

**‘THE WHOLE CITY’S OUR BAWDY–HOUSE, MY LASS’:
AFFECTIVE SPACES AND DISORIENTED BODIES IN DIONNE
BRAND AND EMMA DONOGHUE’S FICTIONS**

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Anonymity is the big lie of a city. You aren’t anonymous at all. You’re common, really, common like so many pebbles, so many specks of dirt, so many atoms of materiality. (Brand 3)

It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. (Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’ 10)

In her study *Globalization and its Discontents* (1998), the sociologist Saskia Sassen argues that the presence of immigrants and other traditionally excluded peoples in what she refers to as ‘global cities’ pushes the limits of legitimacy by interrogating a key question: ‘Whose city is this?’ (xix). In global urban networks such as New York or Tokyo, corporate actors and traditionally disadvantaged ones share economic and cultural participation. Sassen’s claim thus allows for the emergence of a series of spaces and localities of resistance in these new transnational geographies. Applying Homi Bhabha’s spatio-temporal insights for an analysis of contemporary Irish novels, the critic Linden Peach argues that ‘when the socially marginalized emerge from the margins, a spatial shift occurs’ (78). This shift, he explains, may involve the geographical, the socio-cultural, and the figurative. Taking up Peach’s ideas, this article incorporates the affective terrain into this equation in order to discuss the possibilities and limitations of such practices of intervention. Drawing on globalisation studies and theories of affect (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*; Sedgwick; Sassen), I consider the representation of affective space in the novels of two queer transCanadian¹ women writers: Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2005) and Emma Donoghue’s *Slammerkin* (2000). I follow the term ‘transCanadian’, as proposed by Kamboureli and Miki (2007), to dislodge a series of contemporary transnational women writers from traditional definitions around national literatures and instead, understand how their work is invested in rearticulating new ties of affect and

coalition in a two-way dialogue between Canada and the rest of the world.² By posing the term ‘trans’ after ‘queer’ in my understanding of queer transCanadian women’s writing, I also aim to provoke a certain collision of meanings that would bring in the presence of non-normative practices of gender and sexuality into the discussion, engaging with the presence of queer and other bodies, and thus moving beyond geopolitical border crossings. This problematisation of borders, I argue, allows these writers to challenge normative categories of gender, space, and affect, creating unexpected alliances between bodies, and often reshaping the social and ethical fabric.

In this essay, I claim that Brand and Donoghue’s ‘eccentric subjects’ (De Lauretis) actively struggle to legitimise the presence of their sexualised and racialised bodies in the transnational urban centers in which they are situated, Toronto and London, respectively.³ As such, they contribute—albeit momentarily—to the remapping of geo-political and cultural space and the tentative creation of alternative affective communities.⁴ Here, I use the term ‘community’ in its etymological sense—*Lat. communis*, meaning common. As the narrator in Brand’s novel claims, ‘that friendship of opposition to the state of things, and their common oddness, held all of them together’ (19). And yet, what do Brand and Donoghue’s characters hold in common? What is being exchanged in the characters’ relations? Notably, in her discussion on affective economies, Sara Ahmed claims that ‘feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation’ (*Cultural Politics* 8). Affects, then, are not property; they are not owned or possessed by subjects. Rather, they circulate between bodies constantly generating new encounters through spatial processes of approximation, disorientation, and reorientation (*Cultural Politics*). In Brand and Donoghue’s fictions, affect shapes social and bodily space and this is seen through the constant struggle for seemingly disoriented bodies to develop and maintain a sense of community that can distance themselves from normative affective ties and affiliations. Though set in disparate temporal and spatial frameworks, these novels engage with how the perverse entanglement of capital and affect in so-called global cities systematically threatens to shatter the sustainability of such affective communities, often turning these spaces into sites of bare affect.⁵

In an interview reprinted in *No Margins: Writing Canadian Fiction in Lesbian* (2005), Brand, Toronto’s Poet Laureate for 2009–10, shares her view on the creative potential of urban space within her work: ‘I’ve always wanted to write about the emergent city...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 it’ (33). From her early

essay collections such as *Bread Out Of Stone* (1994) to her more recent memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), as well as her poetry collection *Thirsty* (2002), the city has continued to occupy an important role in her writings. In particular, Toronto has been rewritten and reimagined throughout Brand's *oeuvre* as a site of contradiction, a vision that has often attracted the attention of Canadian literary and cultural critics (Ty; Goldman; Walcott). In a key essay on public space and citizenship, Emily Johansen discusses how the group of young Canadians in *What We All Long For* develop what she terms a 'territorialized cosmopolitan subjectivity' (49). Johansen claims that although these youths are constructed through multiple affiliations across the axes of gender, sexuality, race and class, their alternative subject position is neither uprooted or deterritorialised but firmly located in the streets of Toronto. While supporting Johansen's insights, I would like to shift the attention from what I see as the cosmopolitan make up of the novel to instead focus on the affective ruptures that emerge (partly) as a result of aggressive capitalist ideologies under processes of uneven globalisation.

Set in 2002, the novel introduces Tuyen, a lesbian artist of Vietnamese ancestry who lives alone in a shabby apartment in College Street after leaving her family's suburban house in Richmond Hill. Surrounded by objects that she crafts and moulds to turn into art, Tuyen is a Pygmalion figure who sculpts and transforms matter through touch, an interaction that both Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have indicated is crucial in understanding affective orientations. Tuyen's brother, Quy, went missing when he was five years old in the South China Sea when their parents were fleeing Vietnam. The loss of their young boy shapes both the family's affective relations and their attitude towards Toronto following emigration to Canada. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed aptly notes that 'emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others' (4). Tuyen's parents have been emotionally paralysed by the pain of losing their child, whereas Tuyen has re-oriented affect towards objects as a way to compensate for her lack of affective ties towards her family. Also disconnected from her brother, Binh, as well as her other sisters, Tuyen longs to escape familiarity and everyday life, and instead longs for the touch of strangers: 'Tuyen wanted no duty. And perhaps that is what she had arrived at. Yet, she wanted an embrace so tight, and with such a gathering of scents and touches. She wanted sensuality, not duty' (61). Refusing to engage in emotional debt towards her family, Tuyen instead craves for the polysensual possibilities of the city as a

vehicle to develop a sustainable affective community. By so doing, she constantly reinvents her subjectivity and the social relations around her.

One of Tuyen's longings involves her friend Carla who inhabits 'a world of fantasy, of distance, of dreams' (17) and thus remains out of touch throughout the narrative. Unlike Tuyen, Carla is, by contrast, unable to feel desire, so the sense that she has most developed is that of sight. She is constantly depicted staring out the window, voyeuristically observing the life of others: 'She watched and watched until the light went and the street lights came on and the crowd changed, with the exception of the regular homeless' (39). Significantly, though, Carla is barely seen throughout the narrative; her presence is often described as otherworldly or ghostly: 'She rode along the shore, feeling translucent' (30). From his family's point of view, Quy occupies a similar spectral position; they have not heard from their son since he went missing as a boy. Readers, however, have partial access to Quy's life through the sections in the novel where he functions as narrator. Quy explains how after he went missing, he spent seven years living as an orphan in a refugee camp in Pulau Bidong, an island off the coast of Malaysia, where he learnt how to survive. Yet, this traumatic experience produced a precariousness in his affective attachments. In the essay 'Beyond Human Life', Giorgio Agamben argues that 'the refugee should be considered for what it is, namely, nothing less than a limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed' (*Means* 21-22). Interestingly, the apartments where Carla and Tuyen live are described as places of refuge thus establishing an indirect connection with Quy's bare life on Pulau Bidong. The juxtaposition of their narratives, as Eleanor Ty observes, allows Brand to show 'the condition of globality and displacement in contemporary Canadian society' (107). Furthermore, by portraying all of these characters as occupying refugee spaces, Brand problematises the normative productions behind the categories of community, nation, and belonging to instead advocate for the forging of alternative affective affiliations.

The episode of Carla's mother's suicide is significant in illustrating the novel's use of affective spaces. When Carla was five, her mother, Angie, jumped off her apartment's balcony leaving her son Jamal, then a baby, with the young girl. Her growing cancer, together with the emotional dislocation of having been exploited by Carla's father (himself a married man) leads to Angie's tragic suicide. Understandably, this moment of negative affect shapes Carla's social relations in various ways. Loss, on the one hand, makes her retreat from intimacy with others:

Loving Angie was a gate, and at every moment she made decisions based on that love, if the gate swung open or closed. She kept from loving because she loved Angie. She collected nothing like furniture or books because she loved Angie and things would clutter the space between her present self and the self that Angie loved. Carla needed a clear empty path to Angie as a living being. (Brand 111)

There is no room for the development of affective ties given that her love for the lost object—her mother—(already) occupies this space. When Angie vanishes off the balcony, she both symbolically and literally remains forever out of touch from her daughter, and yet her presence is forever imprinted on Carla like a scar on her skin. Thus Carla lives a life of bare affect that systematically truncates the possibility of her forging any affective community. Moreover, when her mother entrusts her with the baby, she dooms Carla to a complicated bond of emotional debt and dependence with her brother: ‘Her affection for him had never kept him safe or close. She knew that she loved him with a possessive passion, but she had never felt that love returned. He had always felt himself disconnected’ (236). Here, in *What We All Long For*, Brand depicts the global city of Toronto not only as a transnational space of interconnectivity but also as a site of death.

Building on the city as a site of negative affect, Toronto’s ‘polyphonic murmurings’ (Brand) and multicultural surface hides a darker side of racism and exploitation that is intertwined with the stories of affective longings experienced by the characters in Brand’s novel. For instance, the lives of Tuyen’s parents, Cam and Tuan, are saturated by negative affect, primarily guilt and shame, as a result of the accumulation of loss they have experienced. A former doctor in Vietnam, Cam is unable to perform her profession in Canada and so temporarily becomes a manicurist. Interestingly, this job entails the touch of other women though only superficially, since the interaction only involves the nails located at the very tip of the fingers. Importantly, however, these ephemeral moments of touch are determined by an economic exchange, thus limiting the possibility for any sustained affect to occur. Far from connecting herself to a larger community of women, the role of manicurist leaves Cam further disconnected from other people, so, after a while, she gives up this job to open a restaurant with her husband in Chinatown. As a consequence of suffering anxiety and fear of being caught without proof of her identity—proof, in other words,

of citizenship—Tuyen’s mother rather erratically (and systematically) covers all the surfaces of her house with plastic:

Cam had laminated everything in sight when she discovered a shop, Vickram’s, that did laminating... Which is why the carpeting in their spacious house had a path of plastic running over regularly travelled surfaces. And the chairs and couches were not only Scotchgarded but covered in protective plastic that made sitting the most uncomfortable act. (Brand 63)

This compulsive need to laminate her furniture not only prevents Cam from touching and thus feeling familiar objects but also signals her affective rupture that emerges as a result of being subjected to certain forms of institutionalised racism. In contrast to Tuyen’s sensuality, Cam’s life has been stripped of desire, which has led this woman into a sterilised existence. And yet, Cam is consumed by the city and its inhabitants who are ready to enjoy all the tastes of Vietnamese food in the restaurant. Ironically, neither Cam or her husband are able to cook well, but this proves no obstacle for their customers: ‘Eager Anglos ready to taste the fare of their multicultural city wouldn’t know the differences’ (67). Out of a ‘lapping shame’ (20), Tuyen feels compelled to leave her home and family; she is ashamed of their language and their nostalgia towards a place that is no longer within close physical proximity, but elsewhere, in a distance region as well as a place of the imagination. Calling herself a Dadaist, Tuyen refuses to be assimilated by the nation and instead rebels by developing alternative tastes and affective attachments with other people like herself; those born in Canada to parents born elsewhere: ‘This is what drew them together. They each had the hip quietness of having seen; the feeling of living in two dimensions, the look of being on the brink, at the doorway listening for everything’ (20). Tuyen’s failed orientation to family life has reoriented her towards an alternative community where the senses are prioritised. What orients these characters towards each other and a potential touch is, in fact, their shared sights and hearings. Tuyen’s disorientation from her family, however, is not that different from the disorientation that her mother feels since in a way, they are both caught in circuits of shame (Sedgwick). Cam’s guilt, however, paralyses her and prevents her access into any affective community: ‘It was she to blame, it was she who could have with one turning of the head caught sight of Quy and pulled him to her. She could taste that moment, she longed to live it, it terrified her. She had such a deep sense of shame she felt

inhuman' (113). Failing to turn makes her disorient herself from her son thus making her not only lose a most prized object of positive affect but negatively affecting Quy's own life trajectory.

Brand's characters constantly struggle to counteract the negative racialisation and sexualisation of their bodies in the global city of Toronto. Oku, a young black poet and literature Master's drop-out student of Caribbean ancestry, strives to find his identity and place in the city against the oppressive forces of institutional control and the endemic problem of institutionalised racism that are personified by social structures like the police who systematically criminalise his body. Here, Toronto functions as a site of contradiction for black men like Oku who, despite being Canadian by birth, lack the fully recognised right to access all the practices of citizenship (Johansen 48). Thus Brand shows how the superficiality of skin colour further complicates the meaning of citizenship. Nevertheless, as Sassen argues, the 'global city is a strategic site for disempowered actors because it enables them to gain presence, to emerge as subjects, even when they do not gain direct power' (xxi). In the novel, Brand illustrates this during Oku's recollection of an encounter with the police when he was just eighteen. Recalling the incident, Oku recounts how he foresaw the racialised charade about to occur and thus anticipated his part in this perverse performance: 'Two cops came out of the car. He can't remember if they called him, if they told him to stop. His arms rose easily as if reaching for an embrace.... He yielded his body as if to a lover, and the cop slid into his arms' (165). From an Althusserian perspective, Oku's interruption of the police's interpellation activates a process of de-subjectification. However, his "already knowing" the role to play momentarily subverts the police's authority. By means of using his body as an affective shield, Oku contains the violence of the situation and instead shifts attention onto the corporeal and spatial aspects of the choreography played out with the police. As Phanuel Antwi claims, 'Brand's model presents in Oku a black man who, through experience, has learned to strategically use his body as an instrument of dissent to navigate grey zones with police officers' (218). Oku, then, momentarily disrupts institutional structures in this macabre tableau not only through his anticipated bodily knowledge but by locating a form of reverse affect at the centre of the exchange of power.

The perverse entanglement of capital and affect in so-called global cities has also shaped Quy's life trajectory and the relationships that he has formed along the way. Quy repeatedly explains how he spent most of his life alone; from the ages of five to twelve when he met Loc Tuc, a heroin-addicted monk who took him out of Pulau Bidong. 'He gave me

a direction. He taught me who I was' (Brand 217), Quy claims. Described as a cosmopolitan man, Loc Tuc is one of several other ethically dubious characters in the novel involved in a variety of illegal activities such as the unofficial refugee trade. Importantly, they all live in the city's underworld that echoes Donoghue's portrayal of late eighteenth century London in *Slammerkin* at a time when industrialisation was booming. Quy and the monk engage in transnational flows, that is, they move to Singapore and then to Bangkok. Quy's affective ties thus develop intertwined with processes of economic exchange in the growing markets of the Asian tigers of the 1990s: 'We were like a gang, like any conglomerate of businessmen. We had territory, we had monopolies, we had wars, we had alliances' (284). Importantly, Brand resists portraying Quy as an example of universal innocence and instead, turns him into an equally suspect character; he is someone not to be trusted, as the narrative suggests. As such, he is not distinctly different from Binh, Tuyen's other brother, who runs a store yet also spends his time trading and exchanging illegal goods, often engaged in dubious activities. As Brand shows, however, disadvantaged populations not only survive on trading official and unofficial goods but also on the circulation of physical threats: 'their gains weren't stock options and expensive homes but momentary physical control and perennially contested fearsomeness' (257). This is the same space of negative affect where Quy has grown up. His affective affiliations have been structured around violence and economic gain: 'Brotherliness is another feeling I can't come up with. Self-interest is what moves the world. People bunch together because they are scared. I'm a loner' (139). It is this self-interest that orients him, making him cross the Pacific to reach the shores of Canada in search of more economic gain.

When Binh seems to have found his lost brother Quy, a turning point in the narrative occurs, which shapes spatial structures and once again transforms affective relations in the novel. Far from providing Tuyen with any sense of peace, Quy's appearance disrupts her: 'She felt disoriented, drawn to the babyishness of the face against the body springy as violence' (227). Facing her missing brother reactivates Tuyen's emotional debt thus creating a moment of negative affect. And yet, Tuyen slowly accepts the idea of taking some responsibility and so she unites forces with her brother to help their parents deal with the shock of seeing their missing son again. Similarly, when Carla's father, Derek, finally takes responsibility for his son, Jamal, Carla momentarily experiences a sense of happiness and relief: 'She rode through the city, now feeling free.... Derek had bailed Jamal out. Jamal was going to live with him. Whether that lasted or not now was up to them' (314). These

ephemeral moments of positive affect quickly vanish when it is revealed that Carla's brother is yet again involved in an illegal activity soon after leaving prison. In a perverse twist, Jamal's violence is targeted towards Quy who is alone outside his parents' house, waiting to be finally recognised by his family. *What We All Long For*, then, ends with Quy bleeding in the street and his parents frantically running out to grab him. This final moment of touch becomes a brief instance of what Lauren Berlant terms 'cruel optimism' (21) where the promise of a happy future is left unresolved. Brand, therefore, gives no room for affective ties within the family to become sustainable.

In his analysis of *What We All Long For*, the cultural critic, Kit Dobson, claims that Brand's novel 'represents a generational shift in the politics of being in Canadian space, pushing the notions of community and belonging in different directions' (142). In their recognition of the city's dangers, violence and limitations, characters like Tuyen and Oku represent alternative bodies capable of reclaiming such urban spaces; as Oku explains, beings 'longing for the dissonance' (228). As a result of a series of structural violences, the moments of affect that these characters experience, however, cannot be sustained and thus remain ephemeral. The young people in Brand's novel have been exposed to a series of emotional ruptures that have pulled them into searching for alternative forms of affective communities that are yet 'to come' (Derrida 79). In more dramatic ways, the older generations depicted in the text have no access to affective intervention owing to personal histories of loss being intertwined with contemporary processes of global displacement and dispossession.

Despite being set in late eighteenth century Britain, Donoghue's *Slammerkin* (2000) resembles Brand's narrative in how social relations and affective spaces are indirectly shaped by processes of uneven globalisation and aggressive neoliberal ideologies. Donoghue departs from the Irish-centred focus of her earlier "coming out" novels *Stir-Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995) and moves into the realm of historical or historiographic fiction that characterises her later pieces such as *Life Mask* (2004) and *The Sealed Letter* (2008). Donoghue's shift allows her to contest directly received masculinist constructions of history and nation, thus sustaining a critique against normative affective and gender structures. *Slammerkin* (meaning a loose dress, and a loose woman) covers the tortuous life of the young Mary Saunders from 1760 to 1763. In spite of suffering rape, abandonment, abortion, and eventually prostitution, Donoghue's portrayal of this partially historical protagonist transcends victimisation and subjection. Together with other prostitutes in the novel, Mary is depicted as an active presence in the city, often

reterritorialising and resexualising the masculinist spaces she occupies despite her socio-economic limitations. Mary's emotional precariousness, however, generates an on-going sense of disorientation that ultimately prevents her from remaining within the borders of any solid affective community. In considering Donoghue's novel, I wish to focus on two affective encounters (Gregg and Seigworth) that, in similar fashion to Brand's, are tangled with the transaction of capital thus forming a variety of economies of affect (Ahmed, 'Happy Objects').

As critic Morales Ladrón argues, problematic relationships between mother and daughter figures are a constant trait across Donoghue's *oeuvre* (107), and *Slammerkin* is no exception to this. The first section of the novel narrates Mary's initiation into London's underground life after being evicted from her family home by her own mother, Mrs. Susan Digot. When Mrs. Digot realises that her daughter is pregnant, she kicks Mary out of the family home, telling her, 'You have no mother now' (31). Left homeless, alone and wandering the streets of London, Mary wonders about her lack of place and resources: 'If she was sunk so low that her own mother wouldn't give her shelter, what use was it to appeal to strangers?' (33). This moment of negative affect dramatically shapes Mary's future encounters with other female characters in the narrative. Having been repeatedly raped and almost beaten to death, a Messianic figure in the body of a young but experienced prostitute called Doll Higgins miraculously rescues Mary, feeding her and giving her shelter. Enacting Derrida's notion of 'pure' or 'unconditional' hospitality, this stranger saves Mary's life by welcoming her into her household, a room at the Rookery, without hesitation.⁶ As Derrida claims, 'unconditional hospitality implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest, to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this' (70). Describing herself as a 'free agent' (38), Doll accepts the stranger without expectation, thus proving her potential for affective allegiances to emerge. In an ironic reversal of the figure of the male professor Henry Higgins in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912), the female prostitute Doll Higgins teaches the young (anti)heroine proto-feminist lessons: 'It's every girl for herself' (36); 'Never give up your liberty' (70). Through Doll's guidance, Mary begins to feel at 'home' and soon integrates into the city's underworld.

Doll's life of prostitution is associated, sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, to concepts of home and citizenship: 'she seemed unable to remember a time before *strolling*—that was her word for it— or any possibilities beyond its reach. It was like a country she lived in.... Doll had no sense that there was any border to her territory' (38–40). At

twenty-one years old, Doll has managed to reterritorialise the streets of a city during a moment when historical women like her were rendered invisible and thus not considered full social citizens. By sharing her knowledge with Mary, Donoghue's (anti)heroine learns how to cope with 'life's shortcuts, back alleys, [and] gaps in the walls' (72). Momentarily, then, Doll and Mary form a deterritorialised affective community that enables their sustenance and grants them certain freedom of movement and choice.⁷ Doll's sense of place is not only described in terms of mobility but also around issues of class, sexuality, and civility. For instance, in one of her lessons to Mary, Doll explains that 'Decent folk don't wander like we do...decent folk stay in their place' (62). When Mary and Doll stroll, they are not only re-inscribing their presence in the city but also re-sexualising the urban spaces they occupy:

By now there was hardly a corner of the city where Mary hadn't turned a trick, from the pristine pavements of the West End to the knotted Cockney streets where Spanish Jews, Lascar seamen from the Indies, blacks and Chinamen all mingled like dyes in a basin. She's had coopers and cordwainers, knife-grinders and window-polishers, watchmen and excisemen and a butcher with chapped hands. (Donoghue 59)

The affective economies of sex and capital are intertwined in Mary's transnational sexual exchanges in her wanderings around the blooming city of London.⁸ An emerging city in terms of industrialisation and trade, this urban centre is beginning to show the traits of the future global cities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As *Slammerkin* shows, the textile industry, for instance, was central to economic development. Mary and Doll are fascinated by clothes, which stand as fetishised objects that they manage to reappropriate despite often becoming commodities that substitute affection:

At night when she couldn't sleep, she consoled herself with the inventory of her possessions. She has sleeves, bodices, ruffles, and embroidered stomachers, a brown velvet mantua and a cardinal cape. She owned a spray of silk daisies and a black ribbon choker, one silk slammerkin in violet and another in dark green. (Donoghue 83)

Ironically, this inventory of substitute affects grants Mary a sense of purpose, pulling her towards a more sustainable future.⁹ In many ways this is the flipside of Quay's entrepreneurial adventures shown in Brand's novel, which involve the exploitation of refugees and other vulnerable populations in the context of the expansion of Asian markets in the 1990s. In a reversal to modern versions of mobility as synonymous to an elitist cosmopolitanism, Donoghue associates mobility with an alternative mode of empowerment for previously disoriented subjects such as female prostitutes who rank in the lowest parts of society in terms of class, respectability, and power. By doing so, *Slammerkin* challenges those discourses and ideologies that privilege mobility over rootedness as a sign of the liberatory condition of globalisation. In fact, Doll and Mary's mobility, like the characters in Brand's *What We All Long For*, is firmly located in the streets of London.

These two young women form a precarious affective community temporarily sustained by their instincts for survival and a shared longing for freedom at any cost. Following Doll's indirect advice and passing as a Penitent, Mary spends nearly two months at the Magdalen Hospital to improve her health. Feeling oppressed, however, Mary decides to leave this symbolic prison, making her decision after realising that she wants to be in charge of her life to stop 'drifting along like a leaf on the river' (102). When Mary comes back home from her symbolic exile, she finds no one at their home – the Rookie – except for a landowner who claims to be owed rent that Mary cannot pay for. Running away from this situation, Mary suddenly encounters Doll's corpse in a back alley:

It occurred to her to kiss the taut scarred drum of Doll's cheek, but she found she couldn't. The lightest touch might keep Mary there, rooted in this frozen alley. Instead, she stretched out her hand to the worn red ribbon in Doll's wig. Was it the same one, she wondered, the first one, the ribbon the child Mary had set her eyes and heart on at the Seven Dials, three long years ago? (Donoghue 116)

The young woman's body not only represents a warning for Mary as to the potential lethal outcome of her life but also becomes a symbolic fetish not to be touched. In the words of critic Eibhear Walshe, 'Donoghue is a very physical writer, always presenting her characters within the context of bodily desires and discomforts and in this novel the body now becomes a place of extreme unease' (281–82). The affective impact of Doll's death on Mary's subjectivity and its embodiment

resembles that of Angie's death on her daughter Carla in *What We All Long For*. On the one hand, this loss symbolises Mary's disorientation as a subject, since without her alter ego, she finds herself rootless and without a home. Far from disappearing, however, Doll now occupies a spectral position that will continue to guide Mary into uncertain paths. In similar fashion to Carla's haunted existence by the loss of her mother, these phantom traces of affect are, on the other hand, impregnated into Mary's skin and sense of self. Temporarily, Mary transfers her affection for Doll into a piece of clothing; a ribbon that will function as the bond between the two women for the rest of the narrative.

Feeling dislocated, the idea of London as a space of possibility collapses so the heroine feels urged to flee the city: 'London was the page on which she'd been written from the start; she didn't know who she was if she wasn't there' (131). Journeying from England into Wales, the city of London becomes imaginary space as it begins to dissolve for Mary. It is through the movement between geographical borders that Mary spins a new identity for herself as an orphan girl in search of a position as a servant for Mrs. Jones, an old friend of her mother. Attempting to fulfill a Christian act but consequently putting her own family in a position of risk and danger, Mrs. Jones opens the door and welcomes this stranger into her household. As Mary herself ponders, 'Who'd take in the daughter of a friend she hadn't seen in twenty years? What kind of fool would open her house to a stranger?' (126). Mrs. Jones, however, welcomes her without hesitation, hiring her as a maid. Interestingly, Mary is allocated in the attic with another young maid named Abi, a black 'maid-of-all-work', as she is called (166). The attic becomes an affective space where these two young women tackle issues of gender, race, and class oppression.¹⁰ In this privileged microcosm, the women momentarily develop certain affiliation and solidarity. Again, however, this affective community is rendered precarious given that both women's relationship is entangled with economic issues thus making distrust a key element in their association.

Mary is constantly aware of the charade she is performing, almost to the point of actually believing her invented role as a 'wandering orphan' (223), as she calls herself. As a result, she begins to integrate her presence within the household through the development of intimacy with her mistress, Mrs. Jones. It is through the act of sewing that both girl and woman bond, creating an illusion of equality through the erasure of class difference: 'Mary's hands were too good to wear out on the back of a scrubbing brush. When the pair of them were working away side by side, hour after hour, Mrs. Jones had the curious sensation that they were not mistress and maid but equal helpmeets, almost' (235). When Mary and

Mrs. Jones sew together, they often tell each other stories, thus managing to rewrite the masculinist spaces they occupy via the presence of their own bodies. Mr. Jones is, in fact, excluded from this female community, which ultimately creates his feelings of insecurity. His masculinity is threatened by the active role that this female stranger—as he calls her—plays in his wife’s life. Mary, a young girl, has managed to replace a man in terms of a kind of intimacy that remains incomprehensible to him. For Mary, this microcosm had (finally) made her feel she belonged somewhere:

Here, in the stuffy clutter of a small sewing room in the Joneses’ house on Inch Lane in the town of Monmouth in England or Wales or somewhere in between.... Till this endless afternoon, Mary had never quite known the truth: this was home’ (Donoghue 337).

Significantly, Mary’s moment of affective realisation is spatially determined in a multitude of locations, ranging from a closed room, a family house, a town, and finally, the border between two countries. This moment of placement, nonetheless, is only ephemeral, since these locations soon become stained as a consequence of a spiral of lies and deceit that lead to punishment, violence, and death.

Against the locals’ attempts to make her feel as an insider, Mary systematically lacks freedom: ‘Service had reduced her to a child, put her under orders to get up and lie down at someone else’s rules, working for someone else’s whim; her days were spent obeying someone else’s rules, working for someone else’s profit. Nothing was Mary’s anymore’ (188). Her lack of power prompts her return to prostitution but this time as a secret source of financial independence in order to secure herself an alternative future. Mary’s hidden horde of money becomes ‘a kind of secret fetish’ (Peach 83). Her desire is oriented towards this object thus turning it into the only source of affect. Then, when Mrs. Jones decides to take this sinful money away to charity, Mary responds to this affective betrayal by killing her. Affective practices are entangled in economic exchange, thus blocking the possibility for the (anti)heroine to sustain a long-term affective community. As Quy puts it in Brand’s novel, ‘For some of us, the world is never forgiving. And anyway, we don’t believe in such things, these ideas of forgiveness, redemption—it’s useless’ (285). Described as a murderess and a monster, Mary is sentenced to death by hanging having been charged with the murder of her mistress. She is executed in the public space of the Market Square in Monmouth; her body exposed to strangers and familiar faces alike. It is interesting to

note how, once again, the intersection of the body and space acquires a crucial meaning in Donoghue's text. One woman dies and yet another survives. Benefitting from the confusion after Mrs Jones' murder, Abi runs off to London, a place she describes as 'a topsy-turvy city' where race seems to become invisible: 'Strangers barely turned their heads. She wondered whether her skin had turned white overnight, or become quite invisible. This place would do, she thought with a sudden surge of hope; no one would ever find her here' (378). In a way, Abi is retracing the steps of other women before her; disoriented women like Doll and Mary, who somehow paved out the way into the possibility of creating future communities of positive affect. As Peach aptly claims, 'Donoghue's reader cannot but be aware that, in writing in the eighteenth century, Donoghue is indirectly offering a feminist critique of late twentieth-century, capitalist-society' (12).

Political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri controversially claim that the poor, together with other neglected groups of people, constitute a productive force they understand as a potential resisting 'multitude' against the tyrannical global capitalist processes of what they refer to as 'Empire' (xvii). This article has shown how the affective communities depicted in these transCanadian women writers' novels function as textual instances of the potential force of resistance to normative sexual, gendered, and racial hegemonic structures. In Brand and Donoghue's texts, nonetheless, Toronto and London become global spaces of cruel optimism where affective communities remain precarious, or ultimately, non-existent. Berlant defines cruel optimism as 'the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss' (21). *What We All Long For* and *Slammerkin* engage with these 'compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant 21) in that the promise of an affective community appears as a possibility and yet, the sustenance of these very communities is always already under threat, never secured. By tackling these tensions and contradictions, Brand and Donoghue problematise current configurations of social relations and power structures, particularly in the context of emerging or contemporary global cities. Furthermore, by interrogating and reimagining what I would refer to as the poetics and politics of affect, Brand and Donoghue's novels indirectly advocate for the creation of alternative logics of embodiment and space in the panorama of the unevenly globalised twenty-first century.¹¹

NOTES

¹ The term ‘TransCanada’ has become associated with the *TransCanada Institute* in Guelph (Canada), and the work of scholars such as Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki. Here is a section of their online mandate where their rationale is explained: ‘The “Trans” in TransCanada, then echoes the various processes—historical, political, national, economic, global—that impact on Canadian literature as an institution that has gone through various stages of development: from being ignored as a colonial product, and thus seen as inferior to the British and American literary traditions, to being reified as a national, read ‘white’, literature, from encompassing, under the aegis of multiculturalism, diasporic authors to becoming indigenized and reaching international acclaim to being studied in the context of the humanities’.

² An established voice within Canadian literary circles, Toronto’s 2009–2011 Poet Laureate Dionne Brand has explored, for over two decades, the impact of multiple displacements, positively affirming her identity as a lesbian and as a black Canadian author with an Afro–Caribbean heritage. Also a fitting example of the queer transCanadian author, Emma Donoghue grew up in Dublin, moved to Cambridge (UK) to complete her PhD, and finally settled in London (Ontario) in 1998, where she has become an award–winning writer with a growing reputation in the Canadian canon. I would argue that Donoghue’s post–2000 writings, particularly *Landing* (2007) and *Room* (2010), show a broader interest in addressing the complexity of borders under contemporary transnational and globalization processes.

³ Feminist philosopher Teresa de Lauretis employs the term ‘eccentric subject’ to refer to an ‘excessive critical position...attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses’ (145).

⁴ See Gandhi (2006) for a discussion of the politics of friendship within the context of anticolonial encounters in the late Victorian period. I am indebted to the title of her book for the term ‘affective community’.

⁵ See philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s articulation of the concepts of sovereignty, bare life, and state of exception in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (2000) for further reference.

⁶ The figure of the stranger recurs in Donoghue’s *oeuvre*, oscillating between being a source of uncertainty and a source of comfort, love, and community. After moving to Dublin, Maria, one of the main characters

in *Stir-Fry* (1994), experiences feelings of estrangement associated with the space of the city. On the other hand, it is loss what makes Pen in *Hood* (1995) think of strangers living in one world community. Similarly, the character of Jack in *Room* (2010) develops a form of corporeal citizenship where ties of affection and attachment towards strangers transcend the boundaries of the home and by extension, the nation, towards new reconfigurations of world communities.

⁷ The term ‘deterritorialization’ gained popularity with the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 1970s. Since then, the concept has been rearticulated from diverse fields of study, such as anthropology (García Canclini; Appadurai) and political philosophy (Hardt and Negri).

⁸ In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed discusses the concept of affective economies claiming that ‘feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation’ (8). Involving an exchange of sex and capital, prostitution as such participates in the circulation of affective economies.

⁹ See Brydon (2007) for an intriguing article on the workings of affective citizenship in Dionne Brand’s long poem *Inventory* (2006).

¹⁰ With the publication of proto-feminist texts, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1899), the attic became a symbol of oppression against women’s bodies and subjectivities under patriarchal structures. With the publication of Jean Rhys’ novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a subversive retelling of the story of Bertha Mason, the meaning of the attic shifted to contain further instances of racial discrimination and class inequalities. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s pioneering study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) for an in-depth analysis of this contested space. Contemporary women writers, as illustrated by Margaret Atwood’s novel *Alias Grace* (1996) and Emma Donoghue’s collection *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997), have revisited the attic as a subversive space for feminist intervention and coalition. See García Zarranz for further reference.

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