Counter-Cartographies:  
Literary Wayfinding in Transnational Cities  

by  

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Graduate Department of English  
University of Toronto  

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Abstract

My project examines how minority literary texts from Singapore, Vancouver, and Toronto intervene in capitalist and cartographical configurations of urban space. Reading contemporary literary texts as *detours* in the overlapping postcolonial realities of Canada and Singapore, I demonstrate how these novels, films, poems, and short fictions resist the abstraction of these capitalist spaces, restoring sociality and human complexity. My study draws from the spatial theories of cultural geographers like Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and David Harvey, and anthropologist Timothy Ingold. Using an interdisciplinary methodology, I use the spatial tactics of wayfinding, confabulation, and indeterminacy as modes of reading literary texts. These tactics challenge cartographical understandings of urban spaces, opening them up to the prospects of unforeseen pasts, lived presents, and unpredictable futures. My readings of these texts contribute to a spatial politics that enriches our current understanding of the relationship between literature and space, the imagined and the real, the fictional and the material.

My work on contemporary Vancouver and Singapore examines representations of the cities in urban planning documents, material sites, and popular media. Both urban sites began as cartographic *fictions*, dreamed into existence by planners and land speculators. They continue to
be spectacularly mapped, planned, and commodified in the late capitalist period. My work places these cultural texts in dialogue with recent literary urbanisms from both cities including works by Madeleine Thien, Wayde Compton, Sachiko Murakami, Tan Shzr Ee, Tan Pin Pin and Alfian Sa’at. My project then turns to three transnational novels by Lydia Kwa, Larissa Lai, and Dionne Brand that produce a complex urban politics that goes between and beyond Singapore and Canada. These transnational counter-cartographies resist celebratory accounts of neoliberal globalization while addressing the realities of migration and diaspora through the various genres of historical fiction, immigrant narrative, and dystopian fiction.
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Introduction
Counter-Cartographies:
Confabulation, Indeterminacy, and Wayfinding

“Loose ends and ongoing stories are real challenges to cartography.”

(Doreen Massey)

“Don’t believe everything you read in this book” (Tan 9), so begins the Singapore writer Tan Shzr Ee’s genre bending book *Lost Roads: Singapore* (2006). Ostensibly, a series of journeys to forgotten places and roads of the rapidly urbanizing city-state, Tan’s first sentence immediately destabilizes our expectations of a non-fictional text by admitting to subterfuge and confabulation. She points out later in the text that if a road were to be truly “lost” then it would actually be impossible to write about finding it unless one “improvises” (10). Tan writes “when I didn’t find enough to satisfy my curiosity, or when I was held back from learning more out of cowardice or inertia, I simply, well, improvised my stories. So if you spot any glaring errors, they might well be intentional” (10).

A similar move occurs in another late-capitalist urban text, as Vancouver poet Wayde Compton memorializes the historic black Vancouver neighbourhood of Hogan’s alley by blurring the boundaries between historical and “factitious elements” (*Performance 10*) in “Rune” from his 2004 collection *Performance Bond*. While Compton makes the fiction of these elements (a newspaper article, four landmarks, and two transcribed interviews) clear in the introduction to the book, the way they are presented without preamble or other mitigating factors in the text gives them an aura of authenticity. Particularly affecting are Compton’s staging of the “Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver” – a series of carefully composed tableaux of old shop and house-fronts in Vancouver disguised with fictitious signs like “Strathcona Coloured People’s Benevolent Society of Vancouver,” “False Creek Moslem Temple,” “The Far
Cry Weekly: Voice of the Negro Northwest (Since 1957)” and “Pacific Negro Working Men’s Association.” Compton gives these imaginary communities a real physical address in Vancouver, firmly mapping their presence and absence in the urban landscape. He thus imaginatively creates in “Rune” something new from an unstable sense of the old.

These confabulatory literary urbanisms produced by Tan and Compton raise intriguing possibilities about the role of the literary text in the late capitalist city where, as theorists like David Harvey and Fredric Jameson have noted, capitalism has imbricated itself in all aspects of urban life. These texts recall Henri Lefebvre’s injunction that there is no real division between represented space, spatial practice and representational space --- Tan’s and Compton’s explorations and inventions of these “lost spaces” mean that they engage with them in real life while simultaneously producing them in the text as spaces that are imbued with deeper significance. Lefebvre theorizes that the production of space occurs through “the dialectical relationship which exists within the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived” (39). His conception of space thus creates significant equivalences of the symbolic, the textual and the material — and in the context of urban spaces like Singapore and Vancouver reminds us not to discount both “representations of space” which “intervene in and modify spatial textures” (Lefebvre 42) and “representational space” which “embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations” (Lefebvre 42). Lefebvre cautions that the distinctions between these two spaces and their relation to spatial practice should not be reified (42) and that we should pay attention to “the work of artistic creation” that “occupies the interstices” (43) between them.

Many of the works that will be read in this dissertation often operate and intervene in this overlap between representational space and representations of space. Aside from Tan Shzr Ee and Wayde Compton’s works, this study will perform spatial

1Jameson argues that “[w]hat 'late' generally conveys is... the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive” (Postmodernism xxi).
readings of short fiction by Madeleine Thien and Alfian Sa’at, poetry by Sachiko Murakami, films by Tan Pin Pin, and novels by Dionne Brand, Lydia Kwa and Larissa Lai. I will be reading these texts as *detours* in the mapped postcolonial realities of Canada and Singapore. My comparative reading of them further subverts the universalizing intent of metropole-periphery models and builds on the idea of urban networks beyond this colonial paradigm — in this case, by putting Asian Anglophone literature and diasporic Canadian literature into a transnational dialogue. By bringing these minority texts together comparatively, my study also develops what Francoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih might call a “minor transnationalism,” where “expressions of allegiance are found in unexpected and sometimes surprising places […] and the co-presence of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial space fundamentally blurs the temporal sequence of this moments” (8). The coeval experiences and experimentations of minority texts from postcolonial cities like Singapore, Vancouver, and Toronto share striking similarities, even as they arise from particular historical and spatial contexts.

Theoretically, my study draws on Lefebvre’s work on space, but also on the writings of cultural geographers Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, and anthropologist Timothy Ingold. Using an interdisciplinary methodology, my readings will focus on the tactics of confabulation, indeterminacy, and wayfinding as modes of literary analysis. These tactics challenge cartographical visions of urban space and allow these texts to contribute to a spatial politics that enriches our current understanding of the relationship between literature and space, the imagined and the real, the fictional and the material. Edward Soja in his seminal *Postmodern Geographies* urges us to “spatialize the historical narrative, to attach to *dureè* an enduring critical human geography” (1), to allow us to make more “‘lateral’ connections […] a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic” (1). This, Soja argues, is necessary since it is only by a thorough investigation of the spatial that we can understand “how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (6). Similarly, Massey posits that “thinking the spatial in a particular way can
… be an essential element in the imaginative structure which enables in the first place an opening up to the very sphere of the political.”(9). Space is never to be treated as a void, a backdrop and especially not as one where there is an impossibility of agency.

Indeed, Massey points out how narratives of globalization while evoking “free unbounded space and of a glorious, complex mixity” (81) are in fact often only referring to capitalist globalization, “a discursive manoeuvre which at a stroke obscures the possibility of seeing alternative forms” (83). For the purposes of my project, I have found it crucial to focus on “minority” narratives whether this minor status is borne out of class, race, gender and/or politics. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue that a “minor literature” is a literature that because of its “cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics,” producing “an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” (17). Singaporean writers and filmmakers using colonially inherited English cultural and literary traditions and working within a regimented urban space produce a form of “minor literature.” Similarly, minority texts from Vancouver force us to experience space differently: whether to acknowledge the spatial politics of hidden histories, unspeakable futures or the unacknowledged heterogeneities of present trajectories. The racialized bodies of immigrants, refugees, and diasporic populations in transnational cities exist as well in this “cramped space,” their narratives necessarily connect to the political. In each text that I will consider, the experience of the minor as opposed to the dominant is crucial. Thus, while there are other majoritarian texts that engage with the city and its imagined geographies, minority texts and bodies have fundamentally different relationships with the city. Their visible difference, whether racial, sexual, or class-based, affects their access and subjection to the power that produces urban spaces in the late capitalist period.

**Happenstance and Indeterminacy in Urban Spaces**

Massey’s *For Space* (2004), which comes three decades after Lefebvre’s seminal *The Production of Space*, acknowledges the unfinished, ever-mutable nature of space that is “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (10) and urges us to be fully cognizant of its
“contemporaneous plurality” (10). One key idea in her conception of space is how chance and the chance encounter is “intrinsic to spatiality” (8). She argues that it is in the happenstance juxtaposition, in the unforeseen tearing apart, in the internal irruption, in the impossibility of closure, in the finding of yourself next door to alterity, in precisely that possibility of being surprised [...] that the chance of space is to be found. (116)

Specifically, this concept of chance as extrapolated to urban spaces is one that “makes them the ongoing constructions which are our continuing responsibility, the ongoing event of place which has to be addressed” (180). They are not spaces that can be mapped, since they cannot be fixed or accurately predicted. Massey’s theorizations speak to “the instability and potential of the spatial” (116) and I would argue, for my purposes, to the instability and potential of the literary texts about urban spaces. Michel de Certeau similarly acknowledges the importance of “the unforeseen” (203) to urban life, arguing that


to eliminate the unforeseen or expel it from calculation as an illegitimate accident and an obstacle to rationality is to interdict the possibility of a living and ‘mythical’ practice of the city. It is to leave its inhabitants only the scraps of a programming produced by the power of the other and altered by the event. Casual time is what is narrated in the actual discourse of the city: an indeterminate fable, better articulated on the metaphorical practices and stratified places than on the empire of the evident in functionalist technocracy. (203)

Restoring the “unforeseen” in this sense then, would mean an attempt to carefully reconsider how lived, conceived and perceived space are intertwined, and to consider a different way of seeing the temporal. It would also entail an acknowledgement of how the imaginative and the unexpected are crucial components in our spatial practice.

Two things must be emphasized here in using Massey and de Certeau’s theorizations about the unforeseen or the happenstance: firstly, my dissertation will be looking at a plethora of formal and thematic techniques that narratives employ to suggest
the indeterminacy of urban space. Thus, I will not just be close reading stories that are just about chance flâneur-like encounters in urban space. Secondly, just because something is indeterminate or unpredictable does not mean that it is not a conscious literary move. In each text that will be read, the emphasis on the fictive, unknown, unknowable, confabulated or unexpected is, I argue, an inherently tactical move by the text that circumvents, negotiates and manipulates the abstract urban spaces of the late capitalist city.

The texts that are examined in this study precisely and consciously point to the agency of the fictional in the production of space - it is creative unpredictability that restores complexity and sociality to the erstwhile abstract spaces of Singapore and Vancouver. Tan argues that *Lost Roads* is

a scrapbook — of real and imagined experiences; of half-remembered stories from family, friends and strangers; of interrupted memories; of anecdotes disengaging and dysfunctional; of rabidly untrue rumours; of bizarre signs and notices spotted in unremarkable corners; of overheard conversations and useless laundry lists… throwaway epiphanies that have presented themselves in the course of my travels through *ulu*² Singapore. (10)

It is this unpredictable inventory of unverified stories, truncated memories and minute throwaway details that disrupts the orderly, conformist and capitalist spaces of the city. These produced spaces are resolutely not for profit, whether they are sacred, natural, domestic, fictional or an unwieldy combination of the above. They are “tactics” in Michel de Certeau’s understanding of the term, inscribing in this creative (non) fiction the power to at least temporarily resist the strategies of overplanned, overdetermined Singapore. Compton’s rambling first-hand accounts in the fictitious “From *Portals: East Vancouver Oral Histories*” similarly digress and add seemingly extraneous personal details, creating a tone of uncanny verisimilitude. These are unpredictable, fictive, lost voices that cannot be mapped onto the now altered neighbourhoods of East Vancouver

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² The Malay word for remote, rural and out of the way.
— but their fictionality complicates a simple orientation to the past or a straightforward nostalgia. Through the act of literary confabulation, these texts are instead in the process of producing new spatio-temporalities that complicate teleological conceptions of time and space in the late capitalist city. Their production and reproduction of unpredictable encounters with other strangers (fictive or real) in these spaces also point to the restoration of sociality to erstwhile abstract, transactional spatial relations in the city that have been noted as early as Georg Simmel’s famous “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903). The unpredictable, indeterminate texts that are set in specific urban locations restore what Doreen Massey sees as “the element of surprise, the unexpected, the other, [that] is crucial to what space gives us” (112).

**Counter-Cartographies: Wayfinding without Maps**

In this dissertation I will argue that it is precisely these literary interventions that allow “minority” texts to counter the impulses of colonial and neo-colonial cartographic impulses that dominates the late-capitalist urban spaces of Singapore and Vancouver. Indeed, as the epigraph to this introduction notes, these “[l]oose ends and ongoing stories are real challenges to cartography” (107). How then might the neologism “counter-cartography” be used in the title of my project function? Before I answer that question, I want to begin by working from the assumption that late capitalist cities like Singapore and Vancouver have been mapped since the colonial period when both spaces were “discovered” by the British in the 19th century. In many ways, these cities were first imagined into existence by the surveyor and map-maker.

As Lance Berelowitz notes in *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination* (2005),

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3What Simmel calls the “money economy” results in “the blasé metropolitan attitude” (14)
4The term “counter-cartography” moves beyond D.M.R. Bentley’s initial coinage to describe Dionne Brand’s writing on Toronto. Bentley mainly argues for the term as a more literal remapping of the city, as “the identification of landmarks whose presence and significance are not registered on maps that are insensitive to matters of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation” (311). However, it is his initial analysis of Brand’s impulse to “to imagine Toronto as a place of convergence and contingency, of physical, cultural, and textual interaction” (302) that needs to be further explored.
Vancouver’s physical armature—its underlying infrastructure—was an act of imperial will [...] the street-grid system forms the fundamental underlying structural armature of Vancouver’s subsequent urban form. All else follows from those first measurements of the surveyor’s theodolite that led to the imposition of an unstoppable grid of streets over the Burrard Peninsula humpback and its smaller outrider, the downtown peninsula. (39)

Berelowitz quotes a particular evocative inscription on the historical plaque on Hastings Street beside Victory Square, which reads, “Here stood Hamilton, first Land Commissioner, and Canadian Pacific Railway. In the silent solitude of the primeval forest he drove a wooden stake in the earth and commenced to measure an empty land into the streets of Vancouver” (39) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 “Commemorative Plaque, Hamilton Street, Vancouver: October 6, 2012, 14:19.” [Photo: M. Cynog Evans, CAUSA Archives.]
Vancouver’s city blocks were thus mapped out even before they were constructed, “surveyed and platted out using the medieval English measure known as a ‘chain’” (Berelowitz 45). Variations of this street grid were used throughout the Empire, including in parts of Singapore, as a “promise of commercial efficiency […] of supporting the mercantile city, one of the bases of British colonialism” (Berelowitz 47).

In Singapore, the 1822 Jackson Plan was a colonial map imposed on the new colony of Singapore by Stamford Raffles who was “dissatisfied with the haphazard development” (Eng 165) (See Figure 2). The plan “evinced a strict regularity in the layout of the streets and incorporated provisions for the separation of indigenous and European inhabitants along racial and social lines […] with the aim of achieving political and economic control over the indigenous population” (Eng 165).

**Figure 2 Jackson Plan 1922 [Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain]**

This first plan was followed by another colonial Master Plan in 1958, and then with a series of post-independence Master Plans that continue to map and zone urban Singapore
and Singaporean life in ways that cannot be underestimated. Vancouver’s space, as well, continues to be influenced by zoning bylaws, the first of which was enacted in 1922. Both cities continue to be mapped and planned in contemporary times, to a certain extent having capitalist property developers taking over the role of earlier colonial and governmental surveyors. In many ways, as Lefebvre would put it, the representations of the two cities have come to dominate their spatial practice and representational spaces. The cities’ experiences of mapping are more intense versions of what John Pickles has argued where “cartographic institutions and practices have coded, decoded and recorded planetary, national and social spaces […] They have respaced the geo-body. Maps and mapping precede the territory they ‘represent.’” (5).

Mapping as a way of understanding urban spaces, with its colonial associations of exploring, fixing, categorizing, and totalizing, has been subjected to a long genealogy of critique. Michel de Certeau sees the map as producing “the erasure of the itineraries”, forming “the tableau of a ‘state’ of geographical knowledge” (121) without acknowledging the multiple historical journeys and trajectories, “the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition” (121). Lefebvre discusses the inadequacies of using just one or even a few maps to represent social space, coming to the conclusion that the mutable multi-dimensional, multi-perspectival and multi-scalar aspects of this space mean that we are confronted with “a sort of instant infinity”(85). Map historian and geographer J.B. Harley has famously noted how

Maps as an impersonal type of knowledge tend to ‘desocialise’ the territory they represent. They foster the notion of a socially empty space. The abstract quality of the map, embodied as much in the lines of a fifteenth century Ptolemaic projection as in the contemporary images of computer cartography, lessens the burden of conscience about people in the landscape. Decisions about the exercise of power are removed from the realm of immediate face-to-face contacts. (303)

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Berelowitz has an entire chapter dealing with Vancouver’s experience with master-planning that provides more detail than is necessary in this dissertation. See Berelowitz.
More than ever now, we view our world as one of maps and mapping, and yet it is important to see how Harley’s arguments about the “desocializing” aspects in 1988 are still relevant today. Online mapping tools like the ubiquitous Google Maps have been heralded as the democratization of cartography, with an especially breathless essay in a 2007 issue of Wired magazine trumpeting the devolution of cartography from its history of colonialism due to the work of “a volunteer army of amateur cartographers” (Ratliff 156). Proponents of these forms of participatory cartographies have credited them with creating a kind of “sprawling, networked atlas—a “geoweb” that’s expanding so quickly its outer edges are impossible to pin down” (Ratliff 156). Yet, what this rush to embrace new tools of mapping fails to take into account is the continuing dominance of an unspoken acceptance of the logic and validity of maps and their new use in technologies of commercialization and commodification. Geographer Jeremy W. Crampton reminds us that while cartography has “been slipping from the control of the powerful elites that have exercised dominance over it for several hundred years” (12), this does not mean that we can move beyond a critique of these maps as situated “within specific relations of power and not as neutral scientific documents” (12). Indeed, we must be careful to distinguish more commercial and mainstream uses of the so-called “open source” collaborative tools, mobile mapping applications, and geotagging” (12) and more subversive engagements with the map. Crampton argues that cartography is “being undisciplined; that is, freed from the confines of the academic and opened up to the people” (12), citing four main ways in which this is occurring through the work of artists, everyday mappings, maps as resistance and map hacking (25). These not-for-profit instances of counter-mapping question the predictability of maps and instead, through experimentation, play and resistance, question the very fundamentals of map-making. Like the literary texts that I began with, they do so through confabulation, lying, mis-mapping and the element of surprise.
These attempts at resisting or “hacking” reflect an unconscious realization that maps and mapped space are part of abstract space, as extensively theorized by Lefebvre. In Lefebvre’s theorization, abstract space is a “product of violence and war,” “appears homogeneous” and seems to “grind down and crush everything […] performing the function of a plane, a bulldozer or tank” (285). In particular, it also has no room for “affectivity” and “the sensory/sensual realm” (51). Arguably, map-making in the colonial, and postcolonial eras functioned as an essential part of producing this abstract space. Lefebvre elaborates on the geometric, optical and phallic formants (285-87) of abstract space, and its relation to mapping: the act of rendering a complex spatiality into a two-dimensional representation encourages a homogeneous view of space, occluding the geographies of amnesia, power and inequity. With the proliferation of mobile mapping tools and maps in the past decade, it becomes even more crucial to ask how we can escape the map, this abstraction of space, and produce a differential space that enables a return to the social, the unpredictable, and the lived.

What I will argue in this dissertation is that closely examining particular texts that arise from the over-mapped, over-determined spaces of late capitalist cities like Singapore and Vancouver will enable us to understand how they are attempting to restore the sociality of space. This study encourages us to lose ourselves in acts of reading, disorient ourselves in the semi-fictive spatio-temporalities produced by these texts. These texts lie and obfuscate, they fantasize, experiment, imagine and confabulate. They focus on trajectories that are not linear or teleological and therefore cannot be mapped. They perform counter-cartographies by showing us the inadequacies of our maps to portray the complexities of our relationships to space and time (whether past, present or future). They restore the uneasy balancing act between the trialectic of spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. They counter abstract space by insisting on the contradictions inherent in a would-be homogeneity of space.

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6As map artist kanarinka puts it, artists work with “ethics of experimentation” (39) that is “anything but arbitrary: …[they] experiment with a particular territory in specific ways to reach unforeseen destinations” (24) (qtd in Crampton 25).
Theorists like Fredric Jameson have long sought to move beyond the abstraction of mapping to ways of conceiving and perceiving space that would take into account both its tangible and intangible elements. Jameson, writing about Kevin Lynch’s exploration of the production of mental urban maps in *The Image of the City*, argues that,

Lynch’s subjects are rather clearly involved in pre-cartographic operations whose results traditionally are described as itineraries rather than as maps: diagrams organized around the still subject-centered or existential journey of the traveler, along which various significant key features are marked – oases, mountain ranges, rivers, monuments, and the like. (51-52)

Jameson calls for a social cartography, “cognitive maps” (51) that “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (51).

What would these “cognitive maps” look like? Even as Lynch understood it, ordinary maps were in many ways insufficient means of engaging with the urban, since

At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences. (1)

Given the multi-temporality and affective nature of actual urban space, what process then, would come closer to negotiating the complexity of lived space?

Timothy Ingold’s concept of “wayfinding” may enable us to incorporate spatial practice into representations of space and representational spaces. Ingold turns his back on mapping or map-making, even moving beyond Jameson’s initial fixation with cognitive mapping and Lynch’s urban planning perspectives. Ingold argues that

Contrary to the assumptions of cartographers and cognitive map theorists, life is not contained within things, nor is it transported about. It is rather laid down along paths of movement, of action and perception. Every living being,
accordingly, grows and reaches out into the environment along the sum of its paths. To find one’s way is to advance along a line of growth, in a world which is never quite the same from one moment to the next, and whose future configuration can never be fully known. Ways of life are not therefore determined in advance, as routes to be followed, but have continually to be worked out anew. And these ways, far from being inscribed upon the surface of an inanimate world, are the very threads from which the living world is woven. (242)

Urban texts like the ones I have briefly discussed by Tan and Compton repeatedly attempt to draw our awareness to the unmappable, the “ways of life” that are depend on the corporeal and affective modes of “action and perception.” These texts, and the others that I will analyze, find their way around urban spaces by focusing on the details that push them along their trajectories. As Ingold also points out, where a cartographer feels the need to do away with a “fog of detail” (242) since a map is not processual, a wayfinder is not troubled by this detail since, “the richer and more varied the texture of the environment, the easier it is to find one’s way around” (242). Ironically, then, it is easier to know where one is without a map, since a map provides only the abstract coordinates of a homogenized landscape.

To illustrate this point with a literary example, one might turn to the opening of Dionne Brand’s Toronto novel What We All Long For (2005), which brings our awareness to our Cartesian conception of Toronto’s location as it “hovers above the forty-third parallel” (1). The novel immediately reminds us of the constructed nature of this map: “that’s illusory of course” (1). Instead, this passage highlights the “unforgiving” nature of the city’s winters, their material particularity and the actual lived space of Toronto in opposition to its plotted location. The text reminds us that much of urban life is given over to chance, since “Nature will do that sort of thing — dump thousands of tons of snow on the city just to say, Don’t make too many plans or assumptions, don’t get ahead of yourself” (1). Brand’s novel goes on to confabulate the chance encounters and relationships between the inhabitants of transnational Toronto, both within its map drawn boundaries and without. By doing so, Brand’s Toronto
eschews the abstractions and fixities of a map and allows us to contemplate the messy, problematic, inconvenient experiences of living in this particular urban space.

**Confabulation as Literary Counter-Cartography**

Like Ingold’s conception of wayfinding, what I am calling textual counter-cartography focuses on seemingly superfluous detail and emphasizes trajectories as opposed to panoptic views of the city. This is a differential space, one that produces and is produced by creativity, unpredictability, and difference. The compulsion to confabulate is what modulates textual counter-cartography from ordinary, everyday wayfinding. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “confabulate” in two ways: “To talk familiarly together, converse, chat” and in its use in the discipline of psychiatry “To fabricate imaginary experiences as compensation for loss of memory” (*OED*). This ties the idea of confabulation to the use of language as a means to create a social space in the Lefebvrian sense, but also to compensate for collective losses of memory in an urban setting through fabrication and imagination.

As I have defined it, literary confabulation in the late capitalist city is very much indebted to Linda Hutcheon’s seminal work on historiographic metafiction, where she argues that the genre simultaneously enshrines and undermines its intertexts of history, literature, and culture. In particular, she notes, “the ontological line between historical past and literature is not effaced, but underlined” (10) and that “the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction’s challenges to the presumed transparency of the language of realist texts” (10). In effect, the use and “ironic abuse” (12) of the intertexts lead to a more profound engagement with history, literature and popular culture by questioning these received discourses. Literary confabulation, like historiographic metafiction, engages with the intertext of history and troubles its borders. Indeed, Hutcheon’s sense of the writer’s agency in destabilizing the ontological boundaries between history and fiction is particularly relevant when one considers how Compton’s poems bring together diverse intertexts, and poetic and cultural frameworks. With his “mis-duplications” (Compton, *Turntablism*) of these sources, the conventions of official histories and
literatures are, as Hutcheon puts it, “simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied” (5). Compton shows us the fictiveness, hypocrisy and limitations of official histories, and attempts to create new and confabulated ways of approaching black Vancouver.

However, in addition to challenging the historical, literary confabulation is necessary in the context of the late capitalist urban space and its possible futures. In an era and space of rapid urban development and redevelopment, buildings, roads, and neighbourhoods often disappear or are inaccessible. Thus, making it up as one goes along then becomes a natural way of survival and spatial negotiation. It is through the literary text’s fictive and indeterminate explorations of these complex intersections of the sensorial and the temporal that a remediated space is produced. Beyond historiographic metafiction, confabulation is further concerned with the paradoxically overdetermined and uncertain future that haunts the conceived, perceived, and lived spaces of the late capitalist city. Here one thinks of the ongoing construction of luxury condominiums in both Singapore and Vancouver, the speculative tendencies of their property markets and the endless cycles of demolition and construction in both spaces. Both city spaces have been famously and dramatically read as blank slates or texts, empty voids where meaning is imposed upon them by urban planners and capitalist investors — both foreign and Singaporean theorists have seen Singapore as “the apotheosis of the tabula rasa” (Koolhaas 1031), a site “of an endless cycle of erasure and reconstruction” (Yeo 247), while Vancouver is been labeled Dream City. Each of these assessments further reflect the urban space’s uneasy relationship with its imagined, speculative future. I believe that it is a matter of urgency that we turn to examine the possibilities of counter-cartography and confabulation to reclaim future iterations of our cities from the realm of capital investment, abstraction, and overdevelopment.

**Plan of the present work**

My dissertation will address both semi-fictional and wholly fictional urbanisms, told from minority perspectives in the late capitalist city. The first two sections will focus specifically on Singapore and Vancouver as exemplars of this socio-historical
phenomenon. Contemporary Vancouver writing from the past decade will be the main focus of the first section — given that the city saw a vertiginous increase in construction only in the 1980s and 90s. My work on contemporary Vancouver first examines the cultural image of the city in urban planning documents, material sites, and popular media. As I demonstrate in my readings of these cultural texts, Vancouver began as cartographic fictions, dreamed into existence by planners and land speculators. The city continue to be spectacularly mapped, planned and commodified in contemporary times, with capitalist property developers taking over the role of earlier colonial and government surveyors. I then place these cultural and bureaucratic texts in dialogue with recent literary urbanisms, in particular the engaged spatial politics of three contemporary texts: Madeleine Thien’s short story “A Map of the City” (2001), a poem cycle from Wayde Compton’s *Performance Bond* (2004), and Sachiko Murakami’s poetry collection *Rebuild* (2011).

The section on Singapore will also examine various planning documents, material sites, and spatial ideologies from Singapore. I focus especially on its role as a “model” for other developing cities and its highly regulated and structured space. I then contest these conceptions with radical reorderings of Singapore’s urban spaces in the fictional and filmic work of Tan Shzr Ee’s *Lost Roads: Singapore* (2006), Alfian Sa’at’s flash fiction collection *Malay Sketches* (2013), and Tan Pin Pin’s films *Singapore Gaga* (2004) and *Invisible City* (2007). These literary urbanisms demonstrate the complexities of our relationships to and in urban spaces, revealing the inadequacies of the ideologies of mapping.

The final section of my project focuses on transnational novels that range between Canada and Southeast Asia. While it is clear that the unspoken orientation of both Singapore and Vancouver is transnational - with their histories as port cities in the colonial period and hubs of global trade and migration in the late twentieth century- I have found it useful to distinguish between narratives that are set in one urban space and those which range between multiple locations. Reading Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2005), Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* (2000), and Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), I argue that these novels produce a complex urban politics that goes
between and beyond particular cities, producing counter-cartographies that resist celebratory accounts of neoliberal globalization while addressing the realities of migration and diaspora through the various genres of historical fiction, immigrant narrative, and magical realism. My last chapter on Lai, in particular, moves beyond the realist urban settings of the preceding texts, and considers the importance of imagining alternate urban futures in an age where mapped realities have come to dominate cities even on the level of individual bodies.

Thus, in taking into consideration the complex relationships between conceived, perceived and lived space, my dissertation intends to explore how minority literary texts from late capitalist cities resist the act of mapping, and metaphorical and literal maps. When these works “counter” a two-dimensional and static form of understanding a city, they encounter and restore spatial practice and representational spaces in the city. While the physical city, with its streets, buildings, paths, alleyways and landmarks, remains important, the texts that I will be examining also show that these spaces are produced and augmented by unpredictable possibilities and trajectories. In particular, the literary here allows for a keen insight into the simultaneity and chance intersections of multiple narratives and stories-so-far. While de Certeau and others have theorized the palimpsestic nature of urban spaces, in this late capitalist moment of the city, it is also crucial to note the “radical contemporaneity” (Massey 110) of space and of these texts; it is crucial to see how they are engaging in histories that are “still being made, now” (Massey 118) where “something more mobile than is implied by an archaeological dig down through the surfaces of the space of today. Something more temporal than the notion of space as a collage of historical periods” (Massey 118). My work hopes to build on this notion of “radical contemporaneity,” and on the confabulatory tactics of an emergent minority urban literature, to explore how the possibilities of the fictive and imaginary can paradoxically help us better understand the complex spatio-temporalities of our everyday urban lives.
Section I
Routes, Runes, and Renovations: Literary Interventions in Vancouver

“This is dream city, built on shores
still not ceded…”

- Sachiko Murakami

The history of contemporary Vancouver’s development begins in the 19th century during the period of colonial British settlement and continues into the 21st century with the increasingly vertiginous property market in the city. The object of much speculation and the goal of generations of immigrants, Vancouver has often been called “Dream City” — a name that perhaps implies its continually evolving, semi-fictional status. Its liminality is also evident in another one of its names: “Edge City,” which refers to its position as both the terminal city of westward colonial expansion and a first point of contact for trade and migration from the Pacific Rim. In a national survey of Canadian urban regions, urban geographers Trevor Barnes, Tom Hutton, David Ley and Markus Moos argue that Vancouver’s emergent economy of difference relative to other Canadian cities has been shaped by a confluence of distinctive multi-scalar processes. These processes operate at both the regional level and within international circuits, the latter process underscored by Vancouver’s insistent integration within the markets, societies, cultures, and capital networks of the Asia-Pacific. More than perhaps most other Canadian urban regions, Vancouver exemplifies the city as a space of flows and

\footnote{See Berelowitz’s account of the initial British settlements, also detailed briefly in the dissertation’s introduction. Derek Hayes also provides a cartographically based account in his \textit{Historical Atlas of Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley} (2005).}
recurrent restructuring rather than as a durable construct of stable industries, labour, social class, and communities. (291)

From this socio-economic perspective then, Vancouver has been seen as singular for its culture of transnational mobility and continual construction, both materially and culturally. Like many other colonial port cities including Singapore, the impetus for this development and mobility has primarily been the product of external forces. Cultural theorist Paul Delaney has gone so far as to declare the city’s unique status as a result of how “Vancouver has been discovered, developed—colonised, some would say—by global migrations and shifts of capital” (1). Delaney posits that the city “has uncoupled from its Interior and become more of a Pacific Rim city, drawing nourishment from its direct links to such centres as Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul, Taipei, Tokyo” (14). Delaney’s argument about the extensive economic flows and connections across the Pacific, orient Vancouver away from Canada while simultaneously setting it up as both a terminus and gateway to the rest of the continent.

What do transnationalism and global shifts of capital mean for spatial practice, representational spaces and representations of space in the specific geographical location of Vancouver? How can we move beyond capitalist abstractions of its urban spaces, in order to come to a more nuanced experience of the city? Cartographies of Vancouver fix

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8 It should be noted here that there has been a recent turn to examining the urban in Canadian Literature, given its traditional associations with norticidty, wilderness and rurality. In their critical anthology, Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities, editors Edwards and Ivison point out that the Canadian literary obsession with a “sense of place” (4) has often led its critics to define the literature by its rural landscapes and small towns, with influential scholars like Robert Kroetsch, John Ralston Saul and Ian Angus continuing to “identify the wilderness and Canada’s ultimate site of wilderness, the North, as being the heart of the Canadian cultural imaginary, and thus as being a crucial determinant in the production of Canadian identity” (7). In Edwards and Ivison’s view, this literary norticidty and wilderness must be opposed by the lived and literary experiences of most Canadians who live in urban environments. This would, they argue, at the very least reflect the political, social and economic reality of contemporary Canada. Edwards and Ivison go even further to posit that the binary of urban/rural writing is now meaningless, and that instead of privileging one form or the other, writers and critics should instead “focus on the materiality and specificity of our cities and the experience of urbanism as a way of life in Canada” (12). In the same critical anthology, Richard Cavell elaborates on this
the city in a very particular historic and socio-economic matrix that can only be arrived at if we accept Vancouver’s history as a teleological, progress-oriented move beginning from colonialism and ending with globalization. As seductive representations of Vancouver, maps shaped and shape the way it is experienced, consumed and produced. In his comprehensive *Historical Atlas of Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley*, Derek Hayes argues that “many of the ideas that fashioned Vancouver into the shape and form it is today first saw expression as a map” (6) whether by explorers, fur traders, colonizers, military engineers, planners and real estate developers (See Figure 3). Hayes notes that real estate maps are in fact, indispensable in his historical atlas since it was the selling of real estate that in so many ways shaped the city we know today. The existence, alignment, spacing, form, and the name of many streets are owed to real estate developers whose primary motivation was to make money from their Vancouver lands. (6)

In many ways, the newest cartographic visions of these real estate developers are now the mappings of condominium development brochures and advertisements and have influenced official images of the city.⁹ Sachiko Murakami’s poem “Tower…” describes this view of the city succinctly, it is one where “the foundations are speculative and our point, with a more specific socially committed argument. Drawing on Northrop Frye’s idea of the “garrison mentality,” Cavell argues that perceiving the landscape as inherently “hostile and intractable” (14) means that it is “defeatured” (14) and thus is “a repudiation, in both the critical and literary traditions, of the materiality of cultural production” (15). Cavell defines this “defeaturing” (rendering Canadian space as map-like) as “a process of the evacuation of meaning—a vertiginous precession of signification that renders the landscape nugatory” (15) that occurs in the realist fiction of canonical Canadian authors like Charles G.D. Roberts, F.P. Grove, Sinclair Ross and Ethel Wilson. It is a focus on “the materiality of Canadian writing” (29) that Cavell sees as essential, a long overdue recognition of the urban in Canadian criticism to acknowledge “this long history of abstraction, colonization, of expansionism, of environmental carnage” (29). Cavell’s more pessimistic perception of urban development in Canada and his revelation of the abstract space produced by a fetishization of the rural are calls for a committed and considered approach to Canadian urban space in particular.

⁹See the Application Dossier for Vancouver’s bid to become a World City of Literature, which will be further discussed later in this chapter.
present is built on impatience for the future” (33). The poem here refers to a financially speculative, anticipatory development that is oriented to an unbuilt future; a logical, capitalist alteration of landscape par excellence. It is quite literally abstract, and unbuilt, and has a long standing colonial precedent as Lance Berelowitz notes, since even the earliest maps of Vancouver “illustrate an over-optimistic representation of the built street layout and number of buildings constructed, anticipating the future as a kind of advertisement to encourage settlers to purchase land” (96). Berelowitz then cannily points out that this is a “direct line… to today’s glossy coloured renderings of yet-to-be-built condominium towers” (96).
An awareness of this long tradition of these maps and map-like views of the city gives us a way to understand how Vancouver has continued to be mapped in this colonial tradition in the late capitalist period — a cartographic vision that influences even cultural
and academic iterations of the city. Take for instance, Delaney’s strangely depopulated cartography of Vancouver:

Vancouver marks the end of the settled coast, but it is a head cut off by the 49th parallel, which hinders any merging of the Vancouver/Seattle conurbations. The city’s Asian communities make it another kind of end-point, an enclave or beach-head where the cultures of the East “come ashore” on North America. The end of the coast highway north of Powell River, and the mountains blocking the Fraser Valley at Hope, create the notorious “end-of-the-line” feeling in Vancouver—experienced, according to one’s mood, as navel-gazing, liberation, or claustrophobia. Then, there is the extraordinarily sharp juxtaposition of the city and the wilderness, often without any buffering by transitional zones like suburbs or farmland. Finally, there are the sightlines that constantly remind us of boundary-effects: the skyline of modern and postmodern highrises in the downtown core, the ridgeline of the North Shore mountains, and the shorelines winding everywhere through the cityscape. The coming together of so many visual and social zones creates an urban experience of invigorating complexity.

(19)

Delaney first imposes the cartographic logic of the 49th parallel - itself an arbitrary referent - to the border between Vancouver and Seattle before rendering the city’s “Asian communities” static and part of the landscape where they are “another kind of end-point, an enclave or beach-head where the cultures of the East ‘come ashore.’” This reductive and abstractive move enables Delaney to create a kind of artificial sense of claustrophobia that he also links with the “natural” landscape of mountains. Both city and country here are employed as aesthetic surfaces, and the “sharp juxtaposition of the city and the wilderness” only serves to highlight their spectacularization. The “wilderness” here is a reworking of the stereotypical Canadian wilderness that now is dangerously not “buffered” by any “transitional zones.” Again and again Delaney imposes an invisible map on actual physical space of Vancouver, writing of the “boundary-effects” that are inextricable from “sightlines,” “skylines,” “ridgelines,” and “shorelines” - indeed cartographic lines of every kind. These lines contain and demarcate
as they force a rapid, panoramic understanding of the city. The passage is not “reminded” of these “boundary-effects” by the “sightlines” - it is instead a cartographic logic that imposes its “sightlines” on the vista.

Delaney’s account is echoed by Berelowitz’s cartographic gaze in 2010 in his award winning book *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination*:

As you crest the airport bridge, Vancouver is laid out before you. It seems to float, poised between mountain and sea, a light confection hovering between the temperate rain forest of the Coast Mountains and the convoluted inlets of the Pacific Ocean.

As you travel into town over the whaleback of the Burrard Peninsula, a dense cluster of slim towers emerges ahead, rising in shimmering layers in front of the mountain backdrop.

Compared to the bigger cities of Europe or Asia or even North America, everything seems somehow diminutive, improbably languid, neat and uncrowded, a dream-like simulacrum of messy urbanity. And yet more than two million people live here, in one of the most compact urban centers in North America. So there’s the thing, the maddening contradiction that is Vancouver at the beginning of its second hundred years: a city that seems to have emerged out of its surrounding wilderness chrysalis-like, seemingly almost fully formed yet so young, so unlayered. And with a unique sense of place. (4)

Here, as in Delaney’s account, one appears to be journeying through a glossy tourist map as Vancouver, detached from its surroundings “seems to float” and is thus rendered as weightless as a “light confection,” only made up of “shimmering layers” - a seeming mirage. Berelowitz’s initial encounter with Vancouver is as always an attempt to contain and reduce the city to a paradoxically wild creature that is “seemingly almost fully formed yet so young, so unlayered.” His compression and confusion of Vancouver’s intensely complex spatio-temporalities seems almost wilful. And it is quite extraordinary that his and Delaney’s two accounts have so much in common in their representation of
Vancouver’s spaces. What I want to suggest here is that even while these accounts provide an illusion of movement through the spaces of Vancouver, what becomes apparent is the neat exclusion of human agency, history and sociality in these narratives of Vancouver (aside from the ethnic tokenism displayed in Delaney’s account). The spectacularization of the city and its reduction to the “unlayered” surface is a form of textual mapping that privileges the aesthetics of a capitalist city. These accounts couch their abstractions in literary language and produce a cartographic view of Vancouver that is ultimately an empty symbol of globalized capitalist success with a token natural landscape as background.

This discourse of flattened spatio-temporalities is also in Vancouver’s official depiction of itself. In a 2008 proposal to the United Nations, the Vancouver City of Literature Steering Committee uses almost exactly the same vocabulary, describing an empty, dehistoricized, depopulated landscape as the backdrop for “a young city in a new-world country with a storytelling tradition going back thousands of years” (3). The proposal calls Vancouver “a cultural meeting point and a hotbed of ideas and inspirations” (3) and then proceeds to ‘sell’ and commodify Vancouver’s cultural capital:

Vancouver has grown from a quiet clearing in a rainforest to become one of the world’s most beautiful and vibrant cities [...] In Vancouver, there is a rare balance between new influences and a respect for older traditions. This is a city of paradoxes: modern but steeped in history; technologically advanced but devoted to nature and simple living; cosmopolitan but committed to healthy communities and the environment. Amazingly, the contradictions tend to work in everyone’s favour, infusing the city with just enough friction and diversity to make it interesting and progressive. (3)

Again, as in Delaney’s and Berelowitz’s descriptions, Vancouver seems to arise sui generis, without reference to colonialism or indentured labour on hitherto empty land, “a quiet clearing in a rainforest” to become a “city of paradoxes.” History, nature, and multiculturalism are all instrumentalized, and intense income and spatial inequalities are elided with the phrase “in everyone’s favour.” This commodification of culture and space
becomes even clearer in the second chapter of the proposal when Vancouver’s status as “The Cultural City” is first and foremost seen in monetary terms ($1.9 billion in 2005), 28,000 jobs and various buildings and centres of “cultural infrastructure.”

One of the main authors of this pitch is Vancouver author and artist Douglas Coupland, famous for his postmodern engagements with Vancouver both in highly stylized novels like Microserfs (1995) and Jpod (2006), and in his art and non-fictional writing. Glenn Deer has noted how in Coupland’s City of Glass (2000), “the modernist promises of transparency, freedom, fusion, and mobility … are troped in the various structures of ‘glass’ in Vancouver” (120). However, as Deer astutely points out, Coupland’s “comfortable cultural fusions and leisurely imbibed vistas of rain and glass are not so cheerfully appreciated from the streets” (126), spaces that afford the opposite of the panoptic and panoramic views granted by glass towers. In fact, much of the “culture” and “community” that is being referred to in the visions of Vancouver that I have referred to from Delaney, Berelowitz, Coupland and the Vancouver City of Literature Steering Committee are those borne of a privileged, capitalist view of boutique globalization and multiculturalism where there is “just enough friction and diversity” --- difference that is crucially contained and exoticized.

These maps of Vancouver are obviously fictions in their own way, but what makes them crucially different from the fictions that my study will investigate is their mythic fixity - mythic because of their strangely depopulated, dehistoricized versions of Vancouver’s creation, and fixed because they see an unrelenting progression from the city’s idyllic, wild past to its sleek postmodern present and future. This is the commodification of a city, the exploitation of its spaces, histories and cultures as capital for global investment and profit. What then of the fictions that I will read? I will argue in this section that minority confabulations of Vancouver’s past, present, and future create spaces of indeterminacy that challenge the abstract spaces of a plotted colonial legacy, and an even more deterministic capitalist land developer’s present and future.

While there are some exceptions to this rule, it is undeniable that minority populations in Vancouver, whether immigrant or indigenous, have borne the brunt of the
city’s speculative growth. Similarly, at the risk of stating the obvious, texts by non-minority and/or non-racialized Vancouver writers like Douglas Coupland, Timothy Taylor, Michael Turner, Meredith Quartermain, or even Daphne Marlatt produce for the most part literary urbanisms that arise from the dominant spatial, racial, and intellectual spaces of the city. Texts like Coupland’s *City of Glass*, Taylor’s *Stanley Park* (2001), Turner’s *Company Town* (1991), Quartermain’s *Vancouver Walking* (2005), and Marlatt’s *Liquidities* (2013) are often cognizant of the fraught urban spaces and histories that they depict.\(^\text{10}\) However, these texts arise from subject positions that are fundamentally different from work by minority Vancouver writers such as Wayde Compton, Sachiko Murakami, Madeleine Thien, Eden Robinson, and Evelyn Lau. I would go so far as to say that this difference is inherently spatial — that writers from the dominant white establishment do not grapple with the historical and contemporary dispossession, redevelopment, and erasure in the same ways as writers from minority communities. Further, they may not encounter transnationality in the same ways. This is not to say that work like Marlatt’s poetry on the increasing income inequality in Vancouver does not deserve attentive reading — just that more scholarship on minority literature from Vancouver and, therefore, minority perspectives of its urban spaces are overdue.

Some work on minority literary texts in contemporary Vancouver has been done by Glenn Deer. His essay “Remapping Vancouver” looks at four texts by Madeleine Thien, Nancy Lee, Kevin Chong and Larissa Lai, and argues that they are the harbingers of a new spatial consciousness in a younger generation of Asian-Canadian writers. Deer contrasts the work of these four authors with works by earlier writers like Sky Lee, Wayson Choy and Joy Kogawa, arguing that Thien, Lee, Chong and Lai break out of “ethnic enclaves” like Chinatown and instead “use cityscapes as both the origin and sign of new forms of familial loss, anomie, homelessness, corporate control, and globalized violence” (120). While my work, like Deer’s, goes beyond the earlier historical spaces of

\(^{10}\text{See mclennan on the longer tradition of “Vancouver writing” where he considers the earlier, non-minority writing of George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Michael Turner, Maxine Gadd and Earle Birney} \)
Vancouver as documented by Lee, Choy and Kogawa --- my study also considers the specific formal ways in which both prose and poetry intervene in the spaces of Vancouver to restore the sociality of erstwhile abstract representations of the city. How exactly is the urban spatial expressed, invented and changed through these textual representations of space? How does literary invention, confabulation, and imagination (re)produce urban space, and also intervene to alter it? Deer sees his four authors as “partly literary allies of such urban revisionists as [Richard] Sennett and [Jane] Jacobs” (141) while expressing a kind of “urban epistemological social yearning, that desire to reconstruct ‘inaccessible’ lives through the imagination” (141). I do acknowledge this social yearning in the work of Madeleine Thien, Wayde Compton and Sachiko Murakami. But what is also present in their work is a formalist bent that reveals the textuality of the city. These literary techniques disrupt the easy mapping and ordering of Vancouver. Further, each text also evinces a critical and complex treatment of spatio-temporalities: history cannot be shunted aside for a wholly contemporary look at Vancouver; instead Thien, Compton, and Murakami evince a keen awareness of the complex, albeit fragmented, history that is evident in Vancouver. Their work is not simply a reflection of contemporary Vancouver but an attempt to reinvent, renovate, and rebuild it with real and confabulated fragments. In doing so, these texts counter the abstractions of a carefully mapped and spectacular Vancouver, of which Berelowitz, Coupland, and Delaney’s are but just a few examples.

Reading Thien’s short story “Map of the City” from Simple Recipes (2001) Compton’s poetic cycle “Rune” from the collection Performance Bond (2004), and Murakami’s Rebuild (2011) requires an attentiveness to both the form and content of these minority urban texts. The imaginary literary spaces that are created intervene unpredictably in representations of space, representational space, and spatial practice - weaving the three into a delicate balance. Each text does this differently: Thien’s semi-autobiographical “Map of the City” uses familial history as a linchpin to examine the texture of haunted urban spaces and the relationships between interior and exterior spaces in the city; in a process he calls “retro-speculative,” ("West Coast Line" essay) Compton’s Hogan Alley-centric “Rune” re-imagines the radically utopian spaces of
Black Vancouver, while confabulating the lived spaces and oral histories of its inhabitants; Murakami’s work is more overtly ‘presentist’, and through the unrelenting “renovations” of her own poems, resists fixed capitalist or colonialist mappings of Vancouver. Her poems marry personal memory and affect with the spatial and material realities of post-colonial Vancouver. *Rebuild* also acknowledges the seduction and reality of a spectacular Vancouver — in one poem “Ocean Views”, the persona concludes “It’s hard to imagine the condos / as unintentional. I can’t see myself in one. / I can’t afford the view. I can’t help. / I can’t help wanting to” (38). This admission of guilt and complicity reminds us of the stakes of living in Vancouver, in a city where space and dwelling are heavily imbricated in this transnational, capitalist narrative.

Thien’s short story, Compton’s poetic cycle and essay, and Murakami’s collection engage fully with this urban space, and show how it is inextricable from both the personal and the political. Examining the urban spatialities of both the subject and the poetic form of these texts reveal the multi-scalar complexity of Vancouver, but without eliding over its human elements. This is a Vancouver that resists mapping, that refuses to be pinned down, that is wholly cognizant of the unpredictability, indeterminate and, crucially, confabulated nature of its space. It is an urban space that is undeniably layered with past histories and trajectories - some of which are perhaps unrecoverable except through the imagination and commitment of the literary. What makes these texts particularly significant is their keen awareness and consciousness of the fragmented, damaged and illusory nature of these spatio-temporalities---particularly in a transnational and diasporic city like Vancouver. Thien’s “Map of the City” has this play out on the level of the familial immigrant story, Compton’s on the larger scale of the Black Vancouver community and Murakami’s seeks to link personal grief to the transnational property market. My own analysis of these texts plays a part in re-reading Vancouver’s space as well. As Andreas Huyssen posits, “literary techniques of reading historically, intertextually, constructively, and deconstructively at the same time can be woven into our understanding of urban spaces as lived space that shape collective imaginaries” (7). By actively engaging with the critical possibilities of these texts, I hope to come to a more nuanced understanding of how these three works collectively provide a series of
contemporary interventions into Vancouver’s urban spaces. These interventions restore
the connections between spatial practice, representational space and representations of
space, and in doing so, produce a Vancouver that is less forgetful, more embodied and
alive to the unpredictability of lived social space.
Chapter 1 “A Map of the City”: Wayfinding Vancouver

The title of Madeleine Thien’s “A Map of the City” from her debut short fiction collection Simple Recipes belies its actual goal. Instead of providing a “map” of Vancouver, it produces an unpredictable, temporally complex counter-cartography. The story complicates the city’s grid of streets with its emphasis on personal histories and trajectories of familial angst, and the details of past narratives and lives. A non-linear first person retelling of an immigrant family story set in Vancouver in the late-twentieth century, “A Map of the City” chronicles the challenges and heartbreaks of adapting to a new city, and also the eventual break-up of the protagonist’s parents, and its effects on the protagonist’s own relationships. The story’s titular “map” recurs metaphorically and literally in the text, but opens up the possibility of counter-ideologies to both a new immigrant’s futile use of a map to navigate Vancouver and attempts to demarcate immigrant space in the city. As the story unfolds, we begin to understand that the short story allows us to experience the city through wayfinding, where each place in Vancouver is not “located” but “historicized” (Ingold 219). In his explanation of wayfinding, Timothy Ingold argues that space is experienced through movement and thus, “bound together by the itineraries of their inhabitants, places exist not in space but as nodes in a matrix of movement” (219). Thien’s story provides an elegant literary model for Ingold’s theory: movement is a recurring theme in “A Map of the City” and as the protagonist of the story, Miriam, traces and retraces her steps in Vancouver, the story creates a matrix of complex spatio-temporalities that challenge any easy conceptions of Vancouver’s spaces. Further, Thien’s story complicates earlier immigrant texts’

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11Madeleine Thien was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1974, the year her Chinese-Malaysian family immigrated to Canada. Her first book, a collection of seven short stories, “Simple Recipes” in 2001 won her major acclaim in Canada, four national literary awards, and was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. Since this first collection, she has published a children’s book “The Chinese Violin” (2002) and two novels: Certainty (2006) and Dogs at the Perimeter (2011). Her later novels weave a dense transnational matrix of personal histories and larger historical events, while Thien’s Simple Recipes, however, stays mostly confined to the North American continent. Its final story is set in Vancouver and is simply entitled “A Map of the City.”
confinement to a single quarter or neighbourhood, emphasizing instead the various
degrees of urban embedding inherent in intergenerational immigrant families.¹²

While maps appear in the story, the text suggests early on that they are inherently
inadequate to the task of navigating the city; while the Miriam’s mother is seen as “the
navigator, a map of the city unfurled on her lap” (181), it is the father that the narrator
fixates on watching his “eyes as they glance in the rear-view mirror, the way he searches
for what might appear” (181). The unmappable, unpredictable, and indeterminate are
constants in the story, “what might appear.” Additionally, the story’s formal technique of
a disrupted and non-linear chronology of events ensures that we become more aware of
places as they are linked to events rather than as they are seen on a map, creating a
completely different sense of Vancouver’s urban spaces. Thien’s deceptively simple
familial tale needs to be examined in greater detail in order to understand how it opens up
an understanding of Vancouver spaces that moves beyond both spatially confined earlier
immigrant tales and contemporary glossy map-like versions of Vancouverism.¹³ Instead,

¹²Like Sachiko Murakami, whose work will be examined later in the chapter, Thien’s writing
eschews immediate and overt references to her characters’ immigrant status. In a 2007 interview
with the Waterbridge Review, Thien stakes a claim for a more cosmopolitan sense of belonging:
What I do in my work is not what someone like Amy Tan does. I tend to leave off
physical descriptions and the sense of writing from a specific ethnicity. I think I’m sort
of existing between both worlds and trying to find a way to tell a story that encompasses
those worlds and has a sort of give-and-take between both. Maybe this is because I was
the only one in my family born in Canada. My brother and sister were born in Malaysia. I
occupy a different kind of place. My sense of place is slightly different. I’m the child of
immigrants without being an immigrant. I am the sister of immigrants without being an
immigrant. It’s a sense of occupying a new world, feeling I could embrace a new place
right away, without hesitation, unlike my parents and siblings, but still feeling I was
close to them. (Mudge)

While my analysis of Thien’s work does not rest on her biography, I believe that an awareness of
her initial positioning as a writer is useful for developing a theory on her writing’s sense of place
and space. Thien has certainly been aware from her early career that she occupies “a different
kind of place” and her acknowledgment of being “the child of immigrants without being an
immigrant” has also been noted by scholars like Deer. I call this sense of belonging
‘cosmopolitan,’ after Bruce Robbins’ idea that actually existing cosmopolitanism, is “a reality of
(re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance” (3).

¹³Glenn Deer has noted how earlier immigrant stories by Joy Kogawa, Sky Lee and Wayson
Choy tend to centre around reclaiming and recuperating “the traditional enclave” (122) or more
insular communities in novels like Obasan (1981), Disappearing Moon Cafe (1990) and The
Jade Peony (1995). Deer argues that these works “undertake to restore dignity and complexity to
of a given, mapped Vancouver—Thien’s “A Map of City” is really about how there cannot be an instructive map or guide, but only an ongoing effort to record the trajectories that produce the spaces of the city. The narrative is thus a series of acts of wayfinding, whereas Ingold argues “people’s knowledge of the environment undergoes continuous formation in the very course of their moving about in it” (230). As Ingold puts it “we know as we go, not before we go” (230), a contingent process that counters a pre-conceived, cartographical view of the city and acknowledges the experience of an ever-changing, unfinished spatial practice.

In this regard, the text’s complex conflations of past and present illuminate Massey’s argument that the figure of the palimpsest is, as she posits, “too archaeological” (110). Massey argues against a strictly palimpsestic conception of space, calling it a simplistic way of rendering complex spatio-temporalities:

In this story, the things that are missing (erased) from the map are somehow always things from ‘before’. The gaps in representation (the erasures, the blind spots) are not the same as the discontinuities of the multiplicity in contemporaneous space; the latter are the mark of the coexistence of the coeval. Deconstruction in this guise seems hampered by its primary focus on ‘text’, however broadly imagined. To picture this argument through the figure of the palimpsest is to stay within the imagination of surfaces - it fails to bring alive the trajectories which co-form this space […] as the product of superimposed horizontal structures rather than full contemporaneous coexistence and becoming. (110)

Massey here critiques the metaphor of a palimpsest as limiting a more movement based conception of space. Through its complex narrative structure, Thien’s story similarly resists the strict delineation of past and present, and instead repeatedly returns (physically bodies and communities” (122) that were ‘othered’ by Anglo-European Canadians. This is not necessarily the focus of later writers like Thien, Murakami and Compton.
and imaginatively) to spaces as the loci of multiple, conflicting and sometimes
confabulated memories and histories. These histories are far from “missing from the
map” and instead are interwoven so completely into the narrative that it becomes
impossible to tell when the “contemporary” time of the story is---in effect attempting a
“contemporaneous coexistence and becoming.”

The story’s opening paragraph alerts us to the unexpected temporal and literary
possibilities of this urban space:

In the years after I left home, I used to glimpse my parents in unexpected places. I
would see the two of them in the Safeway, my mother standing patiently by while
my father weighed oranges in his hands, feeling for signs of imperfection. I
would see them on the opposite sidewalk, blurred and old, traffic streaming
between us. During these sightings, I never felt the urge to join them. I only
wanted to remain where I was and watch while they negotiated their way through
the aisles, their bodies slow with old age.

Of course, it was never them. By this time, my father had returned from Indonesia
and my mother was living alone in an apartment outside of the city. I had not seen
my parents side by side in almost a decade. It would be some other couple, vague
and kindly looking, who would catch my eye, remind me of things I thought I had
long forgotten. (161-62)

The story’s elegantly simple opening disguises its complex treatment of space and time.
In these first two paragraphs, the story ranges temporally and spatially, between reality
and the imagined. Miriam is reminiscing about multiple moments both in the real and
imaginary past, even as she is conscious of the semi-illusory nature of her vision. Yet,
the vivid sensory details of the scene allow her to perpetuate this self-deception, and also
allow the reader a meta-fictional moment of awareness of the affective implications of
this urban space. Thien’s text is alive to the possibilities of the “unexpected places” that
existing and moving through space brings. This space is very much one where bodies
must “negotiate” their way through them, even as they are “slow with old age.” Even
more crucial is how the literary text enables the co-existence of desire and confabulated
experience in this space---Miriam’s false memories or deceptive visions construct a past that is not palimpsestic, but rather contemporaneous precisely because of its unreality. The cadence of the text carries along this vision until its abrupt rupture in the first sentence of the second paragraph: “Of course, it was never them.” This mis-recognition provides an uncanny beginning to a text that seeks to produce the unsettled, complex and unfinished experience of existing in an urban space shot through with memories and potential memories.

The text’s more obvious flashbacks continue to modulate between actual spaces and imagined ones. These begin with Miriam’s first spatial attachment is to her father’s discount furniture shop:

Even to me, at the age, the idea of ownership meant something. Along Hastings Street was the bakery, the deli, the children's clothing store, the light shop. My father's furniture store was among these and it had its place in the accepted order of things. (163)

Here, Miriam’s sense of space is immediately anchored by a series of landmarks, as her childhood memories recall the precise geographical location of her father’s shop in relation to other places in the neighbourhood, “the accepted order of things.” This firmly emplaced sense of space is contrasted with her occasional cartographic fantasies of “commercials” (164):

I was six years old then, and dreamed commercials. In my mind, my father was the owner of an exciting retail outlet. Soon the furniture store would be a household word: Bargain Mart. Parents would announce to their children that this weekend's excursion would be to Bargain Mart, and children across the city would look up from their Cream of Wheat and cheer. From where we lived in Burnaby, in the spill of houses beneath the mountain, to Maple Ridge and Vancouver, people would flock to my father's store, carting away sofas on their shoulders, tables in their arms. My father standing at the front, hands on hips, young. (164)
This almost aerial, map like view of Vancouver, with its abstraction of anonymous “children” and “the spill of houses” is an ambiguous moment in the story - where an outright fantasy holds because of the absences of the spatial reality that the text opens with. This view of the city is a purely commercial one, where its spaces are marshaled for commercial gain and an artificial sense of reality. This vision of Miriam’s father is much more coded as a fantasy than Miriam’s initial willful mis-recognition of another old couple as her own parents. This fantasy, while like Miriam’s opening vision in the sense that it intertwines her familial relationships with her spatial ones, projects a fantastical ownership of a space that veers too close to an idealized, commodified version of Vancouver that the rest of Thien’s story takes great pains to oppose.

Instead, most of the story points us to the complex, three-dimensional spaces of the city that must be both emotionally and physically experienced. The text articulates this most clearly towards the mid-point of the story when Miriam has an epiphany that involves both her fraught past and present relationships with her father and the city:

When I hang up the phone, I feel a surge of hope, of fierce protectiveness over him. Perhaps, knowing everything that has brought us here, I would redraw this map, make the distance from A to B a straight line. I would bypass those difficult years and bring my father up to this moment, healthy, unharmed.

But to do so would remove all we glimpsed in passing, heights and depths I never guessed at. That straight line would erase our efforts, the necessary ones as well as the misguided ones, that finally allowed us to arrive here.” (188)

Again here, Thien’s story re-iterates its central motif of familial relationships as they are defined by, and capable of reshaping space. Miriam here wants to “redraw this map” to avoid the suffering of wayfinding through an immigrant’s unsettled life and bring her father “up to this moment, healthy, unharmed.” Miriam realizes, however, that not only is this impossible, it is actually undesirable, since the cartographic impulse disregards life itself, erasing the unpredictability of both positive and negative encounters and decisions that have led the family to their present lives. The spatial metaphors that the text uses here are especially important: “heights and depths” that could never have been “guessed
at” are only “glimpsed in passing” refute any two-dimensional view of these spaces and open them up to the possibility of happenstance. This runs contrary to attempts by Miriam to simplify or flatten her complex relationships with her parents. Crucially, this metaphor begins to transcend its own metaphoricity — Miriam begins by attempting to “redraw this map” at first, to metaphorically compress time and space into a kind of flat, simple map of memory, to “bypass” the suffering to both temporality and spatiality. Yet, the attempt and the metaphor break down precisely because of her realization of the actual material trajectories involved in both living and wayfinding, “in passing” as it were. She does not want a map, a “straight line” to “erase our efforts” both the “necessary” and even more significantly, the “misguided” ones. As the story unfolds, Miriam becomes a character that fully embraces the unpredictability and happenstance of lived space and spatial practice, even in her emotional and intellectual conception of it. Her narrative is a set of physical trajectories, movements through space that finally allows her “to arrive here.”

Miriam’s traversals of Vancouver and her intimate knowledge of the city are also inextricably linked to the development of her character. The spaces of the city are never simply a fixed backdrop to the action of the story, but instead are incomplete, ever-changing and unpredictable. This, then, is the difference between navigating the city with a map and wayfinding. Ingold argues that,

wayfinding differs fundamentally from navigation, just as mapping differs from map-using. For when navigating in a strange country by means of a topographic map, the relation between one’s position on the ground and one’s location in space, as defined by particular map coordinates, is strictly synchronic, and divorced from any narrative context. It is possible to specify where one is – one’s current location – without regard to where one has been, or where one is going. In ordinary wayfinding, by contrast, every place holds within it memories of previous arrivals and departures, as well as expectations of how one may reach it, or reach other places from it. (237)
As a space defined and constructed by wayfinding, Vancouver in “A Map of the City” is conceived of as a matrix of movement, of arrivals and departures that produce urban space. Miriam seeks to answer questions about her identity and purpose through these journeys, and the memories of these past movements. Wayfinding in “A Map of a City” is a narrative unfolding that is always conscious of the unexpected but also of the intensely sensorial and emotional experience of moving through space. These movements are both past and present, remembered and contemporaneous, imagined and real.

For instance, Miriam summarizes the rebellion of her teenage years as a series of secret, late night car rides away from her family home,

During these car rides, I thought of my parents fast asleep at home, tossing in dreams. I was glad to be outside, fully awake, racing away from the example of their love. It did not have to be that way, I thought. I could set myself on a different course, walk in the opposite direction. (192)

This memory is again woven into the narrative as an indistinct time, a series of nights condensed into one vignette in the present continuous tense “racing away.” Unlike her almost static parents, “tossing in dreams,” Miriam revels in the freedom of the city, “on a different course” again using movement in space to define herself, “in the opposite direction.” Her movement through the city here is both literal and figurative, and further refutes the notion that an experience of space could ever be wholly static, mapped out, or predictable.

Further, each of these traversals is different – there are various speeds of moving around the city in both its past and imagined past. Miriam’s journeys by motorcycle with her lover Will enable her to experience a velocity that dramatically alters her relationship to Vancouver and her understanding of herself:

Afterwards, giddy we took the motorcycle out and raced to the university, me holding on to Will’s chest. When we leaned into a curve it was pure joy. I closed my eyes, tuned to the rush of oncoming traffic, the air shattering. For the first
time since I left home, I felt loose and uncontrolled. I pushed my weight back on the motorcycle releasing my grip from Will’s chest, speed tumbling through my body. Will’s face, glancing back, alarmed. (200)

The “pure joy” of this particular trajectory through the city covers more ground than some of the other journeys (on foot, by car) described in the story – and is crucial for its emphasis on the corporeal experience of space. Will and Miriam “lean” into the road as she removes the visual aspect from her experience of this space, closing her eyes as she attunes her body to anamorphic sensation of “the air shattering.” While ephemeral, Miriam’s surrender to the momentum of her movement is a climactic moment in Thien’s story as Miriam’s body becomes conflated with movement itself, “speed tumbling through” it. Yet, this kinetic epiphany is fleeting, for while Miriam sees a form of escape in the movement of her relationship with Will, this is immediately contrasted with the futile, circular trajectory of her father who leaves their family to return to Indonesia after declaring bankruptcy in Canada, “his one suitcase, his solitary self crossing the ocean in search of things remembered. A backwards journey to remake the future” (209). The varying speed of Miriam’s traversals of the city, and the transnational nature of Miriam’s father’s journey reiterate the point that Vancouver cannot be mapped in any conventional cartography that would elide these ideas of differing velocities and mobilities.

As much as Miriam wishes to lose herself in pure movement, the story also repeatedly returns us to particular chronotopic landmarks, node-like time-spaces in the city that represent moments of intense emotion and significance. These are invariably familial memories, but ones situated in very particular locales in the city that would otherwise be inconsequential. For instance, the text seems to focus on the apartment that Miriam’s estranged father settles into after his return from Indonesia. Again, taking our focus away from the stereotypical settings of Chinatown and a community of immigrants, the text depicts the father’s isolated life in an apartment building near Commercial Drive, its facade unremarkably “grey and rectangular” (204). Miriam again marks this as an important points in her parents’ trajectories through Vancouver as she sees her father, “this elderly man in jogging pants and a sweatshirt, standing at a fourth-floor window […] looking out to the shipyards, the tankers on the water, the rooftops
muted of colour” (204). While there is the suggestion of transnational movements in the text’s references to shipyards and tankers, Miriam’s father seems forgotten and immobile in this part of the city.

The text then takes us into this apartment, and imbues it with a significance that belies its anonymous appearance.

Standing in the entrance, I could see the entire apartment. It was small, a kitchen and a living room in one. My father ushered me inside. He gave me the tour, laughing as he did so, saying, “I’m living the bachelor life now. I don’t need much more than this.” I glanced at his furniture — a table, a mattress, and one plastic chair.

He busied himself at the stove, disappearing behind the steam. The air in the apartment was rich with the smell of spices, ginger, lemon grass, hot pepper. “Chilli kepeting,” he called to me, over the sound of the food frying. “I remember how much you liked this.”

Up in the corners, the walls were mouldy and grey and the carpets had a lingering scent, part cigarettes, part damp. He’d done the best he could with decorations. There were Christmas cards, hung up along a line of string, and certificates from the real estate office framed on the wall. I walked onto his tiny balcony, looked across the road at the ramshackle apartments, the wet leaves running bright along the gutters. Out on the harbour, two yellow sulphur hills glowed neon against the grey sky. (204-5)

For Miriam, this desultory space is the culmination of her father’s life, “the result… of being brave. Of dismantling your life” (207). Yet, this is not just an abstract engagement with the apartment; her father’s little room on Commercial Drive is also a vividly sensorial experience. His Southeast Asian past alters the “air in the apartment” filling it with the smells and sounds of an entirely different locale, but also of Miriam’s childhood. This is layered on the decay of the otherwise unremarkable apartment building, with its mould and remnants of other tenants. The space is an attempt at
capturing a kind of life history for Miriam’s father, with memories of family ties and partial business successes. This space is firmly emplaced in the urban Vancouver of “ramshackle apartments,” “grey sky,” and the unmistakable sulphur hills of the Vancouver harbour, striking for how their artificiality mimics natural landscapes. After she leaves the apartment, where her father “could not step over the line that would separate him from where he now lived” (206), Miriam can only walk aimlessly across the city, “until [her] body could go no more” (207), her lack of a destination an echo of her father’s liminal position. The marking of the Commercial Drive apartment as an important landmark and Miriam’s aimless wanderings across the city again act as counter-cartographies to both a neatly mapped sense of immigrant identity and place, and also a grander, glossier version of the city.

In a later scene, Miriam visits and cares for her father who has been hospitalized due to a suicide attempt. It is winter in Vancouver, and her state of anxiety and confusion is mirrored by the snow-covered city, where “the snowfall had cloaked the landscape, so that now it seemed a place where you could walk for days with no sense of moving forward” (214). It is significant that Miriam’s family crisis here is accompanied by a snowfall that erases any possible landmarks or details. This is an enforced abstraction of the city, echoing the grief and confusion that the character experiences here. As she walks through the snow-covered streets, Miriam fears that she is “too late. Not only in body, but in desire, in thought. And if not too late, then something else. Too blind” (219). There are no maps in this situation, nor any familiar landmarks, it is as if the snow has “wiped the landscape clean” (222) — Miriam must continue to be aware of her changing surroundings in order to reach her father in the hospital and indeed it is “through the snowfall [that she sees] the red Emergency lights” (219) before she steps into the building and is led through its various corridors and doors, “into a very silent corridor” (219) where her mother waits in a room. The anonymous intensive care room is transformed into a space that reverberates with Miriam’s father’s breathing where “his heartbeat was amplified in the room, the sound like a slow dance, open and even, open and slow” (220). At this juncture, the text repeatedly returns to memories of driving across the city with her parents, and her father’s guiding hand through Vancouver. Her
father’s body becomes the fulcrum around which the rest of her space turns, a temporally and spatially complex dance where “the hospital staff walked in and out, passing through the periphery like figments of [Miriam’s] imagination” (222).

When Miriam leaves the hospital she revisits her memories of her father’s engagement with Vancouver, while carving her own trajectory through a continually obscured landscape:

A thick fog had settled over the skyline. It wiped the sky clear of mountains and water. I walked along Broadway, past Main Street, where paper cups and newspapers littered the sidewalk. Past the sign that, years ago, my father told me was the tallest free-standing sign in the world. “There it is,” my father said proudly. “Bowmac. Biggest sign in the world.” He also showed me the narrowest building that still stands in Chinatown. My father, the tour guide who took me everywhere. He must have loved this city. Now it was coated with snow. A white-out, everything vanished, as if this were a game, as if I could bring it back from memory. (224)

Unlike the snowfall described in Miriam’s journey to the hospital, here the thick fog that settles over the skyline more specifically obscures the capitalist and naturalist elements of the city, even to the extent of “wip[ing] the sky clear of mountains and water.” This creates a wholly non-spectacular city, where the aerially oriented spectacle of Vancouver as so commonly elaborated by writers and proponents of the city is reduced to streetscape, and specifically the neon signage of the mid-twentieth century and the narrowest building in Chinatown. This complicates the move that Mari Fujita and Oliver Neumann discuss in their essay on the 29-meter-high Bowmac sign, when they argue that the sign is the last remnant of “a dynamic urban environment with street-walls of animated neon signs” which “has been replaced by clear and clean views to a static background.” Fujita and Neumann argue that “this shift in the object of the gaze radically alters our conception of the territory of the city itself…. street life [has] given way to long-shot postcards capturing composed images that promote a sensible balance of nature and city.”
Fujita and Neumann point out that both the 50s and contemporary times celebrate the “visual wonder” of Vancouver by defining it “through a consumptive gaze.” However, it is evident that what has changed is the perspective or physical level from which Vancouver is seen and experienced. Fujita and Neumann point out that in contrast to the streetscapes of Vancouver in the first half of the twentieth century, urban planning guidelines like the City of Vancouver’s View Protection Guidelines in 1989, and the Vancouver Skyline Study (started in 1996) have promulgated the exact cartographic gaze of Vancouver that this study has noted in the writing of Delaney, Berelowitz and Coupland. Fujita and Neumann observe that this perspective of Vancouver seems inevitable given the kinds of constructions that are increasingly privileged:

A visit to any new condominium’s display center illustrates that view is also capital: new developments are described in terms of their uniqueness within the city’s skyline, and are valued according to the quality of their views out to the mountains and ocean. (Fujita and Neumann)

This “view” of Vancouver as tied to long-shot postcards and condominiums (which will also be further directly problematized in Sachiko Murakami’s poems), is completely obliterated by the fog in Thien’s text. This is not replaced by the nostalgic commercialism of the Bowmac sign, since it is tied directly to an intimate familial memory. The Bowmac sign here functions as a wayfinding landmark, its capitalist potential temporarily defused. Even with the snow-covered city, with “everything vanished,” Miriam is still able to negotiate her way through its streets as if “this were a game, as if [she] could bring it back from memory.” The contemporaneity of the past in Miriam’s spatial practice is emphasized, acting as the only guide to the urban space that has been rendered unrecognizable by snow and fog. She needs no maps because of her intense familiarity with the city that comes from her repeated journeys through its “tunnels and arteries” (226) - a description that emphasizes the corporeality of wayfinding. In this penultimate scene in the text, the urban spaces of Vancouver are replete with multiple memories and recollections, the ways that Miriam and her parents have come “to know the city well” (226). By fully inhabiting these spaces, Thien’s immigrant narrative produces a textual Vancouver that is inextricably bound up with the
complex relationships between narratives past and present, real and imagined, intimate and estranged.

As Thien’s short story tells it, wayfinding through Vancouver means being constantly prepared for change and disorientation. To be, as Massey posits, able to “feel the disruptions of space, the coming upon difference” (111). Indeed the story’s finale prevents us from coming to any one fixed understanding of Vancouver’s spaces, even as Miriam repeatedly asserts that she knows the city so well. This occurs when she makes another visit to her childhood neighbourhood,

Last Sunday, I drove out to Hastings Street and the neighbourhood where I grew up. I looked for the old store, but the glass storefronts had changed too much. I had thought that what was so vivid in my imagination would call out to me in real life, as if in verification. Will, in the passenger seat, said perhaps the building had been torn down long ago. To make way for something else, a different building, a new development. He was right, I knew, but still I thought I should recognize the place. (227)

Here, the text makes it clear that neither past nor present space are unyieldingly static. Neither can be adhered to rigidly, but instead must be dealt with simultaneously. Thus, Miriam’s memories might be “vivid in [her] imagination,” but living in the city means constantly having to readjust oneself to its spatial alterations, “something else, a different building, a new development.” Thien’s text ends then, not with closure or a cessation of movement, but with the potentialities and possibilities of continued trajectories through the city.

Walking on Hastings Street, near her father’s old storefront, Miriam sees a “little boy in a blue raincoat” running and notes that,

we could not see where he was headed, only that his arms were stretched out to both sides, like an airplane. I thought that someone would eventually catch him, his feet swinging off the ground, and lift him high. They would give him an aerial view of this street, these stores, all the people crowding along. …The little boy
disappeared ahead of us into the crowd. I knew, then, that I would not find it. But still I walked in the direction he had gone, at home in this place, though every landmark had disappeared.” (227)

Miriam’s journey through Vancouver continues without the limit of a destination. This is, ultimately, a hopeful ending which finally makes a tentative break from the past and turns towards the potentialities of future spaces in the city. The little boy is not given a cartographic “aerial view of this street, these stores, all the people crowding along”--- instead, he continues his way at street level, and finally disappears from sight. He is perhaps, a kind of future version of Miriam’s childhood past, one that she knows that she cannot “find” or “wayfind” again. The story ends optimistically, wayfinding ever anew, “though every landmark had disappeared.”
Chapter 2 “Rune” and “Routes”: Confabulating Vancouver

If “A Map of the City” ends with the acknowledgement that personal and ordinary landmarks have disappeared in Vancouver because of urban redevelopment, then this disorienting experience is experienced manifold for the city’s black community. Vancouver saw the demolition of its first and last black neighbourhood in its East End, “Hogan’s Alley,” in 1970 by the City Council’s decision to build the Georgia viaduct, part of a planned freeway. The Hogan’s Alley Memorial Project is an organization focused on preserving the public memory of Vancouver’s original black neighbourhood and the poet and cultural theorist Wayde Compton’s founding role in the organization reflects his commitment to Vancouver’s lived spaces and his literary work on Hogan’s Alley produces this absent urban space historically, poetically, and critically. Compton’s larger body of work performs a recuperative reading of the contexts of immigration and multiculturalism in British Columbia, and in this chapter, I want to

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14Compton’s website provides a succinct description of the neighbourhood:
“Hogan’s Alley” was the local, unofficial name for Park Lane, an alley that ran through the southwestern corner of Strathcona (a district in Vancouver’s East End) during the first six decades of the twentieth century. While Hogan’s Alley and the surrounding area was an ethnically diverse neighbourhood during this era, home to many Italian, Chinese and Japanese Canadians, a number of black families, black businesses, and the city’s only black church — the African Methodist Episcopal Fountain Chapel — were located there. As such, Hogan’s Alley was the first and last neighbourhood in Vancouver with a substantial concentrated black population. Most of Hogan’s Alley was destroyed circa 1970 by the City Council’s construction of the Georgia Viaduct, the first phase of a planned interurban freeway originally intended to wipe out all of Hogan’s Alley and to cut nearby Chinatown in half. The freeway was stopped by Strathcona community activists, but not before Hogan’s Alley was effectively obliterated. Today, the block or so that is left of the alley itself bears no mark that there was ever a black presence there, having become part of greater Chinatown. (waydecompton.com/hamp)

15Wayde Compton was born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1972. He is the author of two books of poetry: 49 Parallel Psalm (1999) and Performance Bond (2004), and the editor of the first comprehensive anthology of African-Canadian writers from British Columbia, entitled Blueprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature (2001). Most recently, his book of critical essays, After Canaan: Essays on Race, Writing, and Region (2010) was shortlisted for the City of Vancouver Book Award, reflecting Compton’s growing stature as a critic, poet and commentator on black Canadian politics and writing.
focus in particular on his writing on Hogan’s Alley as a “retro-speculative,” confabulated space.\textsuperscript{16} Specifically, I will examine the poetic sequence “Rune” from the poetry collection \textit{Performance Bond} (2004), and consider its more theoretical counterpart “Seven Routes to Hogan’s Alley and Vancouver’s Black Community” from Compton’s theoretical writings in \textit{After Canaan} (2010).

As an introduction to Compton’s work, it is useful to consider the larger context of the debate surrounding the nature, origins and future of actually existing blackness in Canada.\textsuperscript{17} Compton’s work challenges received ideas of multiculturalism, and explores the tensions and contradictions inherent in both national and transnational theorizations of black Canadian culture. In doing so, he contributes to a longstanding conversation among black Canadian critics such as André Alexis, Rinaldo Walcott, and George Elliott Clarke who have intensely debated the nature, origins and future of blackness in Canada. Compton does not align himself completely with any one particular school of thought – choosing neither Clarke’s historical localism nor Walcott’s own “diaspora sensibilities” (22). Instead, he sees himself as both crucially rooted in the textured urban spaces of Vancouver and aware of the city’s position on the West Coast of Canada with its expansive Pacific histories and ties. His work in historical confabulation and recuperation also recalls David Chariandy’s point on second-generation black writing in Canada, “that we have moved into a moment in which belonging has been revealed as a fiction” (828). Chariandy acknowledges the “very real feelings of disaffection and unbelonging” (827) that Afro-diasporic subjects may harbour but remains hopeful that second-generation black writers still “[approach] everyday life in inspiringly creative and sensitive ways” (827). In Compton’s case, this means the construction and confabulation of a black urban history in Canada that is cognizant of its literariness and its interdiscursivity.

\textsuperscript{16}See Leow, Joanne. “Mis-mappings and Mis-duplications: Interdiscursivity and the Poetry of Wayde Compton.” Canadian Literature 214 (Autumn 2012). Parts of this chapter have been adapted from material in this article, with permissions the reproduce these sections from the editor.

\textsuperscript{17}See André Alexis, Rinaldo Walcott and George Elliott Clarke.
With his work in *Performance Bond*, Compton is literally creating and enacting a “bond” – a word that has both affective and legal implications – in the performance of his craft. “[A]n assertive Afroperipheralism” (*Canaan* 15) permeates Compton’s work, which counters “the redemptive drive of Afrocentrism, which iterates everything but a narrow set of perceived traditions as inauthentic and culturally ersatz” (*Canaan* 15).

Peter Hudson argues that Compton’s “Afroperipheralism” and his “sense of isolation and alienation” (Hudson 2007 156) in British Columbia means that his work can fight “any sense of blackness as a known shape, an *a priori* entity, whose main goal is to police its own limits and the terms of its membership” (156). Compton’s efforts at collage and bricolage are techniques that he also sees in Barack Obama’s memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995), of “growing up and piecing together […] black identity from a mix of popular culture representations, books and fleeting encounters with other blacks” (*Canaan* 14). In the context of these multiple discourses, Compton also brings to bear a sense of geographic specificity of the “complicated terrain” (*Canaan* 17) of British Columbia, where he sees “being an afterthought minority has left open a modicum of space for self-definition – if, that is, one can take it as an exhilarating opportunity rather than a deficiency” (*Canaan* 17). Being “of colour” in British Columbia is to be simultaneously excluded from historical discourses within the province and left out of global discourses of black history and culture.

All this perhaps, explains Compton’s obsession with Hogan’s Alley as a lost space that simultaneously allows for the potentialities of a more open sense of racial identity and history, and an actual situating of this fluid identity in a specific space. As Karina Vernon puts it in her review of *After Canaan*,

> the essays in this collection reveal that to be black in BC is to occupy a space of irony; we live somewhere between here and history; between absence and the archive. Living in the Afroperiphery, it is no wonder that Hogan’s Alley and its vanished spaces speak to us so seductively. (Vernon)

That seduction, in part, comes from the indeterminacy of a lost urban space. In the poetic cycle “Rune” and the essay “Seven Routes to Hogan’s Alley,” Compton inhabits this lost
space through wayfinding, confabulation, and what he calls “retro-speculation”. Official histories may never be able to find what has been lost and excluded in the archive, but Compton’s work has a free hand to imagine it—destabilizing the ontological boundaries between history and fiction. His work shows us the limitations of official histories and memorials, as he imagines new ways of approaching the complex, multicultural and diasporic spatio-temporalities of Vancouver.

In “Rune,” the accounts of Hogan’s Alley as a space play with the boundaries of fiction, history and memory. As in much of his other work, Compton draws from a variety of genres, histories and cultural references—however, “Rune” centres these discourses in the vanished spaces of Hogan’s Alley. The poetic cycle presents an idiosyncratic production of space, refusing a single cartographic gaze, and welcoming myriad details of human lives, past and present. In these ways, Compton’s work provides other ways of reconsidering the urban spaces of Vancouver beyond cartography and even the palimpsestic map. By paying attention to detail, the importance of organic landmarks, and drawing on the multiple voices and sources from actual and imagined histories, Compton restores the possibilities of a lost urban space while gently satirizing an all-consuming obsession with the archive and collective memory. His is a political wayfinding, confabulation and counter-cartography, reminding us of the instability of all memories, but also of their potential for play, art and sociality. Compton’s “Seven Routes to Hogan’s Alley,” published six years later, offers seven different readings of the same space, entitled “A History,” “A Home,” “A Poem,” “A Plot,” “A Tract,” “A Collapse,” and “A Coda.” These titles again suggesting the oscillation between the material and immaterial aspects of the space. These sections are respectively: a formal history, autobiographical musings, a critical look at his own poem “Rune,” a political and artistic memorial, a speculation of possible alternate histories, an examination of Vancouver’s linkages to globalization and its effects on urban planning, and a damning “pointillist” timeline view of racist headlines about the black population in Vancouver. These “routes” or trajectories oscillate between larger temporal and spatial perspectives, the official and the unofficial act of remembering, intimate and familial connections with the city, and confabulation and speculation about its alternate pasts and futures. The
multiplicity of genres used to convey a single space, suggest that there are indeed many routes and trajectories to and through a single Vancouver neighbourhood.

Like Massey, Compton is invested in chance and happenstance both artistically and critically. In his work, this figures as the “character/god/theory called Legba” (Wilkinson 138), which he sees as another “literary method, a heuristic process” (138) that privileges the tropes of “indeterminacy, [...] crossroads, and chance” (Wilkinson 138). In her book *Legba’s Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*, Heather Russell sees the tropes of African Atlantic modernity such as “gateway” or “crossing” as epistemologically and conceptually tied to Legba, “god of the crossroads – residing literally at the gateway, the interstices of truth, meaning, and interpretation” (9). She argues that Legba’s power “is derived from his strategic duality – his mastery of discourse and attendant recognition of its gross limitations” (9). Russell makes a case for a “Legba Principle” as a “metonym for African Atlantic narratives whose episteme is engaged in freeing praxis at both the level of form and of theme – in other words, texts whose narratologies interrupt, disrupt, erupt Euro-American literary convention for sociopolitical, ideological purposes” (12). Compton’s poetry is making the same theoretical moves by working with its diverse intertexts, its reappropriation of the Afro-diasporic genre of hip hop, and its focus on the indeterminacy of Legba’s crossroads. The sheer density of his tactical intertextuality and referentiality in *Performance Bond* speaks to the multiple openings and pathways that his poetry provides. In works like “Rune,” Compton’s destabilization of historical truths are an example of how Compton sees his work as a celebration of repetition, knowing that you will mis-duplicate - and that the mis-duplications are the closest achievable thing to an actual you. [...] The remix is a way of - in one moment and one performance - re-enacting the manipulation of history and source culture. (*Turntablism*)

These misduplications are counter-cartographies, mistakes on the map that reveal their limitations. They are also confabulations that allow for Compton’s ideas of retro-speculation to achieve their full potential, much like Thien’s “mis-rememberings” and as
I will argue later in the next chapter, Murakami’s “renovations.” The intricacy of Compton’s work reflects the complexities of a site such as British Columbia, where one is at “an integrated outpost, / a province of edges, / a contact zone” (*Performance Bond* 48).

Most significantly, Compton is not content to simply document the multiple layers and ways of approaching British Columbia’s history; in writing about a space of such diversity, he is conscious of the fact that “the visuals / won’t stay still” (*Performance Bond* 48), and that the intertexts in his work are constantly in flux challenging perceptions of fixed identities and heritages. Winfried Siemerling has argued that Compton’s work in “transcultural improvisation,” hip hop, “lit hop” and turntablism means that he can “combine transcultural and migrant resources in a rooted, historical and social aesthetics that forces […] a rethinking of narratives of Canadian culture” (31). While building on Siemerling’s work, my own analysis will also look at how the particular cultural, theoretical and geographical contexts that Compton employs have also played a crucial role in shaping his poetic oeuvre. His invention and re-interpretation of various historical voices, visuals and records of Black Vancouver point to the complexities, slippages and referentiality inherent in how Vancouver’s past and present spaces are mapped and mis-mapped.

“Rune” comes in the last section of *Performance Bond*, as Compton goes a step further from his active improvisation and mis-duplication of culture and history in the earlier sections of the collection. “Rune,” itself a pun perhaps on the word “ruin,” but also referring to a mysterious or magical sign, suggests a poetic excavation of sorts. This is certainly what we get with Compton’s literary and visual memorial to Hogan’s Alley, which consists of both historical and “factitious elements” (10). As I noted in the introduction to my study, while the text makes the artificiality and fictionality of these elements (a newspaper article, four landmarks, and two transcribed interviews) clear in the introduction to the book, the way they are presented without preamble or other immediately mitigating factors, and their verisimilitude gives them an aura of

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18See Leow for an analysis of other poems in *Performance Bond*. 
authenticity. Compton’s astute confabulation of various historical voices, visuals and records of Black Vancouver fleshes out the gaps and silences in its history. My analysis of his work in this chapter will attempt to give a sense of the intensely varied and referential style of Compton’s writing. The extent of the intertextuality of his work is challenging but also a necessary formal reflection of the complexity of Vancouver’s diverse spatial histories.

“Rune” is at its heart a remixing and mis-duplicating of oral histories in the work of Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter’s oral histories in Opening Doors in Vancouver’s East End: Strathcona, and Andrea Fatona and Cornelia Wyngartten’s moving documentary on Hogan’s Alley. The poetic cycle also takes up the challenge of Peter Hudson’s whimsical essay “Natural Histories of Southwestern British Columbia”. Compton performs what he calls a satire on Afrocentrism:

Afrocentrism is often fascistic, so maybe I'm attracted to satire as a method of de-railing those tendencies. You certainly can't assail Afrocentrism with rational argument, because it usually rejects rationalism, in an essentialist or religious way. (The Tyee 2005)

Compton’s quotation here suggests a certain cynicism and ironic playfulness in an essay for West Coast Line (2005), but in his discussion of “Rune” in After Canaan, he also reveals an emotional attachment to Hogan’s Alley. Indeed, the crossroads constructed by Compton’s work are not only satirical but reveal a set of more affective productions of space. These emotions seem to drive much of Compton’s work, and here produce the creative unpredictability and possibilities inherent in his mis-duplications.

The sequence begins with a poem ostensibly about loss, entitled “Blight.” The title refers to the loaded term used for neighbourhoods like Hogan’s Alley gesturing to disease and contagion-laden imagery to justify their eventual demolition. The poem immediately points out the abstraction of the space that this term implies.

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19 In this essay, Hudson satirizes the lack of diversity and minority representation in official accounts of Vancouver’s history. See Hudson (1997/98)
When _______take _____ pictures of ________, there are no people there; the decay will speak for itself. Nothing in the city is older than space. Nothing closer than time. Muted. Eight balled, lo, crisscrossed and fameless, half-named, enghosted: False Creek to _____? (113)

“Blight” formally highlights the gaps already present in an official accounting of Hogan’s Alley, and the rest of “Rune” attempts to fill in these blanks in the absence of actual facts and landmarks, to move beyond the abstraction of the official map. In “Blight” however, a poetic take on the official view of Hogan’s Alley, not only is this neighbourhood emptied of people, it is also devoid of specifics — something that is made even clearer by the poem’s use of blanks. Names, places, and landmarks are erased since they do not matter to city officials intent on seeing “the decay” that “will speak for itself.” In some ways, the lack of particulars also suggests that this occlusion of low income neighbourhoods is a tragedy that is repeated in many other places. The people who did live in Hogan’s Alley, the poem argues, have been “muted,” erased or “crisscrossed” since they are “fameless, half-named, / enghosted,” the latter term, a particularly apt verbification. The inhabitants have had a ghost-like status imposed on them, a recurring trope in the cycle. The poem’s reference to “pictures” here is arguably the exact same vein of colonial cartography and capitalist interest in space.
In “Seven Routes to Hogan’s Alley,” Compton quotes a former resident of Hogan’s Alley Dorothy Nealy who equates the high-handed urban planning with colonialism:

But the people from outside came in, and told us we shouldn’t have these houses, we should live in housing projects, we should live in high-rises. But what was wrong with living here? They didn’t live here, I don’t know what they were so worried about. […] But somebody comes over from Dunbar district, looking down their nose at this end of town. It’s just like the Christians going to Africa, trying to convert you to Christianity when you already have your own tribal laws and religions and everything else. And that was their attitude when they came down here. (Nealy, qtd. in After Canaan 127)

Indeed, “Blight” shows how these representations of Hogan’s Alley shut down the possibilities of urban space “when City Hall / puts ____ under study” and reduces living communities to anonymous slums. The echoes of colonialism that Nealy so rightly points out are impossible to avoid, and Compton’s recuperation of the lost spaces of Hogan’s Alley feels like a form of belated decolonization.

The ephemerality of these attempts to fill in the blanks is emphasized in the subsequent poetic dialogue “Vèvè” — when the technologies of Digital and Analogue are presented as two characters in dialogue. They discuss how Voodoo as represented by the symbology of vèvè is both a “portal between worlds” (118) and how this is “the beginning of writing, or the urge to make a new kind of language, one unique to the New World” (119). The proto-language that the text imagines here is a part of a Voodoo ritual where a handful of granulated material is used to draw an image on the ground (See Figure 4). Analogue uses a bag of trail mix (reiterating the imagery of journeys and routes) to write Legba’s symbol on the sidewalk of “at the corner of Main and Union, beside the Georgia Viaduct, in sigh of BC Place on the western horizon” (116), exactly where Hogan’s Alley used to be. This inscription is reproduced in the text, and then quickly disappears as pigeons eat all of the trail mix.
Here, the text refuses the illusory permanence of an official history or even a material archive since as Analogue points out the text is “intimate with the limits of permanent etching” (121), and complicit in the teleology of the written word, “ink, scoring, chiselling into stone….the Ten Commandments and the Code of Hammurabi” (120). Analogue chooses instead the unpredictability and ephemerality of an almost language, like the vèvè, inscribed onto the city itself. What the text seems to privilege here is a mode of communicating “that can drift away in the wind or be eaten by birds” since it “would be able to say things we can’t think of” (121). “Vèvè” is careful not to close down the possibilities of what this mode might be, just that it is “something further out there. A leap” (122). But it is clear that it is a mode of communication that is inextricable from the space of the city, and from spatial practice, while resisting the impulse of a fixed cartography and abstract space. The transience of vèvè does not lend itself to being pinned down, demarcated and recorded.
The poetic cycle continues with a forged historical newspaper article “Whither Hogan’s Alley” (115) that has been reproduced in the text as if it were a reproduced facsimile of the actual text. The tone of the piece sets us up for the discovery of further “artefacts.” As I discussed in the introduction to my study however, it is Compton’s stagings of the “Lost-Found Landmarks of Black Vancouver” that are particularly interesting. These are a series of carefully composed tableaux of old shop and house-fronts in Vancouver disguised with fictitious signs like “Strathcona Coloured People’s Benevolent Society of Vancouver,” “False Creek Moslem Temple,” “The Far Cry Weekly: Voice of the Negro Northwest (Since 1957)” and “Pacific Negro Working Men’s Association.” Compton’s choice of names for these sites speaks to the lack of black voices and organizations, or at least a lack of a memory of them in the city. The poet creatively misduplicates history and memory in the absence of any other official or available archive (See Figures 5-7).
Figure 5 Staged photograph of Strathcona Coloured People's Benevolent Society of Vancouver (Performance Bond 123-24), reproduced with the author's permission
Figure 6 Staged photograph of False Creek Moslem Temple (Performance Bond 125-26), reproduced with the author's permission
As an intervention, the “poetic device” (114) of these photographs (as Compton later refers to them in *After Canaan*) makes a fleeting appearance in the actual streetscape of Vancouver, materializing the imaginary, even if momentarily. Compton’s performative act here conflates, however briefly, spatial practice and conceived space in the Lefebvrian sense. While ephemeral, these interventions are then made permanent through art and their memorialization in the black and white photographs included in “Rune,” as Compton shows us just how possible his imaginings of a past might have been. In a
discussion of this particular staging in “Seven Routes to Hogan’s Alley,” Compton discusses his goal of exploring “the twin senses of displacement and self-enculturation that worry blacks in western Canada” (116) and hopes that readers will experience the sensation of acquiring the knowledge of a particular history and then will subsequently feel that history disappear from them with the realization that it is fiction—a process of reading that imitates the conditions of the history itself, the sense of incredulity that our city seems to associate with its improbable black populace. (117)

Again here, it is apparent that Compton’s response to an absent or abstracted space is that of confabulation — a counter-cartography that questions the validity and comprehensiveness of official histories and maps, and blurs the line between reality and fiction.

These speculations are further fleshed out by the oral histories that Compton invents in the style of actual oral histories like those taken by Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter’s in Opening Doors in Vancouver’s East End : Strathcona. While more “literary” in nature, the oral histories of “Madoo Abdul Wahid” and “Geraldine Diamond” provide a spatial understanding of black Vancouver that is both cognizant of its transnational context of larger waves of black migration across the North American continent and other migrants from across the Pacific, and also, of the particular local context of the black community in Vancouver. Wahid’s history for instance, begins with a story of migration that situates him both historically (in the year 1936 when the black athlete Jesse Owens competed in the German Olympics) and geographically (part of a larger wave of black migration from the United States) as connected to a larger black diaspora. Wahid traces his trajectory from St Paul, Minnesota to the railroad in Winnipeg and then finally to British Columbia where he already had a cousin in Vancouver. He crucially imagines a British Columbia free of racism and segregation where he would “be cutting down trees with a white man as my partner — you know, like you see two guys with a big saw on either side of a tree trunk sawing away. That was my idea of BC. That was how I was dreaming and reasoning” (133). This initial expectation of Wahid’s satirizes
black/white racial binaries and an idyllic mode of rurality. What the rest of his oral history reveals, however, is the transnational, multicultural and urban setting that is Vancouver. Wahid’s cousins are “Marcus Garvey people,” --- connecting the black community in Vancouver to part of the black diaspora that hopes for an eventual return to Africa. Wahid rejects this “admirable and crazy” (134) endeavour, and instead turns to Islam, since “it made more sense to [him] than going back to Africa — these people wanted their piece of the pie right here” (135).

Wahid’s initial turn to the Nation of Islam allows him to connect with a larger transnational network, while contextualizing it for the black community in Vancouver. Wahid details these encounters with his characteristic dry wit:

I guess it was around that time that I started telling all the black people I knew about the Message. I would tell them that the white man is the devil, and they’d joke back that if that’s true Canada must surely be hell, and I wouldn’t let them laugh at that too long, I’d cut in and say, “You got it, brother. Exactly! This is hell.” I got a lot of crazy looks, but I got a fair share of them who would kind of stare away in the distance for a while and then say, sort of quietly, “Maybe.” (135)

Here Compton imagines the influence of transnational discourses on the local black community in Vancouver, but also points out the ways in which its understanding of the impact of racism is particularly apt in the Canadian context. The counter-cartographic space created in Wahid’s oral history marries unmappable, transnational influences and a deeply rooted sense of an unjust spatiality - one that results in the eventual disappearance of Hogan’s Alley. Wahid’s story is also about the founding of a particular lost-found landmark — photographed in the previous section as the False Creek Moslem Temple. Here, the text further envisions the temple as a place of cosmopolitan exchanges between Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern and other culturally diverse communities. Compton, through the character of Wahid, reveals the instability of the word “black,” and the insufficiency and problematic exclusionary nature of Pan-Africanism and the American-based Nation of Islam in Vancouver’s context. At the conclusion of his oral history,
Wahid has transitioned to the main mosque in the city, “to be part of the bigger community” (137), showing how Hogan’s Alley must also be viewed as connected to larger movements in Vancouver, movements of mixity where Wahid’s wife “is a Hui — that’s a Chinese Muslim—and [his] kids are half” (137).

Compton’s other fictitious oral history is told by Geraldine Diamond, Wahid’s cousin who begins as a Garveyite and never loses her acute awareness of the transnational and (post)colonial contexts of the black diaspora:

we were paying attention to what was happening in Africa, the decolonization process: Kwame Nkrumah, the Mau Mau, the ANC. We wanted to find a way of tying in what was happening here, in our own environment, this part of the Commonwealth, with what was happening in other parts of the world. That was how the idea for The Far Cry Weekly came about. (141)

In the vein of Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities, Diamond and her husband begin a newspaper to provide a voice for the black community in British Columbia. Again, this institution is given a faux memorial in Compton’s staging of the offices of “The Far Cry Weekly: Voice of the Negro Northwest (Since 1957), 618 Main Street” (128). As in Wahid’s account, there is a keen awareness of the transnationality of Vancouver’s spaces as they are part of the Commonwealth, the decolonization process, and an international Communist movement. The newspaper office, like the False Creek Moslem Temple, is given an actual address in Vancouver —-blurring its status as an elusive and imaginary landmark. Further, like Wahid’s life, Diamond’s also reflects the arbitrariness of racial and cultural categories in heterogeneous Vancouver: she ends up the stepmother of two Jewish girls from her second marriage. The final thoughts of her oral history speak again to the fluidity and possibility of the lives in these lost spaces,

I never balked at the idea of the whole world changing. In fact, have you ever held a piece of mercury in your hand? That’s the whole world right there. Slippery like that. You will never altogether have it, but there it is, in your hands, the whole world. You can try to hold it or you can wonder at its motion. I’d like to think I’ve always chosen wondering over holding. (143)
Through Diamond, Compton is able to respond to the absences in Hogan’s Alley’s history through an invocation of what Massey would see as “the instability and potential of the spatial” (116) and in this case, the instability and potential of a lost space. This space is “slippery” like “a piece of mercury,” unmapped and unmappable because it is always in “motion” and thus, has to be comprehended in an ongoing basis, in an act of wayfinding. Hogan’s Alley is a space that can only ever be mis-mapped and confabulated, a space that “you will never altogether have” and it is clear that Compton has chosen “wondering over holding.”

In the second half of “Rune,” the text reiterates a commitment to the currently existing physical landscape of what used to be Hogan’s Alley. Taking Diamond’s reference to the “forme and chase” of the old printing press that The Far Cry was printed on, the subsequent poem “Forme and Chase” makes a free-associative leap between the ordered structure of the newspaper printing press with its conflation of text and community to a concrete poem mimicking the form of the Georgia Street Viaduct (See Figure 8).
The viaduct is the most obvious physical symbol that marks where Hogan’s Alley used to be, the only constructed portion of a failed plan to construct a series of freeways into Vancouver. In many ways, the viaduct is the scar tissue arising from the process of urban redevelopment of the area. Compton’s choice to focus on its form grounds both the poem “Forme and Chase” and its mirror image photograph “Vividuct” (on the facing page) in the specificities of a single location in Vancouver. Compton’s framing of the photograph makes the viaduct look like a grey concrete wall dominating the landscape, cutting out the sky and blocking access to the houses in the background from a

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20 Artists’ and writers’ obsessions with urban structures that are built post-demolition recur in other texts that my study examines; see Alfian Sa’at poem “The Portrait of a Sentenced Library.” Ironically, the Georgia Viaduct now appears to be itself slated for destruction (see Mickleburgh), raising social and ethical questions about the necessity of demolishing a stable structure at great expense. Critics have argued that at this point, eliminating the viaduct would only serve to line the pockets of property developers like Concord (see “Past Tense”) since they would be able to build and sell high density housing on the land. Obviously, the struggle between the competing priorities of public commons, community space and capitalist spatial impulses continues.
pedestrian’s perspective. The photograph also suggests the bulwarks of grounded ships, or two legs parting. Titling the photograph “Vividuct” recalls the dialogue between Analogue and Digital: is the viaduct a distorted vèvè? Has it vivisected the community? Or is it giving birth, viviparously to a new way of looking at the city? The works leave these questions unanswered, but what is clear is how the text of the poem “Forme and Chase” (using a different, more old-fashioned typewriter style font from the rest of the book) is meant to mirror the structures of the viaduct as photographed on the facing page.

In the poem, the Pearl printing press is personified and declares that “A spectre is haunting this font” (144). Indeed, there are certain equivalences with how the viaduct is itself also haunted by the cosmopolitan, multicultural ghosts of Hogan’s Alley. As the poem puts it, inter-cultural contact in Vancouver’s urban space occurs through migration, marriage or efforts to blend in — “where accents / go when you migrate, marry, or while them / away” (144), “The fading tones of improbable connexions, fricative, / glottal, remedial, settle here” (144). Text, urban structure and the body are conflated in this concrete poem. These are embodied “connexions,” reminders that language cannot happen without the body, even if it just an “ectoplasmic ear” (144) and a printing press called Pearl “that was my tongue” (144). The poem acknowledges the complicated history of the printing press as envisioned by Diamond’s oral history (as it moved from printing a newspaper for a tiny Liechtensteinian community, to Garveyites and then Trotskyists), and also acknowledges “the Chinese next door / shuffling mah jong” (144) as the press “mimic[s] with lead / ABCs” (144). The impossibly polyphonic, multi-layered histories of Hogan’s Alley inhabitants are focalized here as they reclaim the anonymous, concrete viaducts that dominate the current space. Again, the poem’s density and polysemous nature are forms of wayfinding, ways of being attentive to the viaduct — a space that would be deemed inconsequential in a mapped view of Vancouver.

Compton continues to explore alternate histories in the neighbourhood in the other poems in “Rune.” The poems “Wild Style” and “Ghetto Fabulous Ozymandias” however, take a more present-oriented stance, focusing on what endures in the physical landscape of where Hogan’s Alley used to be. “Wild Style” traces a genealogy from blues musicians to graffiti artists, the latter being the descendants of the former, both by
blood and by artistic practice. Where the blues musicians play exercises on their guitars to make them “sound like that train / (the one that was taking half your cousins northward)” (146) embedding diaspora in their instruments and music, the graffiti artists (Grandkids of the bluesmen)

spray paint on trains, then

on windows of trains and then

walls and walls and walls round cities and cities and cities

making nonblankness, signing, singing, singeing (147)

The unusual lineation and spacing of this part of the poem echoes the unconventional placement of graffiti art on trains and various urban buildings. It also attempts to recreate the disjointed experience of seeing graffiti in the city. With the elongation of the word “Spray,” the poem here focuses on the deliberate nature of the art, and also imbues it with motion as the tags move with the trains that they are painted on. Enclosures like walls and other forms of “blankness” and are filled with text, signs, and indeed, “runes.” The poem sees street art as a way of reclaiming the abstract spaces of the city, literally the “blankness” of lost histories and memories that were a consequence of urban

21 Compton’s view of street art here is very similar to Dionne Brand’s description of street artists in Toronto in her novel What We All Long For. There the novel describes the street artists seeing their work “—writing tags and signatures—as painting radical images against the dying poetics of the anglicized city. The graffiti crew had filled in the details of the city’s outlines. You could see them at night, very late, when the streets seemed wet with darkness, agile and elegant in their movements. The spiritual presences of Tuyen, Oku, and Carla’s generation. Their legs straddling walls and bridge girders and subway caverns, spray-painting their emblems of duality, their dangerous dreams” (135).
redevelopment. This text is “mimicking the effect on the eye of glimpsing text stationary / from the elevated train, electrifyingly passing, script anticipating / the blur in the still: futurist blues atomized” (147) — it already anticipates the movement of the city and yet embeds itself in these spaces, “the blur in the still.” This fluidity is what makes it resistant to a mapped, planned city, “a / new uncanny fluid through the concrete mimicking you” (147) - connecting it to human movement, as the tags themselves become new wayfinding landmarks of Vancouver. The repetition of “cities and cities and cities” suggesting that there are so many possible versions of Vancouver.

These graffiti tags are themselves haunted the way the viaduct is. The final poem of “Rune,” “Ghetto Fabulous Ozymandias” makes this clear as it depicts the “narrator” seeing a homeless ghost who is the spray-painted graffiti tag that reads “Rev Oz,” a ghost that he can only through see through the viewfinder of his camera,

When he lowered the camera, the man was gone.

When he looked through the viewfinder again, the man was there.


Are you?” the narrator said, feeling strange speaking with the camera up to his face, but only this way could he keep the individual from evanescing. (153)

This then, is an apt final act to Compton’s confabulation of Hogan’s Alley: in a metafictional move, the narrator becomes aware that the character only exists within his frame, a ghost that he has conjured up from “Down. Gone. Through. There.” The tag itself is reproduced in the middle of the poem, “the script / ducking and interlacing, / weaving into itself, looping” (156) — movements that suggest wayfinding: unmappable, unmapping (See Figure 9). This tag is representative of the new unseen, unpredictable details of the city, in a poem that has hitherto been obsessed with a retro-speculative past. Indeed it is the text suggests that this unmappable, almost illegible, indeterminate tag is representative of the rich multiplicity and potentiality of the imagined and literary alternatives to an amnesiac, capitalist city.
Figure 9 Spray painted tag/Rev Oz (Performance Bond 154), reproduced with the author's permission

The polysemous nature of this confabulation is emphasized, as the Rev. Oz reveals his multiple names, each connected to a local, diasporic, literary and/or historical thread:

   Reverend Oz,
   Revenant Oz
   Revolutionary Oz,
   Revisitor Oz,
   Revisionist Oz,
   The Reinvented Oz,
   Revanchist Oz (155)

The text in the form of the tag, is embodied or rather ‘enghosted,’ to use Compton’s term, and imbued with a historical radicalism that goes beyond a palimpsestic mode of viewing the city. This “Oz,” an imaginary, fantastical place and person that is tied to religious practices, a return from the dead, revolution, revisioning of history, reinvention
of the self and indeed, a revenge of a distinctively political nature. Thus, this is not a static memory, but one that talks back, revises and reinvents itself, and is “arrogant,” because as Rev. Oz puts it “[i]t is arrogant to disappear” (156). The Rev. Oz makes reference to Shelley’s poem, “Ozymandias,” a critique of the hubris of great rulers and an acknowledgement of the fact that all civilizations fall to decay --- referring to the destruction of Hogan’s Alley but simultaneously refusing to be reduced to just a victim of “an injustice” (156). Instead, Compton’s “-ymandias” (156) imaginatively creates something wholly new from an unstable sense of the old as it moves away from dwelling on the historical injustice, to a space of indeterminacy and empowerment — where reinvention and revolution are possible. Recuperating the enforced absence of histories from Hogan’s Alley, a “neighbourhood … flattened by the City” (156), this text reclaims power from this unseen “City” and makes its own disappearance a conscious choice. Indeed, after the its long retrospective ruminations of what could have been by confabulating the lost history of the black community of Vancouver through forged oral histories and photographs, and other poetic interventions, the final page of “Rune” is entirely blank---inviting the reader perhaps, to write what they will, and suggesting the power behind the ultimate unknowability of a fluid past.

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22 The text also makes reference to The Wiz a 1978 musical film that was a reworking of L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) with an all-African American cast.
Chapter 3 *Rebuild: Renovating Vancouver*

Like Compton and Thien, the Vancouver poet Sachiko Murakami’s work is wholly imbricated in the complex spatial histories of Vancouver. Murakami’s first collection, published by Talon Books, enjoyed much critical success — becoming a finalist for both the Governor General’s Literary Award and the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. *The Invisibility Exhibit* (2008) focuses on the missing women of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, and the impact of their disappearance on the city as a whole. Murakami plays on the idea of “invisibility,” asking what is at stake for the marginalized populations who live in one of the world’s most “successful” cities. The poems in this collection demonstrate a great sensitivity to Vancouver as a series of complex interactions between lived and imagined spaces. The dominant representations of the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood by a sensationalist media are acknowledged, but are repeatedly shot through with the ongoing spatial practice of its actual inhabitants. The poems are further imbued with the phantasmagorical and surreal, as Murakami uses these techniques to portray the unconscionable physical and emotional violence that occurs against marginalized women in Vancouver. *The Invisibility Exhibit* instinctively depicts these oscillations between spatial practice, represented space and representational space as the poems entwine moments from the mass media, everyday interactions and the uncanny in her poetry.

This impulse to produce her work from a wholly specific spatio-temporality is as pronounced in her second collection *Rebuild* (2011) where Murakami turns her attention to Vancouver’s property market and what it means to live in a city where the ideas of home and dwelling are so inextricable from a transnational, capitalist market. The poems are set in the ever-growing glass and steel constructions of Vancouver, and explore the implications of living in a city that has yet to come to terms with the fraught genealogies of its lands and communities. Vancouver as a “space of flows” and “recurrent restructuring” (Barnes et al. 291) informs the constructions and dwellings that are Murakami’s poems. This chapter will examine how the poems in *Rebuild* trouble any
easy understanding of the historical, cultural and material constructions of the Vancouver skyline, while formally echoing the process of physical renovation and development. Many of the poems speak to the possibilities of being simultaneously complicit and subversive in the production of urban space in Vancouver, where as one poem declares “we grow where we’re planted, in land already used, / every plot torn up and renewed” (36). The constructions of urban space in Rebuild show how the personal ways of dwelling in the city are entangled with larger political and transnational spatialities. The re-appropriation of the vocabulary of the property market in the poems produces an uneasy recognition and negotiation of how the most intimate spaces of the city, its homes, families and people are imbricated in capitalist systems. While there is not so much emphasis on the obviously fantastical in this collection, it is because the urban reality portrayed in Rebuild, with its property obsessed population, and seemingly endless construction often appears as something surreal in and of itself. Further, in much of the collection, Murakami’s own half-Japanese heritage, and her awareness of the “colonized” nature of Vancouver intersect with the hyper-modern architectural construction of condominiums, and the unabashedly capitalist property market.

Renovations

Rebuild is divided up into four main sections: “Citybuild,” “Homeowning,” “If the Shoe Fits,” and “Return Home.” Most distinctively, the collection is marked by multiple versions of many poems. These “renovations,” as Murakami terms them, complicate the form of the entire book. They either function as immediate repetitions, or echoes of a poem or are interspersed between other poems. These latter repetitions draw the book repeatedly back to certain themes in a chorus-like fashion. Many of the poems are erasure poems, functioning as reductions or crystallizations of the first poem, condensing and focusing an idea or thought in unexpected ways. Others appear to be fragments of the same theme, scattered through each section. They often strip superfluous spectacle away from their own constructions, usually shrinking in size. The collection’s multiple and idiosyncratic “renovations” of its poems reflect a continual, restless search for an accurate portrayal of both the fractured and fragmented pasts and presents of the city. Formally, they also contribute to an unrelenting unity of voice and
place in the poems. While evoking a sense of being both lost and overdetermined by urban development, however, Murakami’s “renovations” also actively seek to resist wholly capitalist or colonialist mappings of Vancouver. They do so by marrying personal memory and affect with the spatial and material realities of post-colonial Vancouver. These poems hesitate, change their minds and alter their focus in particularly human ways. They hint at a fragmented and ephemeral awareness of the complex, unknown pasts of Vancouver and wrestle with an increasingly postmodern, simulated aspects of its future.

*Rebuild* begins with three poems that are immediately placed next to shorter variations of themselves. These poetic variations suggest multiple wayfindings, dead-ends, erasures, and other unpredictable trajectories through Vancouver. “The Form of the City”, “Boundaries” and “I Am Not in the City” lose words, punctuation, and appear in altered forms as if to suggest calibrations or modulations of spatial reality that cannot be fully portrayed by one version of each poem. These reveal the absences and omissions that are present in the city itself, whether they are represented by empty speculative apartments for investment, or the elision of difficult histories by endless demolition and building.

There are other persistent poem titles in the collection: “Hole” recurs four times and “Tower” recurs three times. These appear to be more fragmented attempts to negotiate the gaps and looming constructions that dominate the city — an attempt to make sense of a Vancouver where landmarks to wayfind by are consistently in flux or repeated across the urban landscape. The “hole” is at once corporeally figured as the “size of a fist / through iris / self dugout” (22) and scaled up to industrially sized real estate “big as a city block / small as a condo stacked / on condo” (22). It is also the subject of in “Hole (Looking In)” a poignant two-line lament “What was here before? / What was here before?” (32). The “Tower” poems are about absence, and meta-poetically, the alienation of endless repetition, where “excess of sameness” (24) is the rule and where the builders “make a decision with a mistake and then repeat until familiar. Repeat until familiar. Repeat until shat or shattered or shine or wet or sunset (always, always East) and you know, from here, West is East.” (24). Here, the line plays
with the centrality of investments from the Pacific Rim to the Vancouver property market, but also just plays with the words in a free associative way that disrupts the endless repetition, the “excess of sameness.”

The most famous series of “renovations” in Rebuild are the four poems entitled “Vancouver Special.” The common title refers to the architectural style of a family dwelling particular to Vancouver, one that exists in almost every neighbourhood in the city. These were built mostly throughout the 1970s, as pragmatic ways of making the full use of the lot space available to them. They were seen as typical immigrant housing because of their legal ground-floor suites, which were used for members of an extended family or tenants who would help service a mortgage. In the poems, the houses also represent more human sized and specific aspects of the Vancouver urban landscape. While they are not the wholly impersonal condos of the other poems, these domestic spaces are still implicated in the vagaries of the property market. The quartet of poems began as a single poem that Murakami ran through Google Translate twice: once into Cantonese, Italian, Portuguese and Serbian, and then the second time to retranslate the words back into English — choosing the home languages of people actually living in Vancouver Specials. The resulting changes are more understated than some of the other repeated poems, what Murakami has deemed “a sameness with subtle differences” (Sinclair). Even though the texts have been mediated by a seemingly impersonal technology, the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic nature of Vancouver as an urban space quietly haunts these poems, as it haunts the seemingly mundane streets that the houses are situated on.

The first variation of the poem asks:

How may I fit my family into the equation?

23Much has been written about the “Vancouver Specials” and Murakami is cognizant of their socio-economic and cultural position in Vancouver. See Keith Higgins http://www.vancouverspecial.com/. Michael Kluckner’s Vanishing Vancouver: The Last 25 Years also has a series of floorplans that make for interesting look at the interior of these houses. Finally, Katharyne Mitchell’s essay on immigrant housing in Vancouver is a particularly succinct resource on the evolution of immigrant housing in the city and the socio-economic controversies that plagued the issue.
How will we make the mortgage?
How much land will be allotted,
And to whom? What can’t I afford?
How may we state the look
Of elsewhere? How can I make myself less
Abstracted? In the house but not of it. (51)

Here, the imbrication of a basic social unit, the family, is incorporated into the economic space of the “equation” and “the mortgage.” The home is set upon an allotment of land - allotments that in fact, as Berelowitz notes, were laid down in colonial times based on the “unsentimental military mindset of the British colonial imperative” (47). Yet, the Vancouver Special and its owners, as the poem suggests, struggle with place-making to “state the look / Of elsewhere” to be “less / Abstracted” to exist “In the house” but not have them defined by its capitalist implications. The repeated interrogations create an unsettled and precarious sense of place, even as the poem is about owning a home in Vancouver. Property ownership and mortgages mean that any concept of space or dwelling is imbricated with capitalist systems.

Murakami has also experimented with the idea of these “renovations” beyond the print version of Rebuild and even beyond her own authorial control. The “Vancouver Special” poems have online, collaborative lives on her website Project Rebuild, a portal which preceded and promoted the publication of Rebuild.
Figure 10 Detail from *Project Rebuild* website. Each house icon links to a poem.

As part of the publicity for *Rebuild*, Murakami invited other poets and members of the public to use the website as a way or a space to “renovate” these four poems - leaving them continuously open to change and difference. In doing so, Murakami is actively advocating a way of thinking of poetry about Vancouver as “a community project in which we are all participants: poems are written in context and in conversation” (*Project Rebuild*). These collaborative efforts counter the abstract, profit-obsessed urban space of the Vancouver property market, and seek instead to recapture the participatory aspects of producing a social urban space, complete with its vulnerability to any kind of alteration or erasure. Writers like Larissa Lai, Meredith Quartermain, Rita Wong and Roger Farr, and other anonymous web users have taken up Murakami’s invitation, engaging with the poems and altering them in personal ways, reflecting on the precarity of a space captured through words. Since both buildings and poems are vulnerable to change and renovations in similar ways, as Murakami puts it, in their poems, poets are “temporary residents in the tenement house” (*Project Rebuild*).

**The Body in the City**

The instability of Murakami’s poems, and her impulse to online collaborative
poetry-making are distinctively counter-cartographical techniques. There is no one view or map of Vancouver in these poems, there are instead multiple and collective attempts to understand what it means to physically and emotionally exist in a transnational, late-capitalist city, where both public and private spaces are overdetermined by speculation and profit. Murakami unsettles the breathless acceptance of the rapid movements of global capital and the uncanny duplication of urban space by repeatedly challenging this abstract space, reminding us constantly of the reality of the human bodies that inhabit it. These bodies restore the materiality and sociality to Vancouver’s actual lived present and its links to complex, myriad troubled pasts. The very first poem in the collection “The Form of a City” (13) immediately conflates an intimate sense of domesticity with a vertiginous meditation on the implications of living in a Vancouver condo:

Here, one can walk out the condo door
dressed in “clothes” known elsewhere as “pyjamas”.

One can carry such debt,
one could have fed a village for a century. (13)

In these first two stanzas, the poem moves rapidly in time and space, from the liminal threshold of a “condo door” where the implied intimacy of “pyjamas” signals the domestic to the space of the property market where “one can carry such debt.” From the beginning of the collection then, building and dwelling are already tied to a mortgage regulated by a capitalist property market. The poem further highlights the grave inequality of the Vancouver market by tying it to differences in monetary value in both the spatial and temporal sense. The price of the condo is compared to a village - evoking a rustic, Third World space, but also situating it in a particular time, “for a century” in a hyperbolic description of a condo’s worth. “Debt” is immediately also tied to the idea of subsistence with the word “fed” tying the money to survival.

The poem continues to enlarge the scale of its existence, based on the flows of capital or “cash”:

Cash, no cash. Village, no village. Or village,
to village, to village, would you call this “metropolis”? 
Or “New World”? Or “Pacific Rim”?
The living, “inhabitants”? “Tenants”? “Citizens”? (13)

The repetition and then alteration of the signifiers in this section of the poem reflects the precarity inherent in an escalating property market. It is a space where one is defined by “cash” or “no cash” - but also a space tied to multiple villages around the world “village / to village, /to village” perhaps tracing the movement of migrants and capital to Vancouver. The city and its people are also defined by a series of modulating terms - “metropolis”, “New World”, or “Pacific Rim”; “inhabitants,” “tenants,” or “citizens.” The proliferation of question marks in rapid succession make these questions ultimately unanswerable. Or perhaps, they suggest the simultaneously existing complexities of the space and its actors. These unstable interrogations reveal what Massey has noted about space, that it is “the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity” (9), that “multiplicity and space” are “co-constitutive” (9). Murakami’s poem ends by implying a certain necessary forgetting that comes with physically and psychologically existing in such a complex space, as it is “forgotten, already, with the first grateful sip. (How finite.)” (13). In effect, the poem quickly telescopes between abstract ways of existing in the city and more immediate, corporeal ones - from considerations of immense historical, economic and geographic contexts, to intimate experiences of living in this fraught space.

*Rebuild* consistently inserts the body as a means of grounding these protean texts, as poetic personas struggle and oftentimes fail to determine their location and position in Vancouver. For instance, in the pair of poems entitled “I Am Not In The City,” the first begins with a constant struggle at pinpointing one’s location:

Walked out the front door again
into myth and plan, pitch and surface, and gazed
beyond the plan, always beyond it. At the bank’s
front doors I lay down and wept. At the shores of False Creek
I lay down my coffee cup. Thus it was not litter (17)
Here, the poem evinces the confusion between perceived, conceived and lived spaces - seeing the city as dominated by the conceived space or the representations of space. The persona struggles to gaze “beyond the plan,” but is always “subjected to myth…. Lost / in a maze of glass” (17). It also seems that representational space, in the form of “myth” and the “plan” have become so intertwined as to be inseparable, occluding any individual spatial practice. The city prevents its inhabitants from being “in the city,” because it is already so determined by the images of itself.

In the second “I Am Not In The City,” which comes immediately after the first, many of these lines are edited and re-arranged, heightening the sense of being lost in this urban maze. Here again though, the idea of the “myth” occluding some actual essential truth continues:

The front door, the front myth and centre
pitch and surface, and centre
at the shore of False Creek I lay
in the centre (18)

The repetition of “centre” here belies the fact that for the persona, there is no such centre - it is instead “the story” that “invented a wish / of centre” (18). The poem points out the disorientation caused by an over-planned or over-mapped city. Indeed, the repetitive “renovations” of these and other poems in the collection attest to the work’s struggle to articulate the “radical contemporaneity” (Massey 8) of the city, a contemporaneity that is (like Compton’s retrospeculative history) constantly in flux. Like in Thien’s and Compton’s work, these poems also struggle to wayfind their way through a city dominated in this case by plans, erasures and surfaces. Development and re-development have left a city that is constantly in flux, and without landmarks with which to centre and wayfind with one’s body, nothing but the “front myth” and “plan” of a spectacularized Vancouver and the “pitch and surface” of its ubiquitous glass buildings.

The body struggles with the intense replications and repetitions in a city produced by transnational capital. In the poem “Dream Development” for instance, the persona “stir[s] from a dream of Vancouver / with a mouthful of crumbling stucco” (42). The
“dream” or “illusion” here is made undeniably real in the poem, as it is incorporated into the dreamer’s body in the evocative gustatory image of the taste of construction materials. The persona struggles to find a foothold in this dizzying space that is transnational in both its gestation and influence:

…Shaken, I call
my realtor, who, I discover, has closed
his last deal and moved to Dubai
where the marina looks remarkably like False Creek.
It’s intentional. Duplication. I turn and turn
and still I’m still in the same place. (42)

The poem acknowledges that Vancouver’s development is implicated in homogenizing global movements of architectural design and property development. Instead, of a social space one that is alive with the “simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey 9), this is a space of intentional abstraction and repetition (as echoed in the poem), where Dubai is indistinguishable from Vancouver, a disorienting and vacant duplication. And further where, in another poem “the occupants [are] / missing from the tower” since they are “Empty suites never inhabited / held safe for future profits” (33) — since property is directly transformed into capital, almost without any intervening barrier.

Thus, “Dream Development” explores what it means to live in the context of a city that has been thoroughly (and repeatedly) transformed by transnational capital. Insomuch as it bears witness to the continued flows of people and capital through the city, Vancouver’s colonial history has interesting parallels with the city’s contemporary role as a model or prototype of unabashedly capitalist urbanism — Vancouverism. Other cultural critics like Glen Lowry and Eugene McCann have also seen this capital arriving as “a series of cultural, economic, and political flows, relations, intersections and territorializations extending across space and time” (189). In their essay, “Asia in the Mix: Hong Kong, Vancouver, Dubai,” they provide an account of the construction of condominiums in False Creek by Hong Kong developers and their subsequent reproduction in Dubai. In doing so, Lowry and McCann pay close attention to delineating the multi-scalar factors at play in the development of Vancouver’s urban form:
It is a node in the mobilization of development and policy knowledge from place to place, and it is a key site in the creation of what Ong identifies as ‘pied-a-terre subjects’ who fly from one urban space to another as part of global exchanges of expertise. This new urbanism might be read as a technique with which local governments negotiate the extra-local forces that comprise neoliberal economic development. Vancouverism involves then, the mobilization of Hong Kong development capital and expertise, and this model of high-end, high-density, high-rise urban living has proven to be a catalyst for urban growth, especially for sites outside the dominant geography of world cities. The urban form is a portable technology capable of being mobilized and adapted to the needs of new and emerging middle classes. (189)

Lowry and McCann’s account is important in revealing the somewhat hidden forces behind Vancouver’s exponential growth and the financial stakes at play (a $30 billion project was created from a land purchase of $320 million). But like Murakami’s poem “Dream Development,” their essay goes one step further by pointing out that this is not where this neoliberal, transnational story ends. There is in fact, a False Creek in Dubai, built by the Dubai-based development corporation Emaar Properties after their chairman Mohamed Ali Alabbar was so impressed by the development that he decided to adopt it wholesale (Lowry and McCann 190).

Inheritance

24Lowry and McCann go on to discuss the work of Roy Miki and other Asian Canadian artists in response to the rapid development of Vancouver. A more comprehensive interpretation of this has also taken place by the media art project Maraya that creates an online platform of thousands of photographs and hours of video footage documenting the similarities between the waterfronts of Vancouver and Dubai. The project’s tagline is “Where here is there,” and from its online portal, it is not entirely clear whether this is a critique of a homogenizing globalization or a celebratory fascination with it - the Maraya Project has opened up a series of thought-provoking conversations about Vancouver’s urban development. In particular, Christos Dikeakos’ public talk on “Forgotten Frontiers” in Vancouver’s development appears to be an officially sponsored counter-argument to the Maraya Project’s own goal of showing the similarities between Vancouver and Dubai. In his talk, Dikeakos argues for the specificity of Vancouver’s history and cautions against a superficial understanding of the space. See Ho, Stacy.
Passing from a singular body to generations of related bodies, the final section of *Rebuild* resists a future-obsessed simulation of Vancouver and also complicates the fixed temporality of any cartography of the city. For instance, “Boundaries” focuses on kinship and human sociality as a way to resist capitalist abstraction of Vancouver. The poem begins by interrogating exactly what it means for Vancouver to be labeled “dream city” (15):

This is dream city, built on shores
still not ceded. This is a city of tourists
with mouths agape, these are my boundaries:
the islands in the Gulf, the sea they might call Salish,
the land taken there, taken again
from another family, that line nearly faltered.
And now a nephew with my father’s grin, the last one.
Between the people and the land, what have I to teach?
To tolerate suburbs? To let the land be covered
with another’s vision, they stretch our line out farther than the commuter trains,
stop where the valley’s silt turns hills, the residents nearly Albertans. (15)

Where Berelowitz never really defines why or how Vancouver is “Dream City” - Murakami’s poem points out that this is first and foremost due to the city’s illegitimate status: its existence on “shores / Still not ceded” (15), the line break in the poem placing a heavy emphasis on the ongoing difficulty of staking claim to the city. The poem continues with its uncertain, tentative tone, not just unsure that the sea “might” be called “Salish” but also blurring the genealogies of repeated territorial dispossessions with the repetition of “taken.” Here again the political is conflated with personal, as what seemed to be larger concerns about land ownership become focalized initially in “another family” and then very obviously, the persona’s own family, “a nephew with my father’s grin.”

These poetic lines are both genealogical lines and fault lines, and as they pile up in the poem and in the rest of the text, it becomes obvious that there is no denial of the complicity involved in living in Vancouver. These “boundaries” are a series of lines that are transnational, regional, trans-historical and familial. The pun on the word “line”
evokes both its meaning as a boundary or border but also its signification as a genealogy or continuation.

The complex co-existence of so many lines renders Vancouver unmappable in the conventional sense: the poem rhetorically asks where Vancouver begins and ends, knowing that there is no one clear answer, or perhaps no answer at all. It concludes ambivalently, asserting that in Vancouver “The time is now, and now, and now; built so fast with minds / less changed, from Expo to Olympics, / a lifetime. More than his. Most of mine” (15). Here temporality collapses with the repetition of “now, and now, and now; / built so fast” as the poem both critiques the city’s obsession with the present constructions at the expense of remembering its fraught past, particularly the intense urban development from the World Expo in 1986 to the Olympics in 2010. Yet here again, the poem draws us back to the idea of inheritance through its invocation of human mortality: this development continues past the death of the persona’s father and has in fact been going on for most of her own life (Murakami was born in 1980). This abrupt reduction of urban development to the scale of a human life is particularly poignant, its shortening sentences halting the progress of unbridled development on the formal level as well.

Drawing on these ideas of inheritance, the final section of the text, “Return Home,” Murakami’s collection takes on a distinctively personal and autobiographical tenor. Here, the stakes of living and owning a space in Vancouver are raised to the highest possible degree. Murakami states in the acknowledgements to Rebuild that the book is dedicated to “the memory of my father, Yorihide Bruce Murakami, who passed away during its completion, and so changed its shape, and mine” (95). Indeed, the final section of Rebuild re-examines many of the collection’s themes through a mourning process for the poet’s dead father. From the publisher’s note on Rebuild, it is clear that the poems in this final section are about “the legacy left by Murakami’s father, who carried to his death the burden of the displaced and disinheritied: the house seized by the

25 This autobiographical reading of the line is substantiated by the book’s dedication and further by my analysis of the last section of the text, “Return Home.”
government during WWII, having previously seized the land from its native inhabitants—a “mortgage” from which his family has never truly recovered” (Talon Books). The poem “Mortgage” picks up many of these threads through the initially impersonal lens of a mortgage document, however as the poem progresses it becomes clear just what it means to enter into this legal agreement:

My family has no trust in the bank that promised its trust and then sold land off to neighbours, the lowest bidder. And still they make the dead pledge, and buy and sell without remorse, and are bought and sold: and the deal dies when the owner does or payment fails.

Here in the lost property office we are counting titles, dreams of picket fences tallied and accounted and then filed away. To die with empty hands, to die a renter in a city of homeowners, to die in a land mostly owned by the state, to die and be buried in a little plot and become again the land that will be bought and sold; not even the highway will bend to your little will. Commuters will drive to their homes far from the city, over you, you will be under concrete, under loam. Far from home. (88)

It becomes clear that at the end of Rebuild, the specter that has been haunting the book is one of dispossession: of an anxiety of not belonging and not having any control or say in the space that one inhabits. From the dispossession of Native peoples in colonial times, to the Japanese Canadians during World War II, and the effects of the socially unsustainable property prices in contemporary Vancouver, the personal is again deeply implicated in the political and in the production of urban space. The poem, cognizant of this long complicated history of disinheritance, plays with the word “mortgage”---a “dead pledge” that affects both the living and the deceased. The unemotional, brutal aspects of the property transactions, which are “without remorse,” are apparent here. As are the commodification of “dreams,” which are “tallied and accounted / and then filed away.” Only death signals the end of “the deal,” thus implicating all of life in a property
transaction. The poem then pushes the abstraction of death to its material conclusion, for to be buried is to be “under concrete, under loam”—in effect to be land again, the very space that is being speculated and transacted. This is a terrifying *memento mori* of Vancouver’s property obsessed times, where “not even the highway will bend to your little will.”

Wrenching as this poem is, its “renovation” on the facing page, is in many ways an even more poignant exploration of the same themes. By erasing selected syllables to every word in the preceding poem except in the words “we” “are” and “home” (89), “Mo gage” achieves an uncanny similitude to the Japanese language:

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mi    ha   no   ru    he   ba   ha   romise
ru   he   so   to   ne   bo   he   we   bi   de
   he   make   he   de   ge
bu    se   wi   remo    are   bo   a   so
he   de   he   o   ne   do   pa   me   (89)
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While I am not proposing that “Mo gage” *is* in Japanese, its suggestion of other languages, or other non-English ways of communicating, attempts to again reveal the heterogeneity of the urban space that is Vancouver. Further, the erasures and the nonsensical syllables that remain reinforce the alienation and distancing that occurs when homes are the objects of transactions. Arguably, Murakami’s status as a third-generation Japanese Canadian lends further emotive power to this version of the poem, where a persona struggles with the loss of not just a father, but a familial culture over the preceding generations. By revealing the absences in these representations of space, the empty points in these limited cartographies of Vancouver, Murakami’s work points out how much more needs to be recovered and imagined in the city.

Like Thien’s and Compton’s work, Murakami’s poems restore the complexity and sociality to this erstwhile abstract space – one that has been for too long the object of speculation, investment and constant demolition and rebuilding. While Thien’s short story shows us how wayfinding can reveal the emotionally and socially textured spaces of the city, and Compton’s “Rune” resists forgetting and abstraction through its
imaginative recuperation of a lost space, with *Rebuild*, Murakami asks us to not only fully, corporeally experience Vancouver, but to participate in its continual (re)production. To not let blueprints and maps of the ceaseless demolitions and constructions, investments and profiteering prevent us from (re)building our own urban space. Each of these texts modulates between a Vancouver that is at once material and emotional, lived and imagined, past and present. In fully exploring the possibilities and unpredictabilities of Vancouver’s spaces, they represent a necessarily complex way of being in the city.
Section II

*Lost Roads, Invisible Cities and Malay Sketches* —
Literary Detours in Contemporary Singapore

“They plan. They build. All spaces are gridded, filled with permutations of possibilities. The buildings are in alignment with the roads which meet at desired points linked by bridges all hang in the grace of mathematics.”
(Boey Kim Cheng, “The Planners”)

Like Vancouver, Singapore’s history as a colonial port city has meant that it has been defined by transnational and global flows of capital, immigrants and cultural influences. In fact, as recent historical scholarship suggests, the island has long been a node for transnational movements of people and goods. The city’s physical landscape is itself the product of these transnational flows, beginning with the colonial 1822 Jackson Town Plan and 1828 Raffles Town Plan. Arguably, colonial urban planning was the ultimate imposition of non-local modes of urban spatialization, and this transnational spatialization continued in post-independence Singapore as the new nation repeatedly enlisted the help of United Nations town planning experts and British specialists in historical conservation. In both the colonial and postcolonial eras, the main impulse behind Singapore’s heavily planned cityscape has been economic pragmatism and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\text{See Hack and Margolin (2010) and Miksic and Low (2004).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{27}}\text{Sociologist Chua Beng Huat sees this pragmatism as the defining quality of the People’s Action Party’s ideology, one that has permeated all its policies and thus the physical landscape of the island:}\]
continuous material growth. From the early colonial plans to the most recent Master Concept Plans, it is clear that Singapore has rarely been perceived and conceived in a non-cartographical way; all plots of land in the city-state have been strictly zoned and labeled for particular uses, in effect regimenting its space (See Figure 11 and 12).

Profile of Possible Land Use Allocation in Singapore Beyond 2030

Figure 11 Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority Draft Master Plan 2013

In the first two decades of the PAP regime, this pragmatism has been systematically elaborated and articulated to become a fleshed-out conceptual system that governs the regime's administrative policies and strategies [...] it has also penetrated the consciousness of the population and has come to serve as the conceptual boundaries within which Singaporeans think through significant portions of their daily life. [...] the overriding goal of PAP pragmatism is to ensure continuous economic growth. This singular goal is simultaneously the singular criterion for initiating and assessing all government activities, in terms of how an act will aid or retard this growth. In principle no sector of social life, no matter how 'private', cannot be so administered as to harness it to serve the goal itself. (Communitarian Ideology 68)
These zoning policies have affected the vast majority of the country’s population, particularly approximately eight-two percent of residents live in public Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. As George Clancey points out, Singapore is “one of the few nations in the world to have re-housed virtually its entire population in one sustained, if lengthy, campaign” (36). Housing policy is an instructive way to consider how spatial politics in the country enables the government to consolidate its socio-economic power in the material aspects of its citizens’ lives. Chua Beng Huat argues that the policy of standardized, public housing that emphasizes home-ownership contributes to transforming and disciplining the population into an industrial labor force” (“Singapore as Model” 45). He further argues that “[t]he visual homogeneity of the physical environment of public housing estates…hides the exclusion of the socially and economically disadvantaged Singaporeans who are the ‘collateral failures’ of rapid capitalist economic development” (46). In effect, the standardized cityscapes of the suburban areas of Singapore with their homogeneous model-like exteriors belie sinister

social outcomes. Clearly, this pragmatic and over-determined view of the island has consequences that reach far beyond the superficial aspects of the built environment.

Indeed, a succession of colonial and post-independence governmental agencies have zoned, and re-zoned the entirety of the island. The obvious corollary to the construction of countless blocks of Le Corbusier-inspired multi-story housing, factories and shopping centres by the state was the wholesale clearance of old rundown buildings and slums post-independence. Historian Loh Kah Seng complicates the governing People’s Action Party’s dominant narrative that champions this urban redevelopment as a complete success and evidence of Singapore’s viability as a model for the rest of the developing world. Through the event of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire, where an immense fire destroyed a squatter area leaving it ready for urban redevelopment, Loh reads the management of this narrative as one that produces the formal structures of the state and indeed, “citizens” for the newly postcolonial Singapore. Loh’s book *Squatters into Citizens* contests this grand narrative and notes that these slums or “kampongs” (villages) were “an alternative form of modernity” that was pitted against the “creation of a well-planned city of public housing estates” (2) and that “squatters were not inert, as depicted, but progressive and urbanised, and with effective social autonomy” (2). Thus, the clearance of these “slums” was also the destruction of alternative forms of modernity.

The dominant narrative, however, highlights the government’s architectural conservation efforts --- primarily for touristic consumption, and the protection of Singapore’s historical assets (as a form of cultural investment). Thus, while specific swathes of the island have been redeveloped as densely populated residential areas to house its burgeoning workforce in order to drive Singapore’s economic growth, “urban renewal” and not redevelopment has been emphasized in the downtown core.

A great deal of the architecture of the old British colonial center of the city was left unscathed by the government’s policies of urban redevelopment. In selectively choosing which aged buildings were to be preserved and which ones were to be

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29 I will take up the material and symbolic implications of the “kampong” in more detail in the chapters on the texts by Tan Shzr Ee and Alfian Sa’at.
demolished, Singapore’s planners have inscribed in the city skyline a history that
privileges official power over that of the community-based life. Further, as Ryan Bishop,
John Phillips and Wei-Wei Yeo note, these very same colonial buildings have been
exploited by capitalist ventures specifically for their commodified historic function: 30

Singapore flaunts its colonial past and postcolonial/global present through the
historical maintenance of these buildings’ facades. The act of renovation
preserves the colonial shell of the building while reworking the buildings from
the foundation up to better suit contemporary use, whether as luxury hotel, bank,
government building, or restaurant. Readable in the buildings, then, is a
continuation, perpetuation, and multiplication of colonial richness into the present
global order, while also using the striking juxtaposition of colonial buildings and
modernist high-rise buildings to reveal a specific continuum and continuity.
(“Beyond Description” 2)

In this way, Singapore’s city-planning produces a mapped city as a legible text, with
obvious and fixed landmarks of power and history. Experiencing the city through official
channels means being party to a schematized way of perceiving, conceiving and indeed,
producing city space. As with the various “views” of Vancouver that I critiqued in the
previous chapter, this planned perspective of Singapore is a commodification of city
space. The contemporary uses of colonial buildings are tied with capitalist or governing
functions whether “luxury hotel, bank, government building, or restaurant”. Even the
museums that have also been housed in these former colonial buildings can be seen as a
complex propagation of official versions of history and historicity. Architectural and
spatial “continuity” in this context is thus really a form of neo-colonialism that is geared
towards “a mode of attracting global capital to Singapore” (Bishop et al. “Beyond
Description” 2).

30 Head planner Liu Thai Ker argued in a Straits Times interview that “history had to pay its own
way” (Kong 59): “We have to bring in viable social and economic life so that not only is there
money to pay for restoration, but there is money to maintain the buildings.” (qtd. in Kong 60).
The island-state’s extensive and comprehensive urban redevelopment program was most famously critiqued by the architect Rem Koolhaas, who controversially called the city state “the apotheosis of tabula rasa” (1031) – what he deemed as a blank slate for city planners and politicians. Koolhaas’s rather hyperbolic critique of Singapore’s urbanscape has itself been taken to task - most effectively by C.J. W.-L. Wee, who points out the inherently racist and reductive stance of Koolhaas’s “Singapore Songlines,” arguing that “Koolhaas believes that Singapore’s modernity is unidimensional - though what this position signifies is that in many ways, he accepts the PAP’s own national self-representation uncritically” (80). In contrast, Wee sees “this cityscape as part of a negotiated modernity—as an adaptation of a modernity that was and is globally circulated” (84). Wee’s interpretation is still cognizant of the transnational forces (both material and cultural) that shape the city’s spaces. He sees Singapore as a modernist blueprint, “a contained laboratory test-case of one postcolonial Asian struggle to be modern and economically successful as the Euro-American West is thought to be modern” (13), where the “bland postcolonial urbanism that is contemporary Singapore’s built environment” (75) is a kind of “self-administered” (76) process of Western modernization. Indeed, Wee rhetorically asks whether “this horror is any more than a revelation - indeed a sort of revealing distortion - of the global West’s transculturated presence in Southeast Asia?” (88) --- a tabula rasa that has colonial and transnational foundations.

Wee’s critique, and theoretical work by other scholars like Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Wei Yeo are particularly useful for their ability to trace the ruptures and continuities in Singapore’s transition between colonial state and modern city. These theoretical turns show us how materialist and economic representations of Singapore’s spaces have deeply influenced the way life is lived in the city-state. They further argue for a careful engagement with Singapore’s particular postcolonial context and its relations to the larger global trends in development. These modes of thinking seek to

31Many local architects and planners have felt a great affinity with Koolhaas’s assessment. See Ang, Pauline and Lim, William S.W. Is there Life after Tabula Rasa?
move beyond conceiving Singapore as inherently a planned map or blueprint, and advocate for the return of the possibility of human agency, sociality and imagination. For instance, in their introduction to their Singapore-centric critical anthology *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* (2004), Bishop et al. argue that “urban space and architecture are at their deepest level of significance always beyond description […] beyond any epistemological frame” (2). Thus, instead of fitting their study of the city to an established epistemological frame, they seek to find an alternative to these frames by engaging with particular architectures and spaces. Interdisciplinary in scope, the volume complicates assumptions about how space, historicity, architecture and textuality interact and inform one another by focusing on “the **surenchère**, the spectral and the un-built” (16).

This critical turn towards the (im)possible, and the indeterminate is ever more necessary now, as recent development projects in Singapore appear to bolster Koolhaas’s *tabula rasa* analysis decades after it was made. For instance, the rapid construction of an entirely new downtown quarter on reclaimed land\(^{32}\) south of its original business district has added ever-new considerations to anyone reading Singapore as text. Funded in part by the government and by projected revenues from newly built casinos in “Integrated Resorts,” the Marina Bay area has been transformed from an empty patch of reclaimed land to a spectacular iconic waterfront geared to attract tourists and investors. These new developments are ostentatious manifestations of global capital, expertise and migrant labour. The $5.7 billion Marina Bay Sands project was designed by architect célèbre Moshe Safdie,\(^{33}\) funded by multinational gambling consortium Las Vegas Sands.

\(^{32}\)While reclaimed land may seem to be the ultimate, ahistorical *tabula rasa*, Charles Lim’s revelatory work tells us otherwise. His research has shown how the sand and materials used for Singapore’s reclaimed land come from the ecologically and ethically problematic processes of denuding the beaches of neighbouring countries. See Lim, Charles (2012).

\(^{33}\)Safdie’s euphoric press release posits unproblematically that “Marina Bay Sands is really more than a building project, it is a microcosm of a city rooted in Singapore’s culture, climate, and contemporary life. Our challenge was to create a vital public place at the district-urban scale, in other words, to address the issue of megascale and invent an urban landscape that would work at the human scale” (Safdie). That this is an unconscious mockery of genuine, community-based urban planning goes without saying.
Corporation, and built at great human cost by exploited labourers from Singapore’s economically poorer regional neighbours. William S.W. Lim, in a more general critique of the trend towards “iconic architecture” in Asia, posits that “the present rush of trading in iconic architecture is doomed to fail, as their fashionable theme-park images are full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing” (Lim, *Incomplete Urbanism* 30). Architect Pauline Ang points out the disturbing fact that “the most ‘imageable’ part of the city is now a casino and luxury hotel.”

Even more troubling is the undeniable fact that the new project has created fundamentally elitist, stratified urban spaces while seeking to redefine the city-state. The project’s official press release provides the best example of this in its description of the Marina Bay Sands complex:

A series of layered gardens provide ample green space throughout Marina Bay Sands, extending the tropical garden landscape from Marina City Park towards the Bayfront. The landscape network reinforces urban connections with the resort’s surroundings and every level of the district has green space that is accessible to the public. Generous pedestrian streets open to tropical plantings and water views. Half of the roofs of the hotel, convention center, shopping mall, and casino complex are planted with trees and gardens.

Three 55-storey hotel towers anchor the district and are connected at the top by the 1 hectare (2.5-acre) SkyPark. An engineering marvel 200 meters (656 feet) above the sea, the SkyPark spans from tower to tower and cantilevers 65 meters (213 feet) beyond. It accommodates a public observatory, gardens, a 151 meter-long (495 foot-long) swimming pool, restaurants, and jogging paths and offers sweeping panoramic views, a formidable resource in a dense city like Singapore. Shielded from the winds and lavishly planted with hundreds of trees, the SkyPark celebrates the notion of the Garden City that has been the underpinning of Singapore’s urban design strategy. (Safdie Architects)

The hyperbolic language in the press release makes it clear that this is a manufactured tropical city paradise *par excellence*. The press release’s deceptive use of the terms
“ample” and “generous,” and its repeated references to “lavish” greenery only serve to conceal the actual elite touristic focus of the complex which takes nature as just another aesthetic aspect in its production of space. The close attention to the metrics of the centerpiece of the project, the SkyPark, is of particular significance since as an architectural feature and “engineering marvel” it is the most visible component of the entire project. The panoramic and engineered view of Singapore that it provides is precisely one of a spectacular, planned city cartography. Numerous publicity shots of the view from the Park’s ostentatious infinity swimming pool attest to this. Further, Safdie’s press release claims that the SkyPark “celebrates the notion of the Garden City that has been the underpinning of Singapore’s urban design strategy” — suggesting that the project itself is a microcosm of the larger developments in the city.

Figure 13 Marina Bay Sands Resort (Image taken from Wikimedia Commons)
The Marina Bay Sands project represents the culmination of the two main influences on Singapore’s urban spaces: its impulse to master planning and its reliance on transnational influences of capital and expertise. Like the views of Vancouver that I analyzed in my previous chapter, these are cartographies that fix Singapore in a matrix that emphasizes a teleological progress-oriented move beginning from colonialism and ending with globalization. Even more intensely perhaps than Vancouver’s case, these plans and ideologies literally shape Singapore’s spaces and how they are experienced, and consumed. Any detour or intervention from this space necessitates a radical refusal of the pragmatic and commercial motives that have so far dominated the country’s spaces. How can we move beyond conceptions of a city which are defined by increasingly economically unequal and socially unjust productions of space? In this chapter, I will look at contemporary literary and filmic works that not only seek to depict Singapore in ways that are radically beyond capitalism, but to experiment with ways of perceiving and conceiving of the city that may lead to altered spatial practices. Works by writers Tan Shzr Ee and Alfian Sa’at,\textsuperscript{34} and filmmaker Tan Pin Pin attempt to produce counter-cartographies of Singapore that transcend consumerism and commodification. For instance, as I argued in the introduction to my project, Tan S.’s unpredictable, \textsuperscript{34}Alfian Sa’at is a Singaporean of Malay descent, and has no family name as per naming conventions: Sa’at is his father’s name. As per accepted conventions, he will be referred to as Alfian on second mention. Further, because of the potential for confusion between Tan Pin Pin and Tan Shzr Ee who share the same family name Tan (although they are not related), I will use their initials Tan P. and Tan S. in the rest of this section.
fragmented, and unverifiable spatial inventory of Singapore’s heterotopias disrupt notions of space as solely for investment or profit.

However, the works examined in this section do not evince an uncomplicated nostalgia for spaces that have been lost to development. As I have argued elsewhere about Tan P. and Alfian, not only do the texts attempt to salvage lost histories through art, they also seek to politicize this loss and critique official bouts of amnesia. In doing so, they significantly transform the meaning and significance of what it means to be nostalgic in the Singapore context. In my earlier study, I called this a “committed nostalgia” evident in Tan P.’s film and in Alfian’s early poetry. In light of Alfian’s more recent work in *Malay Sketches* (2012) and Tan S.’s *Lost Roads: Singapore* (2006), and in an updated reading of Tan P.’s films, I will build on my previous analysis to demonstrate how these dissident literary texts show us alternate ways of perceiving, conceiving and producing Singapore’s urban space. This is a move away from much of the past-oriented textual readings of Singapore literature towards an analysis that embraces the potential of the confabulations and unpredictable possibilities of these literary urbanisms.

This is not to discount the imaginative recreation of the past spaces, voices and stories of those forgotten or suppressed — the recuperative work that has been done in Tan P.’s *Invisible City*, in Alfian’s earlier work in *A History of Amnesia*, and in Tan S.’s *Lost Roads: Singapore* is essential for a full accounting of Singapore’s histories. However, as with Compton’s notion of retro-speculative literature, the past whether imagined or real is equally important for its effects on the present. Alfian in particular understands this, and writing the liner notes for the DVD edition for Tan P.’s *Invisible City*, he opens up the possibility of a completely different way of approaching Singapore’s history through the lens of her documentary

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35See Leow, “Future of Nostalgia” for an earlier version of this discussion, parts of the article published by the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* will be reproduced in this chapter, particularly in the analysis of Tan Pin Pin’s film *Invisible City*. 
The structure of the documentary is arboreal, each one of its subjects an extended branch. As viewers, we are left to ponder on lost opportunities, speculative possibilities. What if a certain branch of our history had not been prematurely pruned? What kind of Singapore would have existed if certain chapters, structures, energies – be they student activists, colonial buildings, hawkers’ associations – had not been excised? (Alfian Sa’at, Invisible City DVD notes)

These are the same questions about alternate Singapores that Tan S. asks in Lost Roads— in effect what happens when we make a detour in Singapore’s spaces. Tan S. makes it very clear that this is both a psychological and physical movement, arguing that

The roads I visited are lost — not so much to redevelopment, or even time, but to the drifting unconsciousness of Singapore’s newer citizens - us. We’re an efficient people and focused on riding the one highway that allows for only a destination but never a detour. (10)

Tan S.’s text, like Tan P.’s film, allows us to step off this highway, to everyday spaces of literary, artistic and indeed political possibility. This is an unmappable Singapore, a multiplicity of Singapores that pierce the cartographies and blueprints of the planned city with their unforeseen, unpredictable, and most significantly, unofficial or seemingly, ‘unimportant’ trajectories. I stress this idea of the unimportant because it disrupts the careful priorities of a cartographical view of Singapore, one where historic landmarks, financial districts, densely planned housing estates and even natural reserves are all fixed points.

Alfian, whose work is of a far more political bent than Tan S., points out that Tan P.’s ultimate message in Invisible City is perhaps one of hope — that even in a time and space of such wilful forgetting and planned space, of the deliberate elisions in the

36 Tan S.’s lack of overt political critique here is problematic — Singaporean pragmatism is certainly not an essentialist, cultural trait of efficiency but as numerous scholars have shown, a learned behaviour, borne of numerous government policies, campaigns and our lived experiences.
mapped vision of Singapore, she can instead of “showing us a pile of broken branches… [lead] us to the bruised stumps on the bark, still capable of regeneration and life” (Alfian, *Invisible City*). This arboreal metaphor of Singapore’s spaces and histories sees the possibility of some kind of rhizomatic redemption: paths not taken that can still be explored, in order to consider alternate spatializations of the city-state. Alfian’s own body of work, is an important supplement to my analysis of Tan S.’s reclamation of lost spaces, and Tan’s unearthing of an invisible city since it focalizes these spatial questions through the lens of race. In the chapter of this section, I focus on his most recent collection of flash fictions (prose pieces that are even shorter than a conventional short story) *Malay Sketches*, in which he provides forty-eight insights into minority Malay life in Singapore. Loosely structured as a temporal journey through a single day in the island city, *Malay Sketches* is punctuated by twelve page-long flash fictions that are given specific times of day and placenames. Each piece then can be read as a unique spatio-temporality and counter-cartography of what it means to live as a member of a racialized minority in Singapore. Taken as a whole, the work functions as an assemblage of Malay voices, memories, and trajectories, whose polyphony cannot be resolved as a straightforward collectivity.

There have been some studies on the relationship between the literary and cultural and the developmental landscape of Singapore in the post-independence period. Aside from the major theoretical work done by Bishop, Phillips and Yeo, the two most recent book-length explorations have been done by C.J. W.L. Wee in sections of his book *The Asia Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (2007), and by Jini Kim Watson in her comparative study of Singapore, Seoul and Taipei *The New Asian City: Three-dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* (2011)\(^{37}\). Watson’s book examines the work of earlier Singaporean writers like Edwin Thumboo, Arthur Yap, Su-Chen Christine Lim, and Goh Poh Seng, showing how their literary interpretations of the

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\(^{37}\)See also Holden, Gwee, Poon, Khoo and Tan, Kenneth. Philip Holden has written a book chapter theorizing the Singaporean short story and social space where he discusses the work of Su-Chen Christine Lim, Alfian Sa’at and Wena Poon in the light of Lefebvre’s conceptions of space.
country’s rapid development in the 1970s and 1980s reveal the complexities and contradictions of the postcolonial space of that historical period. Watson’s work situates itself in a very particular socio-historical context where “there is a kind of postcolonial historical development whose primary process is spatial and architectural transformation, a process most clearly registered in the figures and displacements taken up in various fictional texts” (8). Building on Lefebvre’s ideas on space, she points out that

> It is not … a text’s accuracy or correlation to physical reality that interests me, but how the very contradictions of spatial formations are narrated and imagined in it. By seeing the text as a symbolic solution that reflects an invisible structure, we are able to tap into the elusive spatiality that defines any historical mode or production […] a cluster of spatial ideologies, discourses, practices, and relations that are integral […] as both physical and social fact. (15)

This methodology is particularly apparent in Watson’s analysis of Arthur Yap’s work as she points out that the “new cityscape, rather than simply becoming incorporated into poetry, becomes the impetus of new poetic images and for thinking, reflecting, and critiquing the very logic of productive postcolonial states” (183). In its critique and reading of the production of Singapore as a postcolonial urban space, *The New Asian City* thus twines Singapore’s literary output with its developmental politics. While Watson’s study is indispensable for the important historical and theoretical analysis it does on the complex creation of the postcolonial state (and its buildings and infrastructure), it does not place the contemporary literary text at the heart of its inquiry as my analysis intends to. Further, while my work builds on Watson’s insights on literature written at the cusp of Singapore’s modernity, it moves beyond the canonical national texts that she analyzes by Thumboo, Yap, Lim and Goh. My analysis seeks to highlight the spatial aspects of contemporary Singapore texts, and explore their ability to circumvent the ideologies of pragmatism and development that have dominated Singapore’s post-independence history and space.

> In that respect, my work finds a predecessor in C.J. W.-L. Wee’s analysis of filmmakers like Jasmine Ng, Kelvin Tong, and Eric Khoo, and on playwrights like Kuo
Pao Kun and Ong Keng Sen. Wee draws from a body of artistic work that was done in the 1980s and 1990s which to him represent a re-assertion — or, more accurately, also a reinvention — of ‘locality’ in reaction at least partially but also specifically to the PAP created homogenised urban environment, and more generally to the social and cultural costs paid by the citizenry for economic success. Such artistic responses question the nature of the deterritorialisation that the PAP state’s modernisation programme entailed. There emerged a contention that there is more to the city-state’s cultural cityscape — that is to say, other local differences apart from the state’s own particularised capitalist modernity — than lay on the sterilised surfaces (91).

Like Watson’s study, Wee’s *The Asian Modern* is also very concerned with the socio-economic context of these texts, as befits a study that theorizes the modernization of the city-state. Wee’s analysis of these texts then, arises from the question of “what sort of art arises from the city-state’s homogenised urban environment” (90), while considering Singapore’s global context. Wee argues that the existence of these independent films “suggests that … attempts at totalisation have their limits, even in the city without geometry” (98). Indeed he argues that Kuo and Ong’s work attempt “a counter-reterritorialisation and re-imagining of the entity Asia, along with the city-state’s place in it” (128). Thus, perhaps more than Watson, Wee sees the possibility of art’s role in some limited way altering urban spatializations of a specific historical period.

Keeping Watson’s and Wee’s methodologies in mind, my own work seeks to move further along both temporally and spatially, to make sense of a contemporary late-capitalist moment in Singapore where development and growth are foregone conclusions, as is an increasingly diverse and commercialized literary and artistic scene. Singapore scholar Angelia Poon sees this as a “veritable explosion in writing across all three genres in a mere eighteen years” (359), referring to the years between 1990 and 2008. What is also highly significant in this period is the accelerated commercialization of the arts. As Poon points out:
To a large extent, the Singapore state has promoted an understanding of globalizing processes primarily through the lens of overweening consumption. Everything and anything is consumable in this new climate. Thus while the Arts was previously viewed in the immediate post-Independence period as a “luxury” that the Singapore nation, strenuously committed to economic development and industrialization, could not afford to be distracted by, it now represented a potentially lucrative commodity around which an industry could be cultivated. (Poon “Introduction” 361)

The attempt at commodifying the Arts has resulted in multi-million dollar investments in performing venues, galleries, museums, festivals, biennales, and artistic grants. The impact of all this cannot be overstated. How might it be possible to invent tactics of resistance against the very institutions and ideologies that fund literary and artistic output? Further, the state-based capitalist sponsorship38 of the arts opens the possibilities to a passive censorship where projects deemed unsuitable (or unprofitable, or both) are simply not funded.39 There is also a risk that works of art can be exploited as subtle forms of state propaganda. Gaik Cheng Khoo points this out in her book chapter “Where

38For instance, in 2010 the theatre group W!ld Rice saw their government funding substantially reduced because of their satirical, anti-government performances. See Chia, Adeline. Also see Eric Tinsay Valles’ book chapter “On the Commercialisation of Creativity in the Merlion State” for an overview of government policies regarding the arts. He argues that there is “some tension in creative production, primarily between the Singapore-based artists’ desire for individuality and otherness on the one hand and the drive toward conformity with state policies or Western market expectations on the other” (198). He adopts a more hopeful tone than I have in my study, confident that the “creativity” of Singapore writers and artists will produce a “an exciting in(ter)ventive future for both” (204).

39Consider the controversy over writer-director Ken Kwek’s set of short films Sex.Violence.Family Values (2012). Kwek had to rely wholly on private sector funding to bankroll the film’s production which led inevitably to “product placement” for the entertainment complex The Butter Factory that was sponsoring the movie. Kwek further ran afoul of the Films Censorship board in a highly publicized incident that led to the Board first allowing the film, then banning it (due to public feedback on an internet trailer of the film), and then allowing it again with cuts made to satisfy them that it was not racially offensive. See Toh (2013). I cite Kwek’s experience to demonstrate the multi-modal (financial, governmental, artistic) challenges to producing a less than mainstream piece of art in contemporary Singapore (details of this encounter were shared with me in a private conversation with Kwek).
the Heart Is: Cinema and Civic Life in Singapore,” where she interrogates the increasingly nostalgic and sentimental representations of public housing estates in recent government-funded Singapore cinema and multi-media projects, aligning them with the state’s nationalist agenda. Khoo points out that even ostensibly affective, emotionally complex projects like the Civic Life project must be “contextualized within [a] greater state discourse that produces affective and effective neoliberal citizens” (107) and was only allowed because it was not “perceived as threatening to the state” (108). Indeed, Khoo argues, it is especially works like Civic Life and director Royston Tan’s series of nostalgic films with what she calls their “popular aesthetics of affect and nostalgia” (107) that fit “an agenda to use affect in combination with economics to develop a stronger sense of civic nationalism” (107).

Thus, the works by Tan S., Tan P. and Alfian must be understood in the context of this double-edged explosion of the arts in Singapore. In doing so, like Khoo, I do not wish to create a false essentialism of either an artist or their art as pure and untouched by the corruptions of capital or state ideology. Instead, I am far more interested in the real world negotiations and implications that are evident in the literary forms of dissident work in Singapore. These are works that are highly aware of the fraught landscape in which they exist and function. Tan S.’s text was commissioned by a government linked publishing SNP Editions Ltd. on the basis of her work on a national newspaper column called “Accidental Tourist.” Tan P.’s rather cautious skirting of overt political commentary in her films is borne out of a keen consciousness of the parameters within which filmmakers in Singapore operate — a space in which allegedly “party political films” are illegal. Alfian famous for being the enfant terrible of the Singaporean

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40 Helmed by two British filmmakers, the project produced a short film, workshops and a website that was the collaborative effort of numerous well-known local and international writers. See civiclife.sg.

41 In a rare direct outburst, Tan P. led eleven other filmmakers in asking for clarification on what was deemed an offence under the Act after filmmaker Martyn See’s documentary Singapore Rebel on opposition leader Chee Soon Juan was banned. In a letter to The Straits Times Forum Page, Tan P. pointed out the unique financial burden of funding a film saying “It would be a waste to spend resources making a film, only to find out it is unlawful because it has inadvertently run afoul of the Films Act.” See “Films Act: Film-makers seek clarification.”
literary scene also has a fairly successful commercial career as a playwright of gently satirical musical comedies for the local theatre company Wild R!ce. Nevertheless, each of their texts that I will examine in this section have found their own idiosyncratic ways to depart from the overdetermined spaces of Singapore, while somehow staying very much within its literal and figurative borders. Like the Vancouver writers that I discuss in the previous chapter, this often means a return to the affective and private, the indeterminate and the unquantifiable, the confabulated and the everyday. Like Murakami’s *Rebuild*, for instance, Tan S. returns at the end of *Lost Roads* to the memory of her late grandmother who lost her apartment in central Singapore due to end of rent control and the machinations of state-influenced property market. Tan P.’s film *Invisible City*, like Compton’s “Rune,” works with an incomplete or sometimes absent archive, and in the same spirit as Compton, interrogates the historiography of minority narratives. Like Thien’s “A Map of the City,” Alfian’s *Malay Sketches* explores the connections between personal memory and public space, wayfinding through the city. These texts and trajectories produce spaces that sidestep the blueprint of Singapore as a global capitalist success.

Clearly, Tan P. seeks some kind of compromise in her films — a necessary evil if her work is to be seen by a wider Singaporean audience. This raises questions on the effect of the threat of censorship has on art made in Singapore even before it is produced. See "Tan Pin Pin on self-censorship, memories and our views of history."
Chapter 4 *Lost Roads, Singapore*:

Going off the map with Tan Shzr Ee

The genesis for Tan Shzr Ee’s book *Lost Roads: Singapore* (2006) was her bi-weekly column for Singapore’s national newspaper *The Straits Times*, entitled “Accidental Tourist.” *Lost Roads* is an experimental prose collection of anecdotes, lists, ad verbatim reportage, first-person accounts and autobiography. The text comes at a threshold moment in Singapore’s developmental history. At this point in the mid-2000s, Singapore’s planned spatial politics are well-established. The country has enjoyed numerous economic booms since independence but also weathered the Asian financial crisis in the late 90s. Land reclamation and development are accepted facts of life but the country has not broken ground on its most ambitious project of building an entirely new downtown. Work is ongoing for the new subway lines on the island, but they are not yet complete. The 2008 Master Plan, with its projections of a population of 6.9 million in 2030, has not yet come into existence.

All these impending developments loom over Tan’s highly self-conscious text, even as it details the as yet undeveloped spaces of the island with its semi-fictive inventories. Indeed, the unsettled, fragmented tone of Tan’s prose reflects its engagement with a city where land reclamation has left its inhabitants unsure where the island will begin or end, where incessant development alters landscapes overnight, where certain parts of the island are privileged over others and where some have been left to neglect, waiting the next developer’s excavator. *Lost Roads* encounters these anxieties.

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42 Tan’s text was commissioned by SNP Editions, a subsidiary of a Singapore government owned Singapore National Printers Ltd. The book was originally inspired by a series of columns called “Accidental Tourist” which ran in the national newspaper *The Straits Times*. The book however, is substantially different in style and content from the more superficial explorations of the newspaper columns.

43 In this section of the chapter, Tan Shzr Ee will be referred to as Tan on subsequent mentions.
and instabilities, internalizing them in its form and content. The overall structure of the text follows a seemingly map-like one as it geographically stakes out its objects of explorations in the east, north, west, central and offshore components of Singapore. Indeed, there is an official map of the island in the first section of the book, with boxed insets of the locations that the book will be focusing on — an orienting guide of sorts that is carefully labelled with the names of each general region: Loyang/Changi, Sungei Punggol/Buangkok, Sembawang, Lim Chu Kang, Jalan Bahar/Jurong Road, Central Singapore, Southern Islands, Pulau Ubin and Mount Sophia (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15  Prefatory material from Lost Roads, Singapore**

Using the conventional vocabulary of maps, there is a legend that denotes the usual multicultural religious sites, transport lines, terminals and “Places of Interest.” With its prefatory material, *Lost Roads* immediately shows that it is aware of the planned and zoned nature of Singapore’s urban spaces. Even as the text consults a street directory, it seeks to pierce its orderly view of Singapore, where one does not feel what Massey calls,
“the disruptions of space, the coming upon difference” (111), since “on the road map you won’t drive off the edge of your known world” (111). Tan’s text provides us with an actual model of what it means to challenge the map-like view of Singapore by literally driving and walking beyond the map, falling off the edge of a flat, two-dimensional world. By doing so, the text defamiliarizes the city-state’s planned space, revealing its artificiality.

Taking this mapped version of Singapore as its departure point, the text then begins to formulate tactics with which to escape it. In my analysis, I will examine how its formal and structural elements reinforce the text’s desire to inhabit unmappable spaces. From unusual grammatical tenses and shifting narrative perspectives, to unconventional historiography and experimental prose forms, the text uses a range of formal tactics to achieve its aims. One of the most significant things that the text does almost immediately though is to warn us not to “believe everything you read in this book” (9). The narrator suggests that what she is trying to document in this work is “an empty category, a genus of an extinct species, a barely there slip of air between two dog-eared cardboard dividers in a filing cabinet” (9). What Tan does in Lost Roads, is akin to Compton’s work in the history of Hogan’s Alley as she re-invents these lost histories, confabulating them in the absence of material records.

The planned and zoned landscape that Tan’s text pushes against is the product of an endlessly mapped city-state — one where spaces conceived government urban planners and property developers turns rapidly into a physical reality. This is a spatial practice that is wholly dominated by representations of space. In the face of this, Tan muses on the impossibility of her quest for “lost roads” since

…if a road is well and truly lost, you wouldn’t be able to find it anymore, would you? You scour old naval base maps, 1950s street directories and ancient bungalow blueprints, only to find that the assam tree which guarded a shrine marking the start of a squiggly path in Pulau Ubin has since been uprooted, its surrounds flattened into would-be army land.
A once straight thoroughfare in Boon Lay has been chopped into limbs by urban development, its surviving appendages rewired into large ringlets of HDB satellite towns.

The school where you were detained over three afternoons gardening (as punishment for eating Mamee\textsuperscript{44} in class) has been transplanted elsewhere and far away, even as it continues to bear the name of the road where it was first built. Are there really lost roads in Singapore, this proverbial air-conditioned city? (9)

Tan’s search for the “lost” or the “absent” produces literary urbanisms beyond the reach of maps. The text sees the archive, the “old naval base maps” and so forth, as wholly inadequate to its task. Indeed, while portions of the rest of the text have carefully researched historical anecdotes, these are only secondary to the lived experiences of the spaces that Tan explores. In this case, maps are unable to provide the minutiae of the natural and emotional spaces that are bracketed by the ever-changing roads and paths.

The organic metaphors that Tan uses here nightmarishly recall the arboreal metaphor that Alfian uses to describe the recuperative work of Tan Pin Pin. Roads themselves are seen as “chopped into limbs” with their “surviving appendages rewired” in a disturbing combination of mechanical and corporeal. The text’s surreptitious addition of an autobiographical, throwaway anecdote is crucial here, and part of Tan’s tactics of the everyday. What would have been an anonymous school, just another victim of a bureaucratic displacement, becomes an intimately remembered place through a series of intensely personal chronotopes, the recollection of “three afternoons gardening (as punishment for eating Mamee in class).” In referring to these ‘unimportant’ afternoons, Tan raises the personal stakes of the now lost spatio-temporalities.

Unable to rely on maps, the text actively seeks out where this fixed way of navigating space fails: where roads and infrastructure stop, where the blankness indicates

\textsuperscript{44}A snack only found in Malaysia and Singapore that is basically a packet of uncooked instant noodles, seasoned with a condiment pack that is included. It comes in a distinctive plastic yellow packaging with a blue monster logo. The use of the brand name here localizes this memory and imbues it with a nostalgia that Tan’s Singaporean readers would immediately understand.
an unimportance or uselessness of space to the official map-makers. *Lost Roads* looks for “white ribbons that nudged themselves into green patches on paper” (10) and the narrator relies on “postmen and dispatch riders for secrets” (10) or for “family and friends to drive me into the furthest corners of Singapore” (10). Most crucially, she writes, “I walked and walked” (10) — a reminder of de Certeau’s *Wandersmänner*, whose walking “creates within the planned city a ‘metaphorical’ or mobile city” (110). With these unplanned trajectories, *Lost Roads* produces new ways of inhabiting space, a wayfinding that challenges the totalizing confines of Singapore’s urban planning. By this wayfinding, the text rhizomatically restores the unexpected and unpredictable in Singapore’s spaces. This is emphatically not a comprehensive act of preservation, the text “isn’t meant to champion the valiant cause of conservation” (9) — but an act of resistance, as *Lost Roads* refuses to mould itself to fit into any one genre (whether fiction or non-fiction, historical narrative or contemporary account, autobiography or polyphony), it provides us with ever-changing, fragmented glimpses of an unmappable city.

Thus, the text’s improvisations are not just a semi-fictional record of a particular moment of Singapore life, they are also a recuperative move for the consciousness of the population. Its detours allow for a different mode of existing in an urban space that only allows for fixed destinations. The affective and social life of a city’s inhabitants is at stake here, one that is intimately entwined with a visceral particularity of living in Singapore --- a point made clear as the text’s introduction localizes the cliché “Stop and smell the roses”:

I’d like to suggest, ‘Stop and smell the grass.’ Inhale the heaviness of a sky crying to rain, the oily odours of towkays who sit by cracked parlour floors looking for old faces reincarnated in the Maybelline rouge of China girls. Breathe in the colours and fumes of ICI Dulux over dead leaves accidentally memorialised on a dirty wall given a quick paint job. (11)

What the narrator calls for here is a wayfinding that is necessarily constrained by the rapid and totalizing changes in Singapore’s urban landscape. The text revels in the excess
of everyday detail, and a sensorial surrender to the unexpected, unmappable spaces of the city. These are spaces of untold stories, continual migration and transnationality, and the often uncanny juxtapositions of the natural world and urban development. The text’s observations and confabulations on the fringes of the planned spatial reality of contemporary Singapore are crucial because these possible alternative trajectories around and through Singapore’s overdetermined urban spaces represent an important resistance to the abstraction of lived space emotionally, intellectually and corporeally. Tan’s inventory of these “lost roads” is intentionally neither comprehensive nor infallible. This eschewal of the quantifiable and the exact is in itself a deliberate departure from the colonial and neo-colonial planned city. This idiosyncratic counter-cartography of Singapore is necessarily a liminal one, one involving coastal areas, intertidal spaces, offshore islands, cemeteries and neglected spaces.

**Throwntogetherness**

We begin with Changi/Loyang, an eastern area of Singapore known primarily for its proximity to the country’s international airport --- an award-winning, much lauded symbol of international connectivity and gleaming modernity. The airport is the point of departure for most journeys away from the island, and is highly regulated by the country’s immigration authorities and auxiliary police forces. Crucially, the text bypasses this “important” space in its journey eastward, “your car takes you past the airport (which is as far as you usually go)” (15):

You glide through an endless stretch of highwayesque tarmac, a zoom of streamlined expanse fringed by the Changi Meteorological Station, a noisy, incense-steeped Chinese temple, a landfill, liver-red brick apartments (where, incidentally, Singapore’s only professional Baroque fiddler and harpsichordist allegedly lives) and rows of short, ugly buildings.

The newer buildings — assemblages of glass-pretending-to-be-plastic, and plastic pretending to be steel, or possibly the other way round—beam at you with the brand-newness of their constructions. They scream efficiency and air-conditioning.
The older ones—chalky walls, algae-seeped paint, exposed ceilings—resist you with decrepitude and the judder of a potential live-in ghost (surely these buildings must look quite different, disused, at night?). The windows are black and silent, hiding empty rooms on a Saturday afternoon. (16)

The deployment of the second person narrative here and in a great deal of the text has the effect of inserting the reader into the text in an immediate, physical way. The attention to detail in this passage is not just an attempt to make sense of the uneven modernity of Singapore; the text’s inventory here of the random, insignificant details and sights provides a textured, heterogeneous view of this urban space, even of its “short ugly buildings.” The coded representations of modernity and the past are made clear, and yet both are imbued with a sense of instability — where even the raw materials are of an unknown provenance. In particular, the uncertain possibilities of the older spaces are emphasized. In this first extended description of space, we get a “throwntogetherness,” what Massey argues is “the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which much must take place within and between both human and nonhuman” (140). This haphazard, chance-filled interaction with space is what the text privileges above all else. The level of detail and overwhelming specificity that we are given in the text is what enables it to move beyond the abstraction of planned Singapore space.

The text continues to wander off the map by following a nondescript path that borders a field, all while continuing to inventory the flotsam and jetsam that line the path. It reaches a green space that it deems “not quite an oasis. It’s really a ditch” (17) reminding us of the tenuous boundaries between the urban and the natural in Singapore. The next section of the text makes clear the disingenuous role that confabulation will play in the text’s evocation of space:

The tide is rising, and you can make out shadows in the water. Perhaps they are fish, or mudskippers. Man-made as it comes, there is still something rugged and charming about this band of channelled water - or so you want to believe. […]
As you inch along the canal, the flattened grass grows thick and sinks into a marsh of last night’s rainfall. It cushions your slippered feet with the taunt of invisible insects that will surely crawl in between your toes and mince on the debris under your nails. (17)

In particular, the phrase “or so you want to believe” implicates the reader in the creative re-naturalization of this environment. As the text slips a little further into its reverie, its language becomes a pastoral turn: the “flattened grass grow thick,” as it “cushions” one’s footsteps. Nature threatens to overwhelm the bodies in this space, as it manifests as “the debris under your nails.” The texture of this space is palpable and there is a fragile romanticization of the landscape. The prelude ends as the text speaks self-reflexively: “you tell yourself that you’ll take all the ugly, beautiful, insipid and magnificent surprises which throw themselves upon you literally, in stride” (18). And again, the idea of chance here becomes paramount, opening up the possibility of the unforeseen in a city where almost everything has been relentlessly foreseen.

**Geographies of Power**

Repeatedly, however, *Lost Roads* comes up against geographies of power that it attempts to challenge. In one instance, it does this by revealing the contrived nature of the official narratives that have been imposed on a historical site. In this case, the text embeds unpredictability and chance in the form of its account of the Johore Battery, a little-known British ammunition store in tunnels near the Changi Prison. In a quietly satirical way, the descriptions of the site send up textbook and guidebook accounts of Singaporean history. The section on the Johore Battery begins with the polyphonic, free-associative comments left in a guestbook at the site. Almost immediately then, the text produces a contemporary, almost post-modernist experience of this historical site. The brief, tangential comments by Singaporeans, and tourists in a variety of languages and tones, in disjointed, epigrammatic phrases provide polyphonic, fragmented perspectives that undercut the totalizing official history of the space.

In contrast, the next part of this section ostensibly provides what looks like a straight, historical narrative, complete with hyper-exact dates, properties, and
measurements of the military equipment: “the Changi guns which weighed 373 tons in total, were dubbed ‘Monsters’ for their giant 16.5-metre-long barrels that could shoot 15-inch shells over 32 kilometres” (22). The careful attention to figures, quantities and measurements is a parody of an overdetermined way of conceiving of this space. To counteract this, the text provides a surfeit of seemingly superfluous footnotes that deflate and disrupt this conventional narrative. There are no less than thirteen short footnotes in the two page section, and I reproduce them below to show the sly, conversational way in which they alter our experience of the otherwise conventional prose:

1. And littered with beer cans from the 1960s
2. But didn’t tell us why, just before they left
3. Whose descendants are still deliciously, incredibly rich
4. Ironically
5. Sitting on a circular platform like a merry-go-round
6. Although you can’t visit them
7. Who is usually absent
8. Bulky and weird
9. But, strangely enough, not English
10. Nailed to the table in case there are any guestbook thieves lurking about
11. Not including the made-up ones
12. But of course we didn’t count them all properly
13. Today, even the neighbouring Police Dog Unit is strangely silent; no doubt the state’s official canines are too well trained to yap on a Saturday afternoon.

(22-23)

Each of these footnotes functions in the micro-context of the sentence that it interrupts, forcing our attention away from the grand historical narrative to the inconsequential details and questions that arise from it. The casual, conversational tone of many of the notes restores sociality to an erstwhile abstract, historical space. Footnotes six to seven disrupt a detailed description of the curatorial paraphernalia that has been incorporated into the space in order to explain the discovery of the site, and the aforementioned guestbook. The interjections here reveal the artificiality and awkwardness of this space,
and point to the confabulatory potential of the text. Further, footnotes eleven and twelve call into question the quantifiable figures of “500 people from 30 countries” in the guestbook that have been noted. These footnotes then destabilize even the earlier part of this section where it was assumed that the guestbook entries were all genuine. The text’s refusal to quantify anything with bureaucratic accuracy resists the pragmatic impulse imposed on the site and its historicity.

What is clear from the account of the Johore Battery and in other sections of the text is that the unseen geographies of power in Singapore are numerous and multifarious. Aside from the parodic and meta-textual critiques that are performed on stereotypical representations of Singapore space, the narrative also finds itself literally up against physical manifestations of these forms of power and governmentality. In most of *Lost Roads*, there is an underlying consciousness of the ephemeral nature of places in Singapore; at one point in a seemingly deserted space, Tan encounters an immense construction site and remarks, “even in the last stretches of green and uncombed Singapore, the tractors are advancing, advancing” (77). There are also clear limits set on the text’s abilities to contest boundaries around military installations, live-firing grounds, radio transmission towers, and elitist local and expatriate communities. In each of these encounters, the map and its set lines appear to be entrenched in military power, elite privilege, and private property, and the text appears to retreat defensively when faced with these aspects of Singapore space. While it may be possible to read these instances as failures of Tan’s counter-cartography, I see the text’s attempts to inventory these spaces and to acknowledge its real fears regarding the latent militarization or gentrification of certain areas in Singapore as highly significant. These unsettling moments in the text provide ways in which to confront the spatial dynamics of power in the island-state.

These geographies of power are enmeshed in complex spatio-temporalities that make explicit links between colonial military power, whose remnants remain in the bungalows, chalets and barracks and “the squirm of roads with fancy English names”
Again and again, the text’s encounter with the ostensible history of the place is disrupted by a run-in with the current Singapore military. In one episode, the narrative sets up the possibility of a haunted space of the tropics, imbued with colonial history and historicity. Tan plays with the established tropes of entering a seemingly (postcolonial) gothic space, with the tunnel like row of trees, the ruins of the buildings with their trappings of decay,

The trees close in to form a green-black jigsaw of the sky, the roads wind into gray slabs of crumbling shortcake. And then, you see it. Or, rather, them: a cluster of magnificent, multi-storey buildings with the requisite paint-peeled walls and ambitious gardens of dead leaves.

Ooh. Let’s investigate.

You inch your car slowly past a State Land signpost and get out to walk.


When were they built? What will happen to the buildings?

Half a century ago, some 50,000 Allied POWs were housed in the Selarang and Roberts Barracks of the era before they were decamped to the too-small Changi Prison to live in huts outside the walls.

Perhaps they were -

But curiosity is killed by a man in a Number Four uniform toting a weapon. He looms out of nowhere, wearing a crown of green leaves and glaring at you. No apparition this is.

[...]

And before you open your mouth to speak, you see the signboard depicting one falling stickman being shot by another rifle-toting stickman.

‘No Tresspassing’, it proclaims.

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45 Singapore’s defence budget was reported to be $12.3 billion in 2013, the largest in Southeast Asia. It has one of the highest per capita expenditures on defence in the world. See Choong, William. “Hard Truths About Singapore’s Defence.” The Straits Times, Mar 17 2013. Web.

46 This is the combat-ready uniform of the Singapore Army consisting of green camouflage fatigues. Note that the system of numbered military uniforms is also a British legacy.
Not quite a ghost, but Number Four is serious enough to make you turn your heel and exit politely. (26)

In this instance, Lost Roads rapidly shifts registers and consistently foils our genre-specific expectations. The text speculates on the unknowability of the past, opening up the possibility of this space to its colonial and war-time history. The series of open-ended questions here point to the forgetting that has taken place, an amnesiac neglect of the colonial traces in Singapore’s landscape. These musings are interrupted self-consciously, mid-sentence by the intrusion of a present day soldier — possibilities and curiosities are “killed” by an armed man. Singapore is haunted not just by the architectural ghosts of its colonial and war-time past, but by the quiet and unseen militarization of its green spaces. The narrative here is anchored firmly in the present, showing how straying off the beaten path in Singapore may set you up against numerous military zones on the island since they make up 19 percent of the island’s 71,000 hectares, the largest percentage of land use in the country.47

The examples that I have provided from the first few sections of Lost Roads are exemplary of the range of literary techniques and tactics with which the text uses to approach Singapore’s spaces, but also give an idea of the range of the text’s foci. In the sections that I have not analyzed in detail, the text goes on to explore neglected colonial-era buildings, and other pockets of colonial architecture that have been turned into expatriate communities in a perhaps unsurprising perpetuation of European privilege in Singapore. The text also encounters spaces of elite privilege for both rich Singaporeans and foreigners. In its exploration of central Singapore, the text describes a golf course as “the sacred portal where men in soft-soled shoes who whip long sticks that push little white balls with millions of tiny dimples on their surfaces into perfect-fit holes eventually retire to hide from the midday sun (or their wives) and sip ice-cold drinks” (99). The satirical, exact tone of the language here mocks and defamiliarizes the orderly, manicured space that the Singapore elite favours. Indeed, the text continues by exposing

the hidden wealth that is perhaps the unseen power and reward of an authoritarian regime. In an almost absurd catalogue of luxury cars parked outside the prestigious golf course: “Car park. BMW, Benz, Alfa Romeo, BMW, BMW, Volvo, Mercedes SLK, Lexus, Lexus, Nissan, BMW, Porsche, Renault, Benz, Jag, Benz, BMW, Volvo, Audi, Opel […] Benz, Benz, Benz, Benz” (99). The passage continues for an entire paragraph, and given the high cost of owning a vehicle in Singapore (due to prohibitively high taxation), these luxury cars are even more of a status symbol than they would be in another country. Yet, the repetition and cumulative effect of this list also diminishes and deflates the cachet of these symbols. The text’s acute awareness of these displays of conspicuous consumption also provides an uncomfortable contrast with the ordinary lives that it depicts in the rest of its explorations.

Lost Singapore

In resistance to these mapped boundaries and abstract spaces of privilege and power, Tan’s Lost Roads seeks out individuals and communities that have taken the time to cultivate emotional and social bonds to the natural world or rare undeveloped spaces. The text fixates on seemingly anomalous spaces like the last kampong or village, an old community mosque, and offshore island communities who resist the seemingly endless developmental policies of the Singapore government. These pockets of heterogeneity humanize the island, imbuing spatial practice with a sociality that is organic, rooted and complex --- in opposition to an official, manufactured nationalism. To illustrate this sociality on a formal level, the text provides what seem to be verbatim transcripts of the conversations that Tan has with the people she encounters in these heterotopias. This injects a polyphony into the text that plays a part in producing the heterogeneous texture of these social spaces. For instance, in one of the last remaining kampungs on the island, Tan meets an old man whose voice then is allowed to permeate the rest of the section “Kampong Lorong Buangkok,”

Pink picket fences, purple doors. A pair of white, iron-grilled gates salvaged from someone else’s abandoned mansion. The gates are green with algae --- or moss? Or vined with some vegetable growing at its base? Chilli, pandan, hibiscus,
tomatoes, morning glory, bougainvillea, kangkong, sugarcane, balsam and that fleshy spiky purple-leafed herb sometimes used for soups; the greens arrange themselves on the ledge, in the earth, they are thriving, thriving, no doubt industriously tended ---

What to do? If rain, no one else to fix. Just try lah, after a while can learn. Last time can find zinc from the sailor shop. Now no more. Now own self fix. Ladder, also plus hammer plus nails. Don’t worry, is safe up here - I can come down myself - you dun move, please, please. No --- I say don’t ---... (37)

The text’s listing of the cornucopia of indigenous flora that is mostly used for forms of subsistence farming overwhelms the senses with the cumulative effects. While idealized to a certain extent, it is clear that this messy, fecund space represents a way for the text to imagine what it would be like to live outside the seemingly all-enveloping rule of the Singapore government’s pragmatic authoritarianism and its spatial effects. The use of italicization here visually cues the reader to the change in voice that is occurring in the text, an alternation that continues in the rest of the section. By reproducing the accent and cadences of her interlocutor’s speech, Tan’s text moves beyond treating him just as a silent object of study. Indeed, this section ends on an italicized paragraph that has the man dismiss the narrator from the village. In the passage I have quoted above, the man’s voice testifies to a self-reliance and self-fashioning that is connected to the construction of his dwelling, a thrown-together salvaged structure that is a physical embodiment of the man’s lack of attachment to Singapore’s official modernity. The conversational, vernacular tone of his comments, and the reproduction of a particular non-standard Singapore English may risk fetishizing the rural or less sophisticated elements of Singapore society, yet it also produces a very specific postcolonial reality and sense of place. This is a historical and cultural reality that is inflected by the use of the English language but also testament to its subsequent modification by the syntax of Asian languages: a creolized, casual form of communication. Indeed, the unnamed man’s use of English is very much akin to how the “pair of white, iron-grilled gates salvaged from someone else’s abandoned mansion” has been recuperated as the entrance to his abode.
Other alternate modes of spatial practice are also evident in the motif of subsistence fishing that runs through the text, recalling Singapore’s earlier iteration as a fishing village. While I am wary of suggesting this as anything like a ‘primal’ connection to the island, there is perhaps a way of seeing these sequences in the text as a glimpse of an indigenous, sustainable relationship with the environment. Occurring in the intertidal or coastal areas of the island, the literal edge of Singapore’s development, the fishing described is done by itinerant groups or migrant workers, usually foreigners who have a tenuous connection to the developmental state. In one encounter, Thai migrant workers who are catching catfish in the marshy river are taciturn about their catch, suggesting that the narrator has no access to their knowledge of the land or its possibilities. Indeed, these figures appear to understand the island's native ecologies better than the Singaporean narrator.

Aside from these undeveloped and natural spaces, *Lost Roads* also stumbles upon man-made places that have been carefully cultivated and kept apart from politics of development. In these spaces, the text focuses on the everyday, the ordinary and the social relations involved in making these old buildings relevant to contemporary life even as they are not “profitable” in the conventional sense. The narrator's visit to the Masjid Omar Salmah, an isolated mosque in a "patch of prime land near Stevens Road" (103), a plot that is highly valuable in Singapore's land-scarce economy. This assessment of the place’s property values is contrasted by its function as a kind of hidden agora that draws various generations and classes. It is a repository of collective memory, and is the last remaining structure of an entire village that was built around it. The people who frequent the mosque recall the older multicultural community before development, that the land was "Hokkien land; before we came" (104), reflecting the complex multiracial interactions in the country (even before these were mandated through a racialized housing policy). The text emphasizes the power of everyday, ordinary rituals in producing a social space in the material objects that are left in the mosque:

Some of them leave extra T-shirts and towels hanging to dry in a shed behind the prayer room; there are also tea kettles, a microwave oven and washing facilities in the mosque’s pantry.
It is a dear, dear place, tended — no, lavished — by small gestures of love, by the habits of devotion; it is a triumph of loyalty and history over distance and ‘upgrading’. ‘We want people to use this place,’ Abdul says. ‘Otherwise maybe the government may take it back.” (107)

This domesticity enables the mosque to transcend a mere religious landmark (as suggested by the touristic gaze of a map legend). This is a lived space, created by a spatial practice, alive to its multiple possibilities. Abdul wants people to "use" it because he knows that it is the only protection it has against the government's repossession. The section closes with a more pessimistic view of the mosque's eventual fate, but for now, the "gestures," and "habits" of its inhabitants sustain it.

*An Autobiographical Turn*

As I have argued in my analysis of the preceding sections of *Lost Roads*, the text opens up of the possibilities of space occurs on many textual levels —— that of narrative structure, genre, perspectival changes and even in its use of grammatical tense. The bulk of *Lost Roads* is written in the second person, a formal choice that imbues the temporality of the text with an involving immediacy. In the final section of the text, the narrative turns to a first person narrative in the present tense as it explores the spaces of Tan’s own familial history. This shift is not only spatial, but is temporal as the narrative turns of the spaces of familial memory that resonate in risky, intimate ways. By offering up a form of autobiography in the final section of the text, Tan raises the stakes of what it means to dwell in Singapore’s urban spaces. Embedding the complex spatio-temporal trajectories of her own grandmother and family here prevents the narrative from becoming a detached, anthropological view of the island. This is crucial in the light of the numerous "informants" whose voices recur throughout the rest of the book. One particular informant, Mr. Mike Tan, first credited only as an "early Sembawang resident" (57), is only explicitly revealed to be Tan's father in the last section of the text as he is describing the history of the narrator's grandmother's flat.

Belatedly, the text reveals its autobiographical texture, making it more than just a set of trajectories traversing the island. The text’s final section, “The Heart of Things,”
with its disjointed narratives and multiple genres (lists, first person narratives, third person narratives, interviews), searches for multiple modes of remembering the narrator’s grandmother’s apartment that has been lost to the family because of the government’s decision to raise the rent to its market value. Each part of this section is a new wayfinding through the slightly altered chronotopes of the apartment 42B, Mount Sophia and its environs. The experimental and non-conventional narrative styles of the rest of the text are amplified as the text attempts to resolve familial and spatial loss --- discovering new lost roads and routes to the past and present.

Here, the text becomes suffused with a kind of autobiographical desire that is individual and idiosyncratic, an entirely human impetus that is has led it through its production of space. Memory is central to this desire in the final section of Lost Roads as it functions as a structuring device for the text and its production of space. In thinking through memory this way, I build on John Frow’s discussion of the significance of textual memory in Jorge Luis Borges’ stories. Frow argues that it is not in fact “retrieval” that is important in the textuality of memory, but “reversibility,” since

The time of textuality is not the linear, before-and-after, cause-and-effect time embedded in the logic of the archive but the time of a continuous analeptic and proleptic shaping. Its structure is that of any dynamic but closed system, where all moments of the system are co-present, and the end is given at the same time as the beginning. In such a model the past is a function of the system: rather than having a meaning and a truth determined once and for all by its status as event, its meaning and its truth are constituted retroactively and repeatedly; if time is reversible then alternative stories are always possible. […] Like a well-censored dream, and subject perhaps to similar mechanisms, memory has the orderliness and the teleological drive of narrative. Its relation to the past is not that of truth but of desire. (229)

In this exploration of textual memory and its potentialities, Frow’s theories complicate the chronotopic aspects of remembered spaces. His distinction between the archive and the text is particularly helpful here in considering the radical possibilities of how textual
memory can alter our production of space, whether past or present. Time is not only reversible here but also unpredictable, since “alternative stories are always possible.” Thus in theorizing the effect of remembering spatially, we must acknowledge how human desire reshapes temporally complex spaces, precisely because it remembers selectively.

This complicated process of how memory shapes space can be illustrated by examining how the text introduces us to 42B Sophia Road. We first see it through the eyes of the narrator as a little girl, an almost straightforward spatialization of the apartment’s context through the patina of the narrator’s memories. The attention to the specificities of this space speaks to the embodied, textured experience of living and remembering it. As is the habit of Lost Roads, the narrator focuses on the minute, throwaway, quotidian details

there was an unused five-foot way around the building too. It was made of pale, orange-brown and maroon tiles: each one had a feathery pattern across it. The tiles were almost identical except for that one tiny, almost indiscernible waver in the feather pattern unique to each tile; I always wondered how they mass-produced tiles like that in 1930. (133)

The attention to localized detail in this passage is very much again, akin to Ingold’s idea that a wayfinder is never overwhelmed by detail as a cartographer would be, but instead revels in it. The narrator’s careful, hyper-attentive gaze, noting the “one tiny, almost indiscernible waver” suggests a highly embodied presence in the space. Further, in the context of the rest of the contemporary heterotopias that have been explored in the text, the hyper-memorialization of this childhood space produces a kind of equivalency between past and present temporalities that complicates the idea of a fixed, static,

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48 A five-foot way is a term for covered sidewalks that are ubiquitous in the shophouses of British colonies in Southeast Asia. Their apparent legacy was traced to Sir Stamford Raffles who apparently specified their exact measurements. Another example, perhaps of the precise colonial legacies on spatiality in the colony. These five-foot ways were often taken over by itinerant hawkers or shopkeepers whose wares would spill out onto their shopfronts. They were also incorporated in later public housing designs. See Liu, Gretchen. Singapore: A Pictorial History.
mapped space. This memory space is one that is vividly present, with its smell “of something damp, something sour and decayed” (133). The text continues by chronicling the narrator’s repeated climbing of the stairs, and at this point, pausing at the threshold of the apartment itself. The narrator then interjects her father’s voice, in italics, providing personal histories of his time in the apartment, and further, the dense social networks of neighbours and old haunts that surrounded his home. Quotations detailing the provenance of the street names in the area are also provided from Victor Savage and Brenda SA Yeoh’s *Toponymics: A Study of Singapore Street Names*. Yet, repeatedly, these “official” records and explications of place are challenged by intensely personal memories and more ordinary details of everyday life.

The text is constantly wary of providing a single perspective through these familial histories and at crucial points in this final section *Lost Roads* makes use of third person, as a gesture of detachment, both from the author’s past as a little girl in her grandmother’s apartment and her present state as an interloper who sneaks back into the estate in a belated attempt to relive the intense memories of the space. These re-visittings and re-workings of 42B Sophia Road recall Massey’s conception of space as “always under construction […] a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out” (9). Space, she argues “is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (9). Indeed, imagining just this single apartment and its neighbourhood in Singapore as “open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming” (Massey 59) is as Massey puts it, “a prerequisite for history to be open and thus a prerequisite, too, for the possibility of politics” (59). Here then, lies the powerful potential of the spatial politics of *Lost Roads* and in particular, in the autobiographical aspects of the text; by opening up this familial space to multiple interpretations, socialities, and temporalities, the text again points us to the ways in which spaces in the city-state can exist beyond the planned and zoned.

To further illustrate the possibilities of the text’s open-ended spatial practice, I return to the motif of the staircase in the narrator’s repeated vertical traversals of 42B, Sophia Road. From the narrator’s (and narrator’s father’s) first memories of the
apartment, there are recurring references to climbing the various staircases in the
apartment. These are embodied experiences that are moments of wayfinding through
various iterations of the apartment building. As a literary trope, it is not a conventional
form of movement through the city — unlike de Certeau’s idea of the walker, for
instance, traversing the city streets. I want to argue for its potential in liberating us from
an ordinary palimpsestic view of a space like 42B Sophia Road. By making us aware of
the repeated upward trajectories that are possible in the apartment, the text draws our
attention to the mobility and ongoing potential of the space and its histories. This
continual, unceasing movement through the apartment, up (always up) the staircase gives
us a way to understand this complex production of time and space in 42B. In the
narrative, the staircase is altered slightly each time that it is traversed --- each time
showing us the different trajectories possible through the multiple temporalities
contained in a seemingly fixed space.

It seems fitting then, that the text ends with the narrator’s final ascent up this
staircase, an encounter with 42B that begins as chance transgression. In the third person,
the narrator returns impulsively, “just for kicks” (151) to her grandmother’s apartment
block. Once again she traverses the five-foot-way and walk up the staircase where “the
steps have been retiled into an ugly flesh-coloured pink” and “a weak florescent light
casts flickering shadows” (151). She is with a lover, and they are trespassing on what is
now private property, reveling in “the thrill of sneaking up a building, rediscovering
things that were or were not there” (152). As she ascends the staircase, again and again
the narrator dwells on the minor and inconsequential: “a wilting, potted dumbcane plant”
(151), “a neighbour’s dirty grilled door” (151) and “original cold, green-gray cement”
(151). These details re-inscribe the power of the quotidian, the everyday and the
subjective. Like for Miriam in Thien’s “A Map of the City” however, the narrator
reaches the rooftop only to be disappointed at the changes that have been wrought on her
childhood space, “there is nothing to see” (152) from her past, her grandmother’s
“orchids are long gone” (152), “everything is ugly, ugly, ugly” (152). Her desire to seek
out this past space however, transforms itself at the end of the narrative to a sustained
openness to the ongoing possibilities of this space,
Who lives there? Have they converted the open-air kitchen? What about the toilet — literally an outhouse? What happened to the neighbours? Are the other units, offices like this one, or do people still live in them? How much is the rent? Can we live here someday? Shall we repaint the walls? Do we need a new fan? Can we live without air-conditioning? We could have a dog and an aquarium and grow orchids — (152)

While unable to re-possess this space in reality, the narrator nevertheless takes it over with a series of open-ended questions, ones that she knows are “just a little fantastic and fanciful” (153). Yet, encountering these possibilities towards the end of a text where so much of the indeterminate and unpredictable nature of space has been driven to the liminal heterotopias of the island provides no small degree of hope. The text “tingles in anticipation of something — she doesn’t know what” (153) and for the over-determined, mapped and planned spaces of Singapore, it is this unknown that so dramatically acts as an antidote.
Chapter 5 “A teeming, contested terrain”:

Tan Pin Pin’s *Singapore Gaga* and *Invisible City*

“By my decision to move back to Singapore, I made the subconscious decision regarding the work I would be making. It would be work whose primary audience is Singaporean, and it would be work that attempts to push open their perspective of Singapore, to see this country as a teeming, contested terrain, that they should continue to contest and above all, to not lose hope.”

(Tan Pin Pin, *Criticine*, 2007)

In an interview done with the Southeast Asian film webzine *Criticine*, the Singaporean filmmaker Tan Pin Pin describes showing her film *Singapore Gaga* (2005) to school students in Singapore,

I wanted to take *Singapore GaGa* out of cinemas and to the “the people”, but I did not imagine that this entailed screening it in stuffy school halls with hundreds of students sitting cross-legged watching it, singing along to it. In some schools the video projectors and sound systems were shoddy. But I got used to these less-than-ideal conditions for there was something very special about seeing the students peering curiously at the screen, watching themselves. The question that capped it for me was one asked by a young boy from Bedok View Secondary, “Excuse me Miss Tan, does this mean I can make my own film about Singapore with just any camera?” Somewhere during the screening, it had dawned upon him that Singapore was waiting for him to define it with something as simple as a handheld camera. I hope he never lets go of this thought. (“*Singapore GaGa Tours Singapore*”)

I quote Tan here as a way to foreground several factors in my analysis of her work. One of the factors is Tan’s audience, thinking of her films and their reach in Singapore, to places and communities in which other literary texts might have had less of an impact.
Another is the visceral experience of Tan’s films, augmented in her descriptions of “stuffy school halls” and “shoddy” audiovisual equipment. These “less-than-ideal conditions” are not just something that Tan becomes accustomed to, but a serendipitous echo of the uncomfortably slow, everyday nature of her documentaries. The short documentary films that I will examine in this chapter, *Singapore Gaga* (2005) and the *Invisible City* (2007) have intense fixations with the ordinary and everyday, and are wholly invested in these quotidian spaces. The last consideration in my analysis is perhaps the most obvious one, but one that needs to be reiterated none the less: that her films inspire and call for the possibility of multiple perspectives and narratives from Singapore. Their fragmentary, incomplete natures render an openness to its spaces and stories that the young boy in the audience picks up on, in an interaction that is perhaps unwittingly revelatory about the confined and mapped spaces that the majority of the population find themselves in. Perhaps in more direct ways then, than any of the other texts that I have chosen for this study, Tan’s films, as representations of space and representational spaces, effect subtle but permanent changes in the spatial practices of the Singaporeans who watch them.

Tan was born in 1969 in Singapore and was trained in law in the United Kingdom and in documentary filmmaking in the United States. Her oeuvre consists mainly of experimental documentaries and award-winning short films, which have consistently evinced an awareness of the Singapore’s cramped spatialities. Her first made for television documentary *Moving House* (2001), for instance, chronicles the exhumation of graves in Singapore driven by urban development and features a final haunting image of a columbarium filmed in manner that makes it an undeniable visual echo of Singapore’s public housing flats. Her most recent film *To Singapore, With Love* (2013) is filmed entirely outside the country, documenting the emotionally constrained lives of political exiles from the country. In between these two works, Tan has made over a dozen other documentaries and short films, the most famous and popular being *Singapore GaGa* (2005) which played to packed halls and theatres all over the island. The film is an aural record of the disappearing sounds of the island: busker songs that wind their way around our hearts, the cacophony of footsteps in an underpass, the specific hollow echoes of void
decks and an eclectic range of songs that reflect the city’s polyglot, cosmopolitan, postcolonial nature.

Her follow-up *Invisible City* (2007) is in her words, “a documentary about documenteurs,” “an ode” to all those who made Singapore the subject of their work. In this later film, she seeks to understand the impulse that drives these chroniclers, while bringing their lost histories to light. Invisible City is suffused with nostalgia for the ultimately unknowable memories of her subjects. From naturalist Ivan Polunin’s rare colour film reels of pre-independence Singapore, to photographer Marjorie Doggett’s black and white elegies to long since demolished buildings, Tan brings to our attention the power and the beauty of the past’s quotidian which has been lost in Singapore’s quest for modernization. My analysis of her work will discuss both *Singapore Gaga* and *Invisible City* as historically recuperative works, but also as ones of resistant historiography. In particular, I want to suggest that this resistant historiography is one that is overtly and radically spatialized. Both films trouble the mapped spaces of Singapore by providing a glimpse of the complicated and polysemous times (past, present and future) that are inherent in these spaces. In these films, Tan’s directorial vision weaves alternative chronotopes of Singapore that are open-ended, frayed at the edges and still in the process of becoming. These revelations are often tied to the slow, contemplative pace of her films, her refusal to move quickly over the everyday, and the unpredictable or seemingly random aspects of her filmic space.

In my analysis of Tan Shzr Ee’s work, I adopted Frow’s ideas about the reversibility of textual time and its ability to provide alternative narratives. Frow argues that this means that memory’s “relation to the past is not that of truth but of desire” (229). Such desire enables the imaginative agency of the narrator in *Lost Roads* to reclaim the dispossessed spaces of her childhood. We see similar moves in Thien’s “A Map of a City” as well, in Miriam’s revisiting each chronotopic node in Vancouver, and in Compton’s confabulated versions of Hogan’s Alley. All these narratives have provided counterpoints to the abstract spaces of the late capitalist city with their unpredictable, temporally fluid natures. Indeed as Frow puts it, in the texts that I have examined so far, the past, and “its meaning and its truth are constituted retroactively and
repeatedly” (229). In effect, these works enable us to become aware of the instability of temporal progression in space, as the past is created and recreated continually, and our present is thus made and re-made. Tan Pin Pin’s work is aware of these contingent, fluid temporalities; in a 2007 interview with the *Straits Times*, Tan argues that her film *Invisible City* aims to give you a visceral experience of the atrophy of memories, whether through self-censorship, death or decay of artefacts. And it allows the viewers to muse on how their experience of the present is shaped as much by luck as it is by the efforts of a few preservationists. (“On self-censorship”, 2007).

By revealing the constructed and conditional aspects of Singapore’s history and spaces, Tan’s work allows us to depart not just from Singapore as mapped space but Singapore’s official history as mapped time. Her films’ polyphonies are particularly powerful for their eschewal of any grand narrative to describe a city-state whose government is singularly obsessed with its teleological progress. She does this with the full awareness that memory can never be complete, thorough, or exhaustive. Indeed, therein lies its power.

Tan’s work reminds us of de Certeau’s point, that memory derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered – unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position. Its permanent mark is that it is formed (and forms its ‘capital’) by *arising from the other* (a circumstance) and by *losing it* (it is no more than a memory) […] Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, it sustains itself by *believing* in the existence of possibilities and by vigilantly awaiting them, constantly on the watch for their appearance. (86-87, italics inherent)

This unmooring and mobility of memory are echoed in the free associative rhythms of Tan’s films. The film’s desire for the past refuses a totalizing agenda, is not for profit, and refuses to pin Singapore or its inhabitants down. This indeterminacy makes memory open to the possibilities of other histories that challenge the singularity of the official
history. This is not to say that there are no narratives in Tan’s work — there are in fact, one might argue, incredibly important ones. And they are all the more significant for having been hidden, forgotten or just ignored in plain sight for so long. These histories leave the film’s viewers open to a whole range of complex and nuanced meanings, hewing to Singapore journalist and scholar Janadas Devan’s earlier exhortation, that precisely because our history is a forgetting […] we must never forget, we must never fail, to remember the past: the actual, real past, the muddle which resists summary. Not to do so, not to remember the muddle – the contradictions unresolved, the alternatives abandoned, the intimations refused – can only mean to give up the past, give it over, to ideologically invested simplifications. (Devan 32-33)

This muddled past is inextricably tied to the present time and space of the city, as Tan puts it the “teeming, contested terrain” and arguably, Tan’s films are an attempt to revive the truly disjointed, fragmented chronotopes of Singapore.

This disjunctive, non-totalizing style has functioned as her films’ best defence against Singapore censors, and the more sinister Films Act and its 1998 amendment. The latter deems it an offence to import make, distribute or exhibit “party political films”.49

49The Films Act can be found online at the Singapore Statutes Online website <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg> and I have reproduced the relevant part of the law in this footnote:

Making, distribution and exhibition of party political films

29D. Any person who —
(a) imports any party political film;
(b) makes or reproduces any party political film;
(c) distributes, or has in his possession for the purposes of distributing, to any other person any party political film; or
(d) exhibits, or has in his possession for the purposes of exhibiting, to any other person any party political film, knowing or having reasonable cause to believe the film to be a party political film shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding $100,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years.

Search and seizure of unlawful films

29E.—(1) Any Deputy or Assistant Commissioner of Police, Assistant Superintendent of Police or any Censor, Deputy or Assistant Censor or Inspector of Films, if satisfied upon written information and after such further inquiry as he thinks necessary that any
Aside from the financial loss of having an often independently funded movie banned, filmmakers are liable “a fine not exceeding $100,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years” (Films Act, 1998 Amendment) if they are convicted of this offence. The legal and personal ramifications of this law are clear, yet the definition of a “party political film” is notoriously vague. In 2005, after two films featuring opposition politicians were withdrawn from the Singapore International Film Festival, Tan wrote to the national newspaper as the representative of ten other film-makers with similar concerns asking for greater clarification on the matter since, she writes,

how do we assess whether something is a political matter? Any subject, no matter how innocuous, could become a political matter depending on the circumstances, and we could easily find ourselves contravening the Act inadvertently.

Similarly, we require some guidance on what constitutes 'bias'; after all, all works of art are the expression of the artiste's opinion, which may favour a particular viewpoint or argument over another.

Are film-makers expected not to render any opinion at all to be considered neutral? (Tan “Films Act: Film-makers seek clarification”)

The government’s response came three days later from K. Bhavani, the Director of Corporate Communications at the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. In her letter, also published in the same newspaper, she states the government’s position, arguing that the ban only applies to

person has in his possession any obscene film or party political film, may without warrant, with such assistance and by such force as is necessary, by night or by day, enter and search any place where he has reason to believe the film is kept, seize the film and any equipment used in the exhibition, making or reproduction of the film and take into custody any person reasonably believed to be in possession thereof.

(2) Any film, and any equipment used in the exhibition, making or reproduction of the film, in respect of which any person has been convicted under section 29, 29A, 29B or 29D shall be forfeited and shall be destroyed or otherwise disposed of in such manner as the Minister may direct.
films which deal with political issues in a partisan manner, such as a film aimed at furthering the cause of a political party or influencing the outcome of an election, or which presents a one-sided view of political issues of the day. Unbiased reporting of political issues on film would not be unlawful.

'Party political films' are disallowed because they are an undesirable medium for political debate in Singapore. They can present political issues in a sensational manner, evoking emotional rather than rational reactions, without affording the opportunity for a meaningful rebuttal or explanation to audience and viewers. (Bhavani, “‘Party political film’ clarified”)

Bhavani’s letter demarcates the subject matter of a “party political film,” linking it to official political events like elections and actual political parties, thus defining the political as something inherently public. She also outlines the government’s concern with film as a medium, seeing it as a tool of propaganda which evokes “emotional rather than rational reactions,” one that does not allow for a dialectical encounter. The Singapore government then, at this juncture, appeared to unwittingly carve out a space for dissident filmmakers like Tan who carefully document only private or personal accounts, seemingly removed from a public political stage. Further, while positing an awareness of the “emotional” potential of film, Bhavani’s letter also evinces a disdain for emotion, relegating it (like nostalgia) to the province of the irrational, sensational, hysterical and thus unpragmatic.

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50 Ironically, Tan’s most recent film To Singapore, With Love (2013) was banned by the Singapore authorities for being overtly political and sympathetic to political exiles. Here it appeared that documenting the personal and sensorial lives of dissidents outside Singapore was deemed “political” and that Tan had finally crossed an invisible line. In its press release detailing the reasons why the film as “Not Allowed for all Ratings,” the Media Development Authority of Singapore noted that “the contents of the film undermine national security because legitimate actions of the security agencies to protect the national security and stability of Singapore are presented in a distorted way as acts that victimised innocent individuals. Under the Film Classification Guidelines, films that are assessed to undermine national security will be given an NAR rating.” (“MDA has classified the film “To Singapore, With Love” as Not Allowed for All Ratings (NAR)”, www.mda.gov.sg. Web. 10 September 2014).
Tan’s films, however, are testimony to how the political is the personal, that the illogical, emotional, affective component usually marshalled to aid the government’s teleological view of material progress, is precisely the space of quiet dissent in its population. This is a government that has tried repeatedly but not always successfully to engineer national feeling through parades, patriotic song writing competitions and the inventions of pseudo-mythic icons like the Merlion.\(^51\) In contrast, Tan’s films---with their avoidance of the public, their reliance on unexpected and idiosyncratic emotions, and their *prima facie* refusal of heavy-handed propaganda---present a way of producing identity beyond both an engineered patriotism and an oppositional politics. In an interview Tan notes that

In everything I’ve done so far, I have never gone out to court politics. It is partly to do with my personality. I myself prefer to be persuaded rather than being told if something is right or wrong.

[… ] Staying clear of politics here is also a question of survival for me. I don’t want to be banned...I want to make movies for the rest of my life here in Singapore. (Heng)

More than just a matter of survival, however, my analysis will argue that Tan’s filmic aesthetics represent a unique way of reclaiming space in Singapore. By space here, I return again to Lefebvre’s trialectic of lived, perceived, and conceived space — that balance between spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. As I have argued, Singapore is dominated by representations of space as manifested by the abstract space of capitalism, overdetermined urban planning and authoritarian conceptions of “zoning” and legislation that govern its population’s living, working and recreational lives --- an imbalanced weight towards conceived space. Tan’s work allow for lived and perceived space to be reclaimed in this trialectic, reminding us of the importance of spatial practice and representational space.

\(^{51}\) The Merlion is a part lion, part fish figure that was invented as part of a tourism campaign in the 1970s.
Tan’s films alter the ways spaces are perceived by observing the very rhythm of how life is lived in them. By focusing on throwaway details and forgotten subjects, the films model different ways of living in an over-regulated, overdetermined space. Tan has argued that her job as a filmmaker is to “to tell a story… to keep a record of the present for the future” (Heng). Her poised summation of what her work does is telling; her films focus on a particular form of narrative “a story,” not “the story” and their interest in the “present,” enables them to bypass a future-oriented national teleology where an official version of the past is already inscribed in the cumulative power structures of the nation. This is not to say that Tan’s films represent a kind of obvious revolutionary change in Singapore; in fact, quite the opposite, their power is more subtle, turning the nation’s spatial practice just slightly askew by listening to voices that are not quite heard, lingering on sounds that have almost been forgotten and wayfinding anew through the unfamiliar terrain of Singapore’s hidden histories.

**Singapore Gaga: Soundscape (xinjiabofeng) 新加坡风**

My first experience with *Singapore GaGa* occurred in a darkened screening room at the Substation, one of the few independently-run alternative art venues on the island. As a young journalist working for the national news channel, encountering Tan's art-house sensibilities and idiosyncratic approach to Singapore's spaces was a watershed moment for my conceptions of Singapore's spaces. Through her lens, much like Compton's meta-narrative symbol of the camera lens through which he sees Rev. Oz, I saw and heard my island city as embodied on screen, in art, as an intricate, incomplete web of human relations, histories, false starts, pruned efforts and deeply personal stakes. I begin with this autobiographical anecdote as an attempt to elucidate the corporeal experience of watching *Singapore GaGa*. In particular, I want to focus on why Tan sees this film as her “attempt to communicate a view of Singapore with other Singaporeans by tapping into our communal aural memory” (“*Singapore GaGa* Tours”). Tan’s focus here on the aural is what makes *Singapore GaGa* such a visceral experience. The spatial practice of *Singapore GaGa* is firmly centred on the body, what it can hear, and how it experiences space through the auditory. The filmic techniques with which Tan chooses to
depict sounds and songs in Singapore, emphasize the subtle possibilities of their ability to subvert the planned spaces of the city.52

Like *Lost Roads*’ preoccupation with the mundane and everyday, *Singapore GaGa*’s city sounds of busker songs, footsteps, echoes, school cheers, and forgotten ditties draw our attention to the marginal and indeterminate. The film’s focus on the easily ignored diegetic sounds of ordinary spaces, and its tactical overlay of non-diegetic songs with particular spaces, also produce a subtle critique of Singapore’s highly regulated spaces. Since, it is impossible to provide an exhaustive examination of the entire film, what my analysis will do here is highlight two sets of sonic experiences in the film: moments of heightened disjuncture and dissonance between the visual and the aural, and ones where the most ordinary sounds are given full, almost overwhelming presence in a particular quotidian space. In the latter instances, then, Tan’s films create alternate spatio-temporalities of Singapore simply by pausing to record the absolutely mundane on camera. Arguably, this deliberate slowing down of filmic time, in effect the use of long single shots in the film, alter a viewer’s relationship to these spaces. These are often places of transition: walkways, void decks and underpasses --- seemingly inconsequential spaces, unmarked on maps and disregarded on a daily basis by most commuters.

The film begins with a scalar aural and visual segue from the heightened scene of a calibrated, stadium-sized nationalism to the confined spaces of an ordinary walkway outside a Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station. This segue points to the fact that everyday life in Singapore is not these seemingly expansive and spectacular versions of patriotism, but rather the repetitive experience of emerging from an MRT station into a temporarily covered walkway, to a busker who is being studiously ignored by all the passers-by. The walkway is a liminal space (a point which is emphasized with the subsequent cut to the interior of a plane landing in Singapore), and is boarded off for further construction by sheet metal, its limits shaped and defined by busker Mervyn Cedello’s amplified,

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52See Leow “Echoing the City: Notes on Re-watching Tan Pin Pin’s *Singapore GaGa*” (2013). Parts of this essay will be incorporated into this section of my chapter.
echoing song (see Figure 16). While it would ordinarily be figured as an unimportant detail of urban infrastructure and a space that was already earmarked with a particular purpose, the film’s decision to linger at this threshold is crucial.

Figure 16 Covered walkway entrance of Novena station, *Singapore GaGa*. Film stills used with permission of Tan Pin Pin.

The busker’s song “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” an American country tune about unrequited love, makes us realize that even this forgotten space is one of potential and sociality. The song’s lyrics suggest a commitment to even the most mundane and difficult-to-love spaces in the city. Like in *Lost Roads*, Tan’s film then immediately gives us a heightened spatial awareness, even in the most mundane of settings.
Cedello is the first of many buskers that the film depicts, and the casual indifference that greets him and the liminal space he ekes out his living is the same one that Gn Kok Lin faces in a downtown underpass (see Figure 17).

Figure 17 Busker Gn Kok Lin, Singapore GaGa.

In these Gn’s scenes, the film recreates the feeling of the low, claustrophobic ceilings in the underground tunnels under the business districts and the feeling of constant surveillance from the closed circuit-cameras. The commuters walk rapidly to their various destinations, oblivious to Gn’s enthusiastic performances. The sound of the busker’s harmonica pierces through the white noise of footsteps and the murmur of the crowd. Tan’s increasingly rapid jump cuts of feet and footsteps which are orchestrated in time to Gn’s music, transform the ordinary underpass into a stage for a rhythmic symphony (see Figure 18). Tan’s film here takes the everyday aural experience of footsteps, the diegetic music of the busker and transforms another anonymous space into
one resonant with life and meaning: a subterranean tunnel suddenly awash with carnival-like music.

Figure 18 Commuters in the Raffles Place underpass, Singapore GaGa.

This whimsical interlude is abruptly cut short by the intervention of a transit official — a reminder that public space or a commons has to be actively sought out and created in Singapore.

The film continues to drive home its point about the importance of its diegetic soundtrack with the central scene of avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan playing her
toy piano in a Pek Kio void deck. This is perhaps the only "staged" scene in *Singapore GaGa*. In a sense, this makes it the heart of Tan's film and, crucially, a moment of fictionality in what is ostensibly a non-fictional documentary. Having a celebrated experimental pianist set up a toy piano in the void deck of a public housing flat and proceed to perform John Cage's notorious 4'33" becomes, arguably, a moment where the fantastical encroaches onto the everyday (see Figure 19). And the pianist's choice of music, or rather performative silence means that the quotidian sounds of the most ubiquitous space in Singapore are amplified and rendered disproportionately significant through the sheer doggedness of the film's (and its audience's) collective focus. This scene reveals the minuscule complexities of space produced by the sounds of the environment, what Margaret Leng Tan later calls the "music of the environment." This moment of fantasy is inherently and intensely participatory in nature.

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53 A void deck, as Robbie Goh describes it “is an architectural feature in public housing in Singapore [...] its openness unobstructed except for interspersed load-bearing walls, facilitates both ventilation and surveillance” (Goh 53).
Figure 19 Pianist Margaret Leng Tan in a void deck, playing John Cage’s 4’33, Singapora GaGa.

Much of Singapora GaGa foregrounds the ordinary sounds of the city, but it is in the heart of the movie where the film really takes this to its logical conclusion. Part of this is due to the nature of Cage's work: 4'33" is a rather difficult four minutes and thirty-three seconds of arbitrary silence. Yet, Tan's film adds another meta-layer to this, as the single unwavering shot of performer and piano unfolds, the background noise in the scene begins to dominate: the shuffle of feet, the cries of birds, the rustle of leaves, the chatter of inhabitants in and outside the frame. The scene produces a hyper-focused

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54 Margaret Leng Tan recounts, in the film, how her first performance of the piece in Singapore, led to an audience member angrily storming out, which she says "was just perfect!"
moment, one where we are coerced into becoming fully aware of this filmic space that is produced through the very bodily experience of sound.

Another particularly complex set of aural and visual textures comes near the end of Tan’s film. In this penultimate sequence, the layering of multilingual textures produces one of Singapore GaGa’s most complex transitions. The sequence begins with a handheld camera shot of Serangoon road in Little India where scores of migrant workers are milling about at dusk. The sound that cuts above all of the bustle comes from a bus attendant shouting into her megaphone --- her repetitive call of “Kaki Bukit! Kaki Bukit!” while literally naming the destination of her buses also reflects the complex geographies of migrant labour as it criss-crosses the island. These transnational flows of labour redefine Singapore spaces, in this case marking the continually reinforced racial and cultural boundaries in the city. The migrant workers are in Little India on Sundays as their only respite from their long week of manual work. Their experience of Singapore is confined to their work sites, their (often squalid) places of residence, Little India and the journeys between these points (see Figure 20).

But not content with one view, the film provides yet another perspective, which we realize comes from inside a taxi. The sound in this segment then abruptly switches to the cocoon like atmosphere in the taxi: the low hum of the engine and air-conditioning coupled with the deeply nostalgic sounds of a news bulletin in a Chinese dialect. In this scene, Tan offers us a crystallization of a regular aspect of living in Singapore: the disjunctive coupling of multiple realities as demonstrated by the pairing of a Chinese dialect soundtrack with the visuals of South Asian migrant workers milling in the streets.

At the time of writing (January 2014), Tan’s portrayal of Little India here seems particularly relevant given the riots that occurred there on December 8, 2013. That this particular racialized space is fraught goes without saying. The riots themselves, the first in decades, were triggered by a traffic accident involving a migrant worker and culminated in attacks on first responders and the burning of police cars. The unrest continued for about two hours. Singaporeans responded with a mix of racist epithets and soul-searching opinion pieces. Arguably, this rare, but not unsurprising outburst of violence reflects the pressures of population and development in the small, highly regulated urban spaces of Singapore. See Au, Alex. “Riot in Little India: spark and fuel.”
(See Figure 21). Each becomes a testimony to the varied, multiple and complex trajectories of migrants that produce Singapore’s spaces. Tan’s artistic gesture defamiliarizes the moment, and highlights how Little India is a space at the crossroads of many Asian cultures, histories and classes. This is a complex spatio-temporality, and Tan’s distillation of this single moment signals a crucial recognition of the heterogeneity of these spaces.

Figure 20 Migrant workers in Little India, Singapore, Singapore GaGa.
The film then transitions to the air-tight, sound-proof space of the radio studio where the Chinese dialect news bulletins are being broadcast from (See Figure 22). The studio again takes on a distinctly heterotopian quality, one that carries the burden of so many alternate voices and histories. The use of Chinese dialects in Singapore is fraught because while they are the original languages of Chinese immigrants to Singapore, the government has made a concerted effort to stamp out their use in the mass media and the public sphere. With numerous “Speak Mandarin” campaigns and a stringent mother tongue education policy, the government’s goal throughout the 80s and 90s was to
standardize communication in a single Chinese language, while fostering the population’s ability to conduct commercial exchanges with mainland China.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{radio_studio}
\caption{Empty radio studio, MediaCorp Broadcast Centre, \textit{Singapore GaGa}.}
\end{figure}

The musealization of these vernaculars is echoed in the seemingly sterile space of the radio studio; the final shot of the empty studio and its utter lack of sound (due to its soundproofing) suggests the logical conclusion of the government’s drive to eliminate the use of these dialects. Even before this final shot, the space seems deceptively shut off from the rest of the island, even though it is in fact broadcasting the newsreaders’ voices all over the island, not in the least significantly in the moving vehicles driven by

dialect-speaking taxi drivers of earlier generations. This duality of this space, seemingly self-contained yet also reaching innumerable other spaces on the island, adds to its heterotopian qualities. These voices, available for a limited, contained time and space each day, bring to mind a plethora of lost stories, voices of grandparents, babysitters - private languages used now in official tones for the news bulletin: economic reports, stories of crime or government policy. This moment of Singapore GaGa reveals how these dialects so long a part of quotidian transactions, intimacies and the familial have been replaced by alternate sets of vocabularies for the official, the governmental, and the formal. Arguably, by focusing on their use in the news studio, the film restores the private to the public, inserting the intimate and familial into the agora of civic life.

The final moments of Singapore GaGa loop back to its opening sequences, and continue to demonstrate how the affective, the social and the private can intrude and intervene in the official spaces of the nation. Tan deliberately overlays the artificial performance of summiting a mountain (complete with patriotic song soundtrack and fake inflatable mountain) during the annual National Day celebrations with a return to Cedello’s rendition of “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” (see Figure 23). This final sequence creates an immediate cognitive dissonance between the official state narrative and everyday life --- but also represents an artistic wayfinding of the city that juxtaposes the inconsequential space of a covered walkway with a busker and the hyper-nationalist space of independence day celebrations in a stadium. The sound-editing here emphasizes the absurdity of the pageantry of the annual National Day Parade by removing its diegetic, predictably histrionic, repertoire of patriotic songs with Cedello’s mournful tones. The repetition of the song and its association with the parade in Singapore GaGa undermine the longstanding propagandistic tendencies and suspension of critical thought that enjoyment of the parade entails. For the Singaporeans watching this film bring with them a deeply ingrained association between fireworks, which for a long time were only ever seen during the parade, and state-produced patriotism. By simply altering the soundtrack of this pivotal space and event in her film, Tan swiftly and cleanly cuts to the heart of what she calls “that really murky world, bittersweet world of being Singaporean” (Leow “Local film”).
Invisible City: Preparing to Forget (beiwanglu, 备忘录)

*Singapore GaGa* was followed two years later by *Invisible City*, and it is useful to read these films as a pair, with their similar preoccupations with unorthodox and unofficial explorations of Singapore’s spaces. Where *Singapore GaGa* is widely acknowledged as Tan’s most accessible film, *Invisible City*’s often languorous pacing, elliptical editing techniques and almost wholly unknown subjects meant that it was only screened in the small art-house film circuit in Singapore. The film documents documenters, and provide alternatives to cartographical understanding of Singapore’s spaces: through the methodologies of archaeology, video records, photography, oral histories, and
journalism. Structured as a series of interwoven interviews and archival footage and photographs, the film takes us through a spatio-temporal history of Singapore through the voices and perspectives of young archaeologists, retired photographers and videographers, dissident civilian historians, ex-Communist guerilla fighters, and expatriate ethnographers. The disparate range of subjects, and timeframes makes for a challenging filmic experience given its lack of a formal narrative structure.

The film announces its unconventional form from the start as it begins with rare colour footage of Singapore in the 1950s and 60s. This is no stereotypically sentimental and nostalgic view of the past; the shots seemed damaged in some way, they stutter frame by frame with a highly audible sound of machinery and running film reel for their soundtrack. Ordinary portraits of families, fishermen eating a meal and street scenes are seductive in their full colour representations of a period in Singapore history with so little footage in colour. Yet the images move in a slow, distorted fashion, forcing the viewer to confront the limitations of this archival footage: its incompleteness without an audio track, and its heavy reliance on technological mediation obvious from the stuttering hum of the machine. From the beginning of the film then, it becomes apparent that this venture into the invisible city will be fraught, fragmentary, and necessarily frustrating.

*Invisible City*’s filmic style continues in this unabashedly idiosyncratic way as it negotiates the forgotten and liminal spaces of the island. From this opening sequence, the film abruptly switches to first person point of view shots of wandering into dense tropical vegetation. Tan has said that the movie is about the “atrophy of memory,” as its Mandarin title suggests, and arguably, this atrophy is one that is inherently spatial. As in Tan Shzr Ee’s *Lost Roads: Singapore*, we get an immediate sense of this with the film’s opening shots, as a slightly shaky hand-held camera struggles through what one of our off-camera guide calls “the last really wild areas in Singapore,” a small patch of jungle on Sentosa Island. In a space reminiscent of *Lost Roads*, we are here off the beaten

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57Sentosa is one of Singapore’s largest offshore islands and has long been used as both a tourist destination with accompanying exhibits that simulate Singapore’s history in wax reproductions of historical scenes, and a long term detention centre for prisoners. In many ways, Sentosa is an
path, in an unmapped space, the camera literally taking in the opening vista as an archaeological team cuts away at foliage and climbs over fallen logs to their site.

While it is tempting to consider this exploration of space as an acceptance of a palimpsestic, archaeological view of Singapore’s forgotten spaces, the literal layers of Invisible City, I would like to argue that one way that Tan challenges the pristine, perfect and ideologically motivated sense of official history is by complicating the trope of archaeology that runs through the film. The film certainly brings out the difficulty and time-consuming process of excavating the past of a country where so much was erased by development and the construction of a national history and ideology. The team is excavating the remains of an old fort that was built in the 1940s (See Figure 24).  

\[\text{ideal example of how the government has attempted to contain history and culture in a clearly defined geographical space that even has the ability to hide a political prisoner with a subversive potential. The island’s so-called historical exhibits resurrect token memorabilia and scenes from the official history without true engagement with the fullness of that history and an emotional investment in the loss embedded in this history. See Leow, “Future of Nostalgia.”}

\[\text{Crucially, all of the “characters” featured in Tan’s film are interested in periods of the past before Singapore’s official independence in 1965, another eschewal of a state-imposed grand narrative.}\]
Figure 24 Archaeologists working on the Sentosa Island site, *Invisible City*. 
More shots of the team of archaeologists continue to be interspersed with other narrative threads throughout *Invisible City* (see Figure 25). These slow meditative shots of tropical jungle-scenes, of archaeologists sifting through dirt, sorting out fragments and cataloguing finds could, on the one hand, be seen as a structuring metaphor for what Tan does in the film, as she pauses to reflect and then brushes off layers of forgetting in order to achieve a limited, fragmentary truth about Singapore’s past. However, Tan admits in the audio commentary in the *Invisible City* DVD that while she had initially intended the entire film to be based on the conceit of archaeology, this fell through because “it was too cerebral.”

Instead, in a moment akin to Tan Shzr Ee’s return to an emotional autobiography at the end of *Lost Roads*, Tan Pin Pin notes, in the audio commentary track overlaying the initial archaeological scenes, that “what worked best was to use the emotional high
and lows as the structure, as the primary way to interact with viewers — the film is structured by emotion and feeling. Since, a film is not logical.” Indeed, in the vein of Frow’s observation that desire (and not truth) is the organizing logic of memory and my earlier argument that spatial remembrance must consider how human desire reshapes social space, *Invisible City* here attempts to bypass a cartographical view of Singapore and even an archaeological one by turning to the mutability of human emotion. Going further than *Singapore GaGa*, *Invisible City* eschews traditional narrative structures, for a meandering focus that relies on its audience’s emotional response to the film as a way to grapple and wrestle with the often disjunctive and thwarted attempts of meaning-making.

Another way to understand Tan’s rejection of the process of archaeology in favour of emotion as a structuring device for her film is to figure these emotional trajectories through the archaeologists and the artefacts themselves. Here again Ingold’s notion of wayfinding becomes an important critical lens through which to understand how *Invisible City* as producing and traversing Singapore’s urban spaces. In this case, the initial wayfinders are the archaeologists and documenters that the film follows, and the physical artefacts that they have unearthed or recorded become the landmarks with which they traverse space. On another level, the film is itself a wayfinder, wayfinding its paths through the unfamiliar, contested, teeming terrain that is Singapore’s hidden spatial histories. Thus, the film’s logic is structured by the intense passion and inquisitiveness of its filmmaker and by its “characters” like the archaeologist Lim Chen Sian (see Figure 26), who is the leader of the featured expedition, and in his own words wants to make an “inventory” and “survey” of what is in the fort to better understand the people who were there before. His desire thus produces this hidden space, as he wayfinds his way imperfectly using the fragments and artefacts that he and his discovers. As Ingold posits, “in ordinary wayfinding […] every place holds within it memories of previous arrivals and departures, as well as expectations of how one may reach it, or reach other places from it” (237). It is thus not the literal action of archaeology that is privileged in the film, although it is important, but rather the desire behind the action, and the steadfast earnestness of the young archaeologists themselves. Their laborious work produces only a fragmentary understanding of the past, but Lim seems to suggest that just being able to
hold on to physical remnants of this history, the only history that he can relate to, is worth it because it allows him to experience his country’s spaces anew.

Figure 26 Archaeologist Lim Chen Sian, *Invisible City*

The film’s central notion of our limited ability to recapture the past finds a particular resonance with one of its most compelling figures: the ageing videographer Ivan Polunin. There is of course, something fitting about the fact that Tan has chosen another filmmaker as one of the central figures in her film. The first glimpse of Polunin (see Figure 27) we get is one of a young documentary maker who has an eye for both his natural landscape and the everyday pleasures of his subjects.
Figure 27 Young Ivan Polunin, *Invisible City*

From a sun-dappled shot of a group of Orang Asli\(^{59}\) boys who are playing with tree branches to the intimate close-ups of the weather-beaten middle aged Chinese fishermen eating their meal of watery rice and small fish (see Figure 28-29), Tan judiciously presents Polunin’s footage of the most mundane, the most quotidian. Watching Polunin’s footage within Tan’s film adds another layer of meaning to the footage itself; here we do not just get Polunin’s empathetic eye to the past, we are also watching what Tan has chosen to incorporate into her film. Tan chooses to show an everyday life that is usually excluded from the grand narratives of Singapore history and in doing so humanizes the abstraction of the past for the viewer. This is not what Chua Beng Huat notes to be the “abstract sentiments” of “kampung life” (Chua “That Imagined Space” 27); watching

\(^{59}\)Malay term for indigenous peoples from the Malaysian peninsula.
Polunin’s footage we are struck by immediacy of the early color film that augments the reality of this life from the barely accessible mangrove swamps, the meager meals of the people, and the busy bewildering markets where produce is sold off the street curb. These long forgotten scenes, markers of ordinary life, act as imperfect landmarks to the film’s wayfinding of the past. Tan notes in her the audio commentary on the *Invisible City* DVD that she was “mesmerized” by this footage precisely because she was “trying to identify places she could possibly recognize” — a corporeal way of re-traversing the city through its lost and forgotten inhabitants, and long demolished buildings and road intersections.

![Figure 28 Polunin’s footage of fishermen eating, Singapore 1950s, Invisible City](image)
Tan’s frustrating interviews with Polunin do not attempt to construct an overarching narrative that links these disparate scenes of Singapore together. In fact, one could say that they make a show out of failing to do so, with Polunin often interrupting himself mid-thought or mid-sentence as he struggles to formulate his explanations. We later discover that he is recovering from brain surgery, a fitting physical corollary to the film’s awareness of the fragmentary nature of memory (see figure 30). Polunin is mostly unable to properly articulate why he found it so important to record and preserve his archive of Singapore in the 1950s. *Invisible City* further brings this incoherence and its fragmentary results to the forefront when at a crucial juncture, the film lets Polunin’s confused voice-overs play over a black screen. Again, as with the repeated shots of the archaeologists’ labours, Polunin’s rather poignant musings on the significance of his work and even his frequent inability to provide geographical and historical details are

**Figure 29 Polunin’s footage of Singapore street scenes in 1950s, *Invisible City***
testament to the impossibility of a perfect record of memory and history, of the possibility of losing your way while wayfinding in this indeterminate space.

Figure 30 An aged Polunin in his Singapore bungalow, Invisible City

Tan additionally emphasizes the fragility of Polunin’s collection, when she shows how his reels are kept in antiquated tin cases on a rickety looking shelf, with an ominous reminder of their flammability represented by a shot of the small fire extinguisher that is mounted next to them (see Figure 31). These shots allow the film to explore the paradoxical possibilities of physical reels of films themselves: that space and time are

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60It is worth noting that after Tan’s documentary was screened, Polunin and his work enjoyed new found fame that resulted in a television special, a museum exhibition, and requests by the National Archives of Singapore for access to his film reels.
present in these forms and can function as wayfinding landmarks through Singapore’s unknown past spatio-temporalities.

Figure 31 Part of Polunin’s film reel collection, *Invisible City*

As the film progresses, it becomes apparent that it is particularly interested in a specific time period of Singapore’s history: the years just before the nation achieved independence. In one scene, a journalist that Tan is interviewing says that he wants to look beyond the artificial marker of 1965, the year of Singapore’s independence, because seeing it as the beginning of Singapore’s modern history means that the years just before 1965 will be neglected. The fifties and early sixties were part of a period of transition and upheaval for Singapore, and as the journalist and the film both suggest, one also of forgetting. This is because a great deal of the official history written of this period has
been constructed with the intention of bolstering a triumphant account of a vulnerable new nation.

While this brief analysis of *Invisible City* does not do complete justice to the polyphony of voices that the movie allows, it perhaps provides an inkling of the scale of historical reclamation that needs to occur. However, Singapore historian Hong Lysa points out that Tan’s film is still an exercise of privilege in the production of spatio-temporalities in Singapore. She notes how in particular that many of the people featured in *Invisible City* have simply “gathered sufficient social capital to have a sense of the limits that they can go” or that their stories are now “useful to state discourses” (Hong). Hong asks,

What narrative frames are Singapore Malays permitted that would enable them to prepare for being forgotten, when they have yet to have a place in the nation’s collective memory, save for being party to race riots?

Much as *Invisible City* reveals the contours of the past that struggle to be remembered, it is also a documentary of those who belong to particular discursive communities whose existence already is a sign of privilege, albeit hard-won. Too much of the city remains invisible. (Hong)

Taking Hong’s critique into consideration, my last chapter in this section on Singapore turns to the prolific career of Singapore’s most prominent contemporary Malay writer Alfian Sa’at. While it is certainly true that in a hegemonic, illiberal state, all citizens are to a certain extent minoritized, to be a Singaporean Malay may be to be a minority of a minority.
Chapter 6 Malay Sketches, Singapore: Alfian Sa’at’s Minor Literature

Alfian Sa'at is by far the most prolific of the Singaporeans that I have discussed in this section. Besides his initial award-winning two collections of poetry *One Fierce Hour* (1998) and *A History of Amnesia* (2001), and his short story collection *Corridor* (1999), Alfian has gone on to great critical and commercial success as a playwright. In the past two decades, he has written twenty-three plays in English and another thirteen in Malay. His body of work has played a significant role in shaping literary and political discourse in Singapore. In a country where the penal code still criminalizes homosexual sex (a throwback to its colonial legacy), Alfian has openly declared his own homosexuality and worked to raise the visibility of the gay community in Singapore. Alfian is of mixed Malay and Chinese descent, but identifies primarily with what he sees as a disenfranchised Malay minority in Singapore. Generally, his works have sought to address what it means to be gay and of a racial minority in a Chinese majority and heteronormative nation.\(^{61}\) While Alfian's plays are the medium by which he engages most directly with his audience, his comparatively smaller body of poetry and prose present more intimate experiences. His first two collections of poetry: *A History of Amnesia* and *One Fierce Hour* suggest a preoccupation with Singapore’s history and its developmental politics. In particular, *A History of Amnesia* poetically rewrites episodes

\(^{61}\) The politics of sexuality and race (and their intersections) are consistent themes throughout his oeuvre — from the celebrated trilogy of queer plays *Asian Boys Vol. 1.* to *3.* to his more recent political verbatim theatre pieces *Cooling Off Day* (2011) and *Cook A Pot Of Curry* (2013). While not without its flaws, Alfian's work has been indispensable for its unrelenting insistence on a socio-political critique of the People’s Action Party government, its ability to capture the zeitgeist of Singaporeans and to imagine alternatives to the current state of affairs. Whether by revealing hidden perversions in the early *sex.violence.blood.gore* (1999), providing a queer history of the nation in *Asian Boys Vol. 1: Dreamplay* (2000), or simply letting ordinary Singaporeans’ voices drive his work in *Cooling Off Day* (2011), the writer’s works have presented some of the most innovative and heartfelt attempts at political dissent in recent Singapore Literature.
of accepted history, and further excavates specific sites in the city that are irrevocably changed by development.

One poem speaks directly to my analysis of his work---“Portrait of a Sentenced Library,” attempts to memorialize the ordinary brick structure of Singapore’s first National Library constructed in the late 1950s. The poem attempts the physically impossible by superimposing the ghostly image of the library and its contents on the traffic tunnel that has replaced it:

This is the logic of nostalgia –
This is what I mean when I say
That my memory is selfish.
Who can guarantee that roaming

Through a tunnel I will find again
The Children’s section, where a boy walked
With ‘The Little Prince’ in his hands,
His smile the first line of a novel

Neither of us had read before? (45)

In these lines, the poem distorts fixed spatial and temporal rules, disrupting the hierarchies of a linear, progress-oriented history and state-dictated city planning. By imposing the ghostly image of the past and the soon-to-be demolished “Children’s section” on the soon-to-be constructed traffic tunnel, the poem creates an indeterminate zone where “neither” the poet nor his young self have read “The Little Prince”. While calling this is a “selfish” and individually oriented view, Alfian’s affection for the library and his evocation of the illogical nature of nostalgia is a counter-cartographical move in

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While ostensibly a public building, the library had evolved over the years to be an important social space for Singaporeans of all walks of life. It was demolished in 2005 to make way for a traffic tunnel since it was not judged to be of sufficient architectural and historic merit by the authorities to be saved. However, the public outcry that arose when plans for its destruction were publicized points to its status as a focal point for collective urban memory in Singapore.
itself. The neatly planned and mapped traffic tunnel that has been conflated with the emotionally charged site of the former National Library is imaginatively and momentarily altered here. Further, if we recall Lefebvre’s trialectic of space, through the represented and representational space of Alfian’s poem, it is also clear that this alteration is now a permanent part of the reader’s spatial practice when encountering the Fort Canning traffic tunnel. The final rhetorical question in “Portrait of a Sentenced Library” is powerful because of its gentle but insidious suggestion of an intimate, unmappable spatio-temporality within the overdetermined traffic tunnel. It is a space that the poem very crucially does not “guarantee,” for even to fix its memory that way would be to open it up to the possibility of this nostalgia being co-opted by an official narrative.

I cite this particular poem because of its crystallization of the traits of intimacy, indeterminancy, and detouring— hallmarks of the kind of dissident Singapore writing that I have been analyzing. Additionally, in my analysis of Alfian’s collection of forty-eight flash fictions, *Malay Sketches*, I will consider the role of brevity in his de Certeausian “tactics.” As I discussed in this study’s introduction, de Certeau sees a tactic as something that “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance […] The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them” (xix). What de Certeau stresses here is the possibility of resistance within a fixed system, a resistance however, that is fragmentary and repeatedly ephemeral. Angelia Poon similarly sees de Certeau’s theories as relevant in interpreting the function of Alfian’s work as a series of “tactics” and “ruses,” “employed by individuals or groups caught in the web of power” (121). Poon argues that by

representing […] marginalized subjects in his writing, Alfian traces other storylines, underscoring the ways in which literature and national imagining are inextricably linked. Taken collectively, these narratives question, resist, and problematize the state-imposed vision and versions of nation often so unthinkingly and uncritically internalized. (136)
My analysis of Alfian’s text builds on Poon’s theorization of his earlier work, but places a significant emphasis on exploring the role of episodic brevity and open-endedness in his most recent prose fiction. Poon suggests that literature, and in particular Alfian’s work is “powerfully suggestive for being passing, sidelong glances and beginning utterances, a necessary step towards disrupting the state-established racial, spatial and historical paradigms for imagining the nation” (121). Alfian’s deliberate turn to prose fragments, flash fictions as he calls them may be a formal reflection of the “guerilla tactics” needed to disrupt ways of thinking about history, time and space as wholly teleological and map-like in the first place. These fictions accordingly, range in length, subject matter, narrative voice and setting. They are as short as two paragraphs and rarely as long as four or five pages. They speak in the voices of children, adolescents, the middle-aged and the very old. They occasionally venture across the border to Malaysia and one piece is written from the viewpoint of an overseas Malay student in New York City. Twelve of the shorter fictions are simply titled with a place-name and a time, giving the collection a semblance of a spatial rootedness in Singapore and a chronological structure that begins in the wee hours of the morning and ends twenty-four hours later.

Given the expansive range of these fictions, my reading will seek to complicate the idea that they should be taken in a “collective” manner — while there is certainly unity in Alfian’s Malay Sketches, it is not one that collectively opposes what is “state-imposed.” Instead of constructing another grand narrative of private resistance against the public state, Malay Sketches provides us paradoxical glimpses of rebellion and complicity, dissidence and resignation. At this juncture, perhaps a more useful way of thinking of Alfian’s most recent work is by returning to Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of a minor literature and assemblages. Certainly, Alfian’s work in English can be thought of as being part of a minor literature, “a minority construction within a major language” (Kafka 16). As a minority working in the postcolonially inflected-English of a majority Chinese country, Alfian’s work is as Deleuze and Guattari would see it, written in a language that “is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (Kafka 16) where “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (Kafka 17).
Arguably, faced with these limited spatial and linguistic boundaries, the text pushes Deleuze and Guattari’s spatial envisioning of the minor literature further and works as a sort of “assemblage” in the loose and mutable way that it is defined in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari see one of the main characteristics of minor literature in its functioning as “the collective assemblage of enunciation” (18). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they elaborate on this possibility by posting that,

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*. (Thousand 34-35)

Assemblage then, in the spatial manner that Deleuze and Guattari conceive it, is a critically productive way to consider the deliberately fragmentary, rhizomatic structure of *Malay Sketches*. Each flash fiction is a trajectory through the island-state, each one varying in its function and intensity. Some are deeply contemplative: “Paya Lebar, 5am” gives us a brief moment of prayer in the darkness. While others are anxious, and rushed: “Tanjong Pagar, 12 noon” tracks an office worker waiting interminably for a cigarette break only to discover that he does not have a light. Many of the fictions approach central fissures in Singaporean society through an oblique spatial shift—indeed, they “deterritorialize” these issues from particularly fraught public spaces. For instance, instead of attending to the issue of the death penalty in the space of the execution chambers for instance, the pieces “The Hole” and “The Sendoff” take us instead to the private home where the news of an executed son is delivered to a father, and a prison cafeteria where a retiring executioner is giving advice to his replacement. The pieces focus on spatio-temporalities that are momentary, glimpsed, unimportant and unmappable. Their disparate themes and polyphony produce a multiplicity, as in Tan Pin Pin’s films, that refuses an overarching narrative yet is interconnected, recalling Deleuze and Guattari’s point that an assemblage, like “a rhizome or multiplicity never allows
itself to be overcoded, never has available a supplementary dimension over and above its number of lines” (9).

What I am suggesting here is that the shifting, varying and indeterminate connections in the assemblage that is Malay Sketches allows for an alternative production of Singapore space, one that rejects the grand narratives and zoned maps of the state. Instead through its very structure and form, the text intimates a radically different mode of understanding and inhabiting the urban spaces of Singapore. In many ways, Malay Sketches is a culmination of the experimental forms that we have seen in the work of Tan Shzr Ee and Tan Pin Pin. The fragmentary yet connected natures of Lost Roads, Singapore GaGa and Invisible City can also be viewed as assemblages, similarly oriented to an alternative production of space, where multiplicity is a remedy to the singular, state-dictated narratives of space. The title Malay Sketches already suggests the contingent and preliminary nature of Alfian’s counter-cartography. This is in direct contrast to the 1895 colonial project that the text takes its title from, in which Sir Frank Swettenham, the then British Resident of Selangor (a state in current-day Malaysia) gives us a fixed, anthropological view of “the real Malay” (2). While Swettenham’s text uses “sketches” as a term to excuse the “unscientific” and romantic nature of its prose, it was nonetheless dominated by a single, authoritative first person narrator: the colonial expert. By contrast, Alfian’s Malay Sketches evinces a polyphony of voices from the Malay community, engaged in what Isrizal Mohamed Isa in the introduction to the text calls “honest, open conversations about issues that are pinning down certain segments of the community whose voices appear already muffled” (13).

In doing so, I believe that Alfian is drawing from his most recent work for the stage Cooling Off Day (2011) and Cook a Pot of Curry (2013) — two plays that rely on the technique of verbatim theatre. These experimental plays have garnered him mixed

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63Independent theatre and live performance in Singapore has long been the vanguard of dissident thought and resistance and the government has tried to regulate its existence. Interestingly, forum theatre (where audiences are encouraged to intervene in the play, especially during scenes of oppression) which enjoyed a brief interest in the 1990s in Singapore was vigorously challenged by the authorities at that time. Quoting a 1994 Straits Times report, Lee Weng Choy notes that
responses from both audiences and critics and they are based on testimonies gathered from a series of personal interviews as the basis for its script. The resultant polyphony of these plays means that there is no single narrative or indeed obvious moral to them. Further, in *Cook a Pot of Curry*’s controversial ending, the national anthem is played and the state flag is raised before abruptly falling to the stage floor. There are no subsequent curtain calls or formal ending to the play suggesting not only the incomplete nature of the so-called national project, but also the play’s rejection of a unifying grand narrative of nation itself as symbolized by the flag. As Michael Anderson and Linden Wilkinson note, there has been a resurgence in the verbatim theatre form and they put this down to the “lack of diverse voices and stories in our community” (154), seeing the form as a crucial way to offer audiences “potentially transformative learning opportunities in a climate of deteriorating public debate and consumer commodification” (167). Similarly, Duška Radosavljevic points to “the increasing mediatization of contemporary life and a rising inability of the public to rely on the media” (147) as reasons for the popularity of the genre. Radosavljevic goes on to argue that verbatim theatre is a “move towards relationality” that sees in the audience “a co-creator of meaning” (149).

The polyphony, multiplicity and interactivity of verbatim theatre thus provide potentially radical possibilities to Singaporean audiences — and arguably the process-driven creation of these plays has fed into Alfian’s most recent work. The polyphonic sketches or flash fictions in *Malay Sketches* are very much like the diverse slate of characters in Alfian’s plays. In these fleeting scenes, the pieces show us the unexpected, improbable links between private lives, private spaces and the political in the “cramped”

the government’s criticism of these forms is on the basis that they “have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation [posing] dangers to public order, security and decency, and much greater difficulty to the licensing authority.” (Lee) Ironically, forum theatre has since been accepted and some would say even co-opted by the state. See Tan, Kenneth (2013).

64 One enraged letter writer to the national newspaper called it a “cheap gimmick which smacked bad taste” even as she realized that she had automatically stood up for the anthem after “being programmed by years attending school assemblies” (“Respect national anthem”).
arena of minor literature. The text traces the effect of fraught histories of displacement and racial politics and policies (social, linguistic, economic) on everyday lives and interactions. A mix of first person narration and third person limited narration, each fiction usually takes on a single character as its focalization, much like the structure of the verbatim theatre that Alfian has written in recent years. The extreme polyphony of the text also presents its own challenges when it comes to literary analysis: it is not possible to look at all forty-eight stories in detail, and yet it must be noted that an indispensable part of the subversive nature of *Malay Sketches* is the fact that it so resolutely refuses to be mapped or to be reduced to a single, understandable stereotype.

While I have considered the collection as assemblage, it is also necessary to address the genre of the flash fiction or microfiction that Alfian uses. The British microfiction writer Holly Howitt-Dring argues that microfiction is “the great reckoning in the little room, the macro in a micro, the ship in a bottle.” There is so much going on inside a microfiction that it feels bigger than its small space on the page allows” (57). Considering the cramped spaces of everyday life in Singapore (the public housing flat, the office cubicle, the subway car), the smallness and brevity of the genre seems particularly apt. Yet, Howitt-Dring like many others have also argued for the expanse possible in the micro fiction, speaking perhaps of the possibility of the genre to alter the spatial limits that it inhabits. Ethan Joella argues that part of this power comes from the “highly calculated” and experimental nature of the flash fiction. Joella sees it “in a rule-betraying, anti-story category of its own. The pieces are effectively condensed, and they revolutionize the stale, customary form. The writers take different roads with their narratives…” (46). The spatial metaphor that Joella uses here is instructive — indeed, I would argue that flash fictions allow Alfian’s *Malay Sketches* to operate in oblique and unexpected ways, to produce new spaces paradoxically by the grace of their constraints. Like Tan Shzr Ee’s *Lost Roads* and Tan Pin Pin’s films, *Malay Sketches*

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65 While I use the terms “flash fiction” and “microfiction” here interchangeably, Howitt-Dring sees “microfiction” as the umbrella term. See Howitt-Dring 2011.
66 A longer literary and philosophical history of the aphoristic or fragment-like aspects of flash fictions might include, among others, William Blake’s idea in the poem “Auguries of Innocence”
also requires an active reader, one that is not only aware of the numerous references and intertextualities necessary for the short form, but who is ready to embrace and participate in a literary form that demands close attention.

In my analysis of *Malay Sketches*, I depart in crucial ways from William Nelles’s most recent article on microfiction, where while he acknowledges the generic uniqueness of the form, also argues that “actions narrated in microfictions are likely to be more palpable and extreme” (91), that its “characters are usually anonymous adults of unspecified age” (92) and that most crucially, “in much microfiction, the setting is virtually blank” (93). While Nelles’s theorization of the narrative strategies that microfiction employs is useful, perhaps it would be better to see Alfian’s work here as postcolonial flash fictions — one where setting and character are central; where the specificity of being a member of a minority Malay community in an Anglophone, Sino-centric capitalist society is inseparable from each narrative. As with Tan Pin Pin and Tan Shzr Ee, Alfian’s work here engages with the politics of the everyday where it is not necessarily “palpable and extreme” actions that are central, but ordinary, mundane routines. While I am conscious of the way the fictions work as an assemblage (insofar as they speak to each other, alter each other’s spatio-temporalities by being placed side by side but cannot be reduced to a homogeneous collective), I will focus on just three fictions that inhabit quotidiem spaces. These stories may seem “cramped” in spatial and formal terms, but as my analysis argues, they are able to come to remarkably disparate and unexpected revelations

**The interracial marriage**

*Malay Sketches* begins immediately by exploring the instability of the spaces allocated to a minority Malay population. Its very first fiction, "The Convert" gives us an of the possibility of “the Universe in a Grain of Sand” and Walter Benjamin’s discourse on the “monad” in his 1940 essay “On the Concept of History.” My thanks to Ato Quayson for pointing out these connections.
intimation of the porousness of boundaries of race and culture as seen through an interracial marriage. Jason, the eponymous Chinese convert of the story is, at first, superficially engaged in a production of an exoticised minority space. This is evident through his obsession with the spectacle of his wedding to his Malay Muslim bride:

   Jason wanted the whole works for his wedding. Hawa, his wife-to-be, was actually nervous about having the bersanding ceremony, where bride and groom would side by side on a dais. She thought that too much attention would be focused on the fact that he was a Chinese man, dressed in traditional Malay garb. (Sa'at 2012, 17)

The bersanding, or "entronement" ceremony is interesting spatially, since it can be seen as the fleeting transformation of an ordinary void deck of a HDB block (where Malay weddings are usually held to accommodate the large numbers of guests) into a elevated space. The story notes how Jason is fixated on the material items of the wedding that signal racial identity: the baju kurung, the songket, and also the voicing of the space in the Malay language during the akad nikah or marriage solemnisation ceremony. Hawa, on the other hand, is aware of the transgressive nature of their union and how it will alter the traditional space of the Muslim wedding. In the space of its short opening paragraph then, the story immediately highlights the presence of a clearly defined racialized space in Singapore, most conventionally at what is usually a wholly Muslim affair: a Malay wedding. Inter-ethnic marriages between Malay women and Chinese men are rare in the country; according to Singapore’s Department of Statistics, only seventy-four out of over one thousand interethnic marriages between Malays and non-Malays in 2012 were of this

67Bersanding literally means "entronement" or "sitting in state." Karen Frisk describes the ceremony as when "the bride and groom are presented as a royal couple. They are seated on a dais, elevated above the rest of those present, and they are dressed in royal style with suits made of brocade. The bride does not cover her hair and wears a tiara. The cultural roots of the custom of bersanding are traced back to the Hindu influence in the Malay Peninsula" (Frisk 2009, 144).

68Malay Sketches includes a glossary at the end of the text that translates the Malay words baju kurung as "Traditional Malay attire for women consisting of a knee-length blouse worn over a long skirt" (224) and songket as "A hand-woven fabric in silk or cotton, and intricately patterned with gold or silver threads" (224).
configuration. Thus, Hawa is justifiably concerned on the out-of-placeness that Jason's ethnically Chinese features will signal when he is seated on the dais, a hyper-racialized space in Singapore.

The story then goes on to show how her worry may be justified, although not necessarily in the limited way that she intuits. Moving quickly from the contained space of the wedding and its preparations, the story turns to three other spaces that briefly show the visible and invisible effects of the racialisation in the country. First, we move to the space of an army camp, where a few months later, Jason is informed by his superior that he is to transferred to another unit, with "no explanations... forthcoming" (18): while he is trained as combat engineer he must now be an infantry specialist. What the story relies on here is an unspoken understanding in Singapore that Malays are usually not given combat ready positions because there is a fear that they would not be loyal during a potential conflict involving Singapore's neighbouring majority-Muslim countries.\textsuperscript{70} In this way, story subtly posits the encroachment of the abstract space of the state into the private and social space of the inter-ethnic marriage and religious conversion. What begins as a slightly unsettling hybridization of a Muslim wedding ceremony is suddenly given greater geo-political significance when the ordered spatial divisions of the state's military policies readjust and reinscribe their power after this change.

The story then moves immediately to the intimate space of the marital bed


\textsuperscript{70} In his paper "Multiculturalism as an Instrument of Social Control," Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat points out that "Malay ethnicity still haunts domestic race relations, most notably in relation to Malay participation in Singapore's armed forces [...] Malay youth were not conscripted for at least the first decade after the establishment of the defence force. Now, Malays are not found among the top ranks. The government has not denied the discrimination but points to the alleged potential 'moral' conflict that might face a Malay soldier if Singapore were at war with Malaysia or Indonesia. He could be placed in a situation of either having to shoot his own 'ethnic brethren' or fellow Singaporeans. According to Lee Kuan Yew, prime minister from 1959-90, 'it would be a very tricky business for the SAF [Singapore Armed Forces] to put a Malay officer who was very religious and who had family ties in Malaysia, in charge of a machine-gun unit'. Apparently after forty years of 'nationhood', the loyalty of Malays remains a political issue." (65)
It was only later that night, lying beside his sleeping wife that Jason thought of an answer to his superior: "I never went around telling all of you to call me 'Jamal'. I'm still Jason." But was he? He turned towards his wife and kissed the back of her neck. She stirred and curled her back to rest in the concavity of his body. (18)

The scalar shifts in this flash fiction, from wedding to military policy back to a marital bed, are dizzying but rightly so. In these ways, the story shows how, in the cramped space of Singapore, the personal is always inextricably linked to the political. Yet, even while the abstract space demarcated by the state acts as a zoned map of inclusion and exclusions, Alfian's fiction shows us how there continue to be unmappable spaces and identities. Thus, with this third spatio-temporality, the story highlights an indeterminacy inherent in this private space that contests the fixed lines of race, religion and state policy that dominate Jason and Hawa's spatial practices. As Jason muses on an appropriate response to his army superior, both Jason (in what is perhaps free indirect discourse) and the narrator (as an interjection) ask a seemingly rhetorical question about his hybrid identity, "But was he?". The ambiguity of this question is both in its imagined response and in its asker. The question is not within quotation marks, and might be part of Jason's interior monologue or asked by an omniscient narrator as a larger question for the narrative. The flash fiction leaves this richly unresolved, suggesting perhaps that the question does not need to be definitively answered since the point of the story is that racial and religious markers are essentially social constructs. Additionally, the text posits the vulnerability of all citizens, not just the ones who happen to currently fall into particular racial categories. The only respite from this constant bureaucratic categorization it seems, is when Jason turns to the corporeal reality of his wife, in the space of their shared bed where their bodies curl into each other.

If this seems like an unlikely utopian ending, it is. So much so that the story does not end there. Instead, the text then reveals that Jason and Hawa's story is just one of many in Singapore, now subsumed without its complexities and slippages into a grand narrative of patriotism and nationalist propaganda. Jason appears again, two years later, on the screen of an editing room where a television producer is "reviewing rushes to be used for a montage for the National Day Celebrations" (18):
Ordinary Singaporeans were asked to respond to the question, 'What will you defend?' A yuppie-type with black-framed glasses said, 'My job.' A scout hesitatingly said, 'My future?' A woman at a food court said, 'Myself'. And then Jason appeared on the monitor. He was wearing his army uniform, with his green infantry beret. He stared straight into the camera, and in a slow, measured tone, said, 'I will defend my family. My beautiful wife, and my one-year-old son.'

The producer thought this was the most heartfelt and sincere testimony, and slotted it right at the end of the montage. It helped that one could almost detect tears filling up the soldier's eyes. (18-19)

"The Convert" shows how Jason's positioning and complex subjectivity must negotiate with the state's policies and the complicated racial terrain of the country, even as they are elided in the official national narrative. In addition to being subject to the racialized mapping of the state, he also is treated as a punchline of sorts to the televised propaganda that produces a version of Singapore space where military strategy, the economy, and the biopolitics of reproductivity are clearly evident. The story here also lays bare the mechanics of the production of abstract space -- the represented space of the National Day Parade video dominates conceptions of space in Singapore and frames them in a geo-political, military discourse of what one will "defend." The television producer is an unwitting cog in this machinery, completely unable to access the complex spatialities behind Jason's statements, and perhaps, unaware of the politicized space that the montage helps to underpin. Indeed, this final sequence in "The Convert" shows how the state is able to mobilize emotion and affect to its benefit, subsuming these qualities into a virtual/real space that advances its own nationalist, neoliberal agenda.71

From this first flash fiction then, we can see the density and potential of Malay Sketches. Yet, I hesitate in my analysis of Alfian's work to see these scenes as layers in a

71 It is also interesting to consider this scene in the context of this study’s earlier analysis of Tan Pin Pin’s satirical take on the National Day Parade where she pairs the footage from the celebrations with the country and blues song “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights.”
kind of palimpsestic view of Singaporean life -- the notion that the marital and domestic spaces are hidden tidily under the official military or televised ones. What the title of the story in this case suggests is the unmappability of Jason's own body as a "convert." The story directly asks, "But was he?" because it is clear that even Jason does not know whether he is Jamal or Jason. The indeterminancy of his body, and the spatial detours that the story takes in order to remind us of this, show us the instability of racial categories, and in turn racialized spaces in the country.

**The identity card**

The spatialities of other minority bodies in *Malay Sketches* are consistently subjected to the planned and mapped spaces of contemporary Singapore. In an especially chilling flash fiction, "The Hole," the father of a convict receives news that his son has been executed. He is handed a letter and his son's pink identity card that functions both as a *memento mori* but also as something far more sinister,

I put the letter to one side and stared hard at the I/C. So this was what a dead man looked like. There were shadows under his eyes. There was something far away in his expression, a face not prepared for the snap of the camera.

There was his name.

My name also. Separated from his by the word 'Bin'.

His race.

Date of birth.

Country of birth.

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72 Singapore citizens' identity cards are pink while permanent residents' are blue. See Clammer, John for particular significance of the racial classification category on the card and its links to bureaucratic control in the country. As Clammer notes, “Every Singaporean carries an identity card on which this identity is inscribed, and anyone coming into Singapore society must adopt such an identity, or functioning is impossible as one cannot be classified” (138).
On the back, his I/C number.

Our home address.

But what absorbed me the most was a little hole that had been punched in his I/C. It was there to say that the I/C could no longer be used. To show someone an I/C like this, you would have to place your finger and thumb over the hole, praying that nobody would notice that you were holding something that had been damaged. (98)

The uncanny aspect of seeing his now dead son's photograph on a ubiquitous government issued document is further amplified by the document's ability to emplace its citizen subject in a specific, spatial context. The focus on the pink identity card or I/C reminds us of its import as the ultimate symbol of governmentality in the context of the Singapore state. Even a nameless citizen who has been executed by the state, still has his parentage, race, place and date of birth, home address and his identifying number all mapped ineluctably onto one another. He is reducible to a subject that is defined by these metrics and situated in his family home, even though he has long since departed. With this emphasis on the mechanics of how the Singaporean identity card functions as a bureaucratic mapping of the citizen’s body and a simultaneous defamiliarization of this everyday object, Alfian’s story reminds us of the ways the state has intruded into the most basic parameters of its citizens’ lives. The father in the story fixates on the hole that has been punched into the card as a means to paradoxically invalidate and fix his son’s space in Singaporean society. The irrevocable nature of the state implemented death penalty is symbolized by the casual destruction of this important document; in the story the father turns his anger "towards the person who had punched the hole [...] this clean, straightforward hole" (98-99).

The hole lets the story critique the enforcement of the death penalty in Singapore which until recently was one in the highest per capita in the world. By translating the image of the noose into the spatial iterations of a citizen’s life, the fiction tracks a citizen's downward spiral, making the son's demise seem inevitable:
My son was no more. I saw a series of circles, perfect circles... the outline of a playground, the stone table under our block, the noose tightening around his neck, the shape of his mouth when he was still a baby, shrinking to the size of the hole. It was an opening through which I felt my body leaking, drop by drop, until the day I join my son on the other side. (98-99)

These circles are metaphorical and material, constraining and defining the lives of racialized citizens with their perfection and mundaneness. In linking the corporeal with the built environment, "The Hole" conflates the private and public in a way that blurs the distinctions between the citizen’s body and the material productions of the state, from the playground to the noose. The father in the story sees the hole and its association with death as the only escape from these spaces, and in one of the darkest moments of the collection, is unable to see any other form of reprieve. The complex imagery in this fiction is also powerful because taps into a collective Singaporean consciousness of the banality of life in a public housing estate --- a living space that is the daily reality of the vast majority of the population.

The public housing estate / The camping site / The kampung

It is thus important that "The Hole" takes place in the domestic space, and not in any official setting. Indeed, many of the flash fictions return repeatedly to the small, crowded lives that take place in and around the public housing estate. In some of these stories like "Sacrifice," "Proof," "The Bath," and "Second Take," issues like drug offences among the Malay population, the policy of detention without trial enacted upon local Islamic terrorists, the death rituals for a Muslim AIDS victim, and the cross-cultural effects of poverty are all played out in brief instances in these flats. Other stories like “After Dusk Prayers” suggest ways in which spatial practices of older social communities in the country are fleetingly present even in the confines of the public housing estate.

The final story of the collection, “Overnight,” further offers a brief moment of respite from these overdetermined living spaces, one that attempts yet ultimately fails to contest their strictures. Set on Changi Beach in a temporary camping site, the fiction
begins with a simple premise: Farisha, and her family are celebrating her son's birthday by purchasing a tent and going for a camping trip. Farisha's father we are told had lived on Pulau Ubin, an offshore island that is still today thought of as one of the last remaining rural spaces in Singapore. Thus, embedded in this narrative from the beginning is the fact of massive rural-urban displacement that occurred through Singapore's years of development, where the population was moved en-masse from villages and slum housing to public housing flats. "Overnight" symbolically and literally reproduces the space of the kampung or Malay village as the family assemble the temporary "blue trapezoid structure" in a spot "located along a row of eleven other tents" (41). The nine-year-old son poking fun at the enterprise perhaps, asks "Is this our new house?" (41) to which Farisha's husband replies in the affirmative. Yet, this act of playing house is not mere child's play, as the two-page fiction progresses, the family find themselves participants in the production of what Michel Foucault would see as a heterotopian space since it seeks a counter-existence to a city where all living space is zoned for specific uses (Foucault 1984, 47).

Farisha finds herself conversing with the other women in the camping site and they realize they have mutual friends and other connections that stem from their earlier lives in the kampong,

They talked about their childhoods in their respective kampungs. This was something Farisha could never share with her husband, as he was a Queenstown

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73 Loh Kah Seng's comprehensive study on the widespread clearance of the kampungs to build new public housing flats shows that the entire process was mired in complex politicking, suspicious cases of possible arson and the loss of "the semi-autonomous urban kampong population" which was "progressively being socialised into becoming citizens of the new nation-state" (Loh 2009, 642). While Loh's study looks mostly at low-income Chinese families, his study sheds invaluable light on the tightly knit, proto-anarchist communities that inhabited these kampungs. Further complicating attempts to see these villages as abstract concepts of ideological difference, Loh (like George Clancey before him who writes about the largely ideological public housing "emergency") is also highly critical of how the spatial politics of rehousing the entire population also meant that they were being trained to be "a disciplined citizenry" (643) and further argues for a more skeptical view of "the historiographical divide between the British and PAP governments in postwar narratives" (643).
estate boy for most of his life. They talked about being woken up by roosters, the rain clattering on zinc roofs, nights scented by the haze from mosquito coils.

'The government took away our kampung,' Farisha said, 'and they gave us camping!' (42)

Farisha finds an alternative community, bound by its spatial memories of the auditory, tactile and olfactory qualities of kampung life. The narrative attempts to make the kampung more than just an abstract concept, and posits that "camping" is somehow a surrogate for kampung life with its camaraderie and communality. The story does not just dwell on the memory of the kampung here, it produces this heterotopia again, in what it calls Farisha's "makeshift neighbourhood" (42). Her husband brings back large quantities of food to the campsite which they proceed to share with the others. When Farisha teases him good-naturedly about his generosity he is "bashful" (42) and uses an idiomatic expression to justify himself, "We share-share lah tonight. Who knows when we'll see these people again" (42). The repetition of the word "share" here echoes the cadences of the Malay language, which often repeats adjectives or verbs for emphasis. The night passes with a barbeque, group singalongs, a "seashell-hunting expedition" (42) and ends with Farisha falling asleep to "the sound of the waves, a familiar, regretful lullaby" (42). These linguistic textures, communal gestures, and social relations are, in effect, the spatial practices that produce the space of the kampung.

That this final fiction returns to the kampung as a contemporary possibility complicates the accepted notion of the village as an abstract figure of nostalgia for a precapitalist past in the collective Singaporean imaginary. In That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for the Kampong in Singapore, Chua Beng Huat points out that while there is a palpable nostalgia for this rural space this does not mean that it is a longing for an actual historical space. Chua argues that the kampung must be figured as a discursive site for a "resistance of the present" (Chua 1994, 20) where contemporary life is not relaxed, innocent or idyllic. Writing in the mid-1990s, he cites how the term has been used in public discourse by the mass media, members of government and members of the public. Chua argues that, "invoking the spirit of the kampung is a popular, if inarticulate,
response to the stresses of living under the 'disciplinary' effects of industrial capitalism" (24), even for Singaporeans who have never had firsthand experience of village life.

Chua argues for the *concept* of the kampung as "an alternative construction" (25) of life, one that Chua argues that government cannot afford to allow since its "claim to legitimacy to rule is based on the ability to improve ceaselessly the material life of the population" (25) in the logic of global capitalism. Yet, the kampung persists in what Chua calls "abstract sentiments" (27) as a means of

...resisting being swept away by the unrelenting forces that turn daily life into a resource which furthers the accumulation of capital at the national level and material possession, often in excess and useless, at the individual level. Raising the possibility of an alternative social and personal life at the current conjuncture is indicative of a cognitive and intellectual distancing by a significant proportion of the population from a present that heavily emphasises economic growth and expansion of material consumption. (27)

Chua's argument assumes that the kampung remains in the realm of an abstract alternative, an idealized past that is held up as the seed of an alternative to late capitalist life.

While my own analysis of the depiction of the "lost kampung" in *Malay Sketches* builds on Chua's idea that it "contains within it the possibility for an ideology for social change" (26), I believe that his account of the mythicization of the kampung may need to be re-examined in light of how the stories in *Malay Sketches* treat this collective memory. Arguably, the abstraction of kampung in stories like "After Dusk Prayers" and "Overnight" is subtly diminished by the brief but repeated acts of transgression which provide the text with a tangible albeit fleeting production of kampung life. In “Overnight,” the conversations about past kampungs, coupled with the altruistic actions of food sharing and play which have no profit motive, point to visceral ways in which social connections persists beyond the loss of the physical structures of the kampung. The camping site is a space that is more subtly radical than is evident at first glance – many of the characters here cannot participate in the part of a contemporary spatio-
temporality of Singapore that emphasizes the importance of private property. Indeed, this reverie cannot last in Singapore's current spatial configurations and the family are woken up by a Park Ranger who is going around enforcing its spatial boundaries. This authority figure "demands" Farisha's "camping permit" (43), since there needs to be a legal document to prove that she has the right to camp there. Whatever imagined public commons has been thoroughly wiped out at this point, as the book details this closing encounter:

While dutifully searching through her handbag, she overheard someone shout, "I don't want to see your face here again, you understand or not?" Another woman was pleading, "We have nowhere else to go. HDB took back our flat."
There was something familiar about the proceedings, but Farisha concentrated on locating her permit. She handed it to the Park Ranger, who reminded her to vacate by noon. Farisha realised that no reminiscence of the kampung was complete without the memory of eviction: a rooster crowing at dusk, a roof collapsing under rain, and the ember of a mosquito coil fading from orange, to grey, to a delicate pellet of dust. (42-43)

The Park Ranger here as an agent of the state literally determines who can be "seen" or who needs to be invisible in a particular space. By inserting the other woman's plea about her re-possessed HDB flat, the story is tapping on a real issue of homeless families forced to give up their government flats because they cannot meet their mortgage payments. Yet, here too the kampung returns, as the text notes that there is "something familiar about the proceedings." The story refuses to idealize the kampung as an uncomplicated utopian space. Instead, it is a remembered space that is also shot through with the pain of "the memory of eviction," a fact of Singapore life that continues. The fiction ends with a reworking of the more idyllic memory of the kampung, with a rooster crowing at the wrong time, a roof that collapses in its obsolescence and a final, haunting

74See Jiang, Genevieve. Jiang's newspaper article "Homeless... Hopeless" on a Singaporean family of ten who lead a nomadic lifestyle camping at various parks, beaches and void decks. The piece is indicative of the tone that the mainstream media has taken on the issue and her piece walks a fine line between reportage and poverty victim-blaming.
image of a mosquito coil disintegrating into nothingness. The story's final image presents us with a telling paradox, that something approaching nothingness, "a delicate pellet of dust" is nevertheless still materially present, reinforcing the fact that the kampung is also a set of ordinary, mundane objects and sounds that continue to persist even as they disintegrate into their constituent elements.

**Minority spaces as Rhizomorphous**

Through my reading I have shown that the quotidian spaces produced by *Malay Sketches* are a set of counter-maps that defy the rules of an already mapped space. In doing so, *Malay Sketches* creates a literary urbanism that is at once arboreal and rhizomatic --- rooted in a particular place and yet indeterminate and unpredictable. Here the rhizomatic enriches and challenges the arboreal, in the way Deleuze and Guattari argue that it is possible for there to be "rhizomatic offshoots in roots [...] anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees, aerial roots, and subterranean stems" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 20). Indeed, as they posit, "to be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses" (15). Alfian's loosely interconnected fictions act to "penetrate the trunk" of the existing dominant spatio-temporality of the Singapore state. They are counter-cartographies of this space, producing a rhizome-like spatiality that is no less cognizant of the genealogies of its arboreal past. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that this form of rhizomatic thinking, "must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight" (21). In other words, these Singaporean texts produce a map that is, in fact, a counter-cartography, a map one that goes against ideas of fixity and centralized power by virtue of its being multiple, processual, ongoing, and open-ended. In this way, *Malay Sketches* reclaims the individual, the indeterminate, the unquantifiable, and the alternative.
Section III
Cities, Histories, and Futures: Transnational Wayfinding

In its previous sections, this study may have appeared to have been rooted in specific geographical spaces of Vancouver and Singapore. Yet, the texts that I have examined so far are in fact shot through with the transnational. These transnationalisms include the more obvious immigrant narratives of Thien and the long history of black diaspora as figured by Compton. They are also evinced in the awareness of the global transactions that underpin Vancouver’s property market in Murakami’s poetry, the colonial histories examined by Tan Shzr Ee, and the transnational urbanity of Tan Pin Pin and Alfian’s work. Other spaces co-exist in the urban spaces of Vancouver and Singapore — whether they be remnants of colonial British past, an East Asian oriented economy or the diverse and complicated histories of diaspora and immigration. In arguing for these transnational counter-cartographies, my study has also examined a diverse set of genres, from film, poetry, memoir, flash fiction, and other more hybrid forms of writing. The range of these genres is testimony to the way textual counter-cartographies function: by wayfinding on a meta-textual level and experimenting with literary techniques that work to disrupt our sense of mapped space.

In this final section, I turn to a genre that has not yet been explored in my study: the novel. In particular, I examine three novels whose spatial trajectories function as transnational counter-cartographies writ large between Canada and Asia. Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2005), Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* (2000), and Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) disrupt both local and global cartographies by their characters’ wayfinding (successful and otherwise) in and between transnational urban...
In focusing on the transnational in this final chapter, I again highlight the already mapped nature of our spatialities, now writ larger in spaces between and beyond nations. In the next three chapters, I will further consider how these novels attempt with varying degrees to countermap these spaces. Returning to the concept of wayfinding as a methodology for reading, I argue that characters in these novels find their way in transnational cities as embodied subjects negotiating urban space and contesting already mapped boundaries and borders.

I focus in particular on the transnational and not the global because of the reality of the continuing significance of national borders. These boundaries are political and economic, but they are, of course, also spatial. The cultural geographer Peter Jackson points out that actually existing transnational space has particular kinds of complex spatialities affecting everyone who participates in it "irrespective of their own migrant histories or ‘ethnic’ identities" (2). Like Lefebvre, Jackson notes how it is not just the "material geographies" that are important, but also the "symbolic and imaginary geographies" of transnational space – these latter geographies are central to how we make sense of the transnational world.

This project’s turn to the transnational, is of course not without precedent. As Paul Jay notes “nothing has reshaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism” (1). The “transnational turn” has questioned “the default narrative for historicizing English” (5) which Jay argues is “guided by the sometimes unconscious assumption that the history of these literatures began with the history of nations and with relatively little attention paid to the transnational forces at work in their production” (5). These “transnational forces” are what much of the recent work on transnational prose fiction has focused. Scholars such as Stephen Clingman, Suman Gupta, Berthold Schoene, Robert Spencer and Jay explore ways of reading works of fiction that traverse multiple national and cultural viewpoints and boundaries. As Gupta puts it

Texts and contexts are, in this view, not given in fixed relationships of locations, chronologies and categories. Rather texts move, and the world of and around texts is composed of a multiplicity of boundaries which are constantly traversed, and which shift into and over and overlap and differentiate themselves from each other in a dynamic processive and contingent fashion. (Gupta 145)

Gupta posits that it is not just that literature is traversing these boundaries, but that these boundaries themselves, whether physical, geographical, political and cultural, are also “in constant flux” (145). Similarly, Clingman makes an elegant case for the hope of “transitive and connective identities” (xi) that are created and imagined by transnational fiction and its “grammar of the transitive” (3). Clingman calls for a radical rethinking of positionality and self as one that is “open to change navigating a landscape in transition – to see that a notion of transitive boundaries helps us reformulate our sense of location as well as identity. Indeed, it might help us to understand location as environment, rather than fixed ‘place’” (23). Gupta’s idea of shifting boundaries and Clingman’s call for a mutable “environment” rather than fixed “place” resonates with Ashcroft’s envisaging of the “transnation” as “fluid, migrating outside of the state.”
A different literary production of space needs to be acknowledged with this study’s turn to the novel. In many ways, the space of the novel allows for a more expansive consideration of the ways in which mapped spatio-temporalities can be disrupted. Brand’s text features an extensive parallel narrative about a Vietnamese illegal immigrant and provides a nuanced account of the complexities of Toronto’s multi-historical spaces and communities. While the text chronicles the urban lives of its four protagonists: Tuyen, Jackie, Carla and Oku, it also intersperses their diasporic struggles with the narrative of Tuyen’s lost brother Quy, who symbolizes the transnational spaces that continue to shape Toronto. Tuyen’s family’s painful diasporic history is juxtaposed with the familial histories of the other non-Asian characters, raising further possibilities of inter-minority solidarities. Kwa’s *In This Place Called Absence* similarly straddles multiple labels: Canadian literature, Asian North American literature, diasporic literature, and Southeast Asian literature. Kwa’s novel intertwines colonial Singapore and late twentieth-century Vancouver as the life of its main character Wu Lan, a troubled Singaporean-born psychologist in Vancouver, provides a frame for a historiographic metafiction about Chinese prostitutes in turn-of-the-century Singapore. The first person narratives of these sex workers, Chow Chat Mui and Lee Ah Choi are confabulated from these historical details, their precarity apparent in a moment in Singapore history where the nation is still non-existent. Lai’s novel with its mythological, magical realist, and dystopian moments, makes multiple historical and geographical traversals between the western coast of Canada and Asia. *Salt Fish Girl* moves between the mid-twenty-first century Pacific Northwest city of Serendipity, Canton in the early twentieth century and the mysterious, timeless City of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, a thinly veiled reference to contemporary Vancouver. Thus, while they may be tracing well-trodden diasporic routes from Asia to Canada, all three texts consistently render these trajectories indeterminate, uncanny, and unfamiliar. Indeed, I posit that Lai’s novel pushes these uncanny trajectories further to consider how the borders between the human and the non-human are themselves illusory. Through each of their complex, multi-faceted narratives, these texts are wayfinding transnationally, producing spaces in their traversals that counter earlier colonial maps and contemporary cartographies of globalized capital.
The Mapping of Transnational Cities

While in my earlier sections, I considered the stratified, planned, and overdetermined urban spaces of Vancouver and Singapore, my reading of these three novels will come up against the similarly bound, exclusionary, and overdetermined boundaries of the nation state. In all three novels, the borders of the nation-state, whether Canada or Singapore has been produced in part by the legacies of racism and colonialism. The sociologist Radhika Mongia, through her detailed history of the passport and indentured Indian labour in the British Empire, has argued that “the modern economy of migration, grounded in race and imperialism, is fundamental to the creation of a geopolitical space dominated by the nation-state” (196). Indeed, the relations between migrant communities and the nation-state are evident in all three of the novels that I will examine. For instance, the diasporic and racialized familial histories of the characters in Brand’s novel arise from the legacy of immigration from the Caribbean and Asia to Canada. Kwa’s novel depicts colonial Singapore and its use of indentured labour from China in its role as an entrepôt port and juxtaposes this with the traces of Empire in contemporary Vancouver. Similarly, the dystopian pasts and futures in Lai’s novel traces a seemingly inevitable trajectory from sweatshops in China to genetically engineered minority workers in North America. Many of the characters’ movements between states are mapped, restricted, and determined explicitly on the basis of race and gender. Thus, an illegal immigrant in Brand’s novel, a Chinese sex worker in Kwa’s novel, and a clone worker in Lai’s novel are all characters who struggle with finding their way in the city. The transnational cities that these novels depict are what Avtar Brah would call “multi-axial” (193) spaces whose unpredictability and contingency may provide some possibility of change, even as they are already stratified spaces with differential mobilities for different communities.

Historical and contemporary developments in immigration policies in both Canada and Singapore have restricted and continue to curtail the movement of particular racialized minorities across borders. These policies also dictate the socio-economic position of these minorities once they are in the country, continuing to exert a racist spatial control within national borders. Transnational cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and
Singapore (a city-state) have required and utilized the labour of “temporary” workers who have precarious status and have no recourse to permanent migration. Restrictions on movements have distinctly spatial effects on these transnational cities; a few historical and contemporary examples include head tax regulations in Canada which played a role in the formation of bachelor only quarters in Vancouver’s Chinatown (further elucidated in novels like Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* and Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*), the relegation of temporary foreign workers in Toronto to service industries, and in Singapore, the contested development and strict regulation of foreign worker dormitories. The latter is an example of how Singapore has always required transnational labour to function as a capitalist economy and has consistently sought (from colonial times) to regulate its urban presence. In each of these real world examples, nation-state’s power over those deemed as problematically transnational has always been manifest in distinctly spatial terms in its regulation of mobility.

Moving this study from the specific urbanisms of Vancouver and Singapore, to the larger, more amorphous category of the “transnational” thus allows it to consider depictions of unequal and stratified trans-urban connections between Canada and Asia. The chapters in this section all attempt to reconsider what makes an urban space transnational, but also seek to theorize ways of reading transnationally. These three texts challenge what a “national” literature might look like as they range between Canada and various Asian countries. Philip Holden points out in his reading of Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* that the temporal and geographical shifts in the novel allow it to “[explore] a transnational space by not so much […] looking beyond the nation but rather within” (“Interrogating Multiculturalism” 286). Holden argues that because Kwa’s novel is carefully sets up the historical and social context for both in and out migration from Singapore, it “offers the possibility of rethinking Singaporean identity not simply within the confines of a linear national narrative, but in other terms, in terms of mobility” (287). My work in this section, builds in part on Philip Holden’s reading of Kwa’s work as a series of parallel narratives that are patterned on each other. However, my reading moves beyond the Singapore-centric one that Holden proposes, to consider how novels like *This
Place Called Absence, What We All Long For, and Salt Fish Girl depict spatialized identities that can contest the existence of national borders.

Transnational (and trans-historical, trans-temporal) connections are worked out in literary forms in all three texts as they feature juxtapositions of various chronotopes: contemporary Toronto placed against the web of refugee camps in Southeast Asia in the 1980s, contemporary Vancouver woven in with Singapore in the 1900s, and twenty-second century Vancouver interspersed with mythical and magical realist pasts, and Canton in the 1900s. The novels’ abilities to tie these seemingly disparate chronotopes together allow for transgressive configurations of space that contest the linear narratives of nation-states and their citis, in both spatial and historical registers. Brand’s depiction of Toronto is criss-crossed with the trajectories of its “citizens” living with diasporic pasts, and its “immigrants” trying to enter the city. Kwa’s Vancouver and Singapore are both affected by the past and present movements of the Chinese diaspora. Lai’s novel takes us even further back into the past and further out into the future, with its ambitious mingling of reincarnation, race, and bio-engineering.

Cities/Bodies/Temporalities

In all three novels, restrictive transnational spaces are contested by and in the bodies of urban characters — whether it is What We All Long For’s refugee Quy who is marked as stateless and thus out of place, the queer prostitutes Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui who challenge colonial spatiality in This Place Called Absence’s rendering of 19th century Singapore, or the hybrid inter-species coupling of the clone Evie and Miranda in the conclusion of Salt Fish Girl. These bodies and their trajectories through the city enable these texts to act as counter-cartographies. Through their interactions and relations with the city, they produce literary spaces that challenge overdetermined capitalist, colonial or neo-colonial urban space. Quy’s narrative disrupts a celebratory view of multicultural Toronto, Ah Choi and Chat Mui’s same-sex desire alters the official historical perspectives of early Singapore, and Evie and Miranda’s ability to propagate an inter-species child challenges the human/non-human hierarchy of a post-apocalyptic Vancouver.
Moreover, these bodies in cities enable us to read the range of *temporal* genres that inflect these transnational urban counter-cartographies: whether through historical fiction, contemporary immigrant novel, and post-apocalyptic dystopia. All three novels, examine how bodies move through urban space and time in ways that alter and produce the cities and temporalities that they live in. Brand’s Toronto, Kwa’s Vancouver and 19th century Singapore, and Lai’s early twentieth century Canton and late twenty-first century Serendipity (in the American Pacific Northwest) are all intensely and bodily lived urban hubs of migration and diaspora. Through their twining of disparate urban geographies, the literary bodies and spaces in these texts bring together incommensurable juxtapositions — that of cities and their inhabitants separated by time, geography, and development, of literary genres like the folktale, the immigrant narrative and the science fiction story. The stories juxtapose and weave multiple settings and genres that exist because of the collision of various narratives and bodies in these cities and the texts further produce new iterations of transnational urban space in the late capitalist moment.

These temporal disjunctures are consistently figured through the characters’ bodies — thus, Quy in Brand’s *What We All Long For* fails in his wayfinding of Toronto, he is consistently figured as a man whose face remains that of a child’s. Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* moves between historical and contemporary cities and considers the commonalities of bodies and inheritance with these juxtapositions. Nu Wa and Miranda’s journeys in Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* are nuanced by the novel’s conceptions of mythic time and its anticipatory position with regard to Vancouver’s future. All three novels appear to suggest that there can be no transnational movement without a concurrent traversal of temporalities.

**“Border thinking” as Wayfinding**

What this final section will begin to theorize as well, are more ethical ways of thinking through transnationalism beyond neoliberal globalization. For my purposes, this means being mindful of the specific geographic and material spaces that these novels are set in. The borders that enclose and define the spaces of these novels whether they be in Singapore, Vancouver, Toronto, Canton, and the refugee camps in Southeast Asia are
constructed both in political and material terms, as well as in fictional ones. Here, my spatial readings engage with Walter Mignolo’s concept of “border thinking” that exhorts us “not to confuse thinking about borders while dwelling in disciplinary territorialities” but instead to practice “border thinking that emerges from dwelling in the border and delinks from disciplinary territorialities” (*Local Histories* xvi). Mignolo’s distinction here between “thinking about borders” and “border thinking” is crucial, particularly for its emphasis on the potential liminality of transnational spaces. If we, as Mignolo suggests are “where [we] think” (xvi), then perhaps the spatial particularity of decolonial and border thinking might be further supplemented by considering how bodies moving through the transnational city alter these border spaces. Mignolo argues that thinking from the border instead of being fixated on these boundaries means “unveiling the logic of coloniality and delinking from the rhetoric of modernity, knowledge and truth in parenthesis” (xviii). And indeed — thinking from the border, thinking from a specific imagined urban spatiality that is in flux between nations, is a form of wayfinding that attempts to contest mapped borders themselves. Each of the texts attempt their own version of border thinking, whether it is the refugee and human trafficker Quy weaving an uncertain way to Toronto, the queer phenomenologies in Kwa’s text, or Lai’s magical realist treatment of border crossings in *Salt Fish Girl*.

My own readings of these texts in this chapter further investigate how thinking at the border and ultimately, testing its fixity might work. Each text calls for a slightly different approach: thus I will examine failed wayfindings in *What We All Long For*, *This Place Called Absence* through Sara Ahmed’s concept of queer phenomenology, and

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77 Earlier iterations of thinking about these liminal spaces include Mary Louise Pratt’s idea of “contact zones” and Avtar Brah’s idea of “diaspora space.” Like in Mignolo’s work, what Pratt’s and Brah’s theorizations have in common is their investment in the specificity of the spatial. Pratt’s “contact zones” are actual “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). And even as Brah sees the idea of diaspora more as a conceptual tool part of a “theoretical creolisation” (192) that is necessary for encompassing the contradictions inherent in a transborder world, her insistence of the materiality, particularity and specificity of each diasporic community is central to the “multi-axial” (189) nature of her ideas. Brah’s “diaspora space” is one where the dominant and the minority interact, but also a space where various minorities interact and, crucially, negotiate configurations of power.
finally *Salt Fish Girl* through the anti-capitalist potential of dystopian narratives. My spatially-oriented reading of Brand, Kwa, and Lai’s work will continue to consider ideas of wayfinding, confabulation and indeterminacy as ways that these novels produce transnational urban spaces. All these modes of producing and conceiving of this transnational space, whether as a global contact zone, a queer diaspora space, or through dystopian border thinking, also highlight the role of fictionality in these spaces. Here, I use the term fictionality again not only to emphasize the constructedness of the these mapped spaces, but also the fact that they *can* be constructed and reconstructed in ways that resist cartographic ideals.

These methods of reading are necessarily preoccupied with the structures of power that already exist in these spaces, revealing their sometimes invisible presence. The urban spaces in all three novels are shaped by histories of colonialism, settlement, and immigration, and are not truly “national” or the “site of homogeneous time and territorialized space but [are…] inflected by a transnationality that suggests the intersection of ‘multiple spatiotemporal (dis)orders’” (Sassen qtd. in Lionnet and Shih 6). Focusing on the novels’ transnational, “(dis)ordered” literary geographies, my research will argue that these texts engage in a spatial politics that as Henri Lefebvre puts it have the potential to “point the way towards a different space, towards the space of a different (social) life […] straddl[ing] the breach between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived” (60). This is not always an ideal or hopeful space, but it is always one that is cognizant of the spatial inequities inherent in transnational cities. Thus, Brand’s novel ends with both the tragic perhaps fatal beating of the long-lost Quy but also with the continuing sounds of his sister Tuyen chipping away at her artwork. Kwa’s novel sees one of the sex workers die from an opium overdose, but has the other escape her brothel by marrying a gay, mixed race scholar. Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* ends with a birth that is a rebirth, a baby that is both the embodiment of the principles of reincarnation and genetic engineering. These redemptive moments are only momentary respites — Tuyen’s art, Chat Mui’s escape, and Nu Wa’s rebirth are small glimpses of hope in the midst of often brutal, dominant conceptions of transnational urban spaces that produce exploitation of labour, social inequities, and misogyny in all three texts.
Chapter 7 Transnational Toronto in Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*  

Dionne Brand’s substantial oeuvre deals consistently with the negotiation of national borders, particularly in cosmopolitan urban spaces. Brand returns to this concern repeatedly with her non-fiction, poetry, and fiction: *No Language is Neutral* (1990), *Land to Light On* (1997), *thirsty* (2002), *Inventory* (2006), *Ossuaries* (2010), *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988), *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), and *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) all deal with border crossings and/or the immigrant urban experience. Brand’s overarching preoccupations are also evident in her novel *What We All Long For* (2005) --- an urban text set in Toronto that is deeply concerned with diaspora, immigration, and the status of various racialized minorities in Canada’s most diverse city. My analysis in this chapter recalls this study’s reading of Madeleine Thien’s short story “A Map of the City.” There, I began by arguing that Thien’s Vancouver is a city experienced by wayfinding, a movement through space that encounters places as “nodes in a matrix of movement” (Ingold 219). Thien’s story, with its depictions of Miriam’s movements through the city, is an ongoing effort to record the trajectories that produce the spaces of the city — a “map” that is rather, a counter-map that does not rely on cartographic vision that is planned and overdetermined. Instead, through wayfinding, as Timothy Ingold argues, “people’s knowledge of the environment undergoes continuous formation in the very course of their moving about in it”, since “we know as we go, not before we go” (230). Variants of this idea of wayfinding are repeated throughout my study, as the texts by Wayde Compton, Sachiko Murakami, Tan Shzr Ee, Tan Pin Pin, and Alfian Sa’at contest cartographic views of both Vancouver and Singapore through various literary and filmic genres. In some cases, like with Murakami’s *Rebuild*, Compton’s *Performance Bond*, and Alfian’s *Malay Sketches* this involves metaphorical traversals of Vancouver and

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78 Parts of this chapter come from my article “Beyond the Multiculture: Transnational Toronto in Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 37.2 (2012). It has been reproduced with permission from the editors.
Singapore. However, in the works by Thien, Tan Shzr Ee, and Brand, this contestation often occurs during actual traversals of urban space, wayfindings through a city that challenge mapped space.

Amplifying these previous wayfindings is an early scene in What We All Long For where the character Carla recalls her bicycle ride through Toronto after she has visited her brother Jamal in Mimico prison. Told in retrospect — a memory in the morning after — the novel self-consciously highlights how memory and the construction of narrative are tied to the act of wayfinding. Even more significantly, it suggests that the act of wayfinding through the city can only be understood in its totality after the fact. While Carla is engaged in the actual act of wayfinding, riding her bicycle through “the city as a set of obstacles to be crossed and circled, avoided and let pass” (32), she is relying on her own corporeal cues to negotiate the city beyond any cartographic views of the city:

The afternoon light was sharp for spring. The sun coming west was dead angled at her head as she rode east, chipping between cars, crazily challenging red lights. The city was vivid. Each billboard screeching happiness and excitement. The cars, the crowds intense in the this-and-that of commerce, of buy this, get that, the minutiae of transient wants and needs. As fast as she was riding, she could make out the particularity of each object or person she saw, so acute this searing light around her, tingling her skin. Could anyone see her? Drenched in lightning? (28)

Carla’s wayfinding cannot be as easily narrated while it is in process. Like the graffiti art that she encounters (and is comforted by because “she recognized the tags” (31) as being tied to graffiti artists that she knows personally), Carla’s journey is a series of improvisations and reactions through Toronto’s traffic and infrastructure. Evidently, the novel uses Carla’s trajectory through the city as a narrative device to depict the texture and diversity of Toronto’s urban spaces. Yet, the narrative focalizes these spatialities through Carla’s body, even as she “exhausted,” “streaming with sweat” (27) and “burning off a white light on her body” (28) from her exertions through the city. The image of this “light” continues through this section, through Etobicoke, Runnymede,
High Park, Bloor Street, Keele, Dundas Street, and Roncesvalles, with each neighborhood rendered in its socio-economic specificity but also with a sharp awareness of the spaces’ effect on Carla’s body. Her hyper-awareness of the unmappable, unpredictable, ever-evolving nature of the city is central to this description of Toronto. This particular urban trajectory is in a specific temporal and seasonal moment, where the afternoon light itself is given a quality of contingency — that it is “sharp for spring.” Carla’s body is precisely positioned as riding east with the sun “dead angled at her head”, an embodied, mobile sundial of sorts. She is literally producing urban space as she rides, “crazily challenging red lights” and altering the flow of traffic. Further, while she sees the billboard advertisement, the consumer crowds “intense in the this-and-that of commerce,” she is able to cut through these distractions to instead “make out the particularity of each object or person.”

This intense, kinetic vision is much like the climactic moments in Thien’s story where it is only through movement in the city that corporeally-based epiphanies are possible. As in Thien’s story, where Miriam’s movement is contrasted with the futile, circular trajectories of her father, Carla’s ability to cross, circle, avoid and let pass in the city, her ability to wayfind successfully in contrasted with her brother Jamal’s view of the city “as something to get tangled in” (32). Jamal’s inability to move beyond Toronto’s racist power structures and spaces is less a testimony of his ability than of the way the city spaces are gridded and mapped out for the racialized bodies, and in particular black men, in the novel. The only other African Canadian man in the novel, Oku, submits to the physical indignities and injustices of racialized policing, “a passion play” (165), where his movements are reduced to stasis as he stops and holds his arms out like a crucified Christ, as a tactic for avoiding violence. Tellingly, he sees “the city as a prison” (176) for black men like him.79

Readings of Oku and Jamal have been done by Kit Dobson, Molly McKibbin, and Phanuel Antwi, who all point to Brand’s depiction of racialized and immobile citizen...
bodies and urban spaces in the novel. Indeed, most readings of Brand’s novel focus on the ostensibly dominant narratives in the novel, which center on second-generation immigrants negotiating the haunted pasts and layered histories lying beneath the city’s facades. The lives of Tuyen, Carla, Jackie, Oku and their friends and family are inflected by a multiplicity of historical and transnational factors. From the Cold War to the contemporary trade in electronics, to human trafficking, to the cynical use of ethnicity as a commodity (Tuyen’s civil engineer father and doctor mother set up a Vietnamese restaurant), *What We All Long For* exposes the uneasy complexities and contradictions involved in living in a transnational Toronto. At its most optimistic moments, the novel envisions the possibility of new forms of community in Toronto and points new and unexpected combinations and complications that can occur in the streets, subways, and other spaces of the city. Dobson notes how the characters “build their communities across borders, rhizomatically connecting to each other without a predetermined logic. They are linked by their desire for inclusivity, and not limited by the discourses that are handed to them” (195). Diana Brydon has further argued for the existence in Brand’s work of “global intimacies” (991), which “enable different forms of imagined communities beyond those associated with the nation-state alone” (991). With these complex, often miscegenated inheritances, these characters construct and inhabit their own Toronto, which, as Dobson puts it, is “built collectively and from below, across borders, and between communities” (142). As Tuyen, Carla, Jackie, and Oku, and their families navigate a multiplicity of attachments, effects of globalization, postcolonial pasts, and postnational lives, the text reveals Toronto to be transnational in the most domestic and immediate sense. This Toronto, as Dobson rightly points out, is “a battleground[,] . . . a space for action and for the creation of a viable sense of self — a space for building culture from below” (180).

While work like Dobson’s and Brydon’s are important foundations for my reading of the novel, here I wish to turn more intently to first consider larger unmappings of Toronto that the text performs but also the character of Quy, Tuyen’s long-lost brother and the only figure without legal status in Canada. His first-person narration punctuates *What We All Long For* in unnumbered sections and much like Jamal’s interactions with
Toronto, Quy’s trajectory dominates the lives of his Toronto family, functions as a failed wayfinding in the city, albeit writ on a larger, transnational scale. The novel’s final scenes, which see the collision of these futile urban wayfindings, as Quy is left for dead by Carla’s brother Jamal, show with unquestionable finality that there are no real distinctions between the violent acts outside Canada and in Toronto. The transnational and the local are ineluctably linked. As in “A Map of the City” where Vancouver cannot be mapped in a conventional cartography that elides its transnationality, Brand’s Toronto transcends national maps in the novel’s counter-cartographies of actual lived spaces. Even in its depictions of failed wayfindings, What We All Long For’s ability to trace out the routes and limits of these trajectories, allows the novel to function as a bleak counter-cartography to maps of Toronto as a series of tidily mapped neighbourhoods full of “neat little lives […] the cute expensive stores, the carapace of wealth, […] the manicured circles of flowers” (29).

From the opening of What We All Long For, we are given a brief historical reference that reminds us of the fundamental inadequacy of colonial mapping tools to locate people or places, since even though Toronto “hovers above the forty-third parallel, . . . that’s illusory of course” (1). Instead, Brand returns to the material particularity of the city, the meteorological and physical realities of where Toronto is actually located:

Winters on the other hand, there’s nothing vague about them. Winters here are inevitable, sometimes unforgiving. Two years ago, they had to bring the army in to dig the city out from under the snow. The streets were glacial, the electrical wires were brittle, the telephones were useless. The whole city stood still; the trees more than usual. The cars and driveways were obliterated. […] Nature will do that sort of thing — dump thousands of tons of snow on the city just to say, Don’t make too many plans or assumptions, don’t get ahead of yourself. (1)

By focusing on the actual lived space of Toronto, the text powerfully invokes the locality of the city in opposition to its global, Cartesian plotted location, “the forty-third parallel.” This Toronto is not mappable in any colonial or neocolonial way, yet its locality in the form of its physical space is rooted and powerful. Thoroughfares, conduits, connectivity
— all attributes of global and local flows — seem helpless in the face of the Canadian winter, as modernity, communication, and mobility are paralyzed in the streets, and wires and telephones freeze. Temporality itself is altered as the city stands “still,” as place literally comes to dominate the passage of time and human “plans or assumptions” become “useless.”

The novel’s opening descriptions further liken Toronto in the spring to the fluidity and flux of “trickling water” (1), pushing the water metaphor from its glacial winter state to a spring thaw, and perhaps seeking to move beyond fixed tropes of a Canadian literary norticity. The text instead introduces another idea of the city as an archaeological site of human detritus and desires, conflating the human and natural landscapes:

Have you ever smelled this city at the beginning of spring? Dead winter circling still, it smells of eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all, longing. Garbage, buried under snowbanks for months, gradually reappears like old habits — plastic bags, pop cans — the alleyways are cluttered in a mess of bottles and old shoes and thrown-away beds. People look as if they’re unraveling. They’re on their last nerves. They’re suddenly eager for human touch. People will walk up to perfect strangers and tell them anything. (1-2)

The accumulated smells, sounds, and inchoate yearnings of men and women in the city are initially hidden and then revealed, laid bare “like old habits.” Maps are again pointless here as “a mess of bottles and old shoes and thrown-away beds,” the material reality of urban backlots is one that cannot be plotted. The “alleyways,” as opposed to the main streets of the city are brought to the forefront, suggesting that more powerful and corporeal potentialities arise from this set of alternate spaces.

Crucially, the fraught spatial histories of the city are acknowledged in What We All Long For as the novel points out the paradoxical effacement of colonization. Thus, even though all of the ethnic neighbourhoods of Toronto come together uneasily in a landscape of heterogeneity, they also exist in a spatial and historical debt to the indigenous peoples — “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” (4). Here a counter-cartography also means acknowledging the temporal density of urban space, a “genealogy” but also an archaeology of past hurts and compromises. Immediately, then, in the first few pages of the novel, Toronto as a space becomes an intricate set of shifting, seasonal tropes. It is a city situated very much in the geographical and topographical realities of Canada, one where the layers of urban histories and desires can be laid bare by a spring thaw. It is also a space where the deep genealogies of harm and hurt are willfully forgotten. Brand’s Toronto offers the possibilities of collisions between its inhabitants, who have come from beyond its geographical borders. Our first introduction to the novel’s main characters occurs on the subway, as it is a place that is “the crossroads of the city” (3), apart from “sovereign houses and apartments and rooms” (3). The subway comes to signify the shifting tropes of the city, a space of commonality and “chance” (4), where “any minute you can crash into someone else’s life” (4). In a sense, it is a miniature of what Arjun Appadurai would see as an “ethnoscape” (297), where “the warp” (297) of the stabilities of communities is “everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion” (297).

These unpredictable encounters, what Doreen Massey would call the “happenstance” or chance that space gives us, have profound implications for the construction of narratives in the city:

Lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated — women and men all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads. At times they catch themselves in sensational lies, embellishing or avoiding a nasty secret here and there, juggling the lines of causality, and before you know it, it’s impossible to tell one thread from another. In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but it’s hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension. (What We All Long For 5)

Narrative is used as a metaphor here to emphasize the complicated layerings of people and events that elude labels and linear and chronological storytelling. Pointing out the
risk of deception and confabulation simply reinforces the convolutions of the narratives and lives that make up the city. From this early passage, the links between language, fictionality, and the urban inhabitants are immediately established. The city is depicted as “women and men all trying to handle their own chain of events” even as they become tangled in a web of complex self-narration where “it’s impossible to tell one thread from another”—a distinct counterpoint to a gridded, mapped view of the city. These are precisely the “loose ends and ongoing stories” that my study’s epigraph calls “real challenges to cartography” (Massey 107).

Turning specifically to Quy, however, as representative of a set of spaces seemingly apart from Toronto, enables us to understand the complex implications behind the idea of Toronto as a transnational space. This focalization also enables an examination of how the novel produces a transnational counter-cartography through the affective resonances produced by Quy’s fraught journey to the city and its political implications for him and others like him. Reading What We All Long For this way means seeing it as a transnational novel that is significantly only partly set in Toronto. The novel’s depiction of Quy’s journey from refugee to undocumented, non-status immigrant challenges more celebratory, insular, and delineated ideas of what it means to call Toronto a global city and reveals the multi-scalar ways that class and race cut across national borders. While other transnational implications in What We All Long For are necessarily incomplete, fragmented, and/or mentioned only in passing (Binh’s trafficking business, the other characters’ diasporic familial histories), the text’s interpolation of Quy in the narrative is a sustained examination of how multicultural Toronto is implicated in a distinctively unequal forms of globalization and transnationality.

Quy, and his absence from his family, destabilizes celebratory narratives of a multicultural and global Toronto by tracing the painful geographies of a globalized world where the inhabitants of Toronto are implicated in the darker, transnational transactions of capital, goods, and people. This world is bounded by the enforcement national borders and citizenship regulations. In their reading of Brand’s novel, Naava Smolash and Myka Tucker-Abramson highlight this political context with the disjunctures and aporia surrounding the character of Quy. Smolash and Tucker-Abramson’s interdisciplinary
study of the migrant justice movement and literary texts seeks to “call into question the implicit naturalization of citizenship rights as the basis for inclusion in the Canadian literary project” (165). For them, the significance of Quy is manifest in how “all of his roles are bracketed; his right to be here . . . as tenuous and segregated as his role in the narrative” (186). Brand’s narrative, they conclude, points to “the contemporary limit of Canadian representation: citizenship status” (187). While it is clear that Quy is set apart from the other characters, I am positing that his placement in the novel makes it necessary to see his narrative not as “tenuous and segregated” but as wholly essential to the rest of the text. Engaging with Quy’s story in this way means that we must look beyond the idea of Toronto as a strictly demarcated space. Arguably, what the novel suggests is that the city itself is porous and amorphous, that is, if we are able to see it beyond the seductions of boutique multiculturalism and instead focus on exactly how and why Toronto is deemed transnational.

This instability of transnational Toronto’s borders is primarily figured through narration. Marlene Goldman has noted how Brand’s “self-conscious references to storytelling, memory and narration underscore that the community [she] has in mind is not predicated on an essentialized past” (26-27); instead,

furnished with Brand’s fluid textual maps, readers are . . . encouraged, in the literal and figurative sense, to remember and re-map complicated transnational diasporic communities whose broken histories and transnational connections repeatedly challenge the bounded, progressivist narratives of nation-states. (27)

Goldman’s term “fluid textual maps” finds numerous resonances with my own theorization of textual counter-cartographies. For instance, What We All Long For’s constant reworkings and reiterations of how Quy was lost complicate the spatial and temporal memories of the incident. Tuan and Cam’s “incoherent fights” (64) painfully emphasize the limitations of memory and narrative to fully encompass loss:

“I didn’t see . . .”

“What is the point?”
“It was the authorities. . . .”

“How long should we have . . .”

“Why didn’t I see?”

“It makes no sense to argue. It’s done.”

“We shouldn’t have come.”

“Do you remember anything?”

“What life is here, tell me?”

“You write and you write and you write. Do I say no?”

“Why? Why should you? Next time I won’t tell you, that’s all.”

“Quiet.” (64)

Their truncated and yet movingly evocative dialogue is overheard by Tuyen and diminished somewhat by her “minimal” (65) understanding of Vietnamese; both form and content underscore the family’s misunderstandings, regrets, confusion, and powerlessness. Cam and Tuan’s maps of their immigrant trajectories and lives are devastatingly incomplete, and the text provides a formal depiction of the inability of official and indeed their personal attempts of this mapping. There are no “points,” the authorities cannot help, they cannot “see” or “remember”, and regret their very passage. In many ways, the novel makes the story of Quy’s loss larger than the reality of Quy himself, as it is “the story that haunted them; the one that made her mother insomniac” (65). This narrative circling also illuminates the routes of Cam and Tuan’s immigration to Canada and reveals their subsequent integration as a journey through a series of unforgiving bureaucratic spaces. Cam becomes obsessed with textual proof in the form of documents, “papers of some kind attesting to identity or place” (63), which she laminates compulsively. These “birth certificates, identity cards, immigration papers, and citizenship papers and cards” (63) are “duplicated tenfold” and proliferated in “cookie
jars, vanity drawers, and breadboxes” (63) as she endeavours to retain some control over a tragic incident that she cannot change or forget.

The family’s attempt at a clearly mapped narrative is, ironically, adapted to facilitate their immigration in the first place. The text conflates the family’s inconsolable loss onto their transnational crossing:

Only when they arrived in Toronto would they fully construct their departure as resistance to communism. That is the story the authorities needed in order to fill out the appropriate forms. They needed terror, and Tuan and Cam had had that too. And perhaps with this encouragement, this coaxing of their story into a coherent wholeness, they were at least officially comforted that the true horror was not losing their boy but the forces of communism, Vietnam itself, which they were battling. (225)

This particular negotiation suggests the multiple aspects of immigration, reflecting the inextricable and disparate ways that personal tragedies and global factors are intertwined. Their story might now be “officially” a “coherent wholeness,” but the novel presses the point that these larger global events can also serve as anonymous categories for more specific, intimate tragedies. Thus, while Cam and Tuan are able to instrumentalize the loss of Quy and “construct their departure as resistance to communism,” they are never fully able to come to terms with their guilt. This guilt marks their experiences in Toronto, even as they face other obstacles in their new lives.

Dobson sees Cam and Tuan’s fate in Toronto as elucidating the remarkably limited nature of multiculturalism: forced to give up their professional identities as civil engineer and doctor, they are “defined by the city” as “the restaurant [becomes] their life” (Brand 66). They achieve “a resigned sense” that “they would lose other parts of themselves” (66) and find it easy to “see themselves the way the city saw them: Vietnamese food” (67). The novel exposes the cultural hypocrisy and contradictions that belie the ethnic restaurant scene; even though “neither Cam nor Tuan cooked very well” (67), “eager Anglos ready to taste the fare of their multicultural city wouldn’t know the differences” (67). And while “national pride and discerning palates” mean that the Vus
hire a good cook, their performances of “the right greeting and treatment” (67) to evoke “satisfaction, familiarity, yet not intimacy” (67) remain at the level of the performative. Thus, their success can only be seen as a way of survival in spite of loss and dislocation; they have found themselves mapped and fixed in the city in their attempts to superficially wedge their lives and livelihoods into pre-conceived ethnic spaces.

In contrast with her parents’ pathological need to constantly reproduce textual proof and repeat arguments as a means of negotiating their loss, Tuyen seeks to rework the family’s trauma in art and in the stories she tells to her friends. Her efforts at confabulation and aestheticization are not always completely successful but they represent potentially productive and unsettling ways of negotiating her family’s diasporic past. She sees important distinctions between what she does and what her father Tuan does in compulsively drawing official buildings in Toronto “as if he was still what he was” (114); his obsession with “the right weight of objects, the correct angle of alignment for a stable structure” (114) is much like Cam’s own obsession with proper official documents. Tuyen instead seeks to “perfect the fabulous as a practice. A head growing out of a drainpipe, a river flowing through the roof of a house” (115) as a way to understand and contain “the double life, the triple images” (115) and embrace the “unexplainable” (115). Tuyen is not concerned with finding the “the official story” (225) or a single truth, as much as finding “a parallel story, a set of possible stories, an exquisite corpse” (225). As the metafictional artist figure in the text then, concerned with the indeterminate and confabulation, Tuyen is herself practicing a form of counter-cartography where maps of reality have failed and where the unexpected challenges more conventional perceptions of space.

In describing Tuyen’s art and artistic process, the novel seems conscious of the inadequacies of the medium. Tuyen’s work (like Brand’s novel, which it arguably represents metonymically) attempts expansiveness in its inclusion of the whole city, with its “polyphonic, murmuring” (149), “the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up into a kind of language, yet indescribable” (149). Tuyen’s art is a desire to cut across cultural boundaries with the universal idea of longings; it is also a complex way to “stave off her family — to turn what was
misfortune into something else” (149) — although she finds, ironically, that she returns to them “again and again” (149). However, What We All Long For is all too aware of the risks of sliding into a utopian vision and undercuts Tuyen’s artistic negotiations of the city with the “hideous” longings that have to be documented as well, “longings about bodies hurt or torn apart or bludgeoned” (158). Tuyen has only “intuited these, perceived them from a stride, a dangling broken bracelet — a rapist’s treasure . . . newspaper articles . . . Vass, Kwan, Hyunh, Sivalingam, Shevchenko — those were the names on the page of the dead or the vicious” (158-59). This violence and ugliness return as spectres in Tuyen’s art and as a real presence in Brand’s novel. Most telling of all, though, is how the novel leaves Tuyen’s work unfinished, as the city’s future is unfixed. Tuyen is aware of the need for “a larger space for the installation,” with room for “the old longings of another generation,” “twelve video projections, constantly changing, of images and texts of contemporary longing” (308), and, finally, a silent room. The novel plays with the positive and negative possibilities of this incompletion: Tuyen “still wasn’t quite certain what she was making; she knew she would find out only once the installation was done. Then, some grain, some element she had been circling, but had been unable to pin down, would emerge” (308). Tuyen’s work, then, stands in for what Dobson has called Brand’s most “hopeful” (195) novel to date, but as a project of mapping out a city of global and local desires, it is still crucially incomplete.

Similarly, the major effect of the novel’s inclusion of the parallel yet disjointed narrative of Quy is incompleteness and indeterminacy, which allows What We All Long For to function as a counter-cartography. By exposing the underbelly and the casualties of globalization, the novel highlights precisely the crossings, routes, trades, and commodities (objects and humans) that are disregarded when Toronto is seen as a seamless, multicultural and global city. Quy’s transnationality comes with the acute awareness of the dangers, deceptions, and hurts that come with this lack of status. While

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80Brydon has noted how this novel is similar to Brand’s other recent work, which acknowledges the “limits of our now global fate” as it “laments a situation in which there are few acceptable choices beyond the poet’s craft, her commitment to language, and her compulsion to respond through all her senses to the world around her” (1002).
Tuyen’s vision of Toronto may acknowledge its potential for violence, it is still largely a utopian vision of commonality and possibility. Quy, on the other hand, sees that “this is a dangerous city” (309), linking its risks to the instability and therefore dishonesty of identities: “you could be anybody here. That is what first took me when I walked among people on the streets” (309). Quy does not see the city as a collective possibility, as Tuyen does, but as a kind of black hole, and he contemplates the troubling idea that “it would be easy to disappear here. Who would know?” (309). Yet, Quy’s narrative refuses to disappear in What We All Long For; as much as his loss haunts the Vus, his story is also interpolated into Brand’s larger narrative, inserted between the fairly chronological, numbered chapters. Thus, Quy’s experience as the forgotten and yet powerful component of globalization becomes a shadowy narrative that cannot be documented in any systematic way or fixed with any particular identity. His grief at the loss of his parents eventually hardens him; however, his physiognomy has “the innocence of a child’s” (284) since he has “managed to change everything except that face,” which is “waiting for its mother and father to come back” (284). Quy’s ageless face seems to echo his inability to move forward in time, even as he manages to physically arrive in Toronto.

Quy sees his extensive experience surviving in this alternative global economy extending to life in Toronto. His experience is one that sees him as a part of “a gang, like any conglomerate of businessmen” (284), a “crew of monks, orange-gowned and macerated, we moved like a dust cloud” (284). He perceives an invisible counter cartography of painful histories that resist any easy mapping since it is like a “dust cloud,” “a web of people . . . laying sticky strings all over the city” (283), who, like him, “know the alleyways that lead to the back doors of Chinatown in this city” (283):

the man living across the street from you could have fought in the Angolan war, he could’ve killed many people, and there he is sitting in a deck chair with his wife as if nothing happened. . . . That woman whose ass you love when she walks down the street, she could’ve been tortured in Argentina and the last thing she wants anyone to love is her ass, her genitals were wired with electrodes once. And the taxi driver you strike up a pleasant conversation with could’ve been her torturer or a torturer of a similar woman in Burma with similar equipment. So if
this guy from Angola can sit there in his shorts and tan himself and remember killing people like a youthful prank, like a necessary job, and if the taxi driver can devote himself to sharing pleasantries and directions, thinking of the electrodes he put in a woman’s cunt as routine, just trying to get the job done, like driving a cab, well, who am I really? Who the hell am I? (309-10)

Here, through Quy’s first person narration, the novel reveals the horror beneath the “doubled, tripled, conjugated” lives, implying the ways in which atrocities in other places can also continue to dwell through the memories and emotional scars of the inhabitants of a global city like Toronto. These traumas further complicate the novel’s initial image of threads of narratives by anchoring them in specific locales and histories beyond Canada’s borders. Quy’s apparent awareness of the duplicity of these people and their specific longings, forgettings, and elisions grounds Tuyen’s more abstract artwork back into its visceral, unpleasant, and material contexts. The novel’s inclusion of his consciousness implicates every Torontonian in its horrors through its use of the second person narrative and the direct address. As Brydon notes, Brand “negotiates the intimate recognitions that link the ’I,’ ’you,’ ’she,’ and ’we’ in global contexts so entangled that no one can any longer claim innocence with any kind of good faith” (992). Here the transition from “you” to “I” is subtle and elusive, suggesting again that there is no difference between Quy and the person he seems to be addressing.

As the only first person narrative in the novel, Quy is able to convey his direct rejection of idealism or naïveté with a series of rhetorical questions aimed straight at the reader, deflating all possibility of transcendence:

Am I redeemable? Did I have a moment of revelation? Can I turn my life around? You’re better at that. For some of us, the world is never forgiving. And anyway, we don’t believe in such things, these ideas of forgiveness, redemption — it’s useless. (285)

Quy is unable to change directions, to “turn” his life “around”, unable indeed to wayfind in the city. The novel’s conflation of narrative and trajectory are fully realized as Quy
consistently rails against the futility of storytelling, in opposition to his mother’s efforts to find him through writing and by hoarding textual proof:

How many times did I have to repeat my own story to some stupid new humanitarian. My words passing like through a sieve. No amount of relating would help. It was always new to them. It got so that to amuse myself, since I was so bored with it, I made minor changes to the tale, or in the end I fantasized wildly. Either way, I was a liar or I was mad. Either way, my listeners went away as if they’d heard nothing. So much for innocence as arbiter of any situation. I never tried to find myself or who I belonged to. The thought made me weak.

Quy’s narrative goes “nowhere,” crosses no borders instead his words “pass like through a sieve” and are unable to alter anything or produce an alternate space for him. The official network of humanitarian workers is overwhelmed with the complexity and multiplicity of transnational narratives and tragedies — each impossible to resolve to a tidy mapping of nationality and status. Quy’s turn to fiction as he makes “minor changes” to his story or at the end “fantasized wildly” offers a bleak meta-commentary on role of art and storytelling in this liminal space. His mother Cam’s attempts to find him through letter writing are based on a similar impulse to control the story of her loss through words, and seem to act as a substitute for any actual physical return to Vietnam, since she is “terrified of returning to that part of the world herself” (116). Cam’s knowledge and use of unofficial transnationalisms — “a network of officials, charlatans, magicians, crooks, and other distraught parents” (116) — ironically proves to be the most successful in drawing Quy back to the family.

Thus, Quy’s attempts at retelling and retranslating his story also mirror Tuyen’s efforts to do so in her art. The failure of his confabulations to achieve any real results also casts her efforts in doubt. The novel continually challenges the possibility of any easy redemption and restitution through memory, storytelling, and art; Quy seems not to have “the bones to reach [his] hand into another set of lives, feel the sweat of stupid dreams” (283). Quy’s story is never told to anyone in the novel, and the violence done to
him at the end of the book seems to close down the prospect that he will ever “find someone to tell this story to, and . . . laugh because all [his] predictions and interpretations were wrong” (312). Dobson argues that Quy’s “likely death suggests an inability to be reintegrated into life in the city” (196). It is precisely the fact that Quy cannot be “reintegrated” that his trajectory through Toronto functions as a kind of counter-cartography — demonstrating the invisible “othered” lives that populate the city.

It is fitting, then, that at the end of the novel Quy and Jamal finally meet in a violent collision of their failed wayfindings. Entangled in a map of conspicuous consumption and legal precarity, Jamal’s displacement plays out in his obsession with status, material wealth, and objects --- to live like the “rich motherfuckers . . . [with] great cars to boost in garages off roadways called crescents and drives” (316) in Richmond Hill. The status symbol that Jamal desires most is a luxury car and in the last pages of the novel, we see him in a parody of successful spatial negotiations with class and race as he drives a black Audi that he has clearly stolen from his father. He puts “the car in gear with a flourish” and driving through “the growing neighbourhood of ex-West Indians, ex-Eritreans, ex-Somalis, ex-Vietnamese, and ex-South Asians” (315), transnational histories elided by the dominant homogeneity of Canadian urban space. It is with no small amount of irony that the novel characterizes the conversations that Jamal has with his friend Bashir just before they end up carjacking Quy: “If it means anything, the conversation they had was about how smooth the ride was, how sleek this Audi looked” (316). Again here, possession of the car gives Jamal the temporary illusion of being able to pass through space, the wayfind with ease and smoothness.

Crime and violence are the only recourses left to Jamal in his attempt to wayfind the city. His brutal encounter with Quy in Richmond Hill is both a chance collision and dramatic irony, foreshadowed by Jamal’s earlier comment to Tuyen about her brother’s “sweet Beamer X5” (302). Jamal is drawn specifically to this neighbourhood because of the “great cars to boost in garages off roadways called crescents and drives.” The nomenclature of these spaces already signalling their apparent detachment from impoverished west-end neighbourhood that he has picked up Bashir from, characterized by “the main drag, with its brief mix of used-car dealerships, dollar stores, cheap, ugly
furniture stores, food stores, banks, and panicky ‘stop and cash’ booths” (315-16). On closer analysis, Quy is in Richmond Hill for similar reasons to Jamal. In his final first person narration, Quy equivocates, wondering if he is indeed related in to Tuyen and Binh, and yet his final impulse is, like Jamal, wanting to exploit the situation for what it is worth:

Wasn’t I lost so he could come to me in his expensive shoes, in his silk shirt, his mouth slow and vulgar on his mother tongue, with his silver Beamer? He knows everything, he’s a swift man, he looks at me like Picasso devouring an African mask—how can he use it, how can he change it, which part of his belly can he put it in? So I say to myself, Fine, let it play.

But I’m so full of rage, a kind I’ve never felt before, and I want to take a swing at him and I want to hug him as my brother. I know that I’m going to take him for everything he’s got. It’s the things that were mine, and he got them double. He’s got my mother and my father and my two sisters. He’s got the world in front of him. (310-11) 

Arguably Quy’s foil in the novel is not Binh but his sister Tuyen who seems as well to be adept at imagining the desires and longings of the city and transforming them in her art. Yet, Tuyen faces other challenges in her life as a gay woman of colour. Her gender and sexual orientation signal a disruption of the values of her patriarchal, conservative Asian family and heteronormative society in general. Further, Carla resists Tuyen’s advances, establishing boundaries that are often spatially figured in the text — resisting Tuyen’s desire to produce alternate venues of kinship and desire. Even when the novel provides a seemingly safe queer space in the bar Pope Joan, it is described as “the last eastern outpost of gay life in downtown Toronto” (268) filled with “butterfly live […] sweet-winged existences” (268), language that implies the frontier-like and transient aspects of non-heterosexual spatialities. Sexual intercourse that arises from these spaces is “casual, performative and muscular, rather than passionate; the kind of sex two strangers have, physical and unartistic except for the artistry of bodies” (271). In a sense, this is culmination of Tuyen’s rejection of familiarity and belonging, instead revelling in the climax of “the alien touch of sidewalks, the hooded looks of crowds” (62) where she embraces “the unfriendliness, the coolness” (62). Writing about Brand’s earlier novels, Goldman similarly notes how their articulation of same sex desire between women, “advocating the pursuit of pleasure and drifting as political strategies” has only a “limited” effectiveness, since it represents “a compromised reaction to both slavery and sexism” (24). In my next chapter, I will consider how Lydia Kwa’s This Place Called Absence attempts in more overt ways to translate same sex desire into spatial forms that trace alternate connections of kinship beyond heteronormativity and patriarchal bloodlines.

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Through the city’s hierarchized, capitalist logic, Jamal and Quy see the successful second-generation immigrant Binh as someone that they must both emulate and rob in order to be able to navigate Toronto. Jamal’s impulse towards the “rich motherfuckers” is echoed in Quy’s simultaneous derision towards and fixation with the trappings of Binh’s wealth. Binh is characterized as having the knowledge to be “swift” in the city and in a telling simile, Quy feels like he is “an African mask” to Binh’s “Picasso,” an image that links his illegal status to that of the disenfranchised black men in the novel. Ultimately though, even as Quy wants to “take him for everything he’s got,” his vulnerable position as a linguistically handicapped subaltern marks him as an easy target for Jamal — his final words in the novel are “Take the fucking car” in Vietnamese, but “no one understands him” (317).

Dobson and other critics may see some final hopefulness in the fact that this is not the only ending in the novel, that we see instead Carla’s emancipation from her duties to her brother as the book’s parting image. But the reference to Carla’s longing for the sound of “Tuyen chipping and chiseling away next door” (318) seems to pale in comparison with Jamal’s actions as he beats and kicks Quy “beyond recognition . . . leaving the man half-dead by the road” (317). Indeed, this focus on Carla is certainly only a temporary, retrospective reprieve — we are told that what happens to Quy “is long after Carla drank that espresso and rode home” (318), confirming that the text’s final event is Quy’s assault. This convoluted temporal structure (one that is repeatedly used throughout the novel) allows for the production of complex spatio-temporalities that blur the boundaries between past and present, and Toronto and the rest of the world. Quy’s final thoughts as he lies on the road, perhaps dying from his injuries, makes the transnational contexts that define Torontonian space ever more evident:

And the man lies there thinking, Not Bidong, not Klong Toey, not in any of those places had he let himself down like this. His mouth is full of the brittle, rusty taste of blood, and the sky looks like the sea that first morning on the Dong Khoi. And he leans his head as he had over the side of the boat, longingly, and Bo and Ma are finally running out of a doorway, running toward him, and the road between
them is like water, and they both grab him as they should have and his mouth splits open and all the water spills out. (317)

In the novel’s penultimate paragraph, it is clear that there are no distinctions between the violence within and without Canadian borders. Quy, as the novel’s representation of the failure of Canadian multiculturalism and inclusivity, is finally figured as being continually in the process of crossing. He cannot find his way in the city, because he has never quite arrived there. Time appears to have stopped functioning for him as he is consistently referred to as someone with a baby’s face, or here as he depicted as a boy looking “longingly” for his parents. The final conflation of Quy with “the road” and “the water” subsumes him into both the space of the crossing and into the very routes that everyone uses to cross the city. By showing us the limits of wayfinding, Brand’s novel gives us the contours and complexities of a Toronto unmapped and unmappable, a transnational counter-cartography of economic, racial, and legal inequality — an urban version of what Marlene Goldman observes in Brand’s earlier novels which “challenge the bounded, progressivist narratives of nation-states” by highlighting their “broken histories and transnational connections” (27).
Chapter 8 Spatialized Desire and Queer Phenomenologies in Lydia Kwa’s This Place Called Absence

In Lydia Kwa’s This Place Called Absence, the novel’s main protagonist Wu Lan is a Singapore-born clinical psychologist in contemporary Vancouver who is mourning the loss of her father to suicide. As part of the attempts to come to terms with her grief, Wu Lan’s multiple traversals across Vancouver see her looking for moments of human connection through same-sex encounters and tentative interactions with the city’s diasporic Chinese community. The character’s research on prostitutes in early twentieth century colonial Singapore is meta-fictionally interspersed throughout her narrative as the first-person accounts of the sex workers Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui. Wu Lan imagines the everyday details of their lives, their musings, and further confabulates a same-sex relationship between the women. The novel’s chorus of female voices becomes a quartet as we are also introduced to Mahmee, Wu Lan’s mother, whose brief interjections provide insights into transnational and intergenerational connections. Wu Lan’s wayfinding through the diasporic spaces of Vancouver, the imagined queer spaces of her historical confabulation, and the emotional geographies of her grief produces a rich, affective counter-cartography that complicates any attempt to see transnational urban sites as fixed in a single spatio-temporality.82

This chapter will focus in particular on Wu Lan’s perambulations in Vancouver, and Ah Choi and Chat Mui’s parallel journeys through Singapore in its iteration as a colonial port city. The tensions that are produced by a heightened awareness of urban spatiality and same-sex desire are of particular note in these trajectories. With this in mind, I find it helpful here to turn to Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “queer phenomenology” which offers “an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking how the

82 The novel is very much in keeping with the rest of Singapore-born, Vancouver-based Kwa’s work. Her other novels include The Walking Boy (2005), a historical fiction, and Pulse (2014) which moves between Toronto and Singapore.
bodily direction ‘toward’ objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space” (68). Ahmed argues that “to act on lesbian desire is a way of reorienting one’s relation not just toward sexual others, but also to a world that has already ‘decided’ how bodies should be orientated in the first place” (102). In effect, Wu Lan, Ah Choi, and Chat Mui’s queer desires are counter-cartographies that alter the way Vancouver and historical Singapore are produced as social spaces in the text. As their “orientations” are not “straight” (in Ahmed’s terms) but either driven by queer desires or literally meandering, unstructured, and aimless, Wu Lan, Ah Choi, and Chat Mui are able to develop alternate ways of traversing and inhabiting these urban sites. Their itineraries across the city produce textured spaces of desire that transcend the way heteronormative colonial and patriarchal norms map the spaces of both cities. Ahmed posits that “‘becoming lesbian’ [is] a very social experience and allows us to rethink desire as a form of action that shapes bodies and worlds” (102). Thinking through Ahmed’s concept queer phenomenology enables us to read This Place Called Absence as a counter-cartography of contemporary Vancouver and historical Singapore. The novel further imagines a counter-genealogy of the Chinese diaspora that moves away from patriarchal and heteronormative lines. Something Ahmed might see as a “queer commitment” that would “trace the lines for a different genealogy, one that would embrace the failure to inherit the family line as the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world” (178). This counter-cartography results in unexpected connections and the production of queer urban spaces both in Vancouver in the 1990s and Singapore in the early 1900s.

My analysis in this chapter resonates with my earlier explorations of the role of desire in spatial production in many of the other texts in this study — whether it is Tan Shzr Ee’s Lost Roads: Singapore and its repeated return to locales of familial significance, or Madeleine Thien’s short story “A Map of the City” where memories and grief alter the way in which Vancouver is perceived. Reading This Place Called Absence also extends and complements my work on Brand’s What We All Long For in two crucial ways: first, the novel allows a further exploration of the implications of the spatial inequalities of the transnational city, and secondly, it considers the gender politics of such spaces in more sustained ways. In Kwa’s novel, queer phenomenologies are also
transnational ones. The intersections of queer and transnational, and the historical and contemporary allows the narrative to imagine alternate ways of being in urban space that functions both on the level of the individual desire, and the collective and generational movement of diaspora across borders. This scalar modulation twines Wu Lan’s attempts to come to terms with her contemporary reality as a queer immigrant woman in Canada with the complex, syncretic histories of the Chinese diaspora’s transnational journeys. This is a more hopeful contrast to Brand’s works which, Goldman argues

express a longing for and, ultimately, a rejection of origins, belonging, and possession, including the potentially beneficial forms of origin, belonging, and possession associated with being part of a family and, by extension, a community.

This ambivalent sense towards community formation in *What We All Long For* is evident as Tuyen, Jackie, Carla, and Oku attempt and ultimately fail to create a sustainable multicultural space with their friendships — Tuyen and Carla’s failed love affair (and Jackie and Oku’s) are in some ways central to this failure, since it is one that would truly transgress the heteronormative and racist lines in the city. Familial connections are also suspect in Brand’s novel with Quy’s failed reunion with his parents, and Jamal’s (and indeed all the characters’) estranged relationships with his family. *What We All Long For*, then, is built of repeated patterns of failed relationships in the transnational city that come to produce its complex, incomplete spaces.

*This Place Called Absence* also works with patterns on the level of plot and narrative in order to challenge mapped national borders and heteronormative urban space. Taking into account the novel’s complex structure, Philip Holden has called Kwa’s text an “elaborately self-reflexive […] example” (286) of historiographic metafiction, one that both implies connections between its parallel storylines but also produces these comparisons by “patterning” (Holden 286) the narrative. My focus in this section will build on Holden’s reading, but turn more intently to the spatial consequences of the novel’s patterning events and movements within each city. The text’s interweaving and overlay of the characters’ specific corporeal interactions with urban space draw
unexpected connections between the spaces of turn-of-the-century Singapore and late twentieth century Vancouver. The chance encounters that arise from these traversals are driven by the characters’ search for queer kinships in the transnational, urban spaces they inhabit. The novel’s patterning is also spatially and temporally unsettling, producing unstable chronotopes that trace alternate genealogical webs connecting the two main narratives. These connections — we intuit that Wu Lan may be a descendant of the family that rescues Chat Mui from sex work — are fleeting and are not based on familial bloodlines and heteronormative relationships. Crucially, Wu Lan asserts that is she “uninterested in breeding [and] will not have a direct descendent to survive [her]” (80), while both Chat Mui and Ah Choi are sterile because of sexually transmitted diseases. Donald C. Goellnicht argues that the feminist and queer aspects of the novel represent place as “a mobile imaginary, a form of desire” (161), and argues that historical Singapore in the novel is Wu Lan’s “imagined hallucination, not a culturally or geographically authentic location that might serve as a foundation for an essential and fixed Singaporean identity” (162). The power of these consciously fictionalized accounts of historical Singapore lies specifically in their ability to challenge forms of nationalist essentialism and patriarchal descent through the figure of the gay Singaporean emigrant.

While Wu Lan’s position as someone who has left Singapore for Vancouver is certainly not the abject one that Chat Mui and Ah Choi endure as sex workers moving from China to Singapore, she is similarly figured as being outside the normative boundaries of heteronormative relationships and familial reproduction. Her departure from Singapore is figured spatially as a “distancing” (20) in order to cope with her coming out to her family, something that her brother Michael sees as a need to “‘separate from the herd’” (20). This metaphorical and literal separation that Wu Lan’s coming out effects sets her apart from contemporary Singapore in the 1990s, a city that where lesbian desire is not recognized.83 Her sexual orientation further sets her apart from the diasporic

83 Tellingly, Singapore’s penal code criminalizes homosexual intercourse between men in Section 377A, but ignores the possibility of same sex relationships between women. Thus, in some ways, homosexual women suffer a kind of double erasure — their alleged “transgression” is not even held to be real enough to be criminalized by a conservative, colonial-era penal code. The novel,
Chinese community in Vancouver — a fact alluded to perhaps by Wu Lan’s seemingly unconscious choice to only have relationships with non-Chinese women. Wu Lan’s confabulation of Chat Mui and Ah Choi’s desire, seeks to alter the historical spaces of early Singapore — opening up a possibility that earlier maps of urban space, colonial spaces, can be altered through fiction. I read this as her attempt to trace a different history of kinship for herself: Wu Lan’s wayfinding thus not only incorporates her actual wanderings through Vancouver, a spatial practice, but also involves a temporal and spatial navigation that queers Singapore’s colonial history through a focus on same sex desire and the bodies of Chat Mui and Ah Choi. Her confabulation of these histories allows her to construct an alternate origin for her own desire, what Ahmed calls “other ways of gathering in time and space” (179).

The novel consistently depicts Wu Lan in motion in the city, as if she is unable to move beyond her grief for her father if she simply stays place. It is during her numerous journeys across Vancouver that she comes to understand her ability to re-situate, re-navigate, and thus wayfind her place in the city. Wu Lan’s meandering walks are circuitous and take her consistently from her basement apartment near off Commercial Drive, Victoria Park to Vancouver’s Chinatown, a cafe just west of Chinatown, the old Vancouver Central Library at Hastings and Main streets, and to a community swimming pool. These traversals trace and retrace personal, idiosyncratic trajectories, a queer phenomenology that enables Wu Lan to produce an alternate, transnational counter-cartography of Vancouver. Her walk cuts across a variety of ethnic and class boundaries shaped by waves of immigration and the spatialization of urban poverty in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side, often recognized as the poorest postal code in Canada.\textsuperscript{84} The well-bounded geographical area of her perambulations works to simultaneously emphasize the exact spatial relationships between neighbourhoods depicted in the novel, while Wu

\textsuperscript{84} Thanks to Karina Vernon for pointing out the diversity and historical specificities of these neighbourhoods.
Lan’s sensorial and affective experiences suggest queer ways of inhabiting transnational space.

The novel begins by noting the transnational connections and disjunctions between Singapore and Vancouver, as Wu Lan’s first person narrative begins:

November 11, 1994. The twentieth Remembrance Day of my life in Canada, but only the ninth one in Vancouver. I count the number of years I’ve been here this way. Back home in Singapore, nobody commemorates the world wars. Back home. After such a long time away, I still catch myself thinking that. (3)

In this opening paragraph, the narrative makes a distinct attempt to locate its central protagonist in a set time and space, even as Wu Lan’s grief alters the way she inhabits immigrant space. While seemingly unremarkable, the novel’s opening bears further parsing as it turns the official, colonially linked Remembrance Day into intimate form of grieving. In this opening sequence, Wu Lan first acknowledges both the temporal and spatial movements that have had to occur for her to arrive at this precise moment. At first reading, it is clear that Wu Lan is bereft and conscious of the differences between the historical and contemporary reality between Canada and Singapore. In Canada, as Goellnicht puts it, the mostly European World War I in particular is “essential to the formation of Canada as a modern nation state, one that had emerged fully from its colonial status” (173). Singapore, reflecting a different postcolonial context does not hold the same commemoration ceremonies. However, her meditation on the sensory realities of the “small ritual” at the neighbouring Victoria Park reveal the inherent slipperiness of the urban space of Vancouver when seen through Wu Lan’s unstable transnational position. At first, the auditory aspects of this space impinge on her private grief, as she listens to “the trumpets blaring out their bold and soulful tones, while the trombones slip-slide lazily through their bass harmonies, to the occasional rasp and beat of a side drum. Brrak, pah-pah-pah, bom-om-om, brrak” (3). The military band produces an aural spatiality that has undertones of the colonial legacy that continues its influence on contemporary Canadian identity. However, the text’s personification of the instruments
makes them seem like competing voices, producing a polyphonic sound that cannot be reduced to a singular meaning.

Similarly, as Wu Lan imagines the visual scene that accompanies the auditory one, it is at first shot through with the colonial legacy of “military regalia,” with the band members’ hands “sheathed in angel-white” (3), and the “red poppies, the field of flowers that announce, *we will hang onto a burst of life*” (3). Again here, however, the auditory aspects of this imagined scene betray it. As Wu Lan hears a hymn that is “familiar from childhood. *Abide with me*” (4), she is immediately transported to the awkwardness of her childhood, where during funerals in Singapore, she’d “heard the hymn too often sung with maudlin emotion. Now, hearing it again, I cringe” (4). This affective reaction to the aural landscape of the British colonial legacy in Canada alters Vancouver’s seemingly stable urban spaces. Empire, it seems, reaches not only to this far western frontier, but also to “a semidetached next to a small Methodist church on Chapel Road in Katong, back to the 1930s” (4) — a Singapore neighbourhood where Wu Lan’s father grew up. She tells us that “he picked up the melody and some of the lyrics from straining his ears at the window. Didn’t matter if he missed some words, because he enjoyed filling in the gaps” (4). This filling in of gaps results in Wu Lan’s father’s case in a painfully humorous mangling of the hymn’s lyrics. Yet, it is also an important demonstration of the syncretic and unpredictable ways in which colonial legacies have been co-opted and re-configured in the space of the postcolony.

The opening of Kwa’s narrative destabilizes the fixed spaces of contemporary Vancouver by using its aural landscape as a link to the seemingly incongruous chronotopes of a remembered Singapore. This spatial linkage is further complicated by the text’s imaginative haunting of Vancouver. Wu Lan not only imagines the visuals and memories that are connected to music she hears, but further places her dead father into the scenario since, he

would have liked this Remembrance Day ceremony, had he made it to this country. He would have risen early, put on too many warm clothes, drunk a cup
of scalding hot Ceylon tea, thickened with condensed milk, then briskly walked out to the park, already having warmed up his voice in preparation. (4)

This is a pre-emptive haunting that speaks firstly of the grief that Wu Lan is coping with, but also of the unsettling potentialities and confabulations possible because of the transnationality of both Vancouver and Singapore. The repeated use of the future unreal conditional tense in these sentences plays with the uncertainty over a future that can never come to be, but is somehow made real by the quotidian detail of the imagined possibility of Wu Lan’s father’s attempts to cope with Vancouver’s climate. The text invites us to inhabit his space: his early rising, his inability to dress appropriately for the weather, and his imbibing of an unmistakably colonial beverage.

The desire for a reconciliation of sorts with her late father is inextricably tied to Wu Lan’s casual sexual encounters in the city. She seeks these moments of human connection as a means of coping with her grief, but also to negotiate her place in Vancouver. While her first encounter with a student named Stephanie is more transient, Wu Lan develops a stable relationship with Francis, a barista from San Francisco who works at a cafe that Wu Lan frequents. Her desire for Francis reorients Wu Lan, alters the way she perceives space, and potentially allows for slippages between Wu Lan’s imagined narrative of colonial Singapore and her current life. For instance, as she follows Francis home for the first time at the threshold to Francis’s apartment she notes how

The stairs are broad, with a dim light at the top barely giving us enough light. I’m developing a bad habit. Following women home after a visit to the library. I walk a comfortable distance behind her. The stairs creak far too loudly. We’re swaying in the hold of a ship, and there’s only a thin boundary of wood that separates us from the utter chaos of the ocean. What is the name of her lipstick? Chocolate. Clove. Or why not Mud? Each name amplifies my courage. She doesn’t look back as we climb the long flight, but I can see the colour anyway. A rich brown, as luscious and inviting as moist earth. (143)

Wu Lan’s desire directs her through the city, but also alters the spaces that she traverses, producing a queer wayfinding. Ahmed points out how “[l]esbian desires create spaces,
often temporary spaces that come and go with the coming and going of the bodies that
inhabit them” (106). One way of reading this scene then would be to consider how Wu
Lan’s queer desire creates an imagined space, “the hold of a ship” that is a metaphorical
image for how she sees mutual queer desire, but also recalls earlier queer spaces that she
has confabulated for herself. The transnational, trans-oceanic implications of the ship are
clear, as is the precarity of the situation where only “a thin boundary of wood” separates
the lovers from “the utter chaos of the ocean.” This moment recalls the descriptions of
Ah Choi and Chat Mui’s South China Sea crossing, where they “sailed, starving, in the
hold of a junk for endless days like nights […] Air no longer neutral or free” (14).
Indeed, Wu Lan’s almost incongruous meditation on Francis’s lipstick finds echoes in
Chat Mui’s earlier description of her desire for Ah Choi, as “[s]eething within, a turmoil
that churns, muddy in the intestines, film of vomit at the throat, the language of secret
desires” (58). While the imagery in Chat Mui’s voice is more visceral, the linking of
queer desire with the geological is explicit in both descriptions — suggesting an
instinctual need for landing and grounding.

The three women’s reclaiming of the land is a counter-cartography of the spaces
of power that they are subjected to. This subjection is most obvious in Ah Choi and Chat
Mui’s positions as sex workers in early twentieth century Singapore. As part of a
colonially sanctioned outlet for heteronormative desire, sex workers in colonial
Singapore in the novel are seen as integral to an economy of exploitation. Chat Mui’s
describes her initiatory gang rape as a moment where “my body sank into the mud. When
they were done, one of them stuffed some papers into my hand and told me I could go,
that thanks to them, I would be able to find wealth in the new country” (14). Later, she
calls the “dirt” her “outerskin” from “that time I rose up from the mud eight years ago,
after the men tore into me. My skin soaked up an extra shadow them” (25). It is clear
then that Chat Mui’s body has been metaphorically and literally mapped into place in the
colony — indeed her “attributes” are literally carved onto the window frame of her
brothel.

Similarly, Ah Choi’s dependence on opium is obviously a legacy of Empire and
we first encounter her again in a very particular geographical location, “here at 61
Hokien Street. My cubicle, Number 2, next to the front room […] this brothel is special, used to be a mansion […] A British merchant built it for his family, lost it […] in one night of crazed gambling” (9). Ah Choi is able to discern the actual significance of her material location as she points out that while this is “a mansion,” it is also “a temple of hell, where bodies must crush other bodies in a pyramid of greed” (9). This nightmarish image positions her body in the space of the brothel but also produces an economy of violent desire that is indistinguishable from the bodies that inhabit it. Both women’s social and spatial positions have been violently imposed on their bodies. Indeed, even as they spend their non-working hours walking around the city, they are still interpellated as sex workers by the men who recognize them and mockingly hail them as such.

These interpellations emphasize the linkages between the sex workers’ bodies and other commodities that are passing through Singapore’s colonial port. Ah Choi’s walks through the city for instance, seem to be inextricably linked to her position as a good to be bought and sold, circulating through these urban spaces:

I know these streets of Chinatown well. I’m sure I can find my way through them blindfolded. This afternoon I walk down past North Canal Road to Boat Quay to be intoxicated with the smells and sounds of a busy river. Tongkangs ply the river, or line up side-by-side, moored. Cradles lulled by gentle waves. A few bullock carts crowd right at the edge, the animals impatient while the coolies load up with goods from the boats. In my black samfu, without makeup, I easily pass for an amah, just an ordinary servant of the household. But a coolie unloading large bags of rice from one of the tongkangs recognizes me, and calls out to me in jest, “Ah ku, hey ah ku, how much, how much?” I wish he wouldn’t do that. Spoiling my precious hours. (40-41)

Here, Ah Choi’s ability to circulate through the city in the day, is tied to the trade of goods by the boats and carts that ply the city’s main waterway and streets. Her “intoxication” with “the smells and sounds of a busy river” suggests her corporeal orientation to the wealth that structures the spaces of the colonial city. In a sense, like Quy in Brand’s novel, she at first seems adept at a sort of wayfinding. She seems to
possess a bodily knowledge of the city that deliberately eschews the visual, she “can find [her] way through [the streets] blindfolded.” Ah Choi’s physical relationship to the city, the river, and the trade that they enable is however, also one that involves her own body as a good. In many ways, she is no different to the coolie as one of the bags of rice that he is unloading: her worth is measured in monetary terms and her labour is meant to assuage heterosexual desire, enabling the colonial economy to function more efficiently. Thus, even as she tries to “pass for an amah, just an ordinary servant of the household,” she is recognized as an “ah ku,” the local epithet for a prostitute, a thing that has a price attached to it.

Arguably, Wu Lan’s imagining of queer desire between Chat Mui and Ah Choi disturbs these structures of power, both heteronormative and capitalist. In many ways, this means that the novel acknowledges these interpellations, but crucially, does not turn around. Ahmed calls this a queer politics where “the hope is to reinhabit the moment after such hailing” (107). Ahmed points out that such a politics would not overcome the force of the vertical, or ask us to live our lives as if such lines do not open and close spaces for action. Instead we hear the hail, and even feel its force on the surface of the skin, but we do not turn around, even when those words are directed toward us. Having not turned around, who knows where we might turn. Not turning also affects what we can do. The contingency of lesbian desire makes things happen. (107)

Clearly, this idea of “contingency” is rendered both corporeally and spatially in Ahmed’s theorization. While acknowledging the reality of the heteronormative forces that “straighten” (107) queer bodies in space, their “force on the surface of the skin,” Ahmed points to the possibility of not turning and of thus turning to an indeterminate direction. Likewise, the women turn to what Chat Mui calls “a labour that doesn’t mark us” (58), the consummation of their same-sex desires.

The women’s turning away from a violent hailing culminates in a turning to a queer desire that is transgressive and figured through imagery of the natural world. Chat Mui and Ah Choi consistently describe their desire in terms of an alteration in urban
space — one that privileges the intrusion of the natural world. Chat Mui, for instance, calls the memory of Ah Choi’s kisses “like the air just before dawn […] a fresh, clean smell, dispelling the mustiness of my cubicle” (55). Ah Choi sees Chat Mui as a tree, “the largest flame-of-the-forest tree in the park” that “envelopes” (75) her. Again, these are but temporary spaces in colonial Singapore, since in this timeline, the two women must meet, “bodies deep in the shadows […] kept company by the narrow belt of visible night sky above, and the rats scavenging at our feet” (75). The material space for queer desire is a truncated, claustrophobic one, hidden space unlike the colonially and heteronormatively coded spaces of power in the city which amaze Chat Mui with their “spaciousness” (195), their large buildings, and the openness of “neat, trim squares” of greenery (195). Chat Mui is often consumed with fear that “people must see the way we turn towards each other” (102), recognizing that her queer orientation towards Ah Choi is primarily figured as a turning away from normative space. She wonders whether it will either be “crush[ed] under the hateful weight of […] gossip” (102) or made “as trivial as a passing cloud, a raindrop disappearing into the vast ocean” (102). Even when it is at risk of being discovered or disparaged, queer desire is consistently and significantly figured as primarily spatial.

This is further apparent when Chat Mui’s rescuer, a Peranakan scholar Koh Tian Chin confesses his homosexuality to her even as they agree to a marriage of convenience.85 Chat Mui realizes,

There’ve been a few instances where I caught sight of this tender love between men. Of course it was not meant for my eyes, but how can I not see? In the small distances between their bodies, there was a subtle language. The way their hands gently touched each other’s shoulder or arm in greeting or parting. (205)

85Peranakans are descended from intermarriages between the earliest Chinese merchants and Malay people living in the Malayan peninsula, Singapore, and Indonesia. Their art, fashion, food, and cultural practices are often said to arise from traditions and practices in both Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures.
This hidden spatial script of queer desire reveals itself to Chat Mui in retrospect, even though it was “not meant for [her] eyes”. The queer kinship she finds with Tian Chin not only produces a new social space and potential genealogy, but reveals (as the novel does) previously unnoticed queer spaces, figured as “the small distance between their bodies” and queer bodies’ alterations of social spaces. The restrictive and secretive spaces of queer desire in turn-of-the-century Singapore is unlike the openness that Wu Lan and Francis enjoy as they walk in Stanley Park, “two women lovers in a crowd of strangers” (158). While she is apprehensive of being publicly affectionate, recalling a history of discrimination against queer desire in “twinges of panic” (158), Wu Lan’s fear of the disapproving gaze of others seems unfounded as “two gay men pass us by. Later on, three dykes together. They look at us with knowing smiles, openly showing their approval” (158). This non-familial display of affinity and intimacy gestures towards utopian possibilities of queer space.86

One way in which these multiple strands of the spatial, the inherited, and the transnational are finally entwined in in the text is illustrated by the novel’s repeated use of the metaphor of swimming to describe negotiating the city space. Bodies of water, and bodies in water continually recur: on one of her walks, Wu Lan sees “twists of aquamarine clouds [that] reassure, we are swimming gracefully into the dusk” (67). Vancouver in the rain is “a dream awash in refracted images” (47). Both Chat Mui and Ah Choi note how Singapore streets altered by the rain become “a red stream” (40). Similarly, when Wu Lan and Chat Mui lose consciousness, they return to the state of “that wonderful feeling of being underwater” (104), “a watery illusion” (201), or “swimming in a dark liquid” (201). This fluidity, while risking cliché, allows for a less

86The novel does not, however, figure Vancouver as completely ideal — for instance, Wu Lan’s quiet observation of the Italian immigrant men who play bocce in her neighbourhood culminates in a face-to-face encounter with one of them who, in attempting to chat her up, advances the heteronormative claim that “Women must be appreciated by men, always, always” (87). Wu Lan’s negotiation of this harassment is telling, she jokes that she is “waiting to be married off” (88) by a disapproving mother. This jest is lost on the man, how “goes away, mumbling something in Italian and politely nodding his head” (88). Yet, it is clear from the man’s comprehension of Wu Lan’s tale of arranged marriage, that heteronormative conceptions of space are still prevalent in parts of Vancouver as depicted by the novel.
rigid conception and inhabitation of city space. It further suggests alternate ways of conceiving of sociality and inheritance, as when Wu Lan arrives at a kind of epiphany while literally submerged in water, swimming in a city pool:

In the chlorine blue, eerie and surreal, I enter a world of muted vowels and consonants. A trail of bubbles exits from the mouth of a swimmer heading towards me in the next lane. Here we are, strangers, bubbling the common ocean with our breaths, our bodies creating turbulence together. Here we are generic green descendants. Limbs and torsos, Speedos, distorted body shapes, colourful fishes or eels in disguise. (89)

The swimming pool here functions as an analogy for Wu Lan’s navigation of Vancouver’s transnational spaces and her own transnational familial ties. The water here serves to make space visible, as bodies share and exchange matter, “bubbling the common ocean” and produce “turbulence together.” The “eerie and surreal” medium defamiliarizes bodies, distorting them and reducing them to their metonymic parts. Being in the pool paradoxically allows Wu Lan to orient herself through the disorientation. As Ahmed puts it, “moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground” (157). This disorientation, again a turn away from a heteronormative orientation, that Wu Lan immerses herself in not only provides her with a new way to think about alternate genealogies where the commonality of human bodies matters more than patriarchal lineages and bloodlines.

This shift in the perception of space and a sense of being in a larger feminist re-visioning of a Chinese diasporic community continues even outside of the pool, no further than the women’s locker room where

a group of Chinese women in their fifties and sixties are peeling off their swimsuits. They all seem to know each other, gossiping in Cantonese. One woman is drying her hair, tightly permed salt-and-pepper curls. She’s wearing loose white panties and around her neck a towel. She’s singing some traditional folk song above the drone of the hot-air dryer, a slow, lilting melody, the kind I
could imagine a young girl singing, to keep herself strong as she labours in the fields. Another woman joins in, hums a few lines, stops, then a few more lines.

I gaze at their bodies in shy snatches as I take off my swimsuit, as if I’m not supposed to look at the folds of flesh, the greying pubic hair, the bulging varicose veins, the floppy breasts. The realities of women my mother’s age, the reality of my own body changing and moving towards theirs. (211)

Vancouver’s transnationality is produced in this locker room as Wu Lan perceives these women actively producing their diasporic space, “gossiping in Cantonese” and singing a folk song. Certainly, it is problematic how Wu Lan romanticizes a kind of essential, authentic Chinese identity that seems to arise from a mythical agricultural past. However, the realities of the ageing bodies before her undercut what might risk becoming a simplistic and self-orientalizing sense of nostalgia. She sees her own body “changing and moving towards theirs,” seeing ageing as both a temporal and spatial movement, bringing her closer to these women, and her own mother. Her affinity to these women is however, not one based on their potential maternality or related to a politics of reproduction. Instead, there is keen awareness of the inescapable, bodily nature of ageing, its “folds of flesh, the greying pubic hair, the bulging varicose veins, the floppy breasts.” This unflinching look, perhaps even desiring encounter, with these older women’s bodies appraises them in ways that go beyond heteronormative desirability. All the usual markers of fertility and attractiveness are absent, and thus, Wu Lan “turning” towards these bodies as she does to her lovers is imbued with a queer significance.

Ultimately, as in Brand’s What We All Long For, This Place Called Absence does not seek to romanticize and idealize the possibilities of the queer, transnational spaces that are produced. Wu Lan’s misgivings about the temporariness of queer spaces leads her to have an epiphany about the contingency of space in general:

My gaze sweeps upwards and startles momentarily at the Lions. Sometimes I forget, and expect that flat landscape of my childhood. Mountains seem immovable and stoic. Yet vision can make us forget the distant past, that these sentinels weren’t always there, having originated from the depths of the earths,
thrusting through the surface as molten or granite batholiths. Even now, there are invisible shifts occurring deep within them. Every earthquake that reaches this landscape, however minor or major, must register within their forms. The faults, the fissures, all the fragmenting consequences” (159).

On one level, Wu Lan’s observations of Vancouver’s mountains and “the flat landscape of my childhood” echo and reverse Ah Choi’s musings about the flat landscape of Singapore and the mountainous landscape of her home village in China. These “patternings” trace the diasporic movements in the novel, and the corporeal effects of these displacements, how Wu Lan’s gaze “startles momentarily” at the Lions. Indeed, Wu Lan goes on to use the metaphor of the seemingly unchanging mountains to explain the mutability of both past and present. But space itself is not the static landscape that “vision” initially makes it out to be. The passage makes it clear that it is not only that we have forgotten “the distant past” when these mountains were “molten or granite batholiths,” but the fact that “even now, there are invisible shifts occurring deep within them.” Wu Lan’s realization of the inherent albeit invisible geological mutability of her lived space is crucial to an understanding of how the novel also posits the mutability and porousness of its queer, transnational sites. In her rhizomatic reading of space, Wu Lan notes that “every earthquake” produces a radiating series of “faults,” “fissures,” and “all the fragmenting consequences” —— the space itself an unseen geology and genealogy, a counter-cartography of violence, desire, and indeterminacy both on the human and non-human scales.
Chapter 9 “The Unregulated Zone”: Borders, Crossings and Speculative Wayfinding in Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl

The first encounter with overtly urban spaces that occurs in Larissa Lai’s novel Salt Fish Girl, occurs not in the “real world,” but in a computer-simulated landscape that the main character Miranda’s father is traversing. Unlike the calm, regulated spaces of Miranda’s essentially suburban life in “Serendipity, a walled city on the west coast of North America” (11) where trim hedges and manicured front yards are de rigueur, the urban landscape that Miranda’s father enters is distinctively post-apocalyptic:

The flimsy video monitor crackled and fizzled to life. I turned away from the dark form of my father zombie-walking in his Business Suit. On the screen I saw a man striding across a burning landscape. Crumpled buildings and burnt-out trucks and tanks were scattered everywhere, all smouldering dully. Inside some, tongues of dying flame still flickered. There was the sound of hammers clanking and sirens blaring and people calling for help. The man was tall and strong and solitary. (27)

I begin with this scene for a number of reasons, not least because it prefigures Miranda’s repeated forays into the “Unregulated Zone”—the dystopian urban ruins of Vancouver where a teeming underclass of the working poor and escaped clones live. The burning landscape is also the invisible reality underpinning the seemingly placid and utopian life in Serendipity. It is a simulation of the actual reality of the novel’s depiction of twenty-second century Pacific Northwest where nation-states have collapsed leaving only small pockets of elite communities. Crucially, our first glimpse of the urban is on a “flimsy video monitor” with what should be the typical figure of an urban flâneur is substituted with a cyborg “zombie-walking” in a virtual reality “Business Suit.” This technological and spatial blurring of real and artificially constructed urban spaces highlights the fragility and tenuousness of life in Serendipity, especially when it is coupled with the reader’s growing understanding of the extent of the urban ruins that surround it. Further,
there are intimations of the magical aspects of this technology that presage the fantastical and speculative elements of the later parts of the book: the ruined urban landscape is figured as a kind of mythic underworld or hell where “tongues of dying flame still flickered” and “there was the sound of hammers clanking […] and people calling for help.”

Why begin with a simulation of the urban in this last chapter of my study, as Lai’s novel does? It seems fitting as I turn to a more complex temporal positioning in my exploration of the literary counter-cartographies of our contemporary moment that we reflect on how urban texts play a significant role in the production of space — symbolic and imagined geographies that seek to intervene in our own lived encounters with space. With its double narrative structure, Salt Fish Girl metafictionally makes its constructedness evident as it intertwines a futuristic Pacific Northwest with retellings of foundational Chinese myths and links the spatialities of the two temporalities to each other. The two main protagonists are Nu Wa, the mythical Chinese snake goddess who is credited with the creation of mankind, and Miranda, an inhabitant of the walled city of Serendipity who has been diagnosed with a disease that makes her smell like salt fish and remember collective traumas. The novel traces the parallel journeys of these characters as they struggle to find lasting connections amidst the equally dystopian and surreal settings of the past and future, culminating in a sequence that sees the two characters profoundly connected through an act of reincarnation and bio-engineering. The text’s self-conscious counter-cartographies of spatial and temporal borders, and its double focus on both a mythic past and an anticipated magical realist future make it a fitting, Janus-faced ending to my project.

With this turn to the future, my final chapter moves beyond and yet complements the past-oriented aspects of the earlier chapters. I am mindful of Andreas Huyssen’s work on what he calls the “media of critical cultural memory” (6). In his 2003 book Present

87 Tania Aguila-Way points out that the novel’s structure “playfully mirrors the double helix structure of the DNA molecule” (171), an observation that will further reinforce my later argument about the notion of wayfinding in the most intimate confines of the body.
Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory, Huyssen examines urban monuments and memorials, but also insists on reading texts by Spiegelman and W.G. Sebald alongside these material objects since these contemporary texts concerned with “haunted space and spatial imaginaries […] partake in the force play of remembrance and forgetting, vision and blindness, transparency and opaqueness of the world.” (10). Much of my preceding chapters in this study examines minority texts in this key, while focusing on the geographical contexts of each text. However, like Massey’s injunction to remember the happenstance, the chance and the unpredictable potentialities of space, Huyssen’s work also reminds us that

It is all the more important that at a time when an avalanche of memory discourses seems to have overwhelmed an earlier activist imagination of the future, we actually do remember the future and try to envision alternatives to the current status quo. It will not do to replace the twentieth century’s obsessions with the future with our newly found obsessions with the past. We need both past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfaction with the present state of the world. (6)

Huyssen here identifies a generational shift towards the pull of memory and nostalgia and a turn away from the “obsessions with the future.” The need for “both past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfaction” is something that many of the minority writers that I have examined have wrestled with, and indeed found ways to complicate a binary construction of “an earlier activist imagination of the future” and “our newly found obsessions with the past.” For instance, in Compton’s retro-speculative view of Black Vancouverite history, the past is reinvigorated by a postmodern reconfiguration of its truths. Thien’s “Map of the City” alters Vancouver’s spatialities with its multiple temporalities, as do Murakami’s fractured and iterative poetics. Similarly, the fragmentary past histories in the work of Tan Shzr Ee, Tan Pin Pin, and Alfian Sa’at haunt their future generations.

Like these texts and the novels by Brand and Kwa, Salt Fish Girl does not just tell one tale in one temporality; even as it has been generally seen as a dystopian
speculative fiction. The novel is also, crucially, the retelling of Chinese foundational myths, an exploration of pre-diasporic life in China, and a meditation on the genealogical, transnational and materialist connections between these chronotopes and a dystopian urban future. Huyssen notes the radical possibilities of these temporal and spatial minglings in a work of art, when he argues that

an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias. (7)

Lai’s novel allows us to turn to history to not only understand the present, but also to imagine alternate futures.

The temporal pluralities that the texts in my study share also reflect a more general formal preoccupation: how to formally move beyond cartographic ways of seeing the city to literary ways of inhabiting it. Lai’s novel is, at times, confusing, fraught, and disjointed. Its structure recalls Murakami’s repetitions, Compton’s confabulations, Tan Pin Pin’s fragmentary filmmaking, and Tan Shzr Ee’s perambulations. Lai’s patterned yet disjointed narratives resist the form of a fixed, determined urban cartography or genre, whether mythological or historical novel or speculative fiction. As in Kwa and Brand’s texts, this resistance is transnational, as the characters and settings in Salt Fish Girl constantly cross what seem to be national borders, whether from Serendipity to the Unregulated Zone, or from Canton to the city of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness. Further, through the implications of bio-genetic engineering and reincarnation, Salt Fish Girl traces diasporic genealogies that move across generations, genomes, and species. These movements may seem larger than the initial definitions of transnational that I began this section with — in a consideration of the texts by Brand and Kwa that move between national borders and diasporic temporalities. Yet, as my

Scholars of the novel have often focused their attention exclusively on the twenty-second century plot of the text. See Paul Lai, Tara Lee, Rita Wong, and Eleanor Ty. Only Nicholas Birns’s work pays more consideration to the role of myth in the text.
study draws to its close, it is my express intention to consider how mapped urban space is deconstructed both by the larger concerns of ecology and the more intimate confines of the body. My reading of the novel will demonstrate how ecology, the city, and the body are a scalar series of critical lenses that are inextricable from each other.

In this final chapter, I will focus on a selection of border crossings in the text as I examine exactly how the text troubles and unmaps the ecological, urban, and corporeal boundaries enacted by capitalist processes. From the time Miranda’s father is able to quietly bribe their way out of Serendipity into the Unregulated Zone with “the papery rustle of money changing hands” (36) to Nu Wa’s magical realist movement from Canton to the City of Hope and the novel’s final utopian scene of a live birth borne of reincarnation and bio-engineering, the novel produces a series of counter-cartographical narrative sequences that disrupt mapped spaces and bodies. These counter-cartographical moments are examples of wayfinding writ large where the body, as it is in the city and of the city, is central to the production of urban space. The mythic, futuristic, and magical realist urban scenes in the novel are where we cannot help but “know as we go, not before we go” (Ingold 230). The characters’ indeterminate trajectories in Salt Fish Girl produce spatio-temporalities that wayfind genomes, cities, and bodies. Following them is a fitting culmination to this study’s underlying preoccupation with how bodies find their way in cities and in doing so produce urban spaces in ways that run counter to the spatializations of capitalist development.

Canton/ the City of Hope

In a reversal of Miranda’s journey from Serendipity to the Unregulated Zone, Nu Wa’s magical realist movements between nineteenth century Canton and the seemingly atemporal City of Hope depict a transition from a space that is subject to the urban poverty like the Unregulated Zone to one where immigrant figures are surrounded by material wealth that they cannot access. Nu Wa’s journey demonstrates the Pacific Northwest’s myriad connections to Asia through a compression of the long history of migration from turn of the century Canton to our present time. If we read Nu Wa’s journey in the timeless past as a parallel to Miranda’s future, Salt Fish Girl not only
dislodges the city from a strictly Canadian geography but also destabilizes a teleological view of the country’s progress—taking its sordid and intimate ties to exploited immigrant labour and its willful forgetfulness of Indigenous land claims to their logical ends: cloned minority bodies as workers and an island city completely detached from history.

The novel’s convoluted narrative structure elucidates the unequal spatial politics of most global cities. For instance, in one particularly nightmarish sequence, Nu Wa finds herself surrounded by factories and sweatshops in Canton where endless rows of men, women and children are producing all manner of commodities in a direct precursor to the cloned workers in the novel’s future timelines. Canton’s factories are mirrored by the exploitation of labour in the City of Hope, a thinly disguised version of contemporary Vancouver. The City of Hope is where the foundations for Serendipity are laid in the form of exploited minority and migrant labour in a coastal city, authoritarian systems, and pronounced spatial and economic inequalities. This quasi-allegorical city is an intriguing mix of the magical (it is floating in the sky) and the realist (with its focus on temporary, precarious work). The text acknowledges its history as an English colony but also describes it as one that “became unmoored from history, lost its connection with the past or the future and floated into the sky” (139). The city’s timelessness and its ability to move Nu Wa rapidly from the beginnings of the industrial age in Canton to the abuses of the service industry in Vancouver speak to the recurrent and continual exploitation of workers and immigrants in an age of global capital. The temporal disjunctures that the City of Hope represents reveal the varying, unequal modes of globalization that Salt Fish Girl is attuned to.

Nu Wa’s encounter with this alternate reality defamiliarizes our view of contemporary Vancouver. The surreality of the city is particularly emphasized in Nu Wa’s initial journey with Edwina to the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, a threshold moment that moves the narrative from the realm of historical Canton to the magical realist city of Hope:
I followed her along a winding path at the edge of the cliff, into mist so thick that in a short time I could not see her at all, although she continued to grasp my hand tightly. I could not see my own feet either, but the ground felt reasonably solid beneath them. Or at least it did for a while. Although imperceptibly, bit by bit, it grew soft and springy. My footsteps fell lighter and faster. When our heads emerged from the clouds, I was shocked to see the land so far below. (124)

This fantastical moment is still very much embodied as Nu Wa attempts to navigate the “soft and springy” path to the Island. The city itself is illusory, literally of the clouds and disconnected from land, history and community. The transmutation of land to air to land again troubles a fixed spatial sense of the City of Hope, much like the way Serendipity’s integrity is subtly challenged in the novel. Maps here are inadequate to describe the complexity of this space; when Nu Wa tries to leave the City of Hope she buys a tattered piece of paper with “nothing on it but a picture of the Sighing River with a line beside it” (169). This forces her to follow a river, to wayfind through this dream city, following “the path into the clouds” (169) back to Canton.

Indeed, the City of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness is the spatialized metaphor of the contemporary Canadian city as an unreal space of hope, a place of constructed literally of immigrant tales. Nu Wa’s explains her disorientation through a reference to confabulation:

I did not understand where I was, or how I had come to this place. In my home village I had heard stories of men who invented South Sea islands, and sold gullible dreamers citizenships in places that did not exist, for outrageous sums. Perhaps the wanting of so many desperate and hopeful people had made one of those island real. But then why was it like this, so cold and damp, and where were the others like me? (136)
Salt Fish Girl shows us the invention of contemporary Vancouver as Dream City,99 “an astonishing city, glinting pink and gold” (125), promising “Progress” and “Democracy,” the inscriptions above its east and west gates. This city, imagined and desired into being by immigrants is abstracted and defamiliarized, “the buildings...huge and pressed tightly against one another, but without ever breaking their carefully planned geometry” (126). The “forgetfullians,” as the novel calls them, have lost their previous ties and connections, and are trapped in a “cold and damp” island — the weather an obvious reference to Pacific Northwest’s climate. There are other obvious anachronistic markers of the City of Hope’s contemporary moment with references to modern hotels, tabloids, spas, an industrial prison system, concrete and glass, and telemarketing. Again, the text takes these rapid shifts between temporalities as a normal occurrence, a commentary on the vastly unequal pace of development between nations. Lai’s novel seems to ask, what makes turn of the century Canton, with its industrial workforce and poverty, so different from Serendipity and the City of Hope? All these urban spaces are defined by their disorienting urban spaces and downtrodden workforces.

Nu Wa is lured to the City of Hope by a woman named Edwina and, after a brief introduction to the various capitalist luxuries available in the city, wends her way through work as a hotel cleaner, a homeless itinerant, a telemarketer, and an unwitting accomplice to a drug runner. She finally ends up incarcerated after a false accusation of drug trafficking and illegal immigration. As in the examples of Jamal and Quy, this is a failed wayfinding as Nu Wa finally finds herself in the deep recesses of the City of Hope’s carceral systems — the epitome of a Lefebvrian abstract space:

I suppose I should have been thankful for the cleanliness and the lack of blood on the walls, but somehow the sterility of the place frightened me more than anything. Except for a slight sag at the centre of the mattress, there was no evidence of any previous presence in this cell. No evidence of beatings, or pain, no trace of the invasion of subdued bodies, and yet somehow those things were all present in the reek of the bleach and the gleam of the walls. I sat on the

99See the first section of this dissertation for Berelowitz’s justification of his use of the term.
mattress with my head in my hands and waited, because that was all there was to do. (140-41)

The endpoint of this failed wayfinding is a space emptied out of human sociality and corporeality where Nu Wa struggles to notice the smallest details of previous human presence, “a slight sag at the centre of the mattress.” This urban space is deeply complicit in the use and abuse of people that Salt Fish Girl more generally critiques. Bodies that are unwilling to adhere to the capitalist boundaries of the factory, the sweatshop, and the service industries are “subdued” here through corporal punishment. Indeed, they are “subdued” to the point of invisibility, evinced by the repeated use of negation in this quotation. Nu Wa’s waiting brings her wandering and wayfinding to a complete standstill, her lack of motion mirroring the seemingly atemporal space of the prison — its erasure of previous lives and histories evident in the “sterility” and lack of “traces.”

Serendipity/The Unregulated Zone

In the novel’s other major narrative thread, Miranda’s initial encounter with the Unregulated Zone is a parallel trajectory to Nu Wa’s movement between Canton and the City of Hope. After her first encounter with the Unregulated Zone via the technological mediation of her father’s virtual reality suit, Miranda’s first border crossing seems unceremoniously ordinary: a quiet attempt to bribe the guard results in a speedy exit from Serendipity. Yet, as she journeys further into the Unregulated Zone, the text prolongs the process of this crossing, undermining the idea of a quick spatial switch accomplished through departing through Serendipity’s gates:

For a long stretch we just bumped along a crumbling highway. Grass and weeds poked out of the cracks. On one side there grew a thin forest of scraggly trees, on the other a parched field of tall yellow grass. A low concrete building came up on the right, though because of my peculiar backwards-looking vantage point, I didn’t see it until we had passed. I turned my head once and saw a vast city mushrooming up into a pinkish purple sky. As we entered it the air grew thick with the smell of old petrol, sulphur, urine and rotten food. Or at least, that was what I detected through the haze of my own odour. The buildings were for the
most part empty. Many of them were crumbling, some from sheer age, and some in long rows where they had clearly been bombed. Very few windows had glass in them. (37)

In this description of what was once suburban and urban Vancouver, the organic and the urban are inextricably conjoined, the failing infrastructure giving way to “grass and weeds,” “a thin forest of scraggly trees, and “tall yellow grass.” The vertical imagery here foreshadowing the ruined buildings and skyscrapers. Miranda sees “a vast city mushrooming up into a pinkish purple sky” as the text again conflates the natural and organic, in this case, a growth of fungus (and of course the intimation of a nuclear holocaust) with the man-made city. The olfactory imagery here is also of note. Stephanie Oliver and Paul Lai have done extensive work on the significance of the olfactory in the text. Paul Lai argues that in the novel, “foul odors jolt us into rethinking our assumptions about modernity and knowledge” (168). While Paul Lai’s work focuses primarily on the corporeal aspects of these smells, in this particular passage, it is the ruined urban space itself that is embodied through the olfactory, even as the smells reorient our views of the urban. The “thickness” of the air with the smells of a post-industrial dystopia of “old petrol, sulphur, urine and rotten food” again reminds us that cities are collections or assemblages of built infrastructure and human detritus. Given the scarcity of both petrol and working motor vehicles, the smell of “old petrol” reminds us of the lack of mobility in the Unregulated Zone and the role of fossil fuels and climate change in the transformation of this city. Vancouver here is both a city of the future, in this anticipatory fiction, but also strangely one of the past, where some great disaster or conflict has already occurred, where buildings are “crumbling…from sheer age.” The complex temporal realities of this scene are arguably illustrated by how Miranda is looking “backwards” on her father’s bicycle as she crosses into the Unregulated Zone and this “peculiar…vantage point” again undermines the idea of a simple border-crossing or traversal. Miranda here is entering space by looking back at the places that are in the past, complicating our understanding of the temporality of the Unregulated Zone. In a sense, Miranda’s positioning in this scene is a metafictional moment where the text itself gives us a retrospective look at future Vancouver.
While these complex physical and sensory disorientations complicate this border crossing experience, Miranda’s final revelation about her first encounter with the Unregulated Zone carefully parses the conceived and perceived aspects of its space from its actual spatial practice, its lived reality:

The place was beginning to seem familiar, and at first I found this very spooky. Then I realized I had seen a version of it in the monitor that was attached to the Business Suit. It was also the city of the Pallas advertisement, except that it had none of that romantic sheen. It was too dirty and too foul-smelling” (37)

Miranda’s instinctive reaction is to attribute this familiarity with a kind of supernatural or fantastical “spookiness,” drawing our attention to the unheimlich slippage between the “city of the Pallas advertisement”, “which, in spite of its dilapidated state, had a sort of romance about it” (35) and the actual dirt and smells of the Unregulated Zone. Even as corporate productions of space cynically try to romanticize the ruins of “an ominous city” (35), Miranda’s actual corporeal experience of these ruins removes the “romantic sheen,” a shimmering virtual reality haze, from the pedestrian, everyday filth of the Zone. This is a precious, temporary epiphany as when Miranda returns to Serendipity, “[t]he crumbling city grew more beautiful as it receded” (39). Nevertheless, Miranda cannot disregard the artificiality of her life in Serendipity and the hypocrisy of romanticizing the Unregulated Zone.

After this first traversal, Miranda and her father begin leading a double life where “not a month went by without a secret trip to some doctor’s office or herbalist’s shop in the Unregulated Zone” (59). In the attempt to rid her body of its salt fish odour, these crossings linger in Miranda’s body as she is repeatedly made to ingest medicines from the Unregulated Zone ranging from “an infusion made by pouring hot water into a jar packed with live, angry bees” (59) and “a soup made from embryonic chickens still sleeping in their eggs and coated in mucusy egg white” (59). The latter, in particular, a substance in a “liminal state” (59) between chicken and egg reflecting Miranda’s own straddling of the border between Serendipity and the Unregulated Zone.
Miranda’s repeated incursions into the Unregulated Zone and her ingestion of various remedies only serve to reinforce her border-crossing through “contamination” — one that began at the moment of her conception when after eating a durian fruit growing “strangely, for this is not their climate” (14) in the Unregulated Zone, her mother, “a good eight year past menopause” (15) became pregnant with her. The durian fruit, usually native to parts of Southeast Asia, is an inextricable part of her parents’ moment of passion as “it tumbled between them, its green spikes biting greedily into their flesh, its pepper-pissy juices mixing with their somewhat more subtly scented ones and the blood of the injuries it inflicted with its green teeth” (15). As with later descriptions of the durian, its status solely as a fruit is suspect here, since it has “teeth” and “bites,” its animation a symbol for the tendency for the Unregulated Zone to eschew spatial and species boundaries. Miranda’s contaminated body is both wayfinding and a site for wayfinding through the Unregulated Zone, revealing the contours of its unmapped, unregulated spaces through its ingestion of compounds, substances, and plants from the ruined city.

Moreover, the Unregulated Zone is one where Miranda finds a series of counter-cartographical routes, ones that are unmarked on maps and that resist any commercial sense of the city. In later parts of the novel, where the rogue clone Evie rescues Miranda from being experimented on, another spatial aspect of the Zone is revealed:

Evie pulled me into a dark narrow alley and we ran. We ran and we kept turning corners until I completely lost my sense of direction. Having been raised to believe that it was far too dangerous to walk in the city, I had no idea about these alleyways, no idea that the city was connected by them, that it had this whole other internal logic, an organizing principle beyond its noisy, commercially active facade. (219-20)

Evie and Miranda’s wayfinding here recalls much of the other traversals in cities that this study has looked at, whether Jackie’s bike ride in Toronto, Miriam and Wu Lan’s perambulations in Vancouver, Tan Shzr Ee’s discovery of hidden paths in Singapore and so forth. This disorientation that Evie allows Miranda to access is metonymic for the
novel’s larger resistance to and eschewal of urban and corporeal “planning.” The alleys that seem like insignificant spaces in the city, that are liminal, invisible, and dangerous have in fact a “whole other internal logic, an organizing principle” that is not crucially, imposed, but organic and dynamic. These tactical connections allow for a growing resistance to the “commercial” as a space where humans are indistinguishable from commodity products in Serendipity and the Unregulated Zone.

Evie and Miranda end up in “a dilapidated street in which many houses were abandoned” (219), not connected to the power, water or sanitation systems, and “the street reeked of raw sewage” (220). Yet, as Evie and Miranda become lovers, what would ordinarily elicit olfactory disgust, like “raw sewage,” is seemingly recuperated. Through the two women’s bodies in the Unregulated Zone, the novel revels in the temporary freedom of unregulated racialized and queer bodies in its urban spaces. As in Kwa’s novel, the same sex relationship between Evie and Miranda queers the spaces around them and is the polar opposite of the sterile prison space that Nu Wa is confined to. When the two women have sex for the first time, their lovemaking is figured through a series of urban smells, ones that we have already encountered in Miranda’s first entry into the Unregulated Zone, but now fully conflated with the lovers’ bodies — a “stench that poured from [their] bodies [that] was overwhelming — something between rotting garbage and heavenly stew” (225). It is the smell of human inhabitance of space, a specifically ethnic one: “the hiss and fizzle of salt fish and durian, minor notes of sour plum, fermented tofu, boiled dong quai — all those things buried and forgotten in the years of corporate homogenization” (225). Repeatedly, through these gustatory and olfactory images, *Salt Fish Girl* textures the lived urban space, figuring it through the queer, ethnic body despite all the preceding industrial and capitalist manipulations of urban space. These tastes, smells, and bodies also produce a transnational urban spaces and histories — producing a lived space of the senses that cannot be mapped conventionally.
Bio-engineering/Reincarnation

Even before this climatic scene, Miranda has already begun to understand the extreme artificiality of Serendipity’s status as a walled city through her own body and the bodies of its other inhabitants. A formative encounter occurs when her classmate Ian shows her the hidden underworld of the “Janitors” that is just below their school. Accessing this underworld through the janitor’s closet, the two children descend to “a boiler room of some sort … with clocks attached and numbers rapidly indicating the passage of time and the consumption of energy” (75). This liminal space sustains the outward comfort of Serendipity with the toil of cloned and genetically modified minority women who maintain its cleanliness and sterility. In this space, Miranda cultivates a hyper-awareness of “the water running and the occasional clank of metal suddenly expanding or contracting” (75) as she realizes that she is in the innards of the Serendipity, the hidden lived spaces that contribute to the city’s appearance and symbolism. It is no surprise that this space is reserved for minority labour, apparent through “women’s voices” speaking in a language she doesn’t understand and “dark bodies in blue uniforms with strange curling text in a language [she] didn’t recognize printed in large white letters across their backs” (75). The markers of race and class are obvious in this encounter, as Miranda realizes the foreignness and othered nature of the labour that supports the walled city. Ian tells her that these women are clones, “not women” but “Janitors”, “illegal” and the “primary carriers of the Contagion” (75), further marking their bodies as nonhuman and diseased.

These women’s bodies reveal Serendipity’s complicity in the perpetuation of this dystopian system of capitalist exploitation. In a meditation on the body that is unsettlingly intimate, Miranda notices a peculiar detail about the cleaners:

There were rectangular holes in their uniforms that ran from the tailbone to the base of the neck. The muscle and skin of their backs had been replaced with some kind of transparent silicone composite so that you could see their spines and behind them, their hearts pounding, their livers and kidneys swimming in oceans of blood and gristle. We had studied anatomy at school. I could see that the
organs had been shifted, had been carefully arranged like stones in a formal
garden, mimicking the asymmetrical aesthetics of nature, but with human
intention. (77)

Here, Miranda’s understanding of the real scope and scale of Serendipity’s spaces
extends into the realm of the corporeal. These cloned, bio-engineered women and their
rearranged internal organs represent the utter domination of conceived space — where
spatial planning has been extended right into the body and made into a spectacle so that
functionality has been subsumed by visuality. The metaphorical language used in this
passage directly links “livers and kidneys” with islands that are “swimming in oceans of
blood and gristle.” The organs are also stripped of their natural tendencies as they are
“carefully arranged like stones in a formal garden.” In an observation that foreshadows
Miranda’s encounter with geneticist Doctor Flowers’s work (and ‘interior decorating’)
later in the novel, she notes that while the arrangement may be “mimicking the
asymmetrical aesthetics of nature” there is no doubting the “human intention” (77). This
hyper-regulation of space is neatly camouflaged by a sly asymmetry, much like how the
strictures of Serendipity are hidden beneath its seemingly bland, suburban exterior.
Miranda’s realizations then, and her discovery of the heterotopian spaces of Serendipity
destabilize its seemingly “walled” spaces.

Thus, early on in the novel, the text intimately links the spatial with the corporeal
in what Richard Sennett would call a “master image of wholeness” (373) in line with the
longer history of the Western city. Sennett argues that “master images of ‘the body’ have
performed the work of power in urban space” (373) and indeed, Salt Fish Girl suggests
that the bio-engineered women whose existence is in service of orderliness are the logical
conclusion of this urban geography of power. Another instantiation of this power is when
the novel depicts the erstwhile villain Dr Flowers’s artificial manipulation of nature
through bioengineered interior design. Dr Flowers’s offices are symbolically walled off
against the rising tide, where “the ocean pressed, full and furious at being shut out of this
territory, which clearly belonged, by natural rights to it and not to us” (112). In this
hermetically sealed space, Dr Flowers’ produces a simulacrum of the natural that
disregards the specific ecologies of Vancouver, a tropically themed reception room
where “[t]he floor was covered in a living carpet of the most expensive genetically engineered moss and the walls climbed with unusual brilliant flowers and succulent green vines” (254) and even the receptionist is genetically engineered to “blend into the lush atmosphere of the reception room much as a Gauguin nude might blend into hers” (254). This reception room gives way to a “once-upon-a-time sort of European forest” that seems cartoonish, both the tropical and temperate climates depicting a kind of colonial idyll that is obviously created as a kind of technological mastery over Vancouver’s ruined landscape. Like the genetically engineered “Janitors” in Serendipity, the over-reliance on “human intention” here is apparent and the over-controlled character of these spaces are simply the effect of a colonial and capitalist attempt at mastery over nature.

Yet Dr Flowers’ machinations have also produced unexpectedly radical and resistant outcomes. In the novel’s iteration of the late twenty-first century, the human genome has been so thoroughly mapped that corporations have been manufacturing workers who are not “defined as persons” (156) by ensuring that a small percentage of their genes are nonhuman. Evie, a clone and Miranda’s lover, mockingly calls herself “a patented new fucking life form” because her genes are “point zero three per cent Cyprinus carpio — freshwater carp” (158). In the midst of these bleak repetitions of industrialized labour and commodified lives, the novel posits the potential crossings (both in the sense of traversals and mixings) of human and nonhuman life as sites of resistance. As with the moment of Miranda’s conception where the wild durian intervenes, the moments of inter-species crossings in the novel provide ways of challenging capitalist iterations of urban space. Commenting on her novel in an essay for West Coast Line, Lai posits that “[h]ope lies in the random — the idea that even out of the worst situations, sometimes mutations occur in a liberatory direction” (“Future Asians” 25). Lai’s use of the word “direction” here enables us to consider how the genetic mutations that the novel depicts do indeed have spatial orientations and effects. This is in the context of a literary dystopia where almost everything has been mapped out and overdetermined: the manicured suburban Serendipity, the long and narrow factory streets of Canton, the bureaucratically structured City of Hope, the rearranged internal
organs of the “janitors”, and finally the human genome and nature itself (Evie further reveals the extent of this capitalist reproduction of the body based on a “nonhuman” blueprint, saying that there are at least a hundred thousand clones with “identical material” (158) as her). Yet, even though Evie has not been “designed for wits or willpower” (158), she manages to escape the corporation that made her and quips “maybe the fish was the unstable factor” (159). This “unstable factor,” something “cold and sharp and electric,” “the fishiness” (191) — the unexpected effects of Evie’s bio-engineering are complicated by Miranda’s unconscious revelation that she knew Evie in a past incarnation.

This conflation of the unexpected results of bio-engineering with the supernatural aspects of reincarnation is a magical realist aspect of the novel that represents another kind of crossing — one that is trans-historical and possibly, trans-ontological. By the latter, I mean that the novel draws important links between scientific and mythological ways of being. Through these crossings, liberatory mutations that arise out of both planned and random combinations of human and nonhuman, the mythological and the scientific, fundamentally disrupt capitalist mappings of lived space and the human genome. Lai’s novel produces hybrid forms of unexpected evolutions, new ecologies that are a co-existence of technology, mythology and agency, where cloning is inextricably linked to reincarnation, and bioengineering produces unpredictable, resistant assemblages.

These unpredictable crossings are most clearly symbolized by the figure of the genetically modified durian tree that Miranda encounters when she visits the commune of escaped clones who are reproducing themselves with the help of its fruit. Evie explains later that scientists had implanted human genes into fruit as a fertility therapy but “of course the pollen blew every which way and could not be contained” (258) and the Sonias realized that “the fruit of certain trees could make women pregnant without any need for insemination” (258). However, the book also gives us an alternate mythological explanation for the durian’s role in fertility, one that involves Nu Wa’s consciousness somehow surviving a suicide by drowning where she crucially describes it as an anamorphic process where she becomes “weighty water… Almost flesh… changing
substance” (205) before turning into a kind of protoplasmic organism that “coiled” (208) into the seed of a durian fruit and is in turn ingested by Miranda’s mother. This dual explanation of the role of the durian tree in Miranda’s own miraculous birth also explains the clones’ fertility and Miranda’s own seemingly inexplicable pregnancy at the end of the novel. The agency of “the pollen” which “could not be contained” is significant here, as is the reference to the divine reincarnation of Nu Wa. Both are moments of border crossing that are unmappable --- where pollen disregards containment and where Nu Wa’s consciousness defies conventional reality.

The vivid anthropomorphization of the tree itself reinforces these crossings:

Its branches were knotted, growing away from the trunk in acrobatic contortions. Its leaves were dark and fluttered a little in the evening breeze, revealing their slightly paler undersides and the faint red of their veins as though blood flowed from the trunk, down the gnarled branches and into the veins of the leaves. As we approached closer, I saw the first fruit, nestled in the dark foliage —— greenish-gold bodies covered in spikes, distinctly lizard-like. Different from the durians that had passed, over the years, through our family store, these ones flushed pink at the ends of their spikes. It was as though blood flowed from the inside to the pointed tips, as it appeared to in the leaves, or as though some giant hand had tried unsuccessfully to crush each one and had left the bloody trace of the attempt on each incisor-sharp point. But the thing that most shocked and astonished and at the same time oddly comforted me was the odour that poured from the fruits, wafted off the leaves and seeped from the bark. It was the same heavenly cat-piss-and-pepper odour that had been the bane of my childhood existence, the odour that still trailed me around like a stray dog. (221)

The human attributes given to the tree begin with its “acrobatic contortions” that imbue a rooted plant with the ability to move and contort. The tree is also depicted as vulnerable and full of blood in its “veins.” Crucially, its fruit are seen as almost separate animals, “distinctly lizard-like,” recalling the conflation of animal and human genes in Evie and other clones. Again, these fruit are imbued with a vibrant sense of warm-bloodedness
with their spikes “flushed pink at the ends,” the constant reference to blood flow perhaps an allusion to their ability to impregnate women. Any human attempt to control this fruit is futile, and only leaves the bloody trace of the attempt” on its teeth-like spikes. Miranda is immediately given a kind of equivalence to the durian, since we are told that its “heavenly cat-piss-and-pepper odour” is exactly the same as hers, again here the olfactory used as a shorthand to draw visceral connections between the human and nonhuman. Later, Miranda will be literally impregnated by eating one of the durians, remembering “the creamy yellow flesh, the pepper-pissy flavour that seeped into the body before it registered as taste” (258). The act of eating the fruit as a sexual act troubles the inter-species boundary. Indeed, Miranda feels her pregnant body “as a pear about to drop […] ready to rot, already dreaming of the return to earth” (259).

At the end of the novel, the rebellious clones are murdered and the durian tree is chopped down by corporations intent on controlling the means of human reproduction and space. However, the text still gives us a glimmer of hope with Miranda and Evie’s survival and escape from Serendipity and its environs. The novel’s final scene sees its cyclical narrative returning us to a moment of rebirth and recreation as Miranda leaves the urban ruins of the Unregulated Zone and goes into labour to deliver her botanically conceived child in “an ancient ocean bubbling up through the rocks, salty and full of minerals” (269). Here, in a final magical realist scene, Miranda undergoes an anamorphic transformation that fully merges her character with that of the mythological figure of Nu Wa while Evie manifests her “zero point three percent freshwater carp”; there is “no shame as the coils unravelled” (269) and as she notices “a tiny layer of tiny silver scales began to form and glisten in the moonlight” on both her and Evie’s bodies. Like in Kwa’s novel, this eschewal of heteronormative reproduction brings us beyond patriarchal lineages and bloodlines to alternate genealogies. In a conflation the vocabulary of creation myth and science, Miranda muses,

we are the new children of the earth, of the earth’s revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how
ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into
the future. (259)

This final act of writing from within and not mapping from without fully realizes the
novel’s disruption of the cartographical borders enforced by capitalist urbanism, science,
and temporality. The text, the body, and space are depicted as inextricably connected and
mutually generative. Indeed, it is this conscious yet unpredictable act of “writ[ing] our
bodies into the future” that takes into account both the “ancient […] alphabet of our
bodies” and also “a variation” that allows for a powerful form of wayfinding that begins
at the smallest levels of corporeal being. The novel’s vertiginous mingling of cloning,
reincarnation, plant life, animal life, mythology, sweatshops, and so forth are messy and
“strange” but its deliberate unruliness reflects the multiplicity of perspectives and
possibilities produced in this complex social space. In its conclusion, the text posits that
genetic and corporeal change in the context of new urban spaces is inevitable. By
embracing these changes, “of DNA both new and old,” the characters in Salt Fish Girl
are able to wayfind ever more profoundly, recognizing how deeply their bodies alter and
are altered by the urban environment, their trajectories, and their unpredictable
encounters.
Coda: Towards Speculative Counter-Cartographies

This study has argued for new ways of reading urban texts that involve a thorough interrogation of the spatial to understand the relations of power and politics that produce transnational urban spaces. I have focused in particular on Vancouver, Singapore, and other transnational Asian/Canadian urban spaces, arguing that these sites are the product of a long legacy of colonial urban planning that has continued in contemporary iterations of capitalist development. These cities have been dominated by representations of their space---maps, plans, and property speculation---as opposed to their lived spatial practice. The fact that both Vancouver and Singapore in particular are often seen as “models” for urban planning and development is testimony to the power of these maps and plans. My readings have examined a range of texts from these two cities, and transnational novels which take old and new connections between Canada and Asia into account. These works develop a complex urban politics that resists celebratory accounts of neoliberal globalization and multiculturalism, while addressing the realities of migration and diaspora.

Central to my endeavours has been a simultaneous engagement with these literary texts and spatial theories from cultural geography and urban studies. This has allowed for interdisciplinary literary readings that acknowledge and contextualize the most recent waves of urbanization and development. Through a range of genre ---the short story, poetry, autobiography, flash fiction, documentary film and novel---I have explored textual counter-cartographies that contest mapped and planned urban spaces. These texts challenge teleological narratives of progress, which are often marked by relentless demolition and redevelopment. I see these textual counter-cartographies as an evolving set of de Certeausian “tactics” that involve historical confabulation, urban wayfinding, literary detours, and transnational border crossing. I have demonstrated how a range of artistic works from poetry collections by Wayde Compton and Sachiko Murakami, short stories by Madeleine Thien and Alfian Sa’at, films by Tan Pin Pin, and creative non-fiction by Tan Shzr Ee, and novels by Dionne Brand, Lydia Kwa and Larissa Lai use a
plethora of modes to resist the abstraction of capitalist spaces, and restore the sociality and human complexity to urban space. Reading in a counter-cartographical way is an intervention that disrupts maps of capitalist and neoliberal power, contesting the status of urban spaces as planned economic investments.

The comparative structure of my study has investigated new methods of transnational thinking through its focus on both urban Canada and Singapore. By putting Asian Anglophone literary texts in dialogue with diasporic Canadian literature, my work seeks to subvert existing metropole-periphery models that have been inherited in various postcolonial literary traditions. In the longer study, it is clear that the inclusion of works from Hong Kong, for instance, would continue my work of building literary networks beyond the paradigms of literary analysis that look towards metropoles like London or New York. Hong Kong is also a coastal postcolonial city with connections to both Singapore and Vancouver, and would stand as an example of an intermediate stage between nation and city. A longer monograph would consider Anglophone texts from Hong Kong that confront further densification, the influx of migrant labour, and seemingly relentless urban redevelopment.

As a gesture to future work that opens itself up from this project, however, I would like to briefly return to the work of historian Andreas Huyssen who suggests in his work on urban monuments and memorials that we must “remember the future and try to envision alternatives to the current status quo” (6). It is my view that the past-weighted chapters of this study are absolutely fundamental to my reconsideration of how urban spaces are inhabited today. That is to say, the reclamation of marginalized histories, lost spaces, liminal sites, and disappearing spatial practices are crucial to an ethical dwelling in the city. These texts remind us of the transient immigrant experience, of erased diasporic communities, and of repressed spatial histories. Doreen Massey deliberately uses the literary to describe this temporal fluidity and the unfinished, ever-mutable nature of space as “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (10). Many of the texts that I have examined complicate linear temporalities by insisting on how the past exists in the present as well: Madeleine Thien’s short story meanders through both memory and city in “A Map of the City,” Wayde Compton’s poems give us retrospeculative musings on an imagined black
community in Vancouver, Sachiko Murakami’s poetic lines evoke the glass facades of condominiums built on Coast Salish land, Tan Shzr Ee’s memoir invents historical confabulations of lost spaces in Singapore, Tan Pin Pin’s films act as excavations of the invisible geographies of the city, Alfian Sa’at’s *Malay Sketches* recognises the way everyday spatial practices recreate older social spaces, Dionne Brand’s Toronto is constructed from transnational histories and memories, and Lydia Kwa’s trans-Pacific novel *This Place Called Absence* twines the colonial spaces of turn-of-the-century Singapore with the queer spaces of contemporary Vancouver.

These past-oriented, occasionally nostalgic encounters with urban sites are thus inextricable from a consciousness of spaces as they are in the present, and a deliberate imagining of what they could be like in the future. This turning towards the possible of an ethical future would push against the disturbing tendency scholars like Gaik Cheng Khoo have observed: for state discourse to co-opt nostalgia and past-oriented works of art to produce “affective and effective neoliberal citizens” (107). Indeed, even in terms of the cartographical imagination that this study has examined, the co-opting of literary nostalgia is already a reality in some of the cities that have been examined in this study. Both Toronto and Vancouver have projects that have constructed maps of fixed “literary landmarks” as if the depictions and connections that texts have with physical spaces are static and thus able to be commemorated with informational plaques and interactive online maps. While these maps have been constructed ostensibly to raise awareness and readership of “city literature,” I would argue that these “literary maps” are precisely dangerous because they allow the literary and the artistic to be folded into the cartographic vision of the city that allows one to navigate this space via map instead of wayfinding through its complex, contemporary iterations. Looking for plaques on a map and on lamp posts is directly in opposition to a textual and material experience of a city.

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Vancouver’s “Literary Landmarks” is a partnership between the Vancouver Public Library, B.C. BookWorld, the VPL Foundation, and Dr. Yosef Wosk. Its website lauds the project as one that “recognizes physical locations with connections to the city’s authors and books” and includes works by Malcolm Lowry, George Bowering, Wayson Choy, Douglas Coupland, Joy Kogawa, and Evelyn Lau. Alan Twigg, publisher of BC BookWorld tellingly uses the idea of capitalist progress to describe this project, saying, “this is progress as much as skyscrapers and high property values.”
in the ways that this study has elucidated. It is, indeed, more akin to treating the city as a museum, than as an ever-evolving, unfinished, contested geography. It also greatly reduces the potential and possibility of the text to a single, immovable point on a map and physical site in a city.

These “literary maps” then, are certainly part of what Huyssen has in mind as he cautions against allowing “an avalanche of memory discourses” “to overwhelm an earlier activist imagination of the future” (6). In Singapore, the National Heritage Board has spent millions of dollars on, as its website puts it, “telling the Singapore story, sharing the Singaporean experience and imparting our Singapore spirit.” Online archives like “The Singapore Memory Project” and smartphone based apps like “Text in the City” also threaten to overwhelm their users with a sepia-tinted, celebratory nostalgia for a pre-1990s Singapore that had yet to experience its unprecedented acceleration of urban development. These efforts are the textual equivalent of what the urban studies scholar Mark Crinson calls “nostalgia de la boue, or memory with the pain taken out” (xi).91 In contrast, the Singapore government most recently decided to ban Tan Pin Pin’s latest documentary To Singapore, With Love (2013) which attempts to acknowledge the “earlier activist imagination” of the first few decades of post-independence Singapore by interviewing political dissidents in exile. In Singapore’s authoritarian context, this is censorship of the difficult work of engaging with counter-histories (and thus potential counter-futures) that might have resulted in alternate spaces for freedom of speech, enhanced workers’ rights, and more compassionate forms of urban development.

With the historical narratives at risk of being circumscribed and co-opted it seems ever more urgent to also turn to future-oriented speculative fiction that provides ways of

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91Crinson uses this term to describe the posturbanist movement where the “villaging” of city centres evokes “lost or mythical forms of public life, [where] historic buildings that are little more than the carcasses of former functions, loft spaces with cleaned brick and stripped interiors filled with new fittings, ‘historic interiors’ […] are preserved as if in aspic, facades saved while their inners are gutted and completely rebuilt” (xi). Thus, form here is strangely decoupled from actual history and spatial context. Space here is abstracted and becomes a mere container to be filled with capitalist desires.
imagining ourselves beyond seemingly ineluctable capitalist-driven spatial development. Thus, my final chapter on Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* is an examination of how a text, even while cognizant of the long, contested spatial histories of Vancouver and Asian cities like Canton, can also imagine the indeterminate possibilities of future Vancouver (Serendipity and the Unregulated Zone) and the imaginary City of Hope. By examining texts that turn to utopian and/or dystopian imaginings of the future of our cities, to move beyond the “stories-so-far” to the “stories-of-what-if.” Indeed, the counter-cartographical ways of reading that this study has highlighted, as applied to *Salt Fish Girl*, have shown how it demonstrates a series of increasingly radical alternatives to what Fredric Jameson has called the crippling universal belief that the tendency towards capitalist development is not only “irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available” (xii). Like other utopian narratives, *Salt Fish Girl* gives us particularly spatial meditations on how to “conceive of such alternative systems” and to meditate as Jameson puts it, “on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality” (xii) The text’s utopian impulses arise out of the irrepressible otherness in the face of a seemingly inevitable dystopian capitalism. These future-oriented speculative counter-cartographies begin to imagine radical alternatives to the neoliberal, capitalist maps of spaces that have shaped our sense of the world since the advent of colonialism.

While work remains to be done with these future-oriented texts, the textual counter-cartographies that I have practiced in this study provide the foundations for ways to read city texts and their re-envisionings of our relationships to urban spaces. These literary urbanisms, both text and praxis, are built on empathy, everyday life, and an ethical, if unpredictable, encounter with the other. These acts of reading and wayfinding

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92 Indeed, many of the writers, artists, and literary geographies examined in this study have increasingly turned to the speculative and the utopian. Larissa Lai, most recently awarded funding by the Canadian government to explore utopian thinking in her writing, will publish *Grist*, the first novel in a trilogy, *Fertile Collectives* that furthers her exploration of genetic engineering (see Allford). Wayde Compton’s latest collection of short stories *The Outer Harbour* (2015) moves us to the Vancouver of the near future in 2025. Tan Pin Pin’s most recent film-in-progress *Hinterland* is on the significance of time capsules in the future.
are particularly pressing given the current intensification and acceleration of unequal development, labour practices, and housing policies in global cities. The city as a lived, perceived, and conceived site is perhaps the best place for these literary and material re-envisionings to occur. Massey argues,

the very fact that cities are home to the weavings together, mutual indifferences and outright antagonisms of such a myriad of trajectories, and that this itself has a spatial form which will further mould those differentiations and relations, means that within cities, the nature of that question - of our living together - will be very differentially articulated. [...] We come to each place with the necessity, the responsibility, to examine anew and to invent. (World City 169)

Counter-cartographical reading takes on this necessity, this responsibility, and seeks to imagine new ways of being together and finding our ways in the city.
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