamanian.

For Tuyen, this jarring experience is the sudden arrival of her long-lost brother, Quy, which happens abruptly near the end of the narrative. Her reaction is total and complete repulsion. She is thrown into a state of shock at the arrival of this ghost sibling who has haunted her life and who has been the sole contributor to her sentiments of loss and resentment towards her family. All at once, the identity she has been carefully constructing for years as distinct from her family and Vietnamese culture is shattered entirely. Much like Mayor with Maribel, she feels a sudden protectiveness over the parents she had so vehemently rejected: “Was she so hateful as to prefer that Quy had not

been found? (...) One thing, she decided, her mother and father could not be hurt...They deserved kindness, and Tuyen doubted whether this ghost could deliver it” (Brand 300).

The experience that Anzaldúa presaged in her text came to pass for both Tuyen and Mayor. In strict opposition to what these two characters had expected, these events engendered feelings of protectiveness toward the home culture they had both struggled to negotiate: Tuyen rejecting it entirely, Mayor stumbling along the balance beam between American and Panamanian expectations. In essence, it is the inversion of their perspectives toward their cultural heritage. Due to these events, they now feel compelled to protect what had been the source of their discomfort for so many years. Perhaps this is what Anzaldúa described as the “massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” that leads to the establishment of the mestiza consciousness.

Relatedly, Mayor’s parents also serve a similar purpose for Maribel’s parents, Arturo and Alma. Alma and Celia, Mayor’s mother, quickly become friends, and Alma is immediately impressed by the ease with which Celia navigates life in America. In one chapter, she considers Celia’s makeup and her hair and her earrings, comparing it to her friends’ in Mexico, “who used nothing but soap on their faces and aloe on their hands and who kept their hair pulled into ponytails...” (Henriquez 55). Celia makes it her mission to make the Riveras feel welcome and to ease their transition into the American lifestyle, socially and culturally. Arturo welcomes this transition more so than Alma. At one point, he blatantly tells her “You have to think like a gringa now...You have to believe that you’re entitled to happiness” (Henriquez 123). This demarcates the lines between the lifestyles, demonstrating how the Rivera family as a unit are grappling with troubles of identity and belonging. They see the Toros as a success story of immigration and

compare it to their desperate situation of financial burden and lack of skills for a successful life in the United States. Much like the characters in *What We All Long For*, the Riveras attempt to define their identities negatively vis-à-vis the American identity. Due to the fact that they came to the United States for Maribel's sake, the drive to integrate culturally is not necessarily as high as it was for the Toros, who made a conscious choice out of necessity in order to run away from the dangers of political upheaval in Panama.

Arturo's situation – forced to do menial labor that he is highly overqualified for – is a melding of citizenship and culture which posits a unique question for the notion of belonging: can Arturo truly belong in the American context if he does not fit into the social stereotypes and stigmas of Mexican immigrants in the United States? He is indignant to the fact that he works at a mushroom farm, but sees little way out of it for Maribel's sake. Similarly, a parallel question can be applied to the Torontonians context: can Tuyen, Oku, Jackie, and Carla belong to the urban space they so admire while also begrudgingly accepting the cultural baggage from their immigrant families that they try so hard to forget? Langwald's 'glocal' concept to describe Toronto can also be equally applied to Arturo, Alma, and the other immigrant families who occupy the urban space of the apartment building. The cultural hybridity emanating from the characters necessarily manifests itself in a glocal context. For example, Langwald makes use of the image of the crossroads in *What We All Long For* to frame her analysis of glocal spaces in Toronto (Langwald 125). When the crossroads imagery is applied to the urban space of the apartment building in *The Book of Unknown Americans*, similar notions of "permutations of existence" emerge (Brand 5). In essence, the glocal is representative of cultural

hybridity in that it is a mixing of local practices with global cultures in one physical space or individual. However, as Anzaldúa explains, this coming together of cultures results in an “inner war” and being “sandwiched between two cultures” (Anzaldúa 209).

For the final portion of the essay, analyzing Cristina Henríquez and Dionne Brand’s inspirations for the books serves to contextualize the themes and conclusions delineated above. Interestingly, their lives demonstrate the experiences of the characters in each other’s novels: Henríquez is the daughter of a Panamanian immigrant and Brand was an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago to Canada (Garvey 757). As such, the characters in *The Book of Unknown Americans* channel Brand’s life experience as an immigrant in a new cultural context, whereas the characters in *What We All Long For* mirror Henríquez’s experience as the child of an immigrant family. This is a unique twist of artistic presentation, as the authors’ works demonstrate a reflective representation of one another’s lives, if only thematically.

Henríquez has spoken at length about her inspiration for *The Book of Unknown Americans* and her reasons for writing the novel. She has this to say about one of the major themes in the book which, according to her, is finding ‘home’: “For me this book was about home...it’s always this shifting concept and I think the idea of what home is boils down to this sense of belonging and the way I always think about it is the place where your soul sighs” (Henríquez YouTube). Henríquez’s use of the word home is also a representation of personal identity. She explains how every character in the book has a unique perspective on their home, such as Mayor who feels his place is in the United States in contrast to his father Rafael who “has two homes” due to his immigrating to the United States from Panama as an adult (Henríquez YouTube). In short, Henríquez is

speaking to the concepts of cultural hybridity and transculturality. Arguably, one's "home" is synonymous with one's culture, and as we have seen above cultural hybridity posits unique challenges to the creation of a sense of belonging for a transcultural individual. These same themes can be equally successfully applied to *What We All Long For*.

This paper has explored the concepts of cultural hybridity and transculturality among the various characters in *The Book of Unknown Americans* and *What We All Long For*. It has been demonstrated that transculturality is a "messy" situation, in that it is not a clear mixture of two distinct cultures but instead an amalgamation of several cultural identities, practices, and heritages. This can be a painful experience for the hybrid individual, creating spaces of contention among belonging to a particular identity or culture.

This process then poses the question: does one culture have to be the dominant one? Should this always be the case? Bhabha, Anzaldúa, and Welsch seem to advocate a symmetry among cultural identities, yet this situation may be considered too utopian for reality. For Mayor, the American culture is dominant; for Tuyen, it is Anglo-Canadian culture. Yet as shown above, both are still transcultural individuals. Must the coming-together of cultures always be a painful experience for the human being whose psyche is serving as the battleground of identities? Can cultures not exist symbiotically in the same space?

In order to begin answering these questions, the study of transculturality and cultural hybridity must move beyond the pages of academia and into the cityscapes of

modern society. Urban centres are hotspots for cultural intermingling, which necessarily produces real examples of the characters presented above. Human migration, whether due to refugee crises or immigration movements or war, predicated dialogue between cultures. As this dialogue intensifies, its results emanate into cultural hybridity. The very practice of establishing oneself in a new cultural context creates the mixing of cultures; however, as Welsh and other scholars have cautioned, we should not think of culture as defined by the arbitrary borders of political geography. Indeed, as Canada continues its mission to welcome thousands of refugees within its borders from around the world, it would do well to understand the possible outcomes when cultures come into contact with one another. As the global political climate is in the midst of potential paradigm shifts, it is now more essential than ever to keep in mind the impact of culture on not only individual relationships and settlement integration, but also wellbeing and even mental health on a national scale. On the final page of *The Book of Unknown Americans* is this passage, which beautifully encapsulates the migrant desire, as well as demonstrating intertextuality with the title of *What We All Long For*: “Maybe it’s the instinct of every immigrant, born of necessity or of longing: Someplace else will be better than here. And the condition: if only I can get to that place” (Henriquez 286). Longing for belonging, a firm identity, and a better place are functional human prerogatives. Yet what is vital in today’s world is changing that longing into action.

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