

Visions of Family and Tradition in Dionne Brand's Writing

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Resumo: O artigo tem como objetivo discutir as visões de família e tradição nas obras da escritora canadense, nascida no Caribe, Dionne Brand. São duas as principais obras analisadas: *At the Full and Change of the Moon* e *What We All Long For*. O enfoque teórico consiste em artigos e livros das áreas de estudos culturais e da crítica pós-colonial, levando em consideração o fato de Dionne Brand ser uma escritora imigrante, o que influencia profundamente a sua escrita. A análise das obras será feita com um enfoque comparativo e contrastivo, estudando assim as diferenças e as semelhanças entre as mesmas e, ao mesmo tempo, estabelecendo uma conexão entre ambas. Analisando os conceitos de família e tradição presentes nas obras, foi possível ver o papel dos valores tradicionais e familiares caribenhos e como eles são diferentes, não apenas no Canadá, mas no modo de viver da sociedade moderna.

Palavras-chave: tradição; família; diáspora; modernidade.

“Tribal cultures are not diasporas; their sense of rootdness in the land is precisely what diasporic peoples have lost.”

James Clifford

“Many contemporary women writers of the Anglophone Caribbean depict migration as continuing to disrupt the home and family in the same way as the middle passage.”

Elizabeth DeLoughrey

“I had replaced the idea of decay, the idea of the ideal which can be the cause of so much grief, by the idea of flux.”

V.S. Naipaul

The discussion about notions of “family”, “community” and “tradition” is not a specificity of diasporic writing, but it is true that under its view these terms have their own particular meanings and importance. Depicting these notions in two different novels, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) and *What We All Long For* (2005), Dionne Brand, a Caribbean writer who has been living in Canada, offers two different backgrounds and perspectives on these issues. The first one begins in Trinidad, and it is clear how tradition influences the characters’ lives, all connected through kinship, since the story is based on a lineage that has its origins in sacrifice and in suffering and fragmentation, which happened with the middle passage, the name given to the Atlantic path of slave trade during colonialism. In the second novel, however, we have a Westernized background. The main characters, all immigrants’ children, are in search of “becoming individuals”, which, in the end, enlarges the gap between them and their ancestors’ tradition. The fact is that a much richer reading can be made by combining these two novels. This combination puts in evidence how the meaning and importance of family and tradition change when seen through different cultures, and how modern society’s search for individuality often dismantles familial and communal ties.

At the Full and Change of the Moon opens with a family tree, which starts with Marie Ursule, a slave in a Caribbean sugar plantation, planning a mass suicide among the other slaves. However, before she puts her plans into practice, she sends her little daughter, Bola, away with Kamena, a slave who knew Marie Ursule, even though it is never clear what kind of relationship they had. That is the beginning of a story, not an individual one, but that of a whole lineage of Marie Ursule’s descendants, which is represented in the family tree. Throughout the book, the reader has access to the lives of some of her descendents, who live in different parts of the world, even in different continents. What is interesting is that the first chapters of the book, which tell about Marie Ursule and Bola, are very dense and full of colours and images. The language seems to be confusing, as well as the grammatical constructions. A semi-oniric atmosphere, created with the use of a language that seems, at every moment, to be alternating between a cruel reality and a liberating fantasy can be seen. However, as the story shifts to other characters, an increasing familiarization with the narrative structure and with the vocabulary is observed. The scenery is then mostly urban, contrasting with the rural one seen in Trinidad.

Nostalgia is a feeling which is present throughout the whole story. The characters are connected more than through blood; they are connected through an origin marked by displacement and tragedy, which goes back to the black dispersion in the middle passage. Portraying different stories that happen in different parts of the world, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* is capable of comparing and contrasting the effects of the diaspora in each case. From the first Bola to her great-granddaughter Bola in Culebra Bay, the paths and the stories of the descendants that emigrate to Canada, Europe and Latin America can be observed.

This connection between Marie Ursule, Bola and their relatives through storytelling reinforces Jameson's (1986) idea about "the allegorical nature of third-world culture", which for him implies that "the telling of the individual story cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself". (JAMESON, 1986, p. 85-86). Having this in mind, Sprinker questions: "In sum, is it not possible, as Jameson here maintains, that certain forms of collective life have until now persisted more powerfully outside the metropolitan countries? And, if so, of what values are these, perhaps *residual but still vital*, forms of social practice?". (SPRINKER, 1993, p. 8). Sprinker, then, calls attention to the persistence of such collective experiences, questioning the reason why they continue to exist, even more intensely, in peripheral countries and proposes a discussion about the values which exist in these *residual, however, vital* social practices.

However, this *collectivistic* characteristic of the so called writers from "peripheral countries" changes its form and meaning when inserted in the "central" ones, where the immigrant writer finds him/herself in a different position: the one of minority. According to Rosemary Marangoly George (1996, p. 112), these individuals, when in minority position, are forced to "experience themselves generically", and so they react transforming this oppressive position into a positive and collective experience.

In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, there are different ways in which the subject sees him/herself in relation to others. By telling Bola's story, Brand also tells the stories which originated from her, showing the continuity generated by ancestry. In this aspect, the novel fits Jameson's idea about the collectivist characteristic of the literature from peripheral countries. However, the idea of collectivity changes when seen from other spots on the maps. From the immigrant position,

Bola's descendents, such as Adrian and Maya, are not capable of fitting in any idea of collectivity, not even the one of minority. On the contrary, they are portrayed as solitary and excluded beings, always trying to find comfort in the memory of home, but never succeeding in doing so. These characters go through a "movement between the past, the present and the future, and between places", which, according to George, is a characteristic of the immigrant genre. According to Walter, Brand "searches in the deep and turbid waters of collective memory buried traces that explain the character's individual past". (BRAND, 2002, p. 88). By remembering the past, the characters try to explain their present situation. And this memory is the main connection they keep with the people who share their diasporic position, which can turn them, in some cases, into an undesirable presence.

To understand the true importance of family connections and tradition in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, it would be interesting to analyze the discussion Stuart Hall makes about the "foundation myths". By using the Old Testament's passage of how Moses freed the "chosen people" from captivity, Hall talks about the hopes such a "myth" brought to the New World and how it is still used as a dominant metaphor in freedom discourses. For Hall, in this metaphor, the history is represented as "teleological and redemptive", and, by circling back to its originating moment, seals every rupture that might have happened along the way. (HALL, 2003, p. 29).

Having the idea of rupture and return in mind, the birth of the two Bolas, Marie Ursule's and Eula's children respectively, can be read as a reference to this redemptive power of history. Both Bolas appear in moments of hopelessness, "dropping out like a moon" (8), referring to an old, and renewed, cycle in the familial spiral, and in this way, bringing the hope of "healing each rupture through this return". (HALL, 2003, p. 29). Like the moon, history is presented in the book as having its phases, not as a finite line, always tracing its end, but as a continuous repeated change of cycles. In establishing a connection between the births of the two Bolas it is possible to see the second as a kind of repetition of the first. Although both births happen in different chronological segments of the spiral, they share the same symbolic meaning of restoration and hope. However, even though the return happened through the birth of the second Bola, the same cannot be said about the reparation. On the contrary, with the second Bola's destiny, this reparation seems to be even more distant. For Walter, there is an "emphasis in the continuity of dis-

continuity” in the novel and this “works as a picture of a fragmented line of lives displaced inside an infinite space characterized by the lack of frontiers that delimit a place-home”. (WALTER, 87 [my translation]). For him, the memory illuminating “its own responsibility for the past” does not guarantee the redemption of what he terms “postcolonial between-existence”. It does not guarantee redemption because the past which comes with this memory continues to write in the present “endless chapters” in which the generations of “silent and silenced voices” continues in a between-space to interminably imagine where they should be.

In the letter Eula writes from Canada to her mother, she talks about this continuity of discontinuity. When talking about history, she tries to explain the fragmentation in which her family finds itself as a continuity of what had happened centuries before, during slavery time.

History opens and closes, Mama. I was reading a book the other day about the nineteenth century and it seemed like reading about now. I think we forget who we were. Nothing is changing, it is just that we are forgetting. All the centuries past may be one long sleep. We are either put to sleep or we choose to sleep. Nothing is changing, we are just forgetting. I am forgetting you, but it is work, forgetting (BRAND, 1999, p. 234).

In the letter, we can see how Eula starts to see the present as a continuation and a reflection of the past. We can also see how Eula’s perceptions are being influenced by modern society. She becomes aware of forgetting and forgetting for her is more than an attempt to adapt, it is an attempt to survive. However, she herself recognizes her own incapacity of forgetting, since her own letter to her dead mother indicates her strong connection with the past. (BRAND, 1999, p. 234). When talking about Brand’s choice of the term diaspora to relate to her own writing, Sandra Almeida says this term “contains an ambiguity inherent to the process – a dubious feeling of belonging and displacement, memory and forgetting, and, above all, the impossibility of return to the original point, which can no longer be sighted”. (ALMEIDA, 2006, p. 194). This impossibility of returning, in both novels, turns remembering into a painful act.

However, Eula cannot avoid feeling the effects of assimilation. Her life now seems governed by the fear of decay, since, for her, “the street is full of decay” and

“everybody seems to be decaying”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 241). Contrary to the idea of continuity and tradition, modern society is based on the idea of decay. Things always go towards an end. This frustrates Eula in the sense that she does not long for things anymore. In fact, she “longs to long” for something: “I remember a calypso. “Take me, take me, I am feeling lonely, take me back to Los Iros...” Why do I remember that? I have never longed for Los Iros but longed for longing for it”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 242).

But how to long for something in a place where all things can only decay? Christopher Lasch makes a very elucidating discussion about the word “identity” and how it has lost its original meaning with the changing of modern society. The word “identity”, which initially meant the uniformity of people or things at each time or circumstance, began to be used at the 50s by psychiatrists to refer to a more “fluid I”, who is defined by his social roles and individual practices. This new psychological meaning of identity eliminates the association between it and “continuity of the personality” completely, and also eliminates the definition of identity being based on a person’s actions and how the public domain sees them. In this sense, this change indicates “the decline of the old meaning of life as a life story” – the belief in a “durable public world, tranquilizing by its solidity, and which survives the individual life and to it forms a kind of judgment”. (LASCH, 1986, p. 23). Being the old meaning related to people and to things, it means for Lasch that both, people and things, lost their solidity in modern society, their characteristic of continuity. This would be related to the sense of linear time so present and feared in modern society, the decay which makes Eula feel so “sick”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 240).

At one moment, Eula is living opposite to a cinema called Eve. The movie which perpetually ran there was called *Emmanuelle*. “Perpetual desire, it said”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 241). To begin with, *Emanuelle* is a well known pornographic movie. This not only shows the objectification of women, also discussed in Maya’s Germany chapter when she exposes her body in a window, but also how banal and impersonal such things as sex as a representative of human relationships in general had become. The second thing which calls attention is the theater’s name. Eve, the figure which, with Adam, represents the origin of all humanity in Western society, had to be thrown away from Paradise because she surrendered to her desire for knowledge. It is a very meaningful image to compare with Eula’s his-

tory. Living under Western rules, she is obliged to live in this “perpetual desire”, always longing for something never to be achieved, that is, to return to her idea of “home”. For Walter, this perpetual suffering is the focus of the novel. He cites the words “perpetual penalty”, that are used in Brand’s novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1997), to refer to “the historical weight as source of fragmentation, alienation and Caribbean migration”. (WALTER, 2002, p. 87). It is interesting at this point to make a parallel between “perpetual penalty” and “perpetual desire”: the first, a perpetual fragmentation, the second, the perpetual desire to return to the center. According to Walter, the diaspora of Bola’s family begins “as a form of resistance and survival”; however, its results end up turning to a “new form of slavery”. (WALTER, 2002, p. 88).

Eula shows awareness of her assimilation to the Western way of living in the passage: “Dear Mama, I stand in the corner of a street and I am falling away. People go by me, so ferocious. They are lurching forward with such ferocity, such greedy determination for life I do not understand. I think I am with them”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 55).

Assimilation in this case would mean having the same destiny as Eve. Once thrown away from home (Paradise), it is not possible to come back. Having assimilated a culture and adapted to a certain way of living – it can be an unpleasant one – the diasporic subject finds her/himself most of the times in a no way back path. As said in Clifford’s statement, which is used as an epigraph to this paper, the “sense of rootdness in the land” is lost for diasporic people. Even though they can make attempts to hold on to their native lands by trying to recreate their homelands in the new country, by means of food, music and cultural habits, returning becomes, more than a physical matter, an unattainable emotional state.

This impossibility of return ends up turning remembering into a painful act. At some point of the book, Dear Mama tells her son: “Father, you know how you get when you remember, Please forget.” This need to forget is depicted throughout a whole chapter, named “Bola”. In this chapter, we see the hi/story of the second Bola, daughter of Eula, who was sent to Culebra Bay to be raised by her grandmother, who she thinks is her mother. After the death of Dear Mama, Bola decides to keep her home the way it was when her mother was alive. She goes to the cemetery to talk with her mother, and finally convinces her mother to come back home. Time passes in the story, but Bola is depicted as remaining

static through all this. She does not recognize anything, even herself. The chapter ends up suggesting what happens to people who do not let go of the past. Wanting her home as it was in the past turns Bola into a “mad” woman, incapable of living in the world external to the house in which she decided to confine herself. At some moment, Bola narrates: “My mother wanted a new life even as I wanted an old one”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 269). Dear Mama’s memory seems all the time to alert her granddaughter of the dangers of remembering. When Bola is dusting the furniture, Dear Mama says: “Don’t dust, it will only grow again”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 275). This statement can be seen as referring to the decaying situation in which Bola finds herself, since dust will only grow in static things, no matter what we do. And static is the condition attained by living in the past. But Bola was living what her mother, Eula, wanted, although the result of it was not what she believed it to be. For Eula, she was doing her daughter a favour, sending her to the past to be with her mother, as herself wished to be able to do. (BRAND, 1999, p. 247).

But living in the past and valuing memories are shown as different things. In the book, the awareness of origin and histories about Marie Ursule are important connections some of the descendants find among themselves. Telling her children about Marie Ursule, Bola says that “Life will continue, no matter what it seems, and even after that someone will remember you”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 297). The idea of continuity, strongly present at the end of the novel, is only possible if there is an invisible chain making a connection among people. And this connection needs more than kinship, it needs a collective memory.

The importance of the idea of continuity and, at the same time, of collective memory is well put again in Stuart Hall’s discussion about the “foundation myths”, when he says these myths are not only “trans-historical”, but also “a-historical”. Their redemptive power lies in the future, but relies on a description of what had already happened, only gaining credibility through the knowledge of what it was at the beginning. (HALL, 2003, p. 29). In the case of *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, we only know the redemptive aspect of the second Bola’s birth because the family’s story is presented to us from the beginning. The fact that the first Bola stays in Culebra Bay even though her several children find themselves in different, and sometimes distant, parts of the world makes the character not only a matriarch, but a symbol of rootedness. Bola, however, seems incapable of offering such a

center, as she herself misses one, remembering constantly of the morning when Marie Ursule handed her to Kamena. Bola herself handed her children to other people, and she even let some of “them to raise themselves”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 71). Eula’s loss of this collective memory shows how this communal life and sense of rootedness can be threatened by globalization, by the contact with other ideas, other forms of behaviour. In the novel this idea is clear when the younger Bola and her sisters have to move out because “the street was coming into [their] house” and they could “hear people walking outside as they were walking in the house”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 259). This is the sign of “modernization” arriving at Culebra Bay. Eula’s fearful reality is now invading the place which in her mind is still an idealized peaceful image of “home”.

This modern global scenario is the centre of Brand’s next novel, *What We All Long For*, set in today’s city of Toronto. Right at the beginning of the novel we see an emotional description of the city, which, paradoxically, appeals to the city’s own lack of emotion. Brand warns the reader about the subjectivity of this description right at the first sentence, when she writes: “The city hovers above the forty-third parallel; that’s illusory of course”. (BRAND, 2005, p. 1). The illusion would be the very concept of city. In using a term like ‘parallel’, Brand discusses the necessity modern society has of making things more exact and how these created “concepts” can be deceitful. For Michel de Certeau, this kind of “fixations”, as he calls it, “constitutes procedures of forgetting”. (CERTEAU, 1984, p. 97). In a very perspicacious discussion about the urban population and how it experiences the city, Certeau talks about the “(voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility”. (CERTEAU, 1984, p. 97). For him, these fixations, which he refers to as routes traced in a map, are no more than the absence of what it was, the “nowhen of a surface of projection”. And this absence, present at the so wanted legibility, “causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten”. These “nominations” transform the city into a “desert” in which what is meaningless, and this became a terrifying idea in modern society, gets out of the shadows and is illuminated by an “implacable light that produces this urban text without obscurities”. (CERTEAU, 1984, p. 103).

Still working on the idea of created concepts and “fixations”, what is even more interesting in the novel’s first sentence is the contrast between the word ‘parallel’, expressing preciseness and exact thought, and the verb ‘hovers’, being

clearly used in a literary sense. Once more, Brand, ironically, makes use of a parallel to expose and question the opposite ideas represented in each word. This opposition is very well represented through Brand's writing style. If in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, a poetic prose, full of imagery and colours, and, as said before, an evolving oniric atmosphere can be observed, in *What We All Long For*, there is a relatively simpler syntactic and semantic construction, with a more urban, cold and colourless, atmosphere and less use of imagery. In that way, her writing embodies the culture it focuses on, permitting a higher identification for those who see themselves inserted in one of the contexts and also permitting the own narrator to insert herself or himself in the object of his or her own observations. In *What We All Long For* the narrator is not a "solar Eye", term used by Certeau to talk about those city voyeurs, who lift their bodies and look at the city like a god, making projections as "a way of keeping aloof". (CERTEAU, 1984, p. 93). Contrary to that idea, Brand's narrator not only recognizes the illusory characteristic of that facsimile of the city seeing from above, but also follows the people who walk "down there", not only living in the city, occupying it, but experiencing it. This narrator, through focusing on the character's minds and describing places and sensations, puts herself or himself in the place of subject and, in that way, seems to experience the city as well.

When discussing the idea of urban concepts we should have in mind that the city really is a human creation, but, as shown in the novel, it also acts upon those who live there. Its habitants are hardly able to avoid being defined by it. People try to adapt the cities to their needs, but what happens is that they also end up having to adapt to the city. The snow time, depicted in the novel as a period of gloominess and reclusion, reflects the feeling of the people who are "suddenly eager for human touch". (BRAND, 2005, p. 2). Anxious for the spring to come, they do not remember that the snow melting will show the ugliness which was hidden by it. The city then "smells of eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all, longing". (BRAND, 2005, p. 1). In this passage, we see nature as responsible for people's reclusion and "most of all, [their] longing". The arrival of spring then raises new hopes, as the following quote states:

The fate of everyone is open again. New lives can be started, or at least spring is the occasion to make it seem possible. No matter how dreary

yesterday was, all the complications and problems that bore down then, now seem carried away by the melting streets. At least the clearing skies and the new breath of air from the lake, both, seduce people into thinking that. (BRAND, 2005, p. 2).

But as the narrator makes clear, this hope is only an illusion. Things will go on as they were after the snow is gone, for it is the city, not nature, responsible for the longing. At the subway train, 8 a.m., people “all look dazed”, “there is a tension, holding in all the sound that bodies make in the morning”. A man, newly arrived at the city, is pierced with some young people’s laughter. As soon as people get out of their “sovereign houses”, there is an imminent danger of them “crash[ing] into someone else’s life, and if [they]’re lucky, it’s good”. So, as a way of avoiding this ‘crash’ “they first try at not letting the city touch them, holding on to the meager privacy of a city with three million people”. (BRAND, 2005, p. 5).

This distance from the city, though, ends up becoming a much greater distance: an emotional distance. Avoiding these ‘crashes’, as Brand calls them, is the same as avoiding human contact, a connection with people and things at an emotional level. According to Hall, this so called people’s “right” to live their own lives “from the inside” is the centre of the concept of individuality, and was really “sharpened and developed” in the Western tradition. (HALL, 2003, p. 84). The choice of both verbs, “sharpen and develop”, to describe this social phenomenon is extremely powerful, because, besides alluding to something harmful, it presents the idea of ‘development’, which does not necessarily mean improvement.

The main characters of *What We All Long For* are immigrants from different parts of the world and their children trying to fit not only in the city of Toronto, but also in the Westernized way of life. And in this context, according to Bhikhu Parekh:

[...] each family is becoming a ground for repressed or explosive fights. And each family, husband and wife, father and children, brothers and sisters have to renegotiate and redefine their relationship patterns, according to their traditional values and to those characteristic of the adopted country. Each family arrives at its own experimental conclusions (apud HALL, op. cit.: 67 my translation).

For immigrants it is hard to maintain the same habits they had in the country of origin. That happens because most of the times they do not have a background which enforces or justifies their traditional values in the “adopted country”. Many of those habits cannot apply to the new culture, which makes it difficult to perpetuate tradition. This is a particularly complicated issue when related to cultural heritage. Immigrant’s children, as those portrayed in the novel, who grow up amidst new forms of behaviour, tend to end up assimilating them. The lack of experience and connection with their parent’s country of origin makes it easier to accept the surrounding culture. As James Clifford says in his article “Diaspora”, “[t]his sense of connection must be strong enough to resist erasure through the normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing” (1994, p. 310). In the case of immigrants’ children, such as Tuyen, Carla, and Oku, the main characters of the novel, this sense of connection is not strong enough.

Here, to talk about Western tradition, as depicted in Brand’s novel, we have to return to Jameson’s idea of “Third” and “First-World” literature. If in the first we have a collectivistic characteristic, in which the individual experiences himself with the community to which he belongs, - even if it is through the suffering of this community-, in the second, we have an increasing separation between the public and the private and a subject who is more aware of his individuality.

According to Lukács, in contemporary “western literature”, the characters act in order to “become individuals”. (apud GEORGE, 1996, p. 114). He makes a comparison with the epic era, which had much the same collectivistic characteristic of the “Third-World” literature defined by Jameson, with the hero being the hope and his destiny defining that of his community. Benjamin also shares this idea, as written by Marangoly George: “loss of the era of the story and the storyteller is deeply lamented by Benjamin for it is the loss of wisdom, of collectivity and of art that has social use-value. This is replaced in the era of the novel by information, isolation and the individual”. (apud GEORGE, 1996, p. 114).

If we take Jameson’s and Benjamin’s ideas and use them as a basis to analyze both of Brand’s novels, it is possible to somehow fit them in both literary and social concepts. We can see stories and storytelling in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, *What We All Long For* is written in the form of isolated individual experiences. Even though in the latter the main characters all form a group of friends, they still reserve a certain emotional distance from each other, most of

the time not knowing exactly what is happening, the problems and the suffering of one another.

For Certeau, this disappearance of stories and legends in the urban environment is the result of a techno-structural witch-hunt, which aims to erase its “superstitions” and “local authorities”. These terms, according to Certeau, refer to systems which create a lack in the discourses that make “people believe”. This lack would form a “free play” area, which would fill such places with “signification”. (CERTEAU, 1984, p. 106). An example of how stories have the power to create significations in places is the description of Culebra Bay, in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. When Bola first arrives in Culebra Bay, all the stories told by Marie Ursule happen there, including the nuns that “came from eternity”, and “which are nothing that truly exist”. (BRAND, 1999, p. 37).

Long before Bola discovers the sea these two old Ursulines have been hovering and multiplying. Long after, they are still. They are dead by any empirical sign, their novices have died, their overseer, their cattle, have died, skins withered to paper with work; their goats dried to drum skins; their convent crumbled to another civilization of rocks and chiton and cytheria, paludina vivipara and triton; crumbled to lancet bats and scorpions, crushed in the liquid silk of snails and the powdered gold of wood ants. All, died. Except, nothing dies. Nothing disappears with finality along this archipelago. Time is a collection of forfeits and damages. (BRAND, 1999, p. 37).

The use of the word “empirical”, which once again reinforces the contradiction, should be highlighted. The role of story and storytelling – in the case of the nuns, it was Bola’s mother who lived there before and passed the story on – fills Culebra Bay, an apparently physically empty place, with life’s acts and signification. The figures which appear to Bola, long dead, at least “empirically”, appear in the form of dust, which is a well known symbol of time and, consequently, of memory.

In *What We All Long For*, the so called “life’s acts” are forgotten and places lose these significations. Taking for instance, the description of the view from Tuyen’s window facing the alleyway:

Overflowing garbage cans and a broken chair rested against the wall of the building opposite to hers. The graffiti crew who lived on the upper floors there had painted a large red grinning pig on the wall. She hadn't noticed the chair there before and examined it from above, thinking what she could make with it. (BRAND, 2005, p. 11).

It is not occasional that Tuyen happens to be an artist. In photographing things she has the chance to have another, a more meaningful, angle of what surrounds her. The loss of the era of the story and the storyteller, "deeply lamented by Benjamin" could be seen as a result of this process of avoiding the symbolical "lack" in places such as in the previous case of Culebra Bay, and in that way not giving room for the unknown to create fantasies in the modern society.

In this context, for Certeau, "there are only places in which one can no longer believe in anything", and "only the cave of the home remains believable". (CERTEAU, 1984, p.106). In the novel, "home" becomes, not only a crucial, but an ambiguous symbol. The story begins with the narrative of a Vietnamese boy named Quy. The reader is informed that this boy lost contact with his parents when the family was escaping to another country. The boy's narrative states how he longs to find his parents and go back home, which is a paradox to Tuyen's, his own sister, behaviour. Instead, she and her friends thought their "families were boring and uninteresting and a general pain, and best kept hidden, and they couldn't wait for the end of high school to leave home". (BRAND, 2005, p. 19). In fact, while Quy laments his solitude throughout all the places he had been, Tuyen prefers to live in a filthy apartment full of mice, because, in her opinion, "everything was better than home". (BRAND, 2005, p. 22).

Tuyen's apartment is a place which deserves special attention. In its description all of her possessions can be seen "scattered in small piles around the growing *lubaio*". (BRAND, 2005, p. 24). The *lubaio* is a central symbol of the novel, being a Chinese signpost in which Tuyen pins down "all the old longings of another generation". (BRAND, 2005, p. 309). She pins the letters her mother wrote to find her brother Quy, pictures, articles and anything which would contain some kind of longing on it. In a passage of the novel, the *lubaio* has one of its "arms" closest to Carla's wall (BRAND, 2005, p. 40) and it makes Carla dream about Tuyen and ask to take that wall down. This is a representation of the thin

but insurmountable separation the two friends find between them, even though they live in the same floor of a building, which can be seen as a connotation of the friendship itself. Tuyen's own apartment has its internal walls taken down by herself, for she is highly influenced by Chinese architecture, which, "dating way back, did not use wall for support. Columns were used". (BRAND, 2005, p. 25).

This Chinese influence on Tuyen's art is really representative, for her family's oriental origin acts upon her even though she does not feel comfortable with this past. For her this past must be forgotten by her family, along with the hunting memory of her brother Quy. (BRAND, 2005, p. 13). What happens is, even though Tuyen collects all those longings, she is still not able to understand them. She sees the letters her mother had so desperately and hopefully written only as "ornate and curious things of a time past". (BRAND, 2005, p. 25). In a passage of the novel she thinks about the reason why she is making this *lubaio*, and is not "quite certain" of what it is. But she continues doing it because she hopes "some grain, some element she would be circling, but had been unable to pin down, would emerge". (BRAND, 2005, p. 309).

This sudden urge to expand the *lubaio* happens after Tuyen has a revelation. Walking with her brother she felt:

[...] comforted by their commonality, the same commonality that had made her so uneasy most of her life; it had made her long to be unexceptional. Yet, here was their specialness now carried between them to the door of the house, the recognitive gaze of an exception cherished through all this time. Wasn't that what her art was all about in the end? (BRAND, 2005, p. 308)

She suddenly realizes that she too longs for something: to belong. Maybe it is to a place, maybe to a group which would accept and share this feeling of exception of hers. In her brother's gaze Tuyen is finally able to see the embracing familiar bound which she avoided and, in fact, did not quite understand until then.

In this western context, for some diasporic subjects "family becomes a symbol of resistance" (LOOMBA, 1998, p. 127) as "in this current global moment of rethinking nation and nationalism, there may be an added desire to keep the idea of "home" and "community" "intact". (GEORGE, 1996, p. 18). This seems difficult, though. When inserted in the modern culture of "openness, rationality,

universalism and individualism” (HALL, 2003, p. 73), the diasporic subject, as those people walking to the subway and avoiding “crash into each other”, may embrace these principles in order to survive. Through this mentality, family becomes an obstacle, since the “familial and communal ties invade the individual’s sense of independence and self-interest in ways that only ‘family’ is allowed to do”. (LOOMBA, 1998, p. 176). The effects of such a behaviour are a complex subject. In breaking these ties, people intend to increase their “sense of independence”, but most of the times what happens is that their sense of awareness and place in society decreases instead. What we see then is a mass of “independent” and “self-interested” subjects feeling out-of-place and out of purpose. They lose their cultural identity, which, according to Hall, is to be “primordially in contact with an immutable and timeless nucleus, connecting the present and the future to the past in an uninterrupted line. This umbilical cord is what we call ‘tradition’, to which the test is its fidelity to the origins”. (HALL, 2003, p. 29).

There is a parallel that is worth making between this idea and one passage of *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. The power and importance of this “uninterrupted” line can be seen in it when Eula writes in the letter to her mother:

I would like a single line of ancestry, Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace. [...] I would like one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything, or forgetting would not help them or matter because the line would be constant, unchangeable. A line that I can reach for in my brain when I feel off kilter. Something to pull me back. I want a village and a seashore and a rock out in the ocean and the certainty that when the moon is in full the sea will rise and for that whole time I will be watching what all of my ancestry have watched for, for all ages (BRAND, 1999, p. 247).

It is difficult not to see the connection between Hall’s quotation and the novel’s passage. Eula expresses in it, once more, her longing to be attached to something stable and more certain, something “constant, unchangeable”. Eula’s wish to trace a line of ancestry is a way to establish this “umbilical cord” which is tradition, and which was lost among the diasporic ways depicted in the novel. The moon in this passage again refers to a continuous cycle of events, which represent,

in the last sentence, a feeling of constancy, of belonging, a connection which is always present between Eula and her ancestry.

This feeling of comfort and longing in relation to tradition, however, changes in *What We All Long For*, for Tuyen's parents themselves are not able to establish this "umbilical cord" between their ancestry and their children. Being diasporic subjects themselves, Tuyen's parents end up losing their own sense of identity, seeing themselves the way the city saw them (BRAND, 2005, p. 67), being "defined by the city", as discussed earlier in this paper. In that sense they are not able to pass on what they themselves accepted having lost. For the children, Bihn and Tuyen, who "were born in the city", and so "were born under the assumption that simply being born counted for something", it is difficult to have any contact with their ancestry tradition. What in the end is perpetuated and passed from one generation to the other is the feeling of displacement. (BRAND, 2005, p. 67). In fact the image of the umbilical cord is used in the novel, but to refer to a connection Tuyen's parents make between their children born in the city and the "desired ineffable nationality" of being Western. (BRAND, 2005, p. 67). So, attaching this umbilical cord to the city, the parents break any sense of connection their children might have felt about the family's country of origin.

Whereas *At the Full and Change of the Moon* focuses on the family origins and connections between kin, *What We All Long For* shows isolated and dysfunctional families that demonstrate little or even no connection with their origin or even between themselves. The urban environment in both novels shows the diasporic subject making use of what James Clifford calls "skills of survival". "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 312) in it. In Eula, loss of comfort and purpose, which comes with communal ties and tradition, and the hope of returning to that can be observed. But if in Tuyen such an awareness of feelings of loss, which is also represented by her lost brother Quy cannot be seen, there is almost an obsession with the feeling of hope, of longing.

Likewise, when talking about Bola's memories, the narrator says: "It is her own hopelessness and her skill. Her faith doesn't believe in endings". (BRAND, 1999, p. 298). Brand's novels show different subjects in different contexts, but somehow she was able to establish a new line which connects the hopes and grieves of these so called diasporic subjects. Saying what sometimes sounds as a question on the cover of her book "What we all long for", she unifies people and

calls attention to one purpose all of us have in common. Tuyen's epiphany at the end of the book says much. It says that even in the exception, we all long to belong to something, to somewhere.

In that sense, the diasporic subjects, as those portrayed by Brand in *What We All Long For* find difficulty not only in establishing connections with the adopted country, but also in maintaining the roots which connected them to the country of origin. This difficulty most of the times is inherited by the children, who, although do not necessarily go through a physical displacement, experience the diaspora as a conflict between the traditional values of their parent's country and their present country. Divergences between parents and children, who find difficulty in establishing patterns of relationship that are common to the whole family are the result of this fact. The demands of the modern world give great emphasis to the individual in the end, breaking, sometimes, the family bounds and distancing people from some idea of tradition.

Abstract: The article aims to discuss visions of family and tradition in the work of Canadian writer, born in the Caribbean, Dionne Brand. The focus will be mainly on two novels: *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and *What We All Long For*. The theoretical focus consists of articles and books of the cultural studies and post-colonial criticism fields, taking into consideration the fact that Dionne Brand is an immigrant writer and that this characteristic deeply influences her writing. The analysis of the novels will be made with a comparative and contrastive focus, studying then the differences and similarities between the two novels and, at the same time, establishing a connection between them. Through the analysis of the concepts of family and tradition in the cited novels, it was possible to see the role of traditional and familial values in the Caribbean and how it differs from the one perpetuated, not only in Canada, but in the way of living of the modern society.

Keywords: tradition; family; diaspora; modernity.

Résumé: L'article présente une discussion sur les visions de la famille et de la tradition dans les romans de l'écrivaine canadienne/caribéenne Dionne Brand. Les romans analysés sont: *At the Full and Change of the Moon* et *What We All Long For*. Du point de vue théorique, on va s'appuyer sur des articles et des livres du domaine des études culturelles et post-coloniales, en tenant compte de la condition immigrante de Dionne Brand, ce qui

caractérise son écriture. L'analyse de textes sera marquée par une perspective comparative et contrastive pour mieux observer les différences et les ressemblances entre les romans et pour établir une connexion entre eux. En analysant les concepts de famille et de tradition dans les romans, il sera possible de comprendre la fonction des valeurs traditionnelles des Caraïbes et de vérifier comment elles sont différentes, pas seulement au Canada, mais aussi dans la manière de vivre de la société moderne.

Mots-clés: tradition; famille; diaspora; modernité.

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