

THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE CITY AND ITS SUBJECTS IN SAM SELVON'S  
*THE LONELY LONDONERS* AND DIONNE BRAND'S  
*WHAT WE ALL LONG FOR*

LA RELACIÓN RECÍPROCA ENTRE LA CIUDAD Y  
SUS HABITANTES EN *THE LONELY LONDONERS*  
DE SAM SELVON Y *WHAT WE ALL LONG FOR*  
DE DIONNE BRAND

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## Abstract

This article seeks to examine the significance of geographical setting in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005) in order to understand the undeniable reciprocal relationship that exists between the city and its subjects. Hence, it analyses the role played by London and Toronto in the construction and development of their inhabitants' identities, as well as the power that city dwellers have in (re)shaping urban spaces. The article aims to examine the dynamic and fluid character of the city and intends to identify the effects that migrant communities have on rewriting and remapping urban spaces when exercising their agency.

**Keywords:** *The Lonely Londoners*, *What We All Long For*, geographical setting, identity, urban space.

## Resumen

Este artículo busca examinar la importancia del entorno geográfico en el que se desarrollan las obras *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) de Sam Selvon y *What We All Long For* (2005) de Dionne Brand para así entender la recíproca e innegable relación que existe entre los sujetos y las ciudades que éstos habitan. Con este fin

pretendo analizar el papel desempeñado por las ciudades de Londres y Toronto en la construcción y el desarrollo de las identidades de sus habitantes, así como el poder que los ciudadanos tienen a la hora de (re)diseñar los espacios urbanos. El artículo pretende examinar el carácter dinámico y fluido de la ciudad y busca identificar los efectos que tienen las comunidades migrantes en el proceso de reescribir y recartografiar los espacios urbanos a través del ejercicio de su agencia.

**Palabras clave:** *The Lonely Londoners*, *What We All Long For*, entorno geográfico, identidad, espacio urbano.

## 1. Introduction

The significance of geographical setting has been a subject of study in postcolonial literature for decades. Contemporary postcolonial cities have been discussed either for their status as modern cities or as reinterpretations of old colonial cities. According to Asef Bayat, the modern city has “a tendency to differentiate, individualize, and fragment its inhabitants, to weaken the traditional ties [...] and increase geographic mobility” (2009: 188). Nevertheless, urban nuclei also serve as a refuge for their inhabitants. They function as spaces where subjects can share experiences and construct their identities. Taking these contrasting views on the role of cities into account, this article aims to analyse Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) in relation to Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2005). Samuel Selvon was a Trinidadian-born novelist and short story writer who emigrated to London during the fifties. He extensively depicted Caribbean life and used creolised English in his works. Dionne Brand is a renowned Trinidadian-born poet, essayist and novelist who emigrated to Toronto. She is well known for her use of language, which can be described as lyrical, sumptuous, evocative and innovative, and her commitment to issues of social justice, focusing mainly on race and gender.

On the one hand, Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* is set in post-World War II London and follows the daily lives of a group of West Indian immigrants as they struggle to survive in the big city, facing several instances of racism, class prejudice and loneliness. On the other hand, Brand’s *What We All Long For* takes place in twenty-first-century Toronto and narrates the overlapping stories of a small group of friends living in the multicultural city as second generation immigrants, described as queer and racialized people. Although both novels are set in two different modern cities and were written at completely different times and places, they share common elements. This article argues that the representation of both urban nuclei and the effect they have on their inhabitants are, to a great extent, quite similar. Both cities construct and are (re)constructed by their dwellers. As

both novels focus on the lives of the immigrant population, the article will also examine the discriminatory power of locations, as well as their potential to generate a feeling of belonging, at-homeness and safety. Drawing on theories that argue for a view of space as socially constructed (Lefebvre 1991) and relational (Massey 2005), I argue that these novels represent a mutually constitutive relationship between the city and its inhabitants. As the cities both shape and are shaped by the experiences of the migrant communities, London and Toronto are not only the setting for the action, but they also operate almost as characters in their own right.

### 2. Analysing Spaces in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

In Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, we are presented with two different and almost opposing 'Londons': the real versus the imagined city, the 'dark' city versus the 'Big City'. In the novel, London is presented as "a place divided up into 'little worlds and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other'" (2006: 60). The city that the 'boys' (immigrants) inhabit is in constant flux, giving rise to different moods and feelings: from desire and excitement to despair, frustration or anxiety.

As readers get immersed in Selvon's narrative, one becomes aware of the effect that city spaces have on the group of immigrants focalizing the story. These West Indian immigrants are relegated exclusively to specific locations within the city and excluded from others. Drawing from theories on Black studies (Hartman 2002; Sharpe 2016; Moten 2017), it can be argued that "blackness isn't a people problem; it is the problematization of the people" (Moten 2017: 202). Black existence has often been determined by "racial subjection, incarceration, impoverishment and second-class citizenship" (Hartman 2002: 766), which constitute the legacy of slavery. Black bodies have been excluded from "social, political, and cultural belonging" (Sharpe 2016: 14), and they have been geographically and historically displaced. In the novel, London itself appears to have been designed to marginalize them, concentrating immigrants in ghetto-like areas. This purpose of ghettoizing the city is highlighted when a sign that reads "Keep the Water White" (Selvon 2006: 77) is mentioned in the novel, meaning that this specific part of the city does not welcome coloured immigrants. Therefore, geographical distribution, employment opportunities and housing become signifiers of alienation and segregation based on racial issues. Black immigrants are usually concentrated in specific neighbourhoods in London. One of those neighbourhoods is Harrow Road, a working-class neighbourhood with old, grey, cracking houses piled up in rows on both sides of the street (59). This area is

described as “the real world, where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday come” (59). There, the immigrants are often jammed into small rooms shared with other family members or homeless people. This situation is prompted by Black immigrants’ unemployment or poor working conditions. The boys, situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy, are forced to accept the jobs rejected by ‘the rich’ (the white population). Thus, as Kabesh states in her analysis of the politics of movement in Selvon’s novel, “*upward* mobility, is blocked by the colour bar” (2011: 7, emphasis in original). The migrants’ skin colour becomes an obstacle to freedom, social mobility and the promise of happiness.

That is the reality faced by West Indian immigrants arriving in London, one of several barriers and limits to their mobility and freedom (physical, social and political). A reality that clashes with the immigrants’ expectations about the ‘Big City’: a city of dreams, prosperity and streets ‘paved with gold’. This idyllic idea of London “granted by imperial tutelage had a much more powerful influence on many of them [immigrants] [...] than their experience of the actual reality” (Lamming 1998: 5). Take the example of Tanty taking the tube to go to Great Portland Street. She is afraid of the unknown but “the thought that she would never be able to say she went made her carry on” (Selvon 2006: 70). Or take Galahad feeling important for saying “he was going there [Charing Cross Station]” (72). For them, the conditions in which they live in London are not as important as the fact of being in the metropolis. Still taking the character of Galahad as an example, we can see how the miserliness of his room, described as an “old basement room” from which “a whiff of stale food and old clothes and dampness and dirt” come out of the door (81), drastically diverges from the fancy public spaces of the city in which he enjoys strolling.

Throughout the novel, immigrants often experience a journey from idealism to disillusionment. When they arrive in London, the idea of a magnificent city turns unsavoury, and London becomes a “lonely miserable city” (Selvon 2006: 126). This pessimistic and more realistic vision of London is personified in Moses, since he “is no longer stirred by the city’s well-known sites and place-names” (Dyer 2002: 126). Moses’s character notably clashes with wide-eyed new West Indian immigrants like Galahad. Contrasting with the idealistic view of other characters, Moses sees London as a place of moral decadence, nothingness and emptiness: “All them places is like nothing to me now. [...] back home [...] You say to yourself, ‘Lord, them places must be sharp.’ Then you get a chance and see them for yourself, and is like nothing” (Selvon 2006: 73). Moses shows us the other side of the coin, the ‘dark’ city. He usually presents a menacing depiction of London to the boys, as when he refers to London as a “lonely miserable city”, a city where people are dying alone in their rooms and “nobody don’t know nothing until the

milk bottles start to pile up in front of the door” (Selvon 2006: 126). Moses turns the city of London into a necropolis and “declares his life to be inert” (McLeod 2004: 35). He highlights the stillness and immobility of his life in London after all those years: “still the same way, neither forward nor backward” (Selvon 2006: 124). To resist the bitterness, Moses frequently takes refuge in his room and daydreams about a utopian view of Trinidad: “I want to go back to Trinidad and lay down in the sun [...] I go and live Paradise [...] get an old house [...] no ballet and opera and symphony” (Selvon 2006: 25). Feeling displaced and alienated in London makes him see his home country as a paradise, a place where he could live freely in a house, not the basement where he lives, with “London and life on the outside” (McLeod 2004: 35). He is not part of English society, ‘life’ is outside while he is inside, immobile. Hence Moses can be considered the epitome of Ahmed’s ‘melancholic migrant’ (2010). The immobility that paralyzes Moses’s development can be related to him getting stuck in bad feelings; he has completely lost hope and is constantly longing for his past life. Sara Ahmed describes the melancholic migrant as the one who cannot “let go”, as the one who “holds onto” something that has been lost (2010: 139). Moses is incapable of getting over the memories of Trinidad, and his suffering becomes a way of holding on to that ideal.

Galahad, on the contrary, spends most of his time wandering around the city; he is associated with movement and vitality. However, as time goes by, Galahad is also affected by the city of London. He gradually becomes disillusioned by a reality that clashes with his imperial education: no job opportunities, decaying housing, immobility or racism. Similar to Moses, he encounters “a city that threatens to disintegrate him” (Habchi 2022: 82). Galahad’s journey goes from the “good migrant who wants what the nation wants him to want” to disillusionment (Ahmed 2010: 157). As stated by Ahmed, “it is the migrant who wants to integrate who may bear witness to the emptiness of the promise of happiness” (2010: 158); and this migrant is Galahad. In Selvon’s novel, West Indian immigrants experienced “a situation that robbed them of their humanities and turned them into different beings which invariably often lead them to an undesired end in their bid to survive and bring the two ends of their lives together” (Mgbeadichie and Asika 2011: 48). Following Ahmed’s ideas, the racism experienced by the migrants “becomes readable as what the melancholic migrant is attached to, as an attachment to injury” which explains their refusal to participate in society and becomes an obstacle to their own happiness (2010: 143, emphasis in original). This state of apathy and unhappiness is shared among most of the boys in Selvon’s novel, who feel alienated in the city. To avoid this feeling, they take refuge in a frenetic lifestyle, distracting themselves or gathering together seeking understanding.

Some geographical locations serve as a kind of shelter for the boys, starting with Moses's room, where the immigrants gather every Sunday. This domestic space contrasts with the feelings of alienation and detachment they experience in the outside world. In Moses's room, the boys create their own community within English society since it offers them comfort, bonding, support and stability. Therefore, in this domestic location, the West Indian immigrants gain agency.

Spaces in the novel do not only affect the characters negatively. Some of them contribute positively to the formation of a new identity and the development of their agency. West Indian migrants live a life exposed to vulnerability. They have no nation to protect them and their citizenship is not respected or recognised, which leaves them in a position in which Black life is "lived in, as, under, despite Black death" (Sharpe 2016: 22). According to Sharpe, to act from this position enables Black subjects to find ways of "re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world" (2016: 22). Similar to Moses's room, where the boys can develop a real sense of kinship, Harris's fete at St Pancras Hall also offers the possibility of bonding and enjoyment. As McLeod describes, "Selvon transforms St Pancras Hall into an inspirational source of spatial creolization" (2004: 38), as well as social and cultural integration. There, the boys share the space with other white guests and feel 'at home' due to the atmosphere, the music and the dancing. Thus, the Hall becomes a space where cultural and social rules can be transgressed. Another instance in which West Indian immigrants share space with the white English population is Hyde Park. Setha Low, Dana Taplin and Suzanne Scheld, in their work *Rethinking Urban Park*, state that parks can function as a home for marginalized individuals and contribute to the process of cultural reproduction (2005: 147). In Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, the park is presented as a kind of liminal space, a contact zone where individuals from different classes and ethnicities converge. The boys integrate with members of the 'upper-social classes' who otherwise would be unreachable: "you does meet all sorts of fellers from all walks of [...] it might be your boss [...] some big professional feller because it ain't have no discrimination" (Selvon 2006: 95). Consequently, the rules of colonization and hierarchy do not seem to be enforced, enabling a certain degree of Black agency and leading to a situation of social and racial equality. Nevertheless, the encounters that take place in the park are mainly sexual in nature. Black immigrants are not only tolerated, but almost desired: "boys coast lime while the pretty pieces of skin suntan as the old geezers watch" (Selvon 2006: 92). The objectification of the Black male body and its hypervisibility leads to Black invisibility (Yancy 2017: xxx). As stated by George Yancy, within a "racially saturated field of hypervisibility, the Black body still functions as the unseen as it does in the case of its invisibility" (2017: 68). Though in the park the immigrants might feel more integrated and

may develop their agency, they are still invisible. Only their Black bodies as objects of white female desire are visible.

Finally, the last instance in which Black immigrants exercise their agency is by walking and wandering across London. In her analysis of Selvon's novel, Rebecca Dyer states that: "The migrant characters' [...] trajectories of their walks, their gatherings in small, rented rooms, [...] are political acts... however incomplete in their ability to alleviate the hardships of actual immigrants' lives in London" (2002: 112-113). Though wandering across the city of London may not alleviate all the difficulties faced by the migrant population, it creates a space in its use and enables the boys to gain some agency. According to Kristine N. Kelly, the activity of wandering and strolling in *The Lonely Londoners* can be considered a strategy "that is integrative, digressive, and layered and that allows the narratives a share in authority over the city's topography and its concomitant meaningfulness" (2019: 66). In connection with this idea of wandering, it is possible to identify in this novel Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur*: a kind of urban dweller who observes city life and experiences the city through his wanderings. Nevertheless, since London is reconstructed and reconceptualized through the immigrants' peripatetic wanderings, it can be argued that Selvon's characters are closer to De Certeau's (1984) idea of the '(resistant) walker': a subject whose movement across the city constitutes a strategy of resistance; an activity that enables the transgression of boundaries and a control of space. Their movement across the city places characters such as Galahad within the realm of the *flâneur* or the walker: "[...] the old Galahad walking out to the road, [...], bowing his head in a polite 'Good evening' and not giving a blast if they answer or not. This is London, this is life oh lord, to walk like a king with money in your pocket, not a worry in the world" (Selvon 2006: 75). Mobility gives these characters a certain degree of autonomy to reshape London, creating a sense of place and belonging.

This ability to reshape urban spaces grows from the migrant awareness of living "in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive" (Sharpe 2016: 130). This self-awareness enables them to reimagine and transform spaces in order to create a feeling that is closer to freedom, safety or belonging; though always remembering that this takes place within a specific consciousness: Black existence. As stated by Kristine N. Kelly, "mobility thus becomes a resource for immigrant self-imagining in this metropolitan urban space that often inhibits movement by geographical directives or containment" (2019: 86). The dwellers and their walks across the city streets create new layers of London, stressing that the city is not static or immobile but a developing and shifting space. The characters' mobility and journeys across the city help create a new 'Black' and 'immigrant' London. Thus, not only does the city have an impact on West Indian

immigrants, but the boys also influence London by reconfiguring the spaces and (re)claiming parts of the city. The city's fluid character and its potential to be rewritten by its inhabitants is also central in Dionne Brand's work, more specifically in her novel *What We All Long For*.

### 3. Analysing Spaces in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*

200 In Brand's novel, the city of Toronto becomes alive; it becomes a character in itself. From the very first page of the novel, Brand reveals the centrality of the city, its inhabitants and its spaces to the novel. As the story unfolds, the personification of Toronto becomes more and more evident. The city is given human characteristics, such as breathing or thinking, together with its constant change: "[...] streets seem to be their own selves, reflective, breathing some other breath, going some other way without the complications of people" (Brand 2005: 39). Brand's Toronto goes beyond the function of a mere setting for the story; it has the power to define and dominate the lives of its inhabitants. Some critics have defined Brand's Toronto as the perfect example of "diaspora space", "a site of 'migrancy' and 'travel' which seriously problematises the subject position of the 'native' [...] [and which] includes the entanglements of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (Brah 1996: 182). *What We All Long For* has been described as "a novel concerned with how the city operates in and influences the lives of its inhabitants and how its inhabitants negotiate the city in their various efforts to find their own comfortable spaces" (McKibbin 2008: 502). Brand presents the city as a space where interpersonal encounters between strangers take place. Toronto can be considered a space of cultural translation "in which the protagonists translate the city's cultural and spatial divisions by creating points of contact that, on the one hand, open up dialogues between different groups of people and, on the other, create silences that point to failed encounters" (Fellner 2010: 232). Toronto is depicted as a cosmopolitan city whose spatial histories are also recognized. The different ethnic neighbourhoods (different 'worlds') that constitute the city are brought together, creating a heterogeneous picture of Toronto, without forgetting the historical origins of the territory:

There are Italian neighbourhoods and Vietnamese neighbourhoods in this city; there are Chinese ones and Ukrainian ones and Pakistani ones and Korean ones and African ones. Name a region on the planet and there's someone from there, here. All of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care because that genealogy is wilfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself. (Brand 2005: 4)



The city depicted by Brand could be considered contradictory, since it presents both positive and negative features. For some characters, the city becomes a “threatening” and “dangerous” place, sometimes described as a “prison” (2005: 115, 309, 166). Similarly, other characters perceive Toronto as a “mothering” place (2005: 67), a place that inspires them and makes them feel at home. These contradictions reflect Doreen Massey’s conception of space as not fixed or permanent, but always in a process of construction: since space “is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made” (Massey 2005: 9). Due to its shifting character and transitoriness, Brand’s Toronto perfectly illustrates this take on urban space: “How does life disappear like that? It does it all the time in a city. One moment a corner is a certain corner, [...] then it disappears [...] A bank flounders into a pizza shop, then into an abandoned building [...] it springs to life as an exclusive condo” (Brand 2005: 183). Consequently, Toronto becomes an example of a postmodern, always-in-flux city.

What is interesting about the constant flux of the city is that it seems to equate to the dynamic identities of its inhabitants. As stated by Isabel Carrera Suárez, “the physical and mental flux of the characters is closely related to the defining characteristics of the global city, which is always described as a *process* formed by a succession of fluxes” (2008: 191, emphasis in original). This fluidity and dynamism in relation to the city and its inhabitants’ identities might be ambivalent. Although it may offer freedom of identification, it also implies a certain degree of uncertainty and chaos.

Just as in *The Lonely Londoners*, the relationship between the city and its inhabitants is central to Brand’s work. In this context, it is necessary to highlight that first-generation and second-generation immigrants present totally different and often opposing relations with the city of Toronto, resulting in diverging spatial identifications. In Brand’s novel, first generations are usually associated with fixed and permanent spaces, such as family homes or the workplace (for example, the Vus’s restaurant). They tend to focus on collective spaces where they can establish a relationship with their past (a lost one), ethnicity and cultural background. Their identities seem to be defined by those city spaces and tied to the notions of traditional multiculturalism or what Bannerji describes as ‘official multiculturalism’ (2000: 37); a multiculturalism that presents an essentialized vision of cultural diversity, an “uncritical, de-materialized, seemingly de-politicized reading of culture through which culture becomes a political tool, an ideology of power which is expressed in racist-sexist or heterosexist differences” (Bannerji 2000: 37). In contrast, their offspring are constantly searching for new subjectivities. They feel much closer to the urban, and their identities combine aspects of both the

global and the local. Younger generations do not “follow the ‘roots/routes’ of ethnic belonging” (Rosenthal 2009: 232). Although they are partly defined by the migratory history of their parents and the characteristics of Toronto as a global city, they occupy transitory and fluid spaces, where they enjoy the present moment and transcend the notions of ethnicity by creating new cultural practices. They embody the intrinsic contradictions of multiculturalism in Canada, since they partly reflect the official multiculturalism that characterises their parents’ experiences, but they also represent the so-called “multiculturalism from below” (Bannerji 2000: 18). Though Bannerji locates this type of multiculturalism in the US, it can also be applied to Brand’s second-generation immigrants, who represent an “oppositional, or at least an alternative, way of contesting the dominant culture and making participatory space for the nation’s others” (Bannerji 2000:18). Their hybrid and fluid identities become the perfect example of Toronto as a site of contradiction and diversity.

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As previously stated, first-generation characters are defined by the city. From the very beginning, they are perceived as a stereotype rather than real people. This perception is reflected in the spaces they occupy, the neighbourhoods they inhabit and their jobs. When arriving in Toronto, they are forced to abandon their previous way of life and do not always manage to establish a place of refuge in the new city. Their experience in Toronto is framed within the notions of an official multiculturalism. Tuyen’s parents, for example, are not able to keep working as a doctor and an engineer respectively. Instead, Tuyen’s mother “became a manicurist in a beauty salon near Chinatown while [her father] unloaded fruit and other produce from trucks to the backs of stores on Spadina” (Brand 2005: 65). After some time in the city, Tuyen’s parents realised that in order to succeed, they had to “see themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food” (66-67), so they opened a Vietnamese restaurant.

Regarding space and belonging, there is a clear feeling of displacement among first-generation immigrants. Once again, Tuyen’s parents are the perfect example. Coming to Toronto as refugees, the Vus’s first residence was a small room in a rooming house, located in downtown Toronto (Brand 2005: 55). Thanks to their hard work, the Vus were able to move to a house in Richmond Hill: “one of those suburbs where immigrants go to get away from other immigrants, [...] end up living with all the other immigrants running away from themselves” (54-55). This transition from downtown Toronto to Richmond Hill symbolizes their discomfort about being immigrants. They moved there to “eradicate that person once and for all”, “the one that does not fit, that keeps drawing attention to language or colour”, believing that Richmond Hill will “give them distance from that troubled image of themselves” (55). As Pooch points out, Tuyen’s parents try to achieve the

American Dream, to climb up in society, by physically distancing themselves from other immigrants (2016: 111). Despite their success in the city, their house is tied to the past, full of “generations of furniture and generations of pots and pans and [...] papers of all kinds” (Brand 2005: 62). Tuyen’s parents are “psychologically immobilized in that moment of personal tragedy, which acquires the poignancy of a ‘door of no return’” (Roupakia 2015: 37); and the only way they feel secure is by constantly recalling their past life. This obsession with former times is shared with Oku’s parents, who “lived in the near past and were unable or unwilling to step into the present” (Brand 2005: 190). Thus, Tuyen’s and Oku’s parents embody the figure of Ahmed’s melancholic migrant. Additionally, Tuyen’s parents rarely leave the house or their restaurant. This immobility that characterizes the Vus’s spatial behaviour relates to their fixed identities. For these immigrants the city of Toronto becomes a “site of marginalization where the places open to them are predicated upon invisibility and separation”; “an unwelcoming city where their difference becomes insurmountable and isolating” (Johansen 2008: 50). Their lack of agency and immobility, both physical and emotional, prevents them from influencing city spaces; they are the ones “being defined by the city” (Brand 2005: 66).

Contrasting with first generations’ experience in the city, the main protagonists (Tuyen, Carla, Oku and Jackie) feel as if they “inhabited two countries —their parents’ and their own” (Brand 2005: 20). Second-generation immigrants “inherit family histories of marginalization, oppression or victimization. Yet rather than asserting difference against some particular form of external oppression, [they] are torn between conflicting loyalties towards personal and communal relationships” (Roupakia 2015: 34-35). Even though their parents tried to transmit their culture of origin, the youngsters share a feeling of “detachment from their parents” (McKibbin 2008: 504) and feel Canadian: “breaking their doorways [...] arrived at their own birthplace —the city. They were born in the city from people born elsewhere” (Brand 2005: 20). In Toronto, they find a sense of origin and a feeling of at-homeness. This idea of the city as a place of origin is discussed by Brand in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, where she states that cities are not places of origin but places of “transmigrations and transmigrations. Cities collect people, stray and lost and deliberate arrivants. Origins are rehabilitated and rebuilt here” (2001: 62). Second-generation immigrants in this novel experience a constant process of transformation and self-creation: from their parents’ origins to their own sense of belonging. Contrary to their progenitors, they lack an immediate sense of origin or belonging, they only have a sense of “drift” (Brand 2001: 118); and within this drift is where they feel they belong. While all of them must confront racism and overcome several barriers in their daily lives, they all encounter in the city a place where they fit in: “as disturbing as all they were living

was, they felt alive. More alive, they thought, than most people around them. They believed in it, this living. Its raw openness. They saw the street outside, its chaos, as their only hope” (Brand 2005: 212). Second generations are willing to leave their homes, since they do not identify themselves with their progenitors; instead, they find “comfort inhabiting the city as [they know] it” (McKibbin 2008: 506). It is in the city where second generations are able to establish their own refuges, search for new subjectivities and create their mixed cultural identities. Additionally, finding an autonomous place contributes to the development of their identities. Though their identity is constructed across different axes, such as race, class, gender, age or sexuality, “their alternative subject position is neither uprooted or deterritorialized but firmly located in the streets of Toronto” (García Zarranz 2014: 91). In Toronto, second-generation immigrants voice their agency by reshaping the city and claiming its spaces for themselves; and this is possible because “when the socially marginalized emerge from the margins, a spatial shift occurs” (Peach 2004: 78). Thus, as theories on the social production of space show (De Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Tonkiss 2005), not only does the city affect its inhabitants, it is also affected by them.

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Starting with Tuyen, when she leaves her parents’ house in Richmond Hill to live in an apartment on College Street, her father is offended. While for him returning to downtown Toronto would be a step backwards and would not reflect their achievements, for his daughter it represents a completely different thing: her apartment implies freedom (including sexual freedom) and creativity. Tuyen does not feel the need to distance herself from other immigrants because she sees Toronto as ‘home’: “You didn’t bring me here, Bo, I was born here” (Brand 2005: 56). Tuyen’s apartment becomes a mirror of the city, reflecting its fluidity and transitoriness. It also becomes a kind of museum but, unlike her parents, Tuyen includes objects from the streets of the city that represent the present time. Additionally, the apartment, similar to Moses’s room, becomes a meeting point for other inhabitants of the city: “places of refuge, not just for their immediate circle but for all the people they picked up along the way to their twenties. Like the Graffiti Boys across the alleyway, Tuyen’s friends from the gay ghetto, a few hip-hop poets [...]” (Brand 2005: 23).

Contrary to Tuyen, Jackie decides to remain in her neighbourhood: Alexandra Park. This “urban warren of buildings and paths” (Brand 2005: 92), which can be considered an “ethno-suburb” (Pooch 2016: 82), is described as a ghostly place, as a reminder of its inhabitants’ misfortune:

The scarred brown buildings [...] ghostly, sometimes scary life at night. With one thought they could have made it beautiful, but perhaps they didn’t think that poor people deserved beauty [...] Jackie’s childhood might have been less hazardous [...]

## The Reciprocal Relationship between the City and its Subjects

The sense of space must have triggered lighter emotions, less depressing thoughts, a sense of well-being. (Brand 2005: 260-261)

The environment is blamed for the hopelessness of the community. The roughness of the neighbourhood has contributed to the creation of Jackie's unreachable personality. Vanauley Way and Alexandra Park "had given shape to her" (Brand 2005: 92), and that is why, although she would love to leave, she feels a certain degree of loyalty to the place. Consequently, she decides to open a shop "on the border where Toronto's trendy met Toronto's seedy" (99). Nevertheless, *Ab und Zu* (Jackie's shop) will always be defined by its location within "a mix of the old neighbourhood —the working class, the poor, the desperate" (99). Despite this, Jackie sees the city as full of possibilities, at least in her mind: "if the city didn't have the good grace to plant a shrub or two, she would cultivate it with her own trees and flowers. And so she did. In her mind" (264). That is her way of re-imagining the city and claiming ownership of it.

Oku, as well as his friends, is willing to leave his home. There, he does not feel understood and he is struggling to be independent. As a Black man, he is aware of the dangers posed by his ethnicity and the barriers that he would have to overcome. In the novel, he is constantly in search of an autonomous place. He is afraid of ending up like his father (a small-minded man who works in construction) or as a criminal (like Carla's brother, Jamal) due to the label that has been assigned to him as a Black man: "despite Toronto's cultural diversity, Blackness is the least 'normal', the least 'at home' in the Canadian city" (McKibbin 2008: 518). He finds Toronto distressing and threatening, a "prison, although the bars were invisible" (Brand 2005: 166). He spends most of his time away from his parents' home, searching for an autonomous place, but he does not find any other refuge in the city. Incapable of properly wandering the Canadian city, Oku lacks a sense of home. His only comfort is Jackie; he only develops a feeling of at-homeness when he is with her.

Lastly, Carla's relationship with the city is relatively different from that of her friends. Although she lives downtown with Tuyen, her home is actually the city itself. Since she cannot find refuge in her apartment because she lost the sense of home when her mom died, she seeks it in the city. Carla "loved the city. She loved riding through the neck of it, the triangulating girders now possessed by the graffiti crew. She loved the feeling of weight and balance it gave her" (Brand 2005: 32). For her, Toronto is a maze in which she can feel relief when wandering through its streets. The city has a kind of therapeutic effect on her: "any small trouble she took care of herself by giving it to the linden trees and the maple trees and the forsythia bushes on her way home" (249-250). Carla usually claims her position in the city by wandering through its streets and racing on her bike: "she

saw the city as a set of obstacles to be crossed and circled, avoided and let pass. She saw it as something to get tangled in. [...] Against the flow of the rush-hour traffic [...] just pedal, just go, go, go...” (32). That is her way of rewriting the city, through her own gaze and movement. Thus, the character of Carla might remind us of Selvon’s Galahad. Consequently, she could be considered a *flâneuse*, the feminine counterpart of the *flâneur*. Nevertheless, this term has been extensively discussed and many critics do not recognise its existence (Wolff 1985), since that figure was not conceived as female; women lacked ownership of space. Additionally, considering that Brand’s novel is set in a postcolonial and multicultural city and takes place within an urban discourse, it can be argued that Carla embodies the figure of the ‘pedestrian’ (Carrera Suárez 2015). Drawing on Meskimon’s theory of the ‘aesthetic of pedestrianism’ (1997), in which she describes pedestrians as “knowing space through embodiment”, being “sentient participants” in the city (1997: 21), Carrera Suárez defines pedestrian as a subject who presents a “physical and emotional engagement with the city, a space shared and inhabited” (2015: 857). In the process of wandering and observing, Carla makes sense of the city and public life; instead of being the object of others’ gaze, she becomes the subject of the action. As stated by Caroline Rosenthal, “Carla presents us with a city on street level, below representative buildings, with a city that bustles with the desires of different people” (2009: 238). In her wanderings, she is not detached from the city, she is not a mere observer of city life, she becomes an example of those “resistance bodies who take action in public spaces” (Carrera Suárez 2015: 864). Carla actively interacts with the space and this enables the remapping of Toronto. Therefore, once again, we can see how second-generation immigrants are able to rewrite and redefine the Canadian city.

After examining the characters’ relationship with the city of Toronto, it can be concluded that while first-generation immigrants are time-focused —constantly longing for their past and rendered invisible in the city— second generations are space-focused —presenting a powerful connection with the city of Toronto, which contributes to the development of their unhyphenated identities, crossing not only spatial borders but also ethnic and national ones. For second-generation immigrants, the global city becomes a “strategic site”, since it enables them “to gain presence, to emerge as subjects, even when they do not gain direct power” (Sassen 1998: xxi). These diverging ways of experiencing life might be explained by the feeling of uprootedness experienced by first generations, who live between two worlds: “a lost past and a non-integrated present” (Chambers 1994: 27). This feeling prevents them from establishing a connection with the spaces they inhabit and results in a sense of displacement, which can only be overcome by emotionally clinging to their past life.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above analysis leads me to conclude that, although written and set in completely different historical moments and geographical settings, both novels perfectly exemplify the mutual influence between urban spaces and their inhabitants. By focusing on the lives of migrant populations, Selvon and Brand depict two dynamic cities and their impact on their dwellers, also paying attention to the (re)construction of city spaces by migrants as a way of exercising their agency.

In Selvon's novel, it can be seen that the majority of the immigrant population has to face barriers in their daily lives and are geographically limited to particular locations within the city. Similarly, in Brand's novel, first-generation characters feel they inhabit two different worlds and mostly perceive the city of Toronto as a marginalizing and unwelcoming place which renders them invisible. Contrary to Brand's first generations, defined by urban space and unable to influence the city, some of the immigrants in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* powerfully reshape the city they encounter upon their arrival, enabling the creation of diasporic communities.

As discussed by James Procter, Selvon's London is simultaneously a place of "dislocation and alienation" and a "landscape of belonging" (2003: 53). In Brand's *What We All Long For*, second-generation characters "resist their imposed invisibility in the city" (Johansen 2008: 49-50) by managing to reshape the city and claiming public spaces for their own. The four friends try to find a sense of belonging and construct a new cosmopolitan identity that reflects their subjectivities. These identities are intrinsically linked to the physical place of Toronto and its reimagination to invert stratification. The city of Toronto is rewritten and reshaped by second generations: take Tuyen's *lubaio* (a traditional Chinese totem, a kind of signpost where people leave notes, which functions as a representation of ethnicity and diversity in the city of Toronto) and the graffiti crew's mural as tangible examples. Therefore, the Canadian city is depicted as a place "where identity and alterity, where what is one's own or another's, live together and interact in a productive manner" (Cornejo Polar in Pooch 2016: 92); a fluid space of cultural intermingling.

Both novels revolve around two ideas: segregation and a constant search for connection by trying to feel at home within the English and Canadian societies. In Selvon's novel, readers can see how the perception of an environment and its idealisation can make the immigrants live happily or in constant anxiety created by that feeling of not belonging. London spaces are not mere settings; they provide either a sense of safety or strangeness, affecting the lives of its inhabitants. Likewise,

the spaces in Brand's novel and the city of Toronto itself are not merely the setting for the action or the place where the characters live. Urban space clearly has an influence on its inhabitants, either a feeling of isolation and incomplete integration or a sense of belonging and at-homeness. Moreover, Toronto's inhabitants also (re)construct the city where they live. Therefore, the cities of London and Toronto are not presented as fixed places; they have room for development and change, which is usually caused by their citizens.

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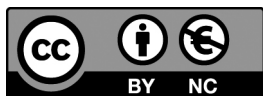
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