

Creating to belong:
tuyen's artwork in
what we all long for



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In Dionne Brand's novel *What We All Long For*, each of the central characters attempts to define and redefine what it means to belong through their own experiences and interactions. For Tuyen, belonging is not defined by identifying with specific communities, but by fluidity and progression through these defined aspects of identity. Tuyen's *lubaio* (an art installation, the basis of which is a sign post made of railway ties) works as a central symbol that represents this evolving definition of interpersonal belonging for the artist. Ultimately, Tuyen's relationships with both her family and Carla are re-examined and redefined through the process of completing this installation.

The state of Tuyen's *lubaio* at the beginning of the novel mirrors her disrupted sense of interpersonal belonging with her family. When the *lubaio* is first introduced, it is described as being a "mess of wooden rails and tree stumps, twigs and rope, debris" (Brand 14). At this stage, the *lubaio* is merely a collection of materials that could dictate what the final product will be. When describing the installation to Jackie, Oku and Carla, Tuyen admits that she "still [has] to think it all through" (17), suggesting that the piece is far from its final form. At this point the *lubaio* is, for the most part undefined, as is the interpersonal sense of belonging of the artist. How Tuyen chooses to belong and identify with other characters avoids typical definitions of belonging and is left ambiguous. This refusal to belong typically is strongly demonstrated with Tuyen's family when Tuyen's brother, Binh, tells Tuyen that he plans to go to Bangkok with the intent of pursuing Quy, the family's long lost son (13). Tuyen immediately responds by telling Binh to "stay out of things," and let their parents "forget instead of encouraging them" (13). In saying this, Tuyen is rejecting a strengthened sense of one of the most

basic definitions of interpersonal belonging, her family. Tuyen recognizes that her response to Binh's quest to find Quy is defying a sense of familial belonging when she introspectively questions why she doesn't want the idea of Quy to be "charged with some specific substance or body" (26). The recognition of her lack of desire to personify a family enigma is recognition of Tuyen's own ambiguous sense of familial belonging. By not participating in the desire to personalize Quy, Tuyen is rejecting this large part of her family's history and refusing to identify with her family. Tuyen's sense of ambiguous belonging to her family is furthered when Tuyen visits her house in Richmond Hill and reflects that, "she had left the embrace of her family" however, she still desires "an embrace so tight" (61). Tuyen desires to leave the family, yet still longs to feel the comfort and embrace of a family. This desire for both embrace and distance, coupled with Tuyen's lack of desire to participate in resolving a source of family pain, shows that Tuyen's sense of how she belongs within her family at this point in the novel is very undefined. So too is her art installation, and relationship with Carla.

Tuyen's interpersonal relationship with Carla at the beginning of the novel is similarly comparable to the state of the lubaio when Tuyen first starts to create it. Just as the finished lubaio seems a distant possibility, Tuyen notices that Carla occupies "a world of fantasy, of distance, of dreams" (17). This disconnect between the two characters interferes with Tuyen's ability to interact with Carla in the "erotic" way she desires (18). With both the lubaio and Carla, Tuyen is attempting to create a drastic change in how she represents and enacts her developing self-identity. The lubaio is supposed to become a "great figure" that would "fill the entire studio apartment from

ceiling to floor" (14). To achieve this transformation means that the materials of the lubaio must undergo a radical change from simply being a mess on the floor of Tuyen's studio apartment (14). Tuyen's desire to change the nature of her relationship with Carla involves a similar radical transformation. Tuyen's sexual attraction to Carla is clearly demonstrated in a variety of instances throughout the novel, as is Carla's refutation of Tuyen's sexual advances. A clear example of this, as Tuyen recalls, happens when Carla and Tuyen wake up from a night of drinking. Tuyen "playfully kissed her, held her", and Carla immediately responds to this advance by saying "'shit, Tuyen, I told you I'm not into that'"(51). This quote establishes that this is a discussion that has been repeated between the two characters, and thus establishes that Tuyen is, and has been, trying to radically change Carla's sexual identity to suit her own needs. In an essay about the meaning of shared space in *What We All Long For*, Johanna Garvey argues that Tuyen's sense of belonging "resists and undoes...bordered identities" (770). In this case, Tuyen is attempting to undo Carla's bordered sexual identity, which involves belonging as a straight woman. Tuyen directly recognizes that she has interfered with other women's bordered identities when she muses, "straight women were never as straight as they put out" (Brand 50). Tuyen's insistence that Carla's sexuality (and sexuality in general) is something that is not as dichotomized as straight and gay shows that Tuyen is attempting to create a drastic change in the way Carla identifies herself within the sexual community. Tuyen does so to satisfy her own personal longings. Similarly, Tuyen is attempting to radically change the mess of materials she has collected into a piece of recognizable art.

As the installation evolves, so does Tuyen's sense of familial identity. When Tuyen first conceptualizes that her installation will be the longings of a variety of people "[written]...down and post[ed]...on the lubaio" (150), she is working in Bihn's store while he goes to " attempt to find their brother" (144). As the installation begins to take an envisioned form, Tuyen begins to interact with her family in a way that supports the belonging of the entire family, including Quy. By allowing Bihn to leave the store and pursue Quy, Tuyen is indirectly supporting this action despite verbally condoning it. Contrary to what she says, Tuyen's actions demonstrate that she desires Quy to be personified, and thus desires the strengthened sense of familial belonging that finding Quy will bring. Tuyen's newfound desire to feel a sense of belonging in her family is further demonstrated when she begins to physically create the lubaio, and decides to " insert her mother's letter into the cloth" (155). Tuyen's inclusion of her mother's letter in her artwork is a conscious desire to fully make her family part of her identity, and thus shows a desire to fully belong within the family. By incorporating her mother's letter in her installation, Tuyen is consciously making it a part of her own individual experience. When contemplating the presence of self in her artwork, Tuyen reflects that " all her installations were filled with self-portraits" (149). Because there is no other mention of a representation of self in the lubaio, and the basis of the lubaio is the longings of strangers, the inclusion of her mother's letter becomes the iteration of self in Tuyen's artwork. Thus, through the process of creating the lubaio, Tuyen internalizes that her family is an aspect of herself, and in doing so, redefines how she belongs within her family. Tuyen's process of developing the lubaio both mirrors and delineates

her sense of familial belonging. This strengthening of belonging is also seen in Tuyen's relationship with Carla.

The development of a tangible piece of art allows Tuyen to belong with Carla in a new manner that is far more intimate than before. When the piece is simply a concept, Carla has the urge to "pound on the wall for Tuyen to stop chiselling" and has nightmares about the lubaio "extend[ing]... through to [her] place" (40). These quotes show that Carla rejects Tuyen's creation both consciously and subconsciously. In these instances, Tuyen's artwork works against her goal of a sexualized relationship with Carla. Carla's initial reaction to the creation of the lubaio in its primal stages is then contrasted with her reaction when the lubaio is close to completion. Tuyen's installation is now clearly defined as written longings that "race down the drape of cloth on the wall" (158). When the lubaio reaches this point, Carla admires the installation, saying it is "gorgeous" (157). In admiring the artwork, Carla changes the nature of her interaction with Tuyen's installation, as well as how she identifies with the artist. As opposed to dreading the sound of Tuyen creating the installation, Carla now appreciates and begins to participate in the creation of the lubaio. When Tuyen asks Carla to "stay with me" and "help me write [the longings]", Carla agrees, and the two begin creating the installation together (158). The collaboration of the creation of the lubaio symbolizes a completely new dynamic in Carla and Tuyen's relationship. In her essay regarding shared space, Johanna Garvey quotes Gopinath as she interprets Tuyen's apartment as a "'female homosocial space' with the potential to become a space of...homoeroticism" (Garvey 771). Thus, Carla entering Tuyen's apartment and interacting with objects in it (specifically the

installation) symbolizes a desire to interact with Tuyen in a place of homoeroticism. The effect of the newly established relationship between Carla and Tuyen is cemented in the final lines of the novel, when Brand tells us that Carla “longed to hear Tuyen chipping and chiselling away next door” (318). The novel closes on the thought that Carla is longing to interact again with Tuyen and her installation, and thus emphasizes the change in how Carla now relates to Tuyen. The physical creation of Tuyen's lubaio is clearly the central cause of the change in the nature of her relationship with Carla.

Tuyen's creation of the lubaio installation at first solely reflects her interpersonal relationships with her family and with Carla. Both relationships as well as the installation are defined only by ambiguity and distance. As the lubaio evolves from concept to physical creation, it begins to tangibly affect Tuyen's relationships. With her family, Tuyen consciously includes a memento of her family's pain in her artwork, which represents her desire to strengthen her sense of familial belonging. Eventually, Tuyen is able to redefine sexual belonging for Carla through enticing her to participate in the creation of the lubaio. Both of these important relationships are markedly different after their interactions with the art installation. By the novel's end, the lubaio not only mirrors Tuyen's development of belonging, but also participates in redefining belonging in Tuyen's most important relationships. For Tuyen, creating art is clearly a tool used for self-discovery, which allows for the possibility of achieving strengthened relationships with those she loves.

Works Cited

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