

(RE)WRITING CANADIAN SPACE: DYSTOPIAN GEOGRAPHIES IN LARISSA LAI'S
SALT FISH GIRL AND M.G. VASSANJI'S *NOSTALGIA*

by

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A Major Research Paper
presented to Ryerson University and York University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the joint program of
Communication and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2019

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**(Re)Writing Canadian Space: Dystopian Geographies in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* and
M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia***

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Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture
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2019

Abstract

This paper examines how dystopian fiction opens up a productive space for disrupting naturalized assumptions, and shifting our understanding of taken-for-granted spaces. Drawing on Doreen Massey's (2005) proposal that space must be seen as the product of constant interrelations, I argue that dystopian literature can similarly prompt us to reconsider our relationship to the spaces we inhabit. Using the concept of the "critical dystopia," I examine how dystopian frameworks are operationalized in the Canadian context through a comparative analysis of two novels that speculate distinctly Canadian dystopian futures: Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016). By applying Massey's theorization of space—its multiplicities, complexities, and political potentialities—to an examination of how Canadian spaces are transformed in the dystopian context, I then analyze how those representations challenge the spatial ideologies associated with globalization, and resist the neoliberal view of space as a surface to be crossed and conquered (Massey, 2005).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my primary research supervisor, Dr. Ruth Panofsky, for her ongoing guidance and support throughout this project, and for always providing extremely helpful and timely feedback on my many incomplete drafts.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Susan Ingram, for her insightful suggestions and comments at both the earliest stages of my proposal and the final stages of my research.

Finally, I am eternally grateful for the support of my colleagues, peers, friends, and family who provided academic, moral, and emotional support all the way throughout this process, and without whom this wouldn't have been possible.

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Introduction

Dystopian fiction comprises a subset of Canadian literature that remains under-researched in Canadian literary scholarship. Although studies have been conducted on the relationship between science fiction and fantasy literature, and Canadian national identity (Weiss and Spencer; Leroux and La Bossiere), there is a critical gap in the research between these examinations and the broader field of dystopian studies—this despite a growing body of works that speculate distinctly Canadian dystopian futures. The absence of scholarship examining Canadian dystopian literature can be understood, in part, as a by-product of parallel scholarly developments in the fields of dystopian studies and Canadian literary studies, as dystopian studies comprises a body of literature that, over the course of the twentieth century, departed from the study of literary utopias largely in response to a growing number of texts that explored the “dark” side of utopia. While dystopian literature has its roots in literary forms that have existed throughout history,¹ Tom Moylan argues that it only emerged as a distinctive genre in the early twentieth century, “as capital entered a new phase with the onset of monopolized production and as the modern imperialist state extended its internal and external reach” (xi).

Over the same time period, Canadian science fiction critics were struggling to articulate a distinctly Canadian ethos against a literary landscape historically dominated by American and British writers. In the introduction to the 1995 collection of essays, *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*, editors Allen Weiss and Hugh Spencer state that “above all, Canadian fantastic literature frequently portrays the search for identity. This search occurs at

¹Moylan identifies “Menippean satire, realism, and the anti-utopian novels of the nineteenth century” as the roots of dystopian fiction (xi).

the level of the individual ... of the nation ... and of the species” (15). Thus, in order to define the Canadian SF canon as a single, unified body of work, as opposed to a broad grouping of texts that encompassed a variety of subthemes, critics emphasized the thematic similarities that existed between works rather than their formal differences; as a result, canonical science fiction in Canada came to refer to any mode of storytelling that explored Canadian issues, anxieties, questions, or themes through a speculative, fantastic, or (re)imagined context.² The drive to locate and articulate a unifying national identity in Canadian cultural studies, however, has often obscured what Raffaella Baccolini terms the ethical dimension of memory—in a discussion of the relationship between memory, history, and utopia, she states, “Only those who choose to remember are capable of taking responsibility for their actions and being accountable. Choosing to ignore or forget what was or what we did ultimately means avoiding responsibility and may lead to political paralysis” (119). The utopian potential of memory, Baccolini suggests, derives from the extent to which society is able to resist “historical amnesia,” or the selective erasure and sanitization of unpleasant or “embarrassing” social histories (119); this tendency is noticeably present in Canada and other settler-colonial states, where the purpose of national narratives is often to conceal, deny, or historicize the theft of Indigenous land, and naturalize the formation of the settler-state. Thus, the general assumption that Canadian dystopian literature does not constitute a distinct category of work, but rather is synonymous with the broader classification of Canadian SF, does not fully allow for the emergence of scholarship that (i) re-imagines and critiques the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of contemporary Canadian society, and (ii) critically interrogates the foundational myths that are central to Canadian national identity.

² In the introduction to *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*, editors Allan Weiss and Hugh Spencer state that Canadian SF refers not only to printed fiction, but also to non-print media, including radio plays, exhibitions, and film and television programs (17).

This investigation extends Baccolini's claim that "memory, then, to be of use for Utopia, needs to disassociate itself from its traditional link to the metaphor of the storage, and identify itself as a process" (120), by suggesting that, in the Canadian context, cultural memory cannot be detached from the construction and representation of space in the national socio-cultural imagination. Following Weiss and Spencer's introduction to *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* in which they identify the search for identity as a central focus for Canadian SF, chapters by John Clute (1995) and Tanya Huff (1995) suggest that, in Canada, the establishment of a cohesive national identity is frequently dependent on a fixed understanding of space/place in popular understandings of Canadian identity. Clute notes, for instance, the central trope of survival in a harsh and unforgiving environment when he states that, "Canadian sci-fi ... can therefore be defined as a genre which translates the fable of survival so central to the Canadian psyche into a fable of lonely transcendence" (26). While "lonely," here, refers to what Clute suggests is "something ineluctably Canadian about the solitary take of ... heroes on the universe" (26), it can also be interpreted as a comment on the vast distances between the country's regions, and the many diverse terrains that are encountered within Canada's national boundaries. Huff's examination of Canadian urban horror similarly emphasizes the significance of place to Canadian identity, stating that the landscape is both "... an integral part of Canadian writing" and, often, "a living, malevolent adversary" that must be overcome (141). The myth of survival that emerges from this representation of space thus reinforces a particular understanding of the relationship between Canadian landscapes and national identity, as it is the protagonist's ability to tame or overpower the landscape that is positioned as quintessentially "Canadian." In order to move outside of these common tropes, there is a need to define dystopia as a narrative project that is distinct from the objectives,

strategies, and foundational myths that structure the established Canadian science fiction literary canon, in order to understand how these narratives reveal social anxieties related to contemporary global systems of power, and in the process, produce, reinforce, or challenge particular understandings of Canadian space. Drawing on Baccolini and Moylan's discussion of the critical dystopia as a mode of socio-political critique, and Doreen Massey's proposal for a view of space that recognizes its multiplicities, complexities, and political potentiality, the following discussion will bring together the critical scholarship surrounding dystopian literature in the Canadian context, before engaging in a textual analysis of two novels that speculate distinctly Canadian dystopian futures: Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), set in the Pacific northwest between the years 2044 and 2062, and M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016), set in Toronto an unspecified number of years after 2032. Through this examination, I argue that any critical consideration of Canadian dystopian literature must recognize, first, that those fictions constitute a body of work that is distinct from, and often in opposition to, the project of national self-definition that has shaped the established canon of Canadian SF; and second, that the question of Canadian space—what it signifies, how it operates, and who it serves—must be treated as a central focus for the interrogation of the foundational myths upon which Canadian identity has been constructed.

1. Background

This investigation necessarily brings together two distinct bodies of scholarship on dystopian fiction and science fiction (SF),³ each with its own approaches, objectives, and

³ While dystopian critiques build on certain themes, concepts and assumptions that also appear in utopian scholarship (for example, the belief that “the transformative potential of [the work] depends on locating it in the future, on thinking through the process of transformation from the present, and identifying the potential agents of that transformation” [Levitas and Sargisson 14]), Moylan's definition (cited above) clarifies that dystopian studies,

complications; thus, any examination of contemporary Canadian dystopian literature must consider the influences of both critical traditions—dystopian studies and SF studies—on the genre, in order to locate the points at which they either intersect or depart from one another. To do so requires a literature review that will (i) introduce the critical dystopia as a literary form by outlining the major developments in the field of dystopian studies over the twentieth century; (ii) position the cultural work of Canadian dystopias as separate from, and often in opposition to, the project of national self-definition that has shaped (and continues to shape) dominant studies of Canadian SF; and (iii) demonstrate why issues of space—social, political, and geographical—are integral to the cultural work of contemporary Canadian dystopias.

1.1 The Critical Dystopia

While literary dystopias have always used the depiction of a futuristic society to reflect on current social conditions, the pervasiveness of global capitalism in the late twentieth century necessitated the development of a narrative framework that could adapt to the rapidly changing socio-political conditions of the global environment. The concept of the critical dystopia was first introduced at the Conference of the Society for Utopian Studies in 1993, during a roundtable discussion of Lyman Tower Sargent's forthcoming essay, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (Baccolini and Moylan 3). Observing that the dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s were "clearly both eutopias [utopias] and dystopias" (qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 3),⁴ Sargent argued

as a distinct field, employs different formal conventions and strategies to achieve this outcome. Therefore, while the influence of utopian studies can be seen in the form of the critical dystopia, utopian scholarship has been excluded from this literature review as, for the purposes of this investigation, it is not directly relevant when considering contemporary Canadian dystopias.

⁴ In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Moylan clarifies that Sargent's interchangeable use of the terms "eutopia" and "utopia" in his article, "Utopia—the Problem of Definition," is a reference to Thomas More's original text, *Utopia*, wherein the conflation of the terms is intended "[to catch] the potential of utopian textuality in that the imagined good place is nowhere to be found in the world as it presently exists and is therefore both beyond and yet connected to the historical moment—thus standing as a critique but also a signpost" (Moylan

that there was a growing body of work that did not fit into the established generic classification schemes; rather, the new dystopias were characterized by their “formal flexibility and political maneuvering,” their ability to blur the boundaries between established forms, and their appropriation of elements from different literary traditions (Baccolini and Moylan 2-8). The use of genre blurring as a tool for socio-political critique was also a topic of interrogation among other scholars in the field, including Constance Penley (1990), Jenny Wolmark (1994), and Jim Miller (1998), who similarly noted the appearance of utopian elements in the new literary dystopias (Baccolini and Moylan 3-4). Thus, the term “critical dystopia” emerged from these ongoing discussions as a way to identify those works that take a critical rather than a nostalgic view of history in the space of the narrative (Baccolini and Moylan) and are therefore distinct from earlier classical, canonical, and “generic” dystopias.

Like the classical dystopias that preceded it,⁵ the critical dystopia depicts a society that normally can be located in space and time (i.e., the setting can be identified as a real geographic location), and functions to “warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world” (Baccolini 115); however, where the former conflates history with a nostalgia for the past, the latter critically interrogates the extent to which history is, already, dystopian (Baccolini and Moylan). Specifically, the critical dystopia employs the relationship between memory and history as a way to intervene in the contemporary historical moment, and to consider the ways in which history itself has been socially and ideologically constructed (Baccolini 116). It is also in this context that the key formal differences between the classical and critical dystopia can be

72). Baccolini and Moylan similarly refer to critical utopian literature as either “eutopias” or “utopias” throughout *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*.

⁵ Moylan identifies E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1928), Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Katherine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937), George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) as notable examples of “classical dystopias” (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* xi, 111, 149).

identified. First, the narrative structure of the critical dystopia is necessarily less stable than the works that preceded it, as there is no single set of identifying characteristics that define the genre (Baccolini and Moylan). Whereas early scholarship on classical dystopian literature categorized dystopian literature according to a binary division between “utopia” and “anti-utopia,”⁶ Baccolini and Moylan suggest that, for the critical dystopia, “it is the very notion of an *impure* genre, with permeable borders which allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology that reduces everything to a global monoculture” (8). In a discussion of genre blurring and science fiction tropes, Jane Donawerth goes further to suggest that the critical dystopia should not necessarily be understood as a genre at all, but rather as a matrix within which genre blending can occur as part of an oppositional writing practice (30). By interpolating the reader into a space that is both narratively and formally alienating, the critical dystopia emphasizes the multiplicity of encounters, experiences, and possibilities that exist outside of hegemonic frameworks, and resists the assumption that there exists a universal solution to the complex challenges of late capitalism.

The formal instability of the critical dystopia is also what allows it to resist the anti-utopian tendencies often associated with this body of fiction, and instead hold onto the possibility that there exists “at least one eutopian enclave” within the dystopian world (Sargent qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 7). In the story, this possibility is revealed through the development of a counter-narrative of resistance to the hegemonic order, and an “ambiguous, open ending ... [that] maintains the utopian impulse *within* the work” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Here, the preservation of hope that there exist alternative possibilities for social organization outside of the dominant order responds to the devaluation of utopia by neoliberal discourses, which associate

⁶ See section 1.2 of this analysis for an in-depth discussion of the distinction between “utopian” and “anti-utopian” literature, and the influence of these terms on the development of dystopian studies.

the globalization of the market with the end of history, thus eliminating the need for social dreaming and foreclosing the possibility of future change (7). According to Moylan, the idea of the “market utopia” functions to “[prevent] the possibility of an emancipatory memory ... and a radically new form of everyday life ... by taking up ‘utopia’ and selling it back to us as an already achieved dream” (Baccolini and Moylan 237). Ruth Levitas similarly argues that the function of utopian thought has shifted from being a mode of enacting social change to a (less effective) mode of critique, where globalization has made it “difficult to identify either mechanisms or agents capable of effecting a real transformation of the global social and economic system” (16). By moving between the established modes of utopian and dystopian forms, the critical dystopia is able to acknowledge and navigate the various complexities of social dreaming as a mode of critique, and reclaim utopia as a possibility outside of its function in neoliberal social systems.

As a narrative framework, then, the critical dystopia is based in a recognition of histories outside of hegemonic discourses, particularly those histories based in a linear trajectory of development that naturalize the inevitability of capitalist globalization. Through the interweaving of genre and theme, these frameworks create space where alternative narratives can be told, and the power relations that structure the global environment under late capitalism can be interrogated.

1.2 Dystopia as Cultural Strategy

The assumption that dystopian literature fits into the larger project of Canadian SF can be seen, in part, as the result of similarities between the speculative world-building processes that take place in each narrative context. By transposing it onto a fictional society or space, both genres employ narrative as “a means to communicate universal or cultural knowledge of human

action and character [via] the domain of ethics and politics” (Leroux and La Bossiere 3). Through this technique, both SF and dystopia create representational spaces in which explorations of identity and knowledge are not confined by the social, political, and economic systems that structure the real world in which they are produced. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), Moylan cites Latour and Woolgar when arguing that the protagonists of science fiction find themselves in an environment of “anthropological strangeness” (qtd. in Moylan 4), in which they “struggle to make sense of their world and to act decisively within it” (Moylan 4). Similarly, cognitive estrangement, in which the protagonist/reader is thrown into an unfamiliar and deliberately alienating narrative context, is a strategy employed by the critical dystopia that enables the reader to identify with the protagonist as they work to understand the hegemonic order and develop “a counter-narrative of resistance” (Baccolini and Moylan 5). The criticality of both SF and dystopia, then, derives from the ability “to re-create the empirical present of [the] author and implied readers as an ‘elsewhere,’ an alternative spacetime that is the empirical moment but not that moment as it is ideologically produced by way of everyday common sense” (Moylan 5).

It should also be noted that the dystopian turn in the twentieth century, particularly in the post-WWII period, resulted in increasingly blurred distinctions between the formal properties of dystopian and anti-utopian literature. In a chapter entitled “New Maps of Hell” (referencing Kingsley Amis’s 1960 critical study of SF published under the same title), Moylan traces the evolution of critical approaches to dystopian fiction beginning in 1909 with the publication of Forster’s “The Machine Stops,” up to the 1970s and 1980s with the shift towards the critical dystopia (Moylan 121-35). Moylan’s timeline identifies “a tendency to reduce dystopian and anti-utopian texts to a single ‘anti-utopian’ category,” based in a binary framing of Utopia (as the

“good” place) against any depiction of an imagined society that is imperfect or deeply flawed (122). As a result, the classical or canonical dystopias that appeared in first half of the twentieth century were understood as belonging to “[an] inverted subgenre of utopia,” and were evaluated through and for their anti-utopian proclivities (Moylan 121). This formal ambiguity was amplified by the social and political climate of the post-WWII period, where any critical interrogation of utopia inevitably also became caught up in the irreconcilability of anti-capitalist dialectics, especially “the prevailing anti-utopian position of postwar anti-communist liberalism” (Moylan 123). Moylan notes, for example, that classical dystopias like Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931) or Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight-Four* (1949) were read by critics as either a response to “the failures of the Left” or, contrarily, as “a negative ... response to modern capitalism” (122).⁷ Consequently, the rising popularity of dystopian literature in the twentieth century was paralleled by the emergence of distinctly anti-utopian texts that not only critiqued utopian traditions, but rejected them outright (122).⁸

By mid-century, both the dystopian turn and the absence of clearly defined formal strategies to distinguish between texts that critically interrogated utopia and those that refused it entirely led utopia scholars to devote increased attention to the problem of definition. In 1956, George Woodcock proposed a distinction between anti-utopians, as those who “still believe in humanity’s ability to survive the worst distortions of progress,” and what he termed ex-utopians, or those who “have lost their original left perspective and abandoned all hope” (Moylan 124).

⁷ Moylan cites Theodor Adorno’s 1955 essay “Aldous Huxley und die Utopie” in which Adorno views Huxley’s dystopia as a commentary on “contemporary capitalist culture” (122), and Phillip Rahv’s 1949 essay “The Unfuture of Utopia” in which Rahv argues that Orwell’s text is “the best antidote to the totalitarian disease [of the Left]” (123).

⁸ Moylan cites G.K. Chesterton’s *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* (1938), and C.S. Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength* (1945) as examples of anti-utopian texts that view utopia as inherently tied to increased state control and Leftist politics, and consequently refuse it entirely as a viable social principle.

Irving Howe (1962) similarly distinguished between the more conservative traditions of utopian refusal and the newer anti-utopian literary forms, which, he argued, “[interrogate] Utopia in an effort not to destroy but to free the Left from its own worst, Stalinist tendencies” through the use of five formal characteristics, outlined in his article, “The Fiction of Anti-Utopia” (Howe qtd. in Moylan 124).⁹ Both Woodcock’s and Howe’s definitions reposition and reclaim “anti-utopia” as a productive or emancipatory literary form by terminologically detaching it from its less hopeful elements; however, these definitions remain based in a binary framework that views any work that resists, refuses, or critically evaluates utopia as belonging to a singular category of “anti-utopian” literature. Consequently, “dystopian” literature continued to be evaluated and defined primarily by what it was not, rather than as a unique form that employed distinct strategies, formal conventions, and thematic tropes in its critiques.

Thus, the state of dystopian scholarship in the 1960s was characterized by continued disagreement between critics on the formal strategies that constituted anti-utopian and dystopian literature. Building on Howe’s identified characteristics, Chad Walsh (1962) and William Gordon Browning (1966) both attempted to define anti-utopia as a literary category in its own right (as opposed to being defined primarily as that which is *not* utopian), with both scholars maintaining the view that anti-utopian texts generate “a utopian response to existing social conditions that would prevent them from reaching the outcomes portrayed” (Moylan 126). Conversely, Mark Hillega’s *Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (1967) defined anti-utopia as a genre that is “fundamentally opposed to the utopian persuasion”; therefore, it is inherently pessimistic and incapable of either imagining or leading to productive

⁹ According to Howe, the anti-utopia, as a literary form, must (i) problematize the idea of a “perfect” society; (ii) explore an idea that is “at once dramatically simple and historically complex”; (iii) manage the details of that idea effectively throughout the narrative; (iv) maintain “our attachment to the plausible” while straining “our sense of the probable”; and (v) put its readers in a position “to engage in an act of historical recollection” (qtd. in Moylan 125).

social transformation (Moylan 126). Moylan summarized the implications of the many inconsistencies that exist within twentieth-century dystopian criticism as follows:

By giving thoughtful attention to “anti-utopian” writing as a specific cultural phenomenon, [these critics] made an important contribution to the unfolding discussion of the function and worth of Utopia and its anti-utopian nemesis, yet their conflation of actual anti-utopian texts with those which would become known as “dystopias” (works that negotiated the utopian and anti-utopian opposition in ways dismissed by the textual “anti-utopia”) preserved a methodological and political murkiness that only began to be dissipated in the critical work of the 1970s. (127)

According to Moylan, Sargent’s (1975) “Utopia – the Problem of Definition” was the first article to propose a terminological distinction between “dystopia” and “anti-utopia,” by defining anti-utopia as those texts that *actively oppose* utopian thought, whereas dystopias “explore the ‘bad place’ and yet remain in the purview of *utopian* expression” (127, emphasis in original). In 1982, John Huntington further clarified that, unlike the anti-utopia, the “utopia-dystopia” or dystopian text “still imagines a coherent whole, just one that is worse than the given society” (Moylan 128). This terminological clarification, Moylan suggests, was a textual response to the economic and political restructuring that took place over the decade of the 1970s, during which time “capital sought to revive its generation of surplus ... through a series of moves that included rationalizing and updating production in flexible sub-systems; finding cheaper sources of labor and material ... [and] eliminating social costs” (xiv). By reclaiming “dystopia” as a mode of critique that is *not* inherently anti-utopian, but rather one that utilizes “oppositional spaces and possibilities” to explore alternative politics, the recognition of the critical dystopia as a distinct

form allowed it to reject the “false ‘utopianism’” of global capitalism, while exploring the effects of these global economic and political shifts (xiv-xv).

This “methodological and political murkiness” that defined dystopian studies for the majority of the twentieth century, I would suggest, likely also contributed to the lack of attention devoted to Canadian dystopian literature and its continued inclusion under the umbrella of Canadian SF, despite the growing body of critical dystopian scholarship; however, the lack of clear distinctions between genre forms in the Canadian context can also be attributed to developments in the broader literary landscape over the same time period. Prominent studies of Canadian SF by Allen Weiss and Hugh Spencer (1995) and by Jean-François Leroux and Camille R. La Bossiere (2004), for example, note an ongoing struggle to insert Canadian perspectives into the science-fiction literary landscape, both due to the notably “political” (as opposed to “technological”) focus of Canadian SF, and to the ambiguous tendency of Canadian literature to define itself by what it is not.¹⁰ The inevitable conflation of dystopian fiction, as itself a mode of writing that is inherently political, is further explained by Leroux and La Bossiere’s recognition that the majority of Canadian SF tends to incorporate both utopian and dystopian elements into the project of self-definition:

Not surprisingly, given the ambiguity built into that act of self-definition, in this conspectus of Canadian SF and fantasy the Utopian impulse toward reconciliation is repeatedly accompanied and challenged by a dystopian critique of the methods used to achieve it, sometimes even in the same piece. (3)

¹⁰ See Leroux and La Bossiere’s citation of Weiss and Spencer, in stating that, “... in contradiction to British and American SF, the Canadian subset of the genre is ‘political as opposed to ... technological’ in its ‘focus’ ... Predictably, then, defining by opposition exactly what the Canadian ethos is, has become a major preoccupation of scholars in the field” (2-3).

Despite this direct acknowledgement that there is, in fact, a body of Canadian literature that engages with dystopian themes, neither Weiss and Spencer (1995) nor Leroux and La Bossiere (2004) attempt to connect Canadian SF studies with the growing field of dystopian scholarship, which clearly differentiates between science-fiction (as a formal genre classification) and dystopia (as a textual mode of political critique). Consequently, the conflation of these genres meant that dystopian narratives by Canadian authors that explored the fantastic or imaginative came to be included under the broader category of Canadian SF. This is further evidenced in chapters by David Ketterer, Allan Weiss, and Amy J. Ransom in *Worlds of Wonder: Readings in Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (2004), which all, at varying points, make reference to dystopian settings and themes in Canadian literature; however, at no point do any of these critics distinguish between dystopia and SF as distinct genres.

Finally, the lack of critical attention paid to Canadian dystopian literature is evidenced by the 1999 publication of a chronological and annotated bibliography of utopian literature in English Canada. Compiled and annotated by Sargent, who prefaced the article by stating that “all prior bibliographies have either ignored Canada altogether or included Canadian texts with either British or US texts, based primarily on the place of publication,” this list names and provides a brief description of all known works published in Canada between 1852 and 1999 that dealt with utopian themes (174). Interestingly, Sargent’s annotations also reveal a dystopian focus in a number of Canadian texts going back to the 1920s—the number of texts that he explicitly classifies as dystopian, as well as the inclusion of these titles in a bibliography of utopian literature, suggests that the exclusion of Canadian authors from twentieth-century dystopian studies was not due to an absence of texts dealing with dystopian themes, but rather to the lack of a generic definition within the developing context of Canadian SF. It is not surprising, then, that

Canadian works were largely ignored by those twentieth-century critics who, increasingly, turned their attention to dystopian literature as a distinct mode of cultural critique and took as their primary object of study those texts that had already been recognized as canonical dystopian fictions.

1.3 “A Vast Untamed Wilderness”: Canadian SF and National Identity

It is not my intention to suggest here that Canadian dystopias are entirely detached from science fiction; the narrative mechanics that contribute to the process of world building, and the thematic centrality of science and technology to explorations of identity, belonging, and survival are, for the most part, shared by texts belonging to both generic categories. Rather, I argue that while the mechanics of story- and world-building are formally and functionally similar, the cultural work of the critical dystopia is fundamentally at odds with the project of national self-definition that has shaped, and continues to shape, Canadian SF literary studies. Consequently, it is necessary to establish a framework within which contemporary Canadian dystopian fiction can be evaluated outside of (and often in opposition to) the critical SF tradition with which it has historically been associated.

In their introduction to *Worlds of Wonder: Readings in Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*, Leroux and La Bossiere state that the construction of alternative worlds in Canadian SF, much like the broader field of Canadian literature, is (and has always been) primarily invested in searching for an answer to the question famously posed by Northrop Frye in 1965, namely, “Where is here?”¹¹ Unlike the popular American SF of the twentieth century, which was defined by its use of fantasy realms to reproduce the frontier mythology that

¹¹ Frye posed this question in the concluding chapter in the 1965 edition of *Literary History of Canada: Canadian History in English*, published by the University of Toronto Press.

characterized American colonial expansion, Canadian SF is invested in a project of “defining by opposition exactly what the Canadian ethos is,” and has deployed alternative or fantastic spaces as a way to explore what it means to be Canadian (Leroux and La Bossiere 2). Consequently, these explorations often focused on what it was like to experience and occupy the different terrains that make up Canada’s physical environment. In the case of science fiction, then, the preoccupation with landscape produced a body of literature that was less concerned with space travel than it was with temporal experimentation as, for the most part, it assumed that the landscape—and its significance to Canadian national identity—was “fixed” (Weiss and Spencer; Leroux and La Bossiere). In an examination of urban horror as a variation of Canadian SF, Tanya Huff similarly states that “the landscape is an integral part of Canadian writing and, in the beginning, Canada’s vast untamed geography provided sufficient inspiration for early horror” (141).

Consequently, early English Canadian science fiction and fantasy tended to be less “fantastic” than its American or British counterparts—in the introduction to *Out of This World*, Weiss and Spencer note that “if there is one thing that distinguishes Canadian science fiction from British or American science fiction, it is its political as opposed to its technological focus” (15). Through this distinction, Weiss and Spencer’s introduction clarifies that experimenting with time allowed the genre to explore the potential consequences of political anxieties that were specifically tied to the Canadian context—Quebec’s separation or the invasion of Canada by a more powerful nation, for example. While, on the surface, the situating of political anxieties within an altered environment may seem to align with the objectives of the classical dystopia (and often did in the post-WWII period), the critical or contemporary dystopia must be recognized as fundamentally at odds with the project of national self-definition that has shaped

SF literary studies in Canada in two key ways. First, where dystopian literature is necessarily engaged in a critical examination of the conditions that have produced a future decidedly worse than the present reality, Canadian SF “tend[s] to be more concerned with preserving our past—our separate cultural ties and heritages—than with speculating on our somewhat dubious future” (Runte and Kulyk 44). The preservation of history was particularly central to the project of SF throughout the twentieth century, when Canadian authors worked to establish a body of literature that voiced distinctly Canadian themes, in a field traditionally dominated by American and British authors, tropes, and cultural references. By locating the genre’s unifying theme in its representation of Canadian landscapes as empty, harsh, and unrelenting, Canadian SF found its identity “as a genre which translates the fable of survival so central to the Canadian psyche into a fable of lonely transcendence” (Clute 26).

This is not to say that Canadian authors of SF have not written back to, challenged, and actively resisted this violent erasure of Canada’s colonial history that is encompassed in the dominant national narrative of Canadian identity. Authors like Nalo Hopkinson, Minister Faust, Cherie Dimaline, and Drew Hayden Taylor are only a few examples of writers whose works employ SF conventions and contexts to imagine possibilities outside the trajectories of neoliberal and settler-colonial frameworks (CBC Radio n.p.).¹² Rather than suggest that all Canadian SF is implicated in the construction of this national narrative, this critique intends to call attention to and problematize the extent to which prominent studies of Canadian SF, and the criteria used to classify authors as “canonical” in those studies, continue to uphold settler-colonial and neoliberal

¹² See Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), a dystopian novel that reimagines Toronto through Caribbean folklore and magical realism; Minister Faust’s *The Alchemists of Kush* (2011), a science fiction novel that draws on mythology to reimagine a futuristic North America; Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Take Us to Your Chief and Other Stories* (2016), a collection of Indigenous science-fiction stories; and Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), a dystopian novel set in a futuristic North America where Indigenous people are hunted for their bone marrow.

frameworks by excluding Indigenous perspectives and reinforcing the existence of a single, unifying Canadian identity, defined by the (primarily white male) scholars who have contributed to this body of work.¹³ In particular, the notable absence of critical scholarship challenging these exclusionary frameworks would suggest that Canadian SF studies is built largely on a foundation that actively denies both the histories, trajectories, and encounters that existed on the land prior to the formation of the settler-colonial state, and the possibility of a future that does not build on that same narrative.

According to Raffaella Baccolini, the ability of the critical dystopia to effectively provide a cultural critique is dependent on the extent that it reframes history and memory through a critical lens in order to “break hegemonic historical discourse” and reframe the “master narratives” that have shaped understandings of the contemporary world (118). Contrarily, the Canadian SF canon is structured around a myth of survival in an environment that is consistently untamed, unfriendly, and unrelenting. According to Robert Runte and Christine Kulyk, a dominant theme in Canadian SF is the exploration of what it means for the Canadian identity to be constantly deprived of agency by the land itself, where “the victories that these characters achieve will be hard won and indecisive since they are always at the mercy of time, the elements, and other such universal foes” (46). As a result of the perceived harshness of the natural environment, Runte and Kulyk state that “Canadians tend to see our heroes as victims, or losers

¹³ It should be noted that the conclusions drawn here pertaining to critical studies of Canadian science-fiction are based on the limited availability of scholarship written on the genre as a distinct body of work. The anthologies cited in this section are the only major studies that I was able to locate over the course of my research, with the most recent being Leroux and La Bossiere’s *Worlds of Wonder: Readings in Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (2004) which takes as its foundation the assumptions outlined in Weiss and Spencer’s *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (1995). Therefore, while articles have been published more recently on individual works of Canadian science-fiction and the ways they challenge these assumptions, I would argue that (i) the difficulty of locating these studies, and (ii) the absence of recent scholarship that attempts to redefine the genre as a whole are evidence that the Canadian SF “canon” continues to be structured around these exclusionary frameworks.

with occasional wins,” rather than characters who are actively able to negotiate with or alter the conditions in which they find themselves (46). By reproducing a myth that both depicts the land as empty and removes narrative agency from the protagonist/settler, Canadian SF positions its exploration of national identity in the context of a history that not only continues to erase violence against Indigenous communities within Canadian spaces, but reinforces a reading of that history as indisputable—an objective or foundational truth upon which Canadian identity can and should be understood. The immovability of this position is antithetical to the project of the critical dystopia, in which “it is in the acceptance of one’s responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relationship with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations for a utopian change” (Baccolini 130). Thus, where Canadian SF scholarship has traditionally been invested in establishing a linear timeline on which the development of a cohesive national identity can be traced, the critical dystopia recognizes that history is not, and cannot be, fixed.

It is precisely in the history of viewing land as empty that the second contradiction between Canadian science fiction and the critical dystopia can be identified. Namely, where SF takes for granted the significance of the landscape to the Canadian national identity and, as a result, is primarily concerned with time, the critical dystopia interrogates the foundational myth of “vast untamed geographies” that grounds this national identity. Specifically, it employs a critical reconsideration of how Canadian space has been constructed and perceived in the socio-cultural imagination, in order to destabilize those understandings that have contributed to the dystopian conditions of late capitalism. In a chapter entitled “Memory and Historical Reconciliation,” Baccolini states, “any discussion of memory [in the critical dystopia] cannot avoid considering the theme of forgetfulness that is increasingly intertwined with the issue of

reconciliation” (120). Referring to Roy L. Brooks’s claim that the contemporary historical moment can be characterized as an “Age of Apology,” Baccolini argues that the complex relationship between history, memory, and utopia has produced a political environment that employs the rhetoric of reconciliation as a tool of forgetfulness, where “one is left to wonder whether these often ‘empty gestures’ [towards reconciliation] are mostly done to make those who apologize feel good and to reaffirm the status quo” (121). Questions of reconciliation in the critical dystopia take on a particular significance in settler states such as Canada, where any critique of capitalism necessarily engages in a critique of the colonial foundations on which the neoliberal state itself exists. Thus, the question of Canadian space—what it signifies, how it operates, and who it serves—is central to the themes of reconciliation and memory engaged through the critical dystopia, and must be treated as a central focus for interrogation of the foundational myths on which Canadian identity has been constructed.

1.4 Globalization, Space, and the Critical Dystopia

The critical dystopia, then, can be understood as belonging to a tradition of flexible cultural work that not only seeks to critique late capitalism as the controlling socio-economic system in the twenty-first century (Moynan 193), but also exposes and interrogates the ways in which neoliberal discourses maintain a hegemonic grip over the ways that space can be conceptualized in those systems. According to Doreen Massey, the organization of global space over the course of the twentieth century was based in the understanding that the relationship between space/society and place/culture was fixed or “bounded” (64). This taming of space, she suggests, was essential to the dominant discourses of modernity, which asserted that the history of the world can (and should) be understood as existing along a singular, universal trajectory:

Moreover, not only under modernity was space conceived as divided into bounded places but that system of differentiation was also organised in a particular way. In brief, spatial difference was convened into temporal sequence. Different “places” were interpreted as different stages in a single temporal development. All the stories of unilinear progress, modernisation, development, the sequence of modes of production ... perform this operation. Western Europe is “advanced”, other parts of the world “some way behind”, yet others are “backward.” (68)

While the globalizing period that took place over the 1990s and early 2000s saw the world being re-arranged into a space of “unbounded flows,” the spatial logic that was employed to naturalize the existence of a singular history of modernity is synonymous with that of neoliberal globalizing processes, which similarly depend on the understanding that communities, cultures, and nations are bound to a particular geographic location and, further, that that location determines their positioning within the absolute, sequential history of “modernity” itself. Massey further emphasizes neoliberalism’s need to maintain rigid control over global space when she states, “the regulation of the world into a single trajectory, *via* the temporal convening of space, was, and still often is, a way of refusing to address the essential multiplicity of the spatial” (Massey 71). In this context, the significance of space to the critical dystopia, as a mode of cultural work that attempts to disrupt hegemonic assumptions around the organization of global space, cannot be understated; specifically, by reorganizing space in a way that intentionally disrupts this timeline and calls attention to the way it has been naturalized through particular spaces (i.e., defining the “global” city as a space that conforms to the expectations of capitalist modernity), dystopian and other speculative fictions offer modes by which these discourses can be challenged.

The two major studies of Canadian science-fiction by Weiss and Spencer and Leroux and La Bossiere, however, suggest that there remains a resistance to critically interrogating the construction of space/place within the genre, as these concepts have long been viewed as central to Canadian identity. When discussing the shift towards situating Canadian horror/SF in urban spaces, Huff states “the biggest difference between the old wilderness and the new [the city] is the speed with which it changes. The forest, the prairies, the tundra changed only seasonally from year to year. The cities change from moment to moment. And change is ... unsettling” (143, ellipses in original). Huff’s claim that these narratives locate horror in the experience of being in an environment that is not fixed, but rather constantly evolving, reinforces the extent to which Canadian SF is dependent on a stable conception of space/place; consequently, any spatial encounter that deviates from this foundational understanding is perceived to be “unsettling” or “horrific.” Furthermore, Leroux and La Bossiere identify a tendency in Canadian literature to represent space as less a physical entity than an abstract concept, wherein Canada’s perceived political adaptability (in contrast with the United States’ “patriotic populist positivism”) results in the structuring of Canadian identity around an ambiguous sense of “being-borderless” (2-6). Citing McLuhan’s “Canada: The Borderline Case” (1977), which argues that Canadian identity is defined by its “between-ness,” and Ketterer’s *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1992), which states that “Canada might well be described as the Switzerland of the world,” Leroux and La Bossiere position Canadian space alongside a wider tradition of viewing Canadian values as “open-minded, tentative, considered, balanced, tolerant, critical, subversive, and richly ambiguous” (Ketterer qtd. in Leroux and La Bossiere 4). The spatial ambiguity that results from locating a central tenet of Canadian identity in its political “placelessness,” however, further renders the significance of space to the Canadian socio-cultural imagination as something that is

fundamentally untouchable in relation to conceptions of national identity. Thus, while space continues to figure centrally in the project of national self-definition that has largely shaped Canadian SF, its representation is predominantly based in an understanding that the spatial in Canada is distinctly apolitical (it is “borderless”) (Leroux and La Bossiere 3).

The Canadian critical dystopia, then, becomes a narrative mode through which these understandings can be exposed and critiqued through the representation and (often) radical transformation of the landscape itself; however, any critical consideration of space in the Canadian context must also confront the settler-colonial histories and foundational myths that have framed the Canadian landscape as an essentialized and unchanging foundation for defining Canadian identity. Consequently, the ability of narratives like *Salt Fish Girl* or *Nostalgia* to effectively engage with the objectives of the critical dystopia is dependent, first, on the recognition that Canadian dystopian literature constitutes a body of work that is distinct from canonical Canadian SF and, as such, should be the subject of a similarly specialized body of literary criticism; and second, on the extent to which this body of work is based in a critical reconsideration of Canadian space. With these criteria in mind, I suggest that Massey’s proposal for an alternative approach to thinking about space, outlined in *For Space* (2005), provides a theoretical framework in which to engage in a productive examination of the distinctly Canadian implications of contemporary dystopian literature. The purpose of *For Space*, as stated by Massey in the chapter entitled “Opening Propositions,” is to make a case for thinking about the challenge of spatiality outside of “that particular form of neoliberal capitalist globalisation which we are experiencing at the moment—that duplicitous combination of the glorification of the (unequally) free movement of capital on the one hand with the firm control over the movement

of labour on the other” (4). To this end, Massey outlines three propositions for the reconsideration of space:

First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. [...] *Second*, that we understand space as 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. [...] *Third*, that we recognize space as always under construction. (9, emphasis in original)

Situating Canadian dystopian literature in this framework, I argue, opens up the possibility of reading Canadian spaces outside of their historically dominant function in Canadian SF; that is, outside of the essentializing, exclusionary, and, in the context of ongoing settler-colonialism in Canada, violent identity narrative that is frequently used to define the Canadian nation-state in the globalized environment.

1.5 Dystopian Geographies in Contemporary Canadian Literature

The following analysis will apply Massey’s discussion to two novels that reimagine Canadian space within futuristic dystopian landscapes: Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), set in the Pacific northwest between the years 2044 and 2062, and M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* (2016), set in Toronto an unspecified number of years after 2032. These novels were selected from a growing body of works that speculate distinctly Canadian dystopian futures,¹⁴ using the criteria for the critical dystopia outlined by Baccolini, Moylan, and Donawerth in *Dark Horizons*:

¹⁴ Alternative works considered for this investigation include Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1999), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), and the collection of short stories edited by Sylvia Moreno-Garcia entitled, *Fractured: Tales of the Canadian Post-Apocalypse* (2014).

Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination: (i) the narrative depicts a society that is fictional but can nevertheless be normally located in space and time; (ii) the narrative does not conform to the formal conventions of any one genre but rather acts as a matrix for genre blending; and (iii) the narrative resists anti-utopian tendencies and resists closure by maintaining hope that the dystopian society can be radically transformed.

In the following chapters of this discussion, I examine how *Salt Fish Girl* and *Nostalgia* employ the narrative strategies of the critical dystopia to expose and critique the distinctly Canadian implications of neoliberal globalization; however, it should first be noted that the novels respond to distinct moments in the unfolding of this particular form of globalization over the last two decades. Published in 2002, *Salt Fish Girl* emerged from a period of intensified debates around issues of boundaries, borders, and citizenship around the world.¹⁵ In an article entitled “Troubling Domestic Limits: Reading Border Fictions alongside Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*,” Rita Wong suggests that the Pacific northwest can be understood as “the west entrance of a haunted house called Canada” (109)—haunted, specifically, by the histories that were concealed, erased, or overwritten through the formation of the Canadian nation-state.

Referencing Canadian Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Denis Coderre’s discussions of opening Canada’s “front door” and closing down its “back door,”¹⁶ and the media backlash that arose against Fujianese migrants who came to Vancouver by ship in 1999, Wong positions Lai’s

¹⁵ It should be noted that this global shift was not only a response to the increasing movement of capital and labour across national and continental borders, but also to the events of September 11, 2001. In the conclusion to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Moylan states that, “. . . in the aftermath of that day in September . . . the anti-utopian denial of possibility and enforcement of the new order did not suddenly begin. Rather, it continued along its established path, now opportunistically drawing on people’s genuine grief and fear to lock in an ideological common sense that valorizes the centrality of the market along with an unquestioning, patriotic loyalty” (234). Through the deployment of this anti-utopian political rhetoric, Moylan notes that the attacks were quickly mobilized “by the ruling economic and political power” as a justification for the reinforcing of Western borders and for “the U.S military response . . . that has resulted in killing hundreds of Afghan civilians in its anti-terrorist campaign” (238).

¹⁶ Coderre was the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration in 2003 (Wong 109).

novel alongside a growing body of west coast literature published in the 1990s that explores “the migration experience through the perspectives of labour that has been devalued through gendering and racialization” (110).¹⁷ The metaphor of the nation as a house and the political rhetoric of closing its “back door” thus reveal an increased emphasis on borders and boundaries that emerged in Canada (and around the world) as regions around the globe became increasingly interconnected (Wong 109-22).

The globalizing period between the 1990s and early 2000s also saw an ideological shift in the way that boundaries and their crossings were conceptualized more broadly. Whereas the modernist view of the world imagined a global geography made up of individually bounded, geographically dispersed places, Massey notes that “the very word ‘globalisation’ implies a recognition of spatiality” (81) that recognizes the flow of capital and culture across national and international borders; however, she argues that the particular form of capitalist globalization that is framed as inevitable in hegemonic discourses reproduces the same relational view of development that shaped the dominant story of modernity over the twentieth century. The result of this renewed emphasis on space, Massey contends, is a distinctly “*aspatial* view of globalisation” that continues to require the convening of “contemporaneous geographical differences into temporal sequence” (81-89, emphasis in original), where the opportunities and “openness” associated with globalization are only accessible by the (predominantly Western) countries leading the “queue.” Thus, the decade leading up to *Salt Fish Girl*’s publication can be understood as a transitional period that was characterized by “two apparently self-evident truths, a geography of borderlessness and mobility, and a geography of border discipline” (Massey 86).

¹⁷ Among these texts, Wong cites SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1994), Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995), Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* (1996), Yuen-fong Woon’s *The Excluded Wife* (1998), and Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* (2000).

Whereas *Salt Fish Girl* emerged from a transitional period in which the development of the world economy was paralleled by a strengthening of political and national boundaries, particularly in those countries belonging to the “developed” world, Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* depicts a world in which “the imagination of globalisation in terms of unbounded free space” has intensified to the point that individual nation-states no longer exist (Massey 83)—there is only “the Long Border” separating the prosperous North Atlantic Alliance from the impoverished “Region 6,” a geographic area that includes the East African Federation (EAF), the former Congo, and Maskinia, a “vaguely defined area of Region 6” made up of several former South Asian and African countries (Vassanji 172).¹⁸ Published fourteen years after *Salt Fish Girl*, the depiction of borders in *Nostalgia* shifts the narrative focus from the political boundaries of the nation-state to the relational and ideological (and, in the novel’s dystopian context, physical) boundaries that separate the “Global North” from the “Global South” in contemporary capitalist systems—in particular, the spatial logics that are used to “[legitimize] the enforcement of export orientation on the economy of country after country; [and] the prioritisation of exports over production for local consumption” (Massey 84). According to Massey, the view of the world as an “unbounded global trading space” reinforces the inevitability of capitalist globalization by “[legitimizing] the view that there is one particular model of ‘development’, one path to one form of ‘modernisation’” (84); however, it also acts as “a powerful imaginative geography” that “...is not so much a description of how the world is, as [it is] an image in which the world is being made” (84). In the resulting spatial hierarchy that is produced through this imagination, the

¹⁸ While the novel does not specify the exact geographic parameters of Maskinia’s boundaries, the reader is told that its name “is believed by some scholars to be derived from *masikini* or *maskin* (South Asian and African languages, through Arabic)” (172). Further evidence as to Maskinia’s location is suggested by the headquarters of the Freedom Warriors “in a suburb of Sinhapura” (172), as both Singapore and the fictional Sinhapura are, at different times, described by the narrator as “the Lion City.” These parallel descriptions suggest to the reader that Singapore, a country that no longer exists in the novel’s speculative context, has become part of the region known as Maskinia.

Global North and Global South are positioned at opposite ends of a singular timeline of development; one which “enables the imposition of programs of structural adjustment” and justifies the continued intervention of the “first” world into “developing” regions (83).¹⁹ By erecting a physical and political barrier between the Global North and the Global South in the space of the novel, *Nostalgia* shifts the narrative critique from the individual nation-state to “the constantly-being-produced new geometries of power, the shifting geographies of power-relations” that accompany neoliberal globalization (Massey 85).

Thus, the narrative positioning of Vancouver and Toronto as simultaneously locatable within, and suspended from, the contemporary realities of the spaces they depict allows *Salt Fish Girl* and *Nostalgia* to reimagine two of Canada’s most prominent global cities through a critical lens, and to thereby interrogate the particular histories that have produced those spaces in relation to ongoing globalizing processes. Here, the definition of the “global” city is based on Massey’s discussion in Parts Three and Five of *For Space*: in “Part Three: Living in Spatial Times?”, she cites Saskia Sassen’s “Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization” (2001) to suggest that the global city has “[an] enormous capacity for generating and controlling flows”; “is built upon vast emplaced resources”; and maintains its image as a space of flows “through the construction of (temporary, provisional) stabilisations” (95).²⁰ The nature of these stabilizations are further explicated in “Part Five: A Relational Politics of the Spatial,” in which Massey examines the ways in which London’s status as a “global” city allows

¹⁹ This imagination of global space as inherently arranged on a linear spectrum is also taken up and challenged in *Salt Fish Girl* through the representation of flows between the Asian Pacific and the Pacific northwest region of Canada, to be discussed in section 2.1 of this analysis.

²⁰ In her discussion of the global city, Massey cites Saskia Sassen’s “Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization,” in A. Appadurai (ed.), *Globalization*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, pp. 260-78.

for a reinforcing of the city's identity as based primarily in its wealth and international status while, at the same time:

[This understanding] fails to interrogate both London's huge resources and their historical and current mobilisation into power-relations with other places, and the subordination of other places and the global inequalities on which this metropolis depends and upon which so much of its wealth and status have been built. Indeed when it does turn to address 'relations with elsewhere' the analysis is pervaded by anxiety about competition. (95)

Both anxieties around the preservation of local space, and the "persistent apparent oblivion of London and Londoners to the external relations ... upon which the very existence of this place depends" here act as stabilizations that "[close] down the possibility of inventing an alternative local politics," while continuing to allow London's identity to be defined "as a function of the city's position within global financial markets and related sectors" (95). The ideological construction of the global city thus aligns with a distinctly neoliberal model of capitalist globalization that, like the imagination of the world as a space of unbounded flows, negotiates between "motion and mobility" and the fortification of local space in order to naturalize the power relations that accompany this particular understanding of global space.

This "negotiation ... between conflicting tendencies" can similarly be observed in the mythologies and power relations that constitute the spaces of Vancouver and Toronto as, at once, portals for international capital and powerful centres within Canada's national boundaries (Massey 95). In order to examine the construction and positioning of these spaces in relation to global systems of power, however, it must also be recognized that different locations in Canada carry their own spatial histories, connotations, and complications—to ignore these differences is

to reproduce an essentialized understanding of Canadian space that aligns with earlier attempts to locate a unifying Canadian identity in its vast and unchanging landscape. In the following chapters of this analysis, I first examine how dystopian geographies are transposed onto the space of Vancouver and the Canadian nation-state through the Pacific Economic Union (PEU) and the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, before turning to M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* to interrogate the global re-organization of space and the re-positioning of Toronto as a centre within the powerful North Atlantic Alliance. Through a comparative examination of the histories, mythologies, and processes that have produced two of the largest and most recognizable spaces in Canada, this discussion concludes by suggesting that both novels can be understood as critical dystopias that challenge the dominant interpretation of space that has shaped the Canadian sci-fi literary canon, and destabilize the hegemonic discourses that continue to shape Canadian geographies in the present.

2. Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

Salt Fish Girl intertwines the narrative streams of two protagonists: Nu Wa, a mythical, shapeshifting being whose story takes place in China in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and Miranda Ching, a citizen of the walled city of Serendipity in the futuristic Pacific Economic Union (PEU) in the year 2044. In a small village in southern China in the late 1800s, Nu Wa falls in love with the daughter of a salt fish merchant; when her father tries to keep them apart, they run from the village to a life of poverty and pickpocketing in the city of Canton, where the salt fish girl is forced to take a job in a factory after the foreman observes her gutting a man who had attempted to rape her. The salt fish girl's health deteriorates rapidly under the factory's harsh conditions, and one night while trying to procure medicine for her, Nu Wa encounters Edwina, a

beautiful, blonde foreign woman who leads her through the clouds to the City of Hope, “an astonishing city, glinting pink and gold” on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness (125). After arriving at the island, however, Nu Wa is abandoned by Edwina and forced to take a job at a hotel for little pay to avoid arrest and deportation. When Nu Wa eventually escapes the island and returns to China, she discovers that fifty years have passed for everyone on the mainland; despite this, Nu Wa herself remains the same age she was at the time she left, suggesting that her journey to the Island through the clouds not only took her out of normative space, but also suspended the passage of time. Having lost her native language, Nu Wa returns to her home village and is adopted by her younger brother—now a middle-aged man—as his daughter. Eventually, she is given to be married to his friend (the salt fish merchant’s brother’s son), and after attempting to become pregnant by a fisherman at her aged husband’s request, she is caught by the villagers and condemned to die by drowning for dishonoring her husband. As the men approach her on the banks of the river, she “[leans] into the water, merging with [her] reflection and obliterating it at the same time” and, almost a century later, implants in the seed of the durian fruit by which Miranda’s mother becomes pregnant (183).

The second narrative stream is set in the Pacific northwest between the years 2044-2062, in the region formerly known as British Columbia. After Miranda’s father loses his job as a tax collector for the Saturna Corporation, the Ching family relocates from the relative security of the corporate compound to the Unregulated Zone, where they open a corner grocery store known for the sale of “the freshest and plumpest durians the city had to offer” (82). The distinctive odour of durian fruit that fills the store is not unfamiliar to Miranda and her family—the stink of the fruit’s “pepper-pissy juices” have followed Miranda since the time that she was born, as “an odd odour that does not seem to emanate from any particular part of the body, but hangs over the

child like a cloud” (69). The persistent presence of a distinctive odour emanating from the body, however, is also a primary symptom of the Dreaming Disease, a condition transmitted through the soles of the feet that instigates within the afflicted body an immediate and intense return of history, experienced through vivid dreams, increasingly blurred distinctions between past and present, and an overwhelming desire to commit suicide by drowning (100). After trying numerous herbal and prescribed remedies to combat her body’s overwhelming scent, Miranda’s father writes to Dr. Rudy Flowers, the foremost researcher of the Dreaming Disease to ask him to evaluate his daughter’s symptoms. Miranda eventually takes a job working for Flowers where she meets Evie, a clone who, it is eventually revealed, was biologically engineered by the doctor for the purpose of industrialized labour. One of hundreds of thousands of women with identical genetic material known as the “Sonias,” Evie was called “Sonia 113” until she escaped by ripping out the tracking device that had been implanted in her skin, creating a distinctive scar across her back that reminds Miranda of feathered wings (156, 232). Evie’s biological makeup is “point zero three per cent *Cyprinus carpio* - freshwater carp” (158), and when Miranda attempts to draw her blood at Flowers’ clinic, the “briny and sweet” scent that emanates from the needle’s puncture wound stirs a dormant memory in Miranda, giving her “the distinct impression the past was leaking through into the present” (105).

2.1 Narrative and Global Flows

Nu Wa’s and Miranda’s narration occurs in parallel throughout the novel; however, through Nu Wa’s drowning, it is confirmed that their stories form a continuous timeline, stretching across time and space to link the events taking place in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China to those in the present-day PEU. While there are similarities between the protagonists’ characterization and circumstances throughout the novel to suggest that their

narrative streams are interlinked, this revelation becomes most apparent in the shift in narrative perspective that takes place in the final chapter of Nu Wa's narration:

And then I [i.e., Nu Wa] saw her, saw that perfect form of my own invention, a dark silhouette against the surface of the water. A wide torso, a head, two arms, two legs. I doubt that I could ever dream such a form again. My [i.e., Miranda's] mother swam on her back, the water a pillow beneath her, looking at the sky hanging blue and gold above.
(207)

In this passage, the "I" shifts from Nu Wa to Miranda as their narratives merge, aligning their historical trajectories in the process—as Nu Wa drowns, she shifts from a physical body, to the river itself, to her original half woman/half fish form, and finally, to the seed of the durian fruit that Miranda's mother eventually eats. This narrative event thus signifies a disruption of normative space and time, as the reader is told that this process of "coming back into being ... took a long time, too long, two hundred and fifty years to be exact" (206); above the water, however, the events of the story move between China in the early 1900s and the Unregulated Zone in 2044, implying that the passage of time beneath the water does not conform to the expectations of "normative" time above it. *Salt Fish Girl* can therefore be seen to challenge the notion that space is necessarily linear by situating characters' spatial movements along a vertical axis—just as Nu Wa and Edwina ascend through the clouds in order to reach the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, the narrative shift from China to Vancouver is prefigured by Nu Wa's drowning and the submerging of her body beneath the water's surface.

The discontinuity of the passage of time above and below the river's surface here aligns with the narrative's positioning of water as both a formal and a physical conduit between the different spatial-temporal contexts of the story. Each time the narrative voice shifts back to Nu

Wa, the gap between present and past is bridged with an image of Miranda's body submerged in water: it is after drifting off to sleep in the tub that Miranda first notices what appears to be scales clinging to the clean porcelain (45); upon encountering Flowers's experimental site at the Pan Pacific Hotel for the first time, she has the distinct impression that she "hit water, a deep well, and fell down into a cool wet darkness" (113); it is raining as she and Evie exit the bus after spending the day in the mountains and, while walking home alone, she recalls the comfort evoked through her dreams of the ocean (167); and in the final transition preceding the merging of their narrative voices, Miranda finds herself imprisoned for a second time in a sub-oceanic, Plexiglas-walled room at the Pan Pacific Hotel (201-3). Thus, water not only facilitates the merging of the protagonists' narrative trajectories in the specific passage following Nu Wa's drowning, but rather, consistently acts as the substance that allows the novel's point-of-view to move fluidly between past and present within the narrative framework.

The ability of water to bridge gaps between space and time also functions in a much more literal capacity to connect the different geographic spaces encountered in the narrative. It is by following Edwina's map, which has "nothing on it but a picture of the Sighing River with a line beside it," that Nu Wa finds her way back to Canton from the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness (169), and upon being turned away by the salt fish girl (now aged 50 years), she follows the river "out of habit, out of the memory that resided in [her] feet" to return to her home village (173). Perhaps the most significant narrative instance of water as a pathway between geographic points, however, is revealed in the moments immediately following Nu Wa's drowning:

I fell into my reflection. I became river water moving through river water. And then in the next moment there was something about me that was heavier than before. The speed

of the river increased, and as I was washed out to sea I also began to sink. Out the mouth of the Pearl River to the South China Sea and down. Deep down. (205)

The directional flow of the water here not only clarifies the spatial relationship between Nu Wa's and Miranda's narrative trajectories—from the Pearl River, to the South China Sea, to the Pacific Ocean, to the roots of the durian tree that stretched “into both the land and sea” (208)—but also evokes the relational flows that shaped the Pacific northwest over the period in which the narrative takes place.²¹ A space of intensified capitalism, the PEU embodies a particular form of globalization that is reliant on the increasingly free movement of capital across international borders; however, Massey notes that this view of the world as a “[new] space of flows” assumes (falsely) that there existed a time when those boundaries were impermeable (65). Consequently, the “opening” of global space in neoliberal systems is paralleled by the rise of a nostalgic drive to return to a time when those boundaries were closed or, as Massey clarifies, “to a past that never was” (65). The “nationalisms and parochialisms and localisms” that arise from this drive are further suggested by the novel's depiction of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness (to be discussed in section 2.3 of this analysis) (Massey 65); however, the narrative positioning of the ocean as an interstitial conduit between eighteenth-century China and the Pacific Economic Union also calls attention to the flows of capital and culture that shaped the contemporary space of Canada's Pacific northwest. By making visible the literal and metaphorical pathways that exist (and have existed) between those spaces that are discursively framed in globalizing discourses as either “there” (developing) or “here” (developed), the narrative disrupts the hegemonic assumption “that space and society [map] on to each other and that together they were, in some sense ‘from the beginning’, divided up” (Massey 64).

²¹ From the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century.

2.2 The Pacific Economic Union

The intertwining of the novel's narrative voice(s), then, prevents the reader from experiencing the space of Vancouver-Serendipity without also acknowledging the global interrelations, flows, and trajectories that are concealed both through the mapping of "modernity" onto global spaces, and through the mythologies that are inscribed onto the space of Vancouver as a "modern" city. Vancouver's geographic location on the edge of the continent means that it has been the destination point for two distinct processes of migration: historically, it was the final site for colonial exploration and the westward expansion of European settlements across North America, and presently, it is "the nation's westernmost port of entry" for migrants travelling to Canada from across the Pacific ocean (Wong 121). Vancouver's position as both entryway and endpoint ascribes a liminal positionality to the city that takes on additional significance in the dystopian context, as a narrative mode that is similarly suspended in-between states of being. In a chapter entitled "The Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's *Geography of Apocalypse*," Robert McGill argues that Vancouver "exists at the confluence of myth and geography," in that the physical space it occupies is constantly mediated between the utopian associations of the West Coast in the Euro-American cultural imagination, and the apocalyptic implications of the colonial and frontier mythologies from which that impulse derives (276). Drawing on discussions of imperialism and utopian explorations raised by Francis Fukuyama and Northrop Frye,²² McGill argues that the West Coast has long been perceived as "a historical end point, insofar as its settlement represented a closing of the frontier" (278). Consequently, the West Coast signifies both a potential utopia and the end of utopian

²² McGill cites Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) and Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

possibilities, as “a space that is fetishized for its newness carries with it a certain apocalyptic inevitability, given that such newness is sure to be exhausted” (McGill 279).

Apocalyptic imagery similarly characterizes Lai’s Pacific Economic Union, where the reader is told that the area formerly known as downtown Vancouver was “the first part [of the city] to be abandoned after the earthquake of 2017 submerged several meters of the original waterfront” (111). The novel further alludes to Vancouver’s precarious position on the edge of the continent by personifying the Pacific ocean as an animate, destructive force, intent on reclaiming the land upon which the city is situated:

[T]he sound of the ocean was deafening. . . . the far wall was made completely of some kind of study Plexiglas, and outside it, 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*. It whipped furiously against the glass, clamouring to get in. It slammed things against it—seaweed, old bottles, frayed rope, scrap metal, swaying schools of fish—whatever it could conjure up from its polluted floor. (112, emphasis added)

By depicting the city as abandoned and partially submerged, these descriptions reinforce Vancouver’s inherent instability as a space that is “symbolic of the apocalyptic immanence that the West Coast residents have inherited as a result of the colonial drive across the continent” (McGill 282). The representation of the ocean as an animate force actively reclaiming its rightful territory, however, also acknowledges the apocalyptic agency that is inherent in capitalist systems and thus permeates the land on which the city is situated. In the novel, the space’s inevitable collapse is not only the result of the lack of utopian possibilities beyond it, but, rather, is indicative of the instability of highly regulated, artificially homogenized spaces such as Vancouver/Serendipity. As Massey suggests, the imagination of space “as in the voyages of

discovery, as something to be crossed and maybe conquered” is based in the notion that space itself is “a surface; continuous and given” (4); however, the view of land as an “empty” surface to be continually built upon actively denies the processes, interactions, and histories that constitute space outside of capitalist value systems, thereby absolving those in power of any responsibility to ensure the land’s survival beyond the use- or commodity-value of its resources. By removing agency from the corporate entity that “owns” the land (the PEU) and returning it to the natural environment, *Salt Fish Girl*’s personification of the ocean as an animate force thereby recognizes the destructive nature of corporatized, capitalist spaces, while, simultaneously, rejecting the notion that space could ever be “empty.”

The significance of the Pacific ocean within the narrative’s critique is also tied to the city’s position as a western gateway to Canadian space, and the processes of migration that accompany that positioning. According to Wong, the narrative’s setting on the Pacific rim engages a critical discussion of the relationship between labour and immigration in late capitalist logic, as it “[renders] problematic the binary constructs of national borders that immobilize labouring bodies while allowing transnational capital to cross with excessive velocity” (116). The movement of labour and capital between the various zones of *Salt Fish Girl*’s dystopian geography, she suggests, is reflective of “the logic of privatization that is being executed by the current British Columbia government’s neoliberal cutbacks and layoffs” (120), which target already vulnerable populations of Canadian society; in Vancouver, these populations are most often “people who live with temporary status, in fear of being denied permanent residency status and thus eventually designated ‘illegal,’ [who] are already working in garment factories for minimum wage (or less)” (121). By framing *Salt Fish Girl* as Canadian “border fiction,” Wong calls attention to the binary frameworks that are used to designate certain individuals and bodies

as existing “inside” or “outside” of the space of the nation, and simultaneously, Canada’s “unacknowledged economic dependencies upon the labour it constructs as ‘other’ and ‘foreign’” (121).

Thus, Vancouver’s geographic position on the West Coast, and its significance to colonial and frontier mythologies, lend the space an apocalyptic inevitability that is narratively reflected in the political and social instability of the fictional PEU. In the novel, the region formerly known as British Columbia has been transformed into a series of walled cities, each of which is controlled by one of the “Big Six” corporations. These corporate entities provide their citizens with various middle-class comforts—fruits and vegetables that have been genetically enlarged to feed an entire family (32); Interactive Electronic Books that allow the reader to enter the narrative as a virtual participant (34); and Swimming Suits that allow their wearer to virtually tour the spaces within and around the compounds for recreational purposes (65)—in exchange for their labour and their complicity with the exploitative (and often violent) forms that that labour takes. In contrast to the relatively innocuous virtual technologies used for recreation, Miranda’s father is routinely subjected to physical beatings with “heavy truncheons” each time he puts on his “Business Suit,” a piece of wearable technology that allows him to virtually perform his duties as a tax collector for the Saturna Corporation from the basement of their family home (25, 66-67). Although the beatings take place in the virtual realm, Miranda’s father’s body carries the mark of the violence even once the suit has been removed:

It was bedtime by the time my father emerged from the basement stairwell, pale as bread and limping. He was so pale, in fact, that you could see the veins pulsing beneath the skin of his face and neck. He looked more like a man who had emerged from a coffin than a

man just home from work. By the sight of him, I could tell that the Receivers General had been heavy-handed with their truncheons today. (78)

In contrast, the cities that exist in the Unregulated Zone (or Real World, as it is alternatively referred to) surrounding the corporate compounds are characterized by their “polluted sky,” “bombed-out buildings,” “crumbling highway[s],” and extralegal trade-based economy (37-39). The heightened economic and social disparities between the regulated, corporate zones of the novel and the interstitial areas between and around them defamiliarize the reader by situating the narrative within a space that has been radically transformed from present-day Vancouver;²³ however, the narrative also draws the reader’s attention to the process of transformation by recalling a time “before the absolute power of the Big Six” (14), and by including the names of real areas of the region in its narrative history.²⁴ Consequently, the reader is reminded that the dystopian geography depicted in the novel is not disconnected from history, but rather emerges out of the processes and mythologies that constitute the space of present-day Vancouver.

2.3 The Island of Mist and Forgetfulness

The ability of the narrative to subvert the expectation that space and time necessarily exist on a linear continuum—both through the shifts in narration that occur between the novel’s protagonists and the positioning of the water as an interstitial conduit between China and the PEU—thus offers an alternative history of modernity for the Pacific northwest; specifically, one

²³ This defamiliarizing effect is heightened by the sharp contrast between Lai’s Vancouver—as a space that has become essentially uninhabitable—and the city’s consistently high ratings in global liveability indexes. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Global Livability Index 2018 rated Vancouver as sixth in the world, with scores of 95.0 in “Stability” and 100.0 in “Culture & Environment.” By moving the PEU’s corporate compounds to the city’s surrounding areas and rendering its core uninhabitable, Lai’s depiction of Vancouver deliberately inverts the reader’s expectations in order to complicate their understanding of the space, and prompt a critical reconsideration of how it functions.

²⁴ Direct references to Canadian locations can be found in Lai’s description of Painted Horse, a “Democratic Urban Village located off Highway 10 in the former municipality of Greenwood, British Columbia” (71), and of the Pan Pacific Hotel, an “old hotel in what was once downtown Vancouver” (111).

that disrupts the “assumption of isomorphism between space/place on the one hand and society/culture on the other” (64). According to Massey, the imagining of global space as inherently “divided/regionalised” is integral to Western capitalist globalization, as it assumes that cultures, societies, and nations are “internally coherent and differentiated from each other by separation” in order to legitimate the nation-state as the most logical model for global organization and governance (64). This view of space not only “[refuses] to acknowledge its multiplicities, its fractures and its dynamism,” but also serves as the justification for “a whole imperialist era of territorialisation” and, more generally, “a way of taming the spatial” (65). Thus, Massey argues that re-telling the story of modernity from different geographic perspectives offers a way to “[provide] a commentary upon, and thereby [challenge], *both* a system of rule *and* a system of knowledge and representation” (64, emphasis in original).²⁵

Salt Fish Girl's representational geographies can similarly be understood as an attempt to centre those histories that have been historically excluded from dominant understandings of Canadian space and, in doing so, to undermine the spatial myth—of survival in a vast, empty, and unrelenting landscape—that has been foundational to understandings of Canadian national identity. The novel invokes Canadian space in two distinct contexts: first, in the aforementioned transformation of British Columbia into the capitalist dystopia of the Pacific Economic Union and, second, in the characterization of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness as a metaphorical stand-in for the Canadian nation-state. Despite the confinement of these spaces to Miranda's and Nu Wa's individual narrative streams, respectively, I argue that the emphasis on boundaries and

²⁵ Massey notes that this is especially apparent in post-colonial critiques where reconceptualizing space from the perspective of the global “peripheries” is of central concern. She cites Stuart Hall's chapter, “When was the post-colonial? Thinking at the Limit” (1996) and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) as examples of attempts to shift modernity's trajectory from “its European centering to its dispersed global ‘peripheries’; from peaceful evolution to imposed violence” (Hall qtd. in Massey 64).

border-crossing in both instances speaks to and offers a critique of the overarching spatial logics that position both British Columbia (specifically Vancouver) and Canada in relation to wider globalizing processes. Over the course of Miranda's narration between 2044-2062, the rigid boundaries that exist between the regulated and unregulated spaces of the PEU become increasingly blurred: the fenced-in corporate zones shift from being a space of relative security for the Ching family to an exclusionary space from which they find themselves "stripped of legal status and left outside the city-state's protection (and yet very much beneath its authority)" (Zacharias 19); and in the years following the family's expulsion from Serendipity, a widespread economic crisis results initially in a mass migration of workers "out of the corporate compounds and into the Unregulated Zone" (Lai 85), and eventually in the physical breaking down of the walls surrounding the corporate spaces and the intensification of state control through police violence at their centres (191). In her reading of the relationship between labour, immigration, and citizenship in Lai's PEU, Wong argues that the disintegration of spatial boundaries in the novel—between public and private, "local and global," and "home and world"—is a direct commentary on the contradictions that characterize the space of present-day British Columbia. As a "gateway" region, the Pacific northwest is centrally concerned with controlling the movement of bodies in and around the space it occupies; however, Wong cites the Live-In Caregivers Program and Vancouver's many garment factories as two examples of the way the region remains economically dependent on the labour of those individuals it deems "illegal" (116). Thus, the gradual disintegration of spatial boundaries in the PEU reveals the extent to which the "global" flows of capital through which sovereign power is exercised are dependent on the demarcation of space "through force and passages of confinement" (Wong 113)—in particular, the confinement and marginalization of bodies that are perceived to be "extra-legal"

or non-human and that exist between the binary frameworks and systemic policies that constitute contemporary capitalist logics.

Robert Zacharias expands on Wong's discussion in a chapter entitled "Citizens of the Exception: *Obasan* meets *Salt Fish Girl*," where he suggests that the collapse of clear boundaries between the novel's various spaces is also indicative of a collapse of the nation-state itself—in particular, the "aggressively normative spatio-temporal structures of sovereignty" that constitute it (16). While I agree with Zacharias that Lai's use of "racially fluid subject identities, myth that intertwines with history, cyborg clones, and Chinese goddesses, and a narrative that is deeply fractured ... violate the strict order and clear *telos* desired by the nation-state" (16), his reading of the novel's spatial organization states conclusively that the nation-state is no longer a useful paradigm for interpreting the text's dystopian critique. As sovereignty shifts from the nation to the corporation with the spread of global capitalism, Zacharias cautions that "an allegorical reading of *Salt Fish Girl* that places the novel back in the context of the nation ultimately serves to limit the text's political gesture" (20). I would argue, however, that the novel's other significant space of migration—the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness—deliberately invokes the nation-as-paradigm to demonstrate the extent to which the exercise of sovereign power through the spread of global capital is dependent on the existence of individual nation-states to maintain what Massey terms *spatial coherence* in global systems of power. Whereas Zacharias suggests that it is only by "resisting the urge to read the novel back into the national paradigm it strives to escape can we begin to consider its commentary on the underlying notion of sovereignty itself" (20), Massey's discussion suggests that a nostalgic emphasis on nationalisms/localisms is, in itself, a political tactic in the exercise of that sovereignty, as a bounded relationship between space and culture is employed to rationalize the arrangement of global space along a linear

trajectory of development. By giving the island a history that clearly alludes to the historical processes involved in the formation of Canada and, in particular, the influence of British imperialism as the dominant force shaping those processes, the narrative depiction of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness appears to deliberately return to a national paradigm in a way that, I would suggest, encourages the reader to view the Canadian nation-state as a space that is not just unnatural, but has been intentionally constructed to refuse notions of multiplicity and plurality within its boundaries.²⁶

The Island of Mist and Forgetfulness is first encountered when Nu Wa is led by Edwina from Canton to the City of Hope, a mythical space that can be reached either by walking through the clouds or by travelling by boat across an unnamed body of water:²⁷

I followed [Edwina] 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. (Lai 124)

²⁶ The narrative similarities between the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness and the Canadian nation-state also tie into a critique of Canada's political "placelessness" (Leroux and Bossiere) in relation to its accountability in global systems, as both the structuring of Canadian identity around an ambiguous sense of being "in-between" (see section 1.4) and the depiction of the island as a space floating outside of normative space and time conveniently allow for Canada to be imaged as an "elsewhere."

²⁷ By noting that the Island can either be reached by travelling through the clouds to arrive at a golden gate (as for Nu Wa and Edwina) or by crossing a body of water (the route taken most often by illegal immigrants from the nearby Spool Island), Lai's description alludes to a reading of the space as alternatively heaven, hell, or both simultaneously. While Nu Wa and Edwina take both routes to the Island at different points in the novel, the outcome for each of them is ultimately the same each time: both routes offer Edwina the ability to "appear and disappear at will" (Wong 116), while, in both cases, Nu Wa is imprisoned shortly after arriving at the Island. Thus, the novel suggests that the Island's status as either heaven or hell is not tied to the route taken to arrive there, but rather to the status of the individual as either a recognized citizen (a "true" Forgetfullian) or as fundamentally "other" (everyone else).

While the island was once home to “Hope” and “Ville d’Espoir,” opposing English and French settlements located on either side of the Sighing River, the reader is told that the victory of the British in the historical Battle of Heart’s Delight resulted in English control over the majority of the island. Consequently, the name “Ville d’Espoir” slipped from its original French to “Ville Despair,” with the settlement eventually becoming the administrative centre of the island, and an extension of the larger and more powerful City of Hope (139)—a space that visually celebrates capitalist ideals of modernity through its “carefully planned geometry” (Lai 126), and “its eastern gate that proclaims ‘Progress’ and its western gate that declares ‘Democracy’” (Wong 116). Notably, the island’s administrative structure parallels the spatial organization of Canada’s federal jurisdiction, as the reader is told that the once-separate settlements of Hope and Ville Despair are connected by eleven bridges that criss-cross the Sighing River, much like the municipalities of Ottawa and Gatineau have grown to “[bleed] into one another” as a result of their proximity on either side of the Ottawa River (Lai 139). Just as Ottawa and Gatineau together have come to constitute Canada’s National Capital Region,²⁸ the administrative centre on Ville Despair is narratively framed as a representational centre of power for the island located precisely at the geographic point where the once separate English and French settlements intersect one another (139).

Thus, the narrative positioning of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness as a space that has become physically and narratively “unmoored” from history calls attention to the way that Canada, as a nation-state, has been similarly disconnected from the histories, trajectories, and relations that exist outside of the imperial processes upon which it was founded. Just as English

²⁸ While the National Capital Region is “not a separate political or administrative entity” in Canada, it is an official federal designation that refers to the region covered by the adjoining cities of Ottawa and Gatineau. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Capital_Region_\(Canada\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Capital_Region_(Canada))

control over the island's legal and administrative functions created a space that "became unmoored from history, lost its connection with the past or the future and floated into the sky" (139), the formation of the Canadian nation-state imposed a particular narrative onto the space that denies "the simultaneous coexistence of other histories with characteristics that are distinct (which does not imply unconnected) and futures which potentially may be so too" (Massey 11). This "master" narrative is then naturalized and reinforced through the binary frameworks that give the state's administrative powers absolute control over which individuals, stories, and histories are permitted to (visibly) exist within that space. Here, it is helpful to return to Leroux and La Bossiere's discussion of borders in the Canadian socio-cultural imagination, as the structuring of national identity around conceptions of political "placelessness" not only assumes that Canadian culture is necessarily bound to the geographic space of the nation (Massey 64), but extends that notion further to suggest that the relationship between space and culture is so absolutely fixed that it could be sustained through the removal of those borders—through the state of "being-borderless." By concealing the imperial processes that produced "Canadian" space, and reproducing understandings of Canada as politically and spatially "neutral," the dominant narrative of Canadian identity not only refuses the possibility that multiple trajectories co-existed (or even could co-exist) within the space occupied by the state, but, in doing so, actively denies the histories and mythologizes the futures that fail to align with that singular trajectory.

The novel similarly depicts the political borders of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness as selectively permissible. While there are no obstacles that prevent Nu Wa from following Edwina through the eastern gate of the City of Hope, her liminal subject position once inside the island prevents her from either existing as a citizen in the space or leaving it to return to Canton.

Shortly after being abandoned at the hotel by Edwina, the hotel manager threatens to have her deported “back to China, or Spool Island, or wherever it is you come from” (128); however, his “unnerving” body language and “too-meaningful” gaze imply that it is an empty threat, intended only to coerce her into taking an under-paid position at the hotel which, according to Edwina, has been “terribly short-staffed” (126-28). When Nu Wa later requests and receives permission to study probability in the hopes that she could get “a dull but respectable job as a statistician” on the island, she learns that employment is paradoxically dependent on membership in the Statisticians Guild which, for foreign-born workers, can only be obtained after working as a statistician on the island for five years (142-43). The island’s “borderlessness,” then, is represented as one-directional and highly conditional—just as the City of Hope is a gated community that paradoxically promises equality of opportunity through its emphasis on “progress” and “democracy,” the legal structures on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness are intentionally designed to allow for the systematic exploitation of immigrant labourers, while preventing those individuals from obtaining the privileges of full citizenship.

The political boundaries of the nation-state thus become a mode by which to reinforce spatial hierarchies in a global environment characterized by a hegemonic narrative of “openness” and increased flows between geographically dispersed regions. This is exemplified in the narrative function of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, as a space that is at once “floating” outside of normative space and time and, at the same time, is locatable in relation to, and has immense consequences for, the “real” spaces of the novel. By depicting the island as discursively and geographically “unmoored” from history, its administrative powers are able to regulate and reinforce its national borders in a way that is consistent with what Massey describes as “an imagination [of space] which, having once been used to legitimate the territorialisation of

society/space, now is deployed in the legitimation of a response to their undoing; a response to ‘globalisation’” (65). At the same time, the island is dependent on the labour of those it deems “other” or “foreign,” whether that labour takes place on the island itself (as in Nu Wa’s experience) or in one of the many factories located in “developing” countries (including the one where the salt fish girl was employed in Canton). The island’s mythical qualities, then, are countered by its position in relation to global hierarchies of labour; while the space has been physically and discursively unmoored from history, and specifically those histories that fail to align with the expectations of capitalist modernity, it remains firmly tethered to, and dependent on, the exploitative labour that is made possible by virtue of its global interconnectedness.

2.4 The Dreaming Disease

While the resistance of anti-utopian tendencies is a conditional requirement for the critical dystopia, the novel’s depiction of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness leaves little room for the possibility of a utopian transformation within that space. Just as the landscape is rendered fundamentally untouchable in the dominant narratives of Canadian identity, the Island’s foundational structures are difficult to locate as they exist somewhere in the space between myth and reality—upon exiting the space, the reader, like Nu Wa, is left without a clear impression of how (or if) a radical transformation of the island’s society could be implemented. The historical parallels between the Island and present-day Canada, however, suggest that the function of the space to the novel’s social critique is as a dystopian reimagining of the past, rather than a projection of the future.²⁹ According to Baccolini, the recovery of history is a necessary step in the critical dystopia’s “social project of hope,” as in order for memory to be a productive force, it

²⁹ This is also suggested by the Ville Despair/Ottawa-Gatineau parallel which shifts the narrative critique from its primary focus on the directional flows between the Asian Pacific and the Pacific Northwest, to the transatlantic flows that led to the formation of Canada in the late eighteenth century.

must first be detached from nostalgia and recognized as a continuing process (130). Citing Ernst Bloch's distinction between *anamnesis* (recollection) and *anagnorisis* (recognition),³⁰ she states that "critical dystopias read like *almost-historical novels*—novels in which history figures significantly and its recovery becomes a pivotal element both for the narrative structure of the critical dystopia and for the protagonist's quest" (118, emphasis in original). Thus, the *Island of Mist and Forgetfulness* can be understood as, first, emphasizing the continued function of the nation-state as an ordering principle to maintain spatial coherence in global systems of power, even as sovereignty shifts from the nation to the corporation, and second, applying this critique to the capitalist logics, histories, and discourses that have shaped the Canadian nation-state—specifically, those that naturalize a bounded relationship between the state and the geographic space it occupies and, in doing so, obscure the settler-colonial processes that constructed that space in the first place. By destabilizing the foundational assumptions upon which the nation was built, the recovery of Canada's imperial history through the *Island of Mist and Forgetfulness* allows the novel to foreground the Pacific Economic Union as a space that, like Canada, has been intentionally produced through exploitative labour, systemic injustice, and exclusionary narratives—it is, arguably, in this space that the novel locates the potential for a utopian transformation.

Both *Salt Fish Girl* and *Nostalgia* take place in a version of Canada that has experienced varying degrees of spatial reorganization as the result of increasing privatization, changes to the climate, and shifts in global relations and flows of commodities. These conditions alone are not unique to the Canadian context as they are consistent with the expected outcomes of global capitalism, and would likely be present in any text classified as a critical dystopia; however, the

³⁰ Baccolini cites Bloch's discussion of the difference between *anamnesis* and *anagnorisis* in Vincent Geohegan's "Remembering the Future," *Utopian Studies* 1.2 (1990): 52-68.

representation of space in both novels is also narratively caught up with the spread of a pathologized memory disease that threatens the “normalcy” of the reformed societies. In *Salt Fish Girl*, the primary symptoms of the “Dreaming Disease” are experienced as “foul odours of various sorts that follow the person without actually emanating from the body, [...] terrible dreams usually with historical content, and a compulsive drive to commit suicide by drowning” (100). Most notably, however, the disease is presumed to be transmitted through the soles of the feet: Miranda is cautioned by Dr. Seto “never to walk barefoot on the beaches where victims have walked into the sea and drowned” (101) and, later, once the disease has become more widespread, she encounters graffiti that “demonstrate[s] how to seal one’s feet inside plastic bags without the danger of infiltration from the ground, the danger of attack from the land itself, fighting back” (244). The Dreaming Disease, then, embodies both utopian hope and dystopian despair as when an individual becomes infected the land becomes a conduit for the return of histories that have been overwritten by the dominant narrative of global capitalism; it “breaks through ... hegemonic enclosures” to make room for utopian possibilities by returning agency to the land itself (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Consequently, those alternate trajectories remain an active presence despite attempts by corporate entities to regulate and remove them from the geographic space of the “progressive” or “global” nation.

At the same time, however, the utopian potential contained in the image of the land fighting back is inextricable from the damage done by the disease itself, as once it has been contracted, the commercialized, capitalist landscape becomes physically uninhabitable for the infected individuals. Early in the novel, Miranda’s narration foreshadows the Dreaming Disease’s devastating impact when she states:

The disease had not yet reached the point of epidemic. In fact, there were not yet any indications that this strange disorder was causing any real harm, except, perhaps at a social level. Its sufferers had not yet begun their compulsive march into the rivers and oceans, unable to resist the water's pull. Their bodies had not yet begun to wash up on the shores like fragments of an ancient rock separated from their seemingly indestructible mass of origin and pummelled smooth by the tide. (Lai 70-71)

Rather than the corporations that created the social conditions for the epidemic, the “sufferers” here are primarily the PEU’s marginalized and vulnerable populations—Miranda observes that it was only after the mass movement of bodies into the Unregulated Zone that “stories of the dreaming disease began to circulate more widely” (85), and as the disease is widely believed to be transmitted through the soles of the feet, the sudden spike in the number of cases post-migration is framed as the direct result of heightened levels of poverty and homelessness in the Unregulated Zone (85). Thus, while the disease actively disrupts hegemonic narratives of “progress” by transforming the land into a conduit for those stories that have been excluded from the dominant history of modernity, resistance to the hegemonic power invokes a lateral violence against those populations that cannot afford access to the protections offered by capital—just as Miranda’s father’s body bears the physical mark of the Receivers Generals’ truncheons, the executives at Pallas Shoes capitalize on the disease by marketing shoes with “memory-proof soles,” at the same time that “the destitute [wander] shoeless and hungry and dreaming with an intensity that only the destitute can dream” (244, 231)

By depicting the land as both an archive of memory and a living entity, and the water as an interstitial conduit between the different spatial-temporal conduits of the story, *Salt Fish Girl* preserves the utopian impulse in its dystopian critique by refusing neoliberal conceptions of

space as an empty, unending surface. While the novel ends on a hopeful note with the birth of Miranda's child, leaving the reader with the impression that "everything will be alright ... until next time" (269), the novel offers no simple solution for a radical transformation; however, Baccolini and Moylan suggest that the purpose of the critical dystopia is not necessarily to provide solutions to the complex problems posed by late capitalism, but rather to reclaim capitalism's co-opting of utopia as "an already achieved dream" (237). Similarly, Lai's reimagining of Vancouver as a capitalist dystopia "destabilizes the lines between 'here' and 'there'" (Wong 116), in order to reclaim the Pacific northwest as a space that has been intentionally constructed through imperial and colonial systems—as the binary logics, contradictions, and economic dependencies that constitute the "global" nation-state are exposed through the story's progression, the representational spaces of the novel become increasingly destabilized. Thus, by disrupting the hegemonic assumption that there exists a bounded relationship between space and culture, the representations of both Vancouver and the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness in Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* destabilize the spatial coherence that is integral to neoliberal globalization and expose the Canadian state as a distinctly unnatural space.

3. M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*

Whereas *Salt Fish Girl* employs the dystopian framework to complicate understandings of the Canadian nation-state as natural, Vassanji's *Nostalgia*, I would argue, is primarily concerned with interrogating Canada's position in relation to global systems of power—in particular, the relationship between the Global North (the West) and the Global South (the rest) under late capitalism. Through a series of events taking place presumably in the latter half of the twenty-first century, Vassanji's narrative introduces the reader to a world that has been re-arranged into two distinct regions: the prosperous North Atlantic Alliance (NAA), and the war-

torn, impoverished Region 6, an area that encompasses everything south of the Long Border (172). Although the year in which the narrative takes place is not identified, the reader is given a brief history of global events that includes the Great Explosion of 2032, when “two 1000-watt megawatt reactors of Canadian design, operating in tandem, mysteriously exploded” in the area of Region 6 known as Maskinia (172). While the narrator notes that the region had experienced periods of instability prior to the explosion, the uncontrolled fallout from the nuclear catastrophe exacerbated conflict in the region, leading to “large-scale internal migrations,” “ethnic and religious strife,” “the emergence of three regional militias,” and the imposition of the Long Border between the two hemispheres as a way to “stop the tides of desperate migrants sweeping upon European and American shores” (172). The fortifying of the North with the imposition of the Long Border thus led to increasing levels of economic polarization between the North and South, further enabling the development of advanced technologies in the former while catalyzing the violence and political instability in the already impoverished latter.

Dr. Frank Sina, the narrator and protagonist, is both a citizen of the North Atlantic Alliance and a member of “Generation New” (GN), one of the first generations in the Western world to be granted immortality through scientific advancements in bodily rejuvenation. In order to ensure that the mind will last as long as the physical body, regeneration techniques have been accompanied by developments in “mind renewal,” or the rewriting of “selected portions of long-term memory” in order to produce new identities to fit the rejuvenated body (7). In practice, however, the overwriting of the brain with new “fictions” renders the individual susceptible to a condition referred to as Nostalgia, or Leaked Memory Syndrome, in which “thoughts burrow from a previous life into the conscious mind, threatening to pull the sufferer into an internal abyss” (7). A memory specialist at the Sunflower Centre for Human Rejuvenation in Toronto,

Frank assists patients who have made the choice to transition from one life to another, as well as those who present with symptoms of the disease once their transition is complete. Presley Smith is one such patient, who arrives at the Centre after experiencing a recurrence of alien thoughts beginning with “a string of words that had no meaning for him”—“*It’s midnight, the lion is out*” (2). As the novel progresses, Frank becomes inexplicably preoccupied with speculating on who Presley might have been; his fixation only intensifies when Presley’s records vanish from the online public database, and the Department of Internal Security (DIS) for the North Atlantic Alliance informs Frank that he is “one of theirs,” i.e. likely a former terrorist, traitor, criminal, or perceived threat to the nation who was captured and forcibly re-created as a productive citizen of the “civilized” world.

As Frank becomes more entangled in the complexities of his patient’s situation, his own fictions begin to unravel and, like Presley, his understanding of the world around him is disrupted by the intrusion of thoughts that are seemingly unconnected from his present reality. At the same time, the ideological and spatial distinctions between “Over Here” (North) and “Over There” (South) are similarly destabilized by the narrative events surrounding Holly Chu, a reporter from Toronto who is captured and (apparently) cannibalized on camera while on a journalistic expedition to Maskinia (Vassanji 64). It is eventually revealed that Holly was not, in fact, eaten by her captors, but rather, through a series of unknown events hypothesized by Frank in his notebook, converted into a revolutionary fighting on the side of the Freedom Warriors, a “terrorist group” that “has controlled the central portion of Maskinia for over thirty years” (172). The escalating global conflict between the North Atlantic Alliance and Maskinia reaches a climax when Holly assists the Freedom Warriors in taking hostage and ransoming a busload of tourists from the North, leaving the citizens of Toronto to wonder, “If this could happen to one of

us, if a privileged young woman, known and admired, suddenly joined the terrorists, anything was possible” (129). Through Holly Chu’s transgression of the boundaries between “here” and “there,” the narrative frames the hierarchical distinction between the Global North and Global South as a fiction that has been similarly created, implemented, and reinforced by those in power, a fiction that is only exposed as such once the perceived separation of “us” from “them” has been violated. Furthermore, by positioning Toronto as a centre within the powerful North Atlantic Alliance, *Nostalgia* invites a critical consideration of how Canada is implicated in the construction of this fiction, and, in particular, the ways that conditional citizenship and cultural memory are deployed as instruments of control in reinforcing these global hierarchies.

3.1 Toronto and the North Atlantic Alliance

Just as Lai’s Pacific Economic Union is simultaneously locatable within, and suspended from, the contemporary realities of present-day Vancouver, the Toronto depicted in Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* is at once familiar and intensely alienating. Frank spends a significant amount of time at a café located near Yonge and Eglinton, and while the reader is told that the intersection has become a major site for ongoing protests against the scientific methods used to prolong life on earth indefinitely, Frank’s narration also reveals that it remains a bustling, commercial centre: “in one smoky corner of the farmer’s market sausages sizzled on the grill, and in the open-air restaurant next to it customers sat in a heated outdoors oblivious of the blistering cold surrounding them. I reminded myself to take some Quebec cheese home” (92). The familiarity of Yonge and Eglinton as a social and commercial hub, however, stands in contrast to the other significant location in Vassanji’s Toronto—a neighbourhood called Lawrence Town, located at the fictional intersection of Walnut Street and Prince Albert Park Avenue. Lawrence Town is characterized as a “Forgotten World” within Toronto’s municipal boundaries (160), a description

that reinforces the sense of alienation experienced by both Frank and the reader upon encountering that space:

I emerged from the dank dungeon of a station from another century *into a world that was alien and truly depressing*, and hurried nervously further east down Walnut Street in the direction of increasing numbers. [...] Walnut Street was dark and dismal, pressed down by a foggy night. Wet potholes lurked like traps to break your legs, street lamps were sporadically lit. The buildings were of yellow or brown brick and of two or three storeys. Many windows were boarded. (160, emphasis added)

For Frank, Lawrence Town is a “border world” that disrupts the dominant fiction told to the citizens of the North Atlantic Alliance—that Toronto is “the best city in the world ... the civilized world of worlds” (16).³¹ Similarly, the reader’s assumptions about the narrative’s setting are unsettled by the inclusion of a space that does not align with their expectations; while a certain knowledge of Toronto’s metropolitan geography is required to recognize the narrative significance of Yonge and Eglinton, that knowledge must be suspended upon encountering Lawrence Town, as a space that does not directly correspond to a real neighbourhood in present-day Toronto. Thus, the juxtaposition of a fictional “Forgotten World” against a highly recognizable space like Yonge and Eglinton implies that—as in Lai’s *Vancouver—Nostalgia* depicts a society that is, at once, tied to and suspended from the present-day realities of Toronto in order to show “how our present may negatively evolve, while by showing a regression of our present it also suggests that history may not be progressive” (Baccolini 115).

³¹ Both Lai’s *Pacific Economic Union* and Vassanji’s *North Atlantic Alliance* are structured around narratives of inevitability; however, where, in Lai’s novel, escalating climate catastrophes—like the earthquake that sunk Vancouver—allow the PEU to claim that the areas under corporate control are the only remaining “safe” spaces (and thus, the only social spaces that will allow for survival), the stability of the NAA is dependent on the perception that it is inherently more “advanced” than the rest of the world in order to justify both the reinforcing of its local borders and its continued interventions into the Global South.

If Vancouver's inherent instability derives from its geographic position on the Pacific Rim, the frontier mythologies that have shaped settler-colonialism in Canada, and its dependence on the labour and capital flowing into the region from the Asian Pacific, Toronto's urban landscape has been similarly influenced by its status as the nation's largest metropolitan centre. In an examination of the ways that Toronto has been reimagined in fiction, essays, and poems, Amy Harris argues that Toronto's rapidly evolving urban landscape constitutes an "archeology of memory" that reflects "[the] compulsion of cities to consume themselves, to demolish and build over their most iconic edifices *in an unceasing quest for civic greatness* that sometimes seems indistinguishable from cultural nihilism" (37, emphasis added). Harris's reading of the city as archive is grounded in the understanding that the geographical features of Toronto's urban landscape—including its ravines, position "in the broad basin of the lake bed," and ever-expanding grid of roadways—act as "forgotten signposts" that provide visual markers of this process of constant demolition (35). Through these markers, she argues, the geographical features have the ability to tie together the infinite, fragmented histories that constitute the metropolitan city, by providing a layered record of ongoing changes in the built environment:

If Toronto's ruins are not as grand as Roman amphitheatres or Abyssinian tombs, they are no less poignant. Upper Canada's first parliament buildings, reduced to rubble and buried under a car wash. ... Even the much maligned Gardiner Expressway is a standing ruin, half-demolished, its brutal, elegant arches lining the waterfront like orphaned mastodons. (37)

Harris's emphasis on the city's visible and invisible "ruins" speaks to the extent that Toronto's identity, as Canada's largest city, has, most often, been framed through the ongoing processes of transformation taking place within the industrialized, urban environment; however, it must also

be recognized that the histories of “progress” that define urban spaces such as Toronto are inseparable from, and work to reinforce, the neoliberal discourses that inscribe the city in a distinctly capitalist form of globalization.

In Vassanji’s Toronto, for instance, the “ruins” are depicted as those structures that, while still present in the built environment of the city, ultimately fail to align with Western ideology’s distinctly linear trajectory of development. The most notable of these is the Mall of the Spirit, located at the fictional intersection of Masjid Road and Rosecliffe Park Drive—described as “a spiritual wonderland,” the Mall is home to various shrines, temples, mosques, and other “fantastic structures” that (are perceived to) resist the city’s drive towards this inevitable “cultural nihilism” by emphasizing spirituality and faith over “science and reason” (209). While the preservation of the space in Vassanji’s Toronto may seem to contradict Harris’s claim that the city’s identity is constituted through acts of constant demolition, the Mall of the Spirit is described as “an island in the middle of a suburb, skirted by its white wall and a road going around” (209), suggesting (i) that it remains fundamentally apart from the city surrounding it, and (ii) that the structures within the walls have, themselves, been commodified as unique spectacles to be experienced. First, this spatial irreconcilability is exemplified in the given description of the two spaces, where, in contrast to the clinical sterility of the city spreading outward from the base of the World Peace Tower “as though cut open neatly by a surgeon” (209), the varying shapes, colours, and designs of the structures contained within the compound are intentionally designed to effect an emotional response in the individual:

As we entered, I beheld a spectacular sight—tall fantastic structures linked by paths, each proclaiming in its unique architecture a sense of beauty and a brand of happiness, worship, and everlasting life. At the centre was an elaborate garden surrounding a small

lake. We walked along for a while ... before we arrived at ... the pièce de résistance. It was a pyramid of a very light blue colour, rising two-thirds of the way up before being crowned by a structure with the shape of an open flower, the actual shrine, with a red pennant flying at its top. (209)

While the Mall of the Spirit may appear to resist the industrialized uniformity of the rest of Toronto, the plain white wall and road surrounding it on all sides imply that it is not, in fact, a part of the city at all. Rather, for Frank, it exists as a ruin that reaffirms his belief in the rationality of Western science—upon exiting the space, he reflects, “I am a rational, modern man. I believe in the physical universe and its laws ... You could call me a high priest of this materialist faith” (211). Second, the Mall’s status as an urban ruin that has been incorporated into the fabric of the “modern” city is further suggested by the commodification of the space itself; as Frank notes, the unique architecture of each structure proclaims a different “brand of happiness, worship, and everlasting life” (209). Thus, just as its name implies, Frank’s description suggests that the space inside the white-walled border is designed to function as a spiritual spectacle—one that has been manufactured to fit into the commodified landscape surrounding it. For *Nostalgia*’s narrator, then, the Mall of the Spirit exists as an urban ruin that creates the illusion of resistance to the capitalist notions of progress that have come to define the “modern” city, while continuing to reinforce the status quo by commodifying spirituality as an experience that can be “bought.”

Finally, Toronto’s status as a “world-class” city is also complicated by its geographic and historical positioning in relation to broader understandings of Canadian identity. In an examination of Toronto’s positioning in the Canadian literary canon, Will Smith calls attention to the tendency in Canadian critical work to use the term “urban” as “a looser catch-all term” that does not refer to a specific geographic location, but rather to the general processes of

urbanization taking place in the Canadian context (155). This critical usage, he suggests, emerges from a literary canon that is primarily made up of “small-town or rural literature that engages with and evokes the processes of urbanisation” (Smith 155); however, Smith notes that this lack of geographic specificity in Canadian literary criticism has made it challenging for critics to engage in discussions of urban spaces like Toronto in relation to the national literary canon (155-56). As a result, Smith argues that representations of Toronto are often complicated by “the bifurcation of the city’s name *as the place itself* and its traditional symbolic significance *as a powerful hub within broader national and international hierarchies* of governance, industry, and communication” (155, emphasis added). The complications that arise from Toronto’s status as both a metropolitan centre in Canada and a “world-class” city in the global environment are then exemplified in the depiction of the city presented in Vassanji’s novel:

From these heights the entire city lay exposed ... downtown in the distance, the World Peace Tower shooting up; from there the roads leading north, pausing at the tall towers of the Centres of Enterprise, before proceeding finally to melt into the haze where lay the winding highways and endless suburbia. (Vassanji 209)

Here, the transformation of the CN Tower into the World Peace Tower is a significant narrative change, as it implies that Toronto’s status has shifted from being a Canadian centre to a centre of power for the larger and more powerful Northern Atlantic Alliance; just as the city is an “endless suburbia” spreading out from the base of the tower, the novel situates the “global” as a space that expands outwards from Toronto, as “the best city in the world; in the best and richest nation in the world; in the civilized world of worlds” (16). According to Harris, the symbolic resonance of the CN Tower in literary and discursive interpretations of Toronto is as a structure through which to narrate experiences of the city—whether it is represented as “a passive backdrop, an empty

vessel, a ‘monument to nothing’, a phallic symbol, a spirit tree [or] a beacon of light, tolerance and hope,” it is consistently evoked in Toronto’s literature as a “sly presence” or “shadow” that cannot be ignored, forgotten about, or detached from its historical position at “the centre of [Toronto’s] identity” (Harris 108-15). The tower’s symbolic power, Harris argues, derives from its ability to “[mark] Toronto’s paracartographic origin point, standing at the very intersection of the city’s axes, where all the coordinates resolve to zero” (109). Thus, the transformation of the CN Tower into the World Peace Tower in Vassanji’s reimagined Toronto evokes the symbolic power that derives from the structure’s position as a geographic origin point for both present-day Toronto and the fictional Northern Atlantic Alliance, and as a symbolic origin point for Toronto’s status as a “world-class” city in global, capitalist hierarchies.³²

3.2 Maskinia and the Long Border

The positioning of Toronto as a political centre for the NAA thus directly implicates Canada in the events that led to the creation of the new (dystopian) global order, and the escalating tensions between the two dominant regions of the world leading up to the narrative climax, in which a targeted military expedition into Maskinia results in the complete unravelling of the fiction that constitutes Frank’s identity as a citizen of the NAA. It should first be noted, however, that despite the replacement of national borders in North America with the singular Long Border, *Nostalgia* resists the tendency of dystopian literature to position Canada as either an absent bystander, an unreachable safe-haven, or a narrative plot-point to demonstrate the

³² For further discussion of the significance of towers, see Meaghan Morris’ “Great Moments in Social Climbing: King Kong and the Human Fly” (1990), in which Morris interrogates “the tower” as metaphor and “tower spectacles” as events. Building on Michel de Certeau’s claim that “space is not a prior condition of something else (‘place’), but rather an outcome, the *product* of an activity, and so it necessarily has a temporal dimension” (de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, cited in Morris), Morris traces the cultural significance of towers on space using “on the one hand, a *penis/phallus* relation ... and, on the other, a *face/faciality* relation” that draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of faciality as “the figure of White Man, or ‘the typical European’—a figure of majority” (4).

degree to which American society has disintegrated in comparison.³³ Rather, *Nostalgia*'s narrator directly links "the current misery of Maskinia" to Canadian political interests, in that it was "two 1000-megawatt nuclear reactors of Canadian design, operating in tandem, [that] mysteriously exploded" in the midst of a regional conflict, permanently contaminating the region's food and water supplies (172).

In order to connect the events transpiring in Maskinia in the narrative present to a discussion of Canadian accountability in the reinforcing of global power relations, it is helpful to return to Massey's explication of *aspatial* globalization, in which she argues that the predominant view of the world as a space of "unbounded flows" under late capitalism is an imaginative geography that requires the ongoing production of global inequalities. In this conception of global space, spatial differences are convened "under the sign of temporal sequence" and attributed to the level of development relative to the West (Massey 82); consequently, "[b]ecause space has been marshalled under the sign of time, these countries [that are perceived to be "developing"] have no space—precisely—to tell different stories ... They are dragooned into line behind those who designed the queue" (82). Massey further notes that, under this distinctly American model of globalization,³⁴ the power-geometries that constitute "*today's*

³³ While discussions of American policies are frequently the subject of dystopian scholarship, it is difficult to find literature that specifically investigates Canada's accountability in these dystopian critiques. See *Blast, Corrupt, Dismantle, Erase: Contemporary North American Dystopian Literature* (2014) in which editors Grubisic, Baxter, and Lee include Canadian literature in their examination but frame it within the political project of North American dystopian fiction as shaped by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (11); and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000) in which Moylan notes the positioning of Canada as refuge in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* when he states, "the iconic suggestion of a border and locales beyond it (Canada, England, Brazil) creates an 'outside' ... that ... offers those trapped in Gilead a possible refuge" (163). Finally, Sargent's annotated bibliography, "Utopian Literature in English Canada," demonstrates that the majority of references to Canada as dystopic are shown to be the result of French-English conflict (if internal), or the result of immigration and/or invasion (if external): see Sargent's annotations for Lighthall's *The Young Seigneur; or, Nation-Making* (1888), Howard's *The Writing on the Wall: In Three Parts Past, Present and Future* (1921), Cook's "No More Fun and Games" (1970), and Rohmer's *Exodus/UK* (1975).

³⁴ Massey states, "Even within the West, European governments following the US model appeal to the 'future' in justification, thereby closing down a politics in which a European approach might challenge that of the USA" (82).

form of [capitalist] globalisation” are reliant on future-oriented discourses of inevitability that are constantly working to separate “the economic” and “the technological” from “the political”:

The unquestioned motors of “globalisation’s” historicising of the world’s geographical inequalities are, in various mixtures, the economy and technology. By this means, a further political result is achieved: the removal of the economic and the technological from political consideration. The only political questions become ones concerning our subsequent adaptation to their inevitability. (82-83)

By framing one particular form of capitalist globalization as unavoidable, and attributing the widening economic disparities between the North and South to their position in the global development “queue,” these discourses of inevitability further enable the production of poverty in those countries perceived to be lagging behind the West by “legitimis[ing] the enforcement of export orientation on the economy of country after country; the prioritisation of exports over production for local consumption” (Massey 84).

In Vassanji’s *Nostalgia*, the discursive depoliticizing of global inequalities is narratively exemplified in the events surrounding the Great Explosion of 2032, in which Canadian intervention is (in)directly responsible for the dissolution of the region’s stability. The timing of the incident—immediately following the “so-called Southern Resurgence, a period of economic prosperity and relative peace” (172)—both ensures that Maskinia is plunged back into a state of political turmoil, and makes it entirely dependent on international aid due to a shortage of food and a lack of cultivable land following the nuclear catastrophe; however, the reader is told that despite being known as “one of the poorest areas in the world,” Maskinia remains naturally rich in uranium and gold (172). Thus, while the precise cause of the explosion is unknown, the narrative invites the reader to conclude (i) that the reactors were of Canadian design because

Canadian energy was likely tied to the region's supply of uranium, and (ii) that regardless of the disaster's specific catalyzing factors, the aftermath—in which local agricultural production is no longer a possibility—enables the justification of continued intervention in the region under the guise of humanitarian “support.” The possibility that the “accident” was politically motivated is further suggested by the narrative unreliability of the source who informs Frank (and the reader) of the events that led to the contemporary situation unfolding in Maskinia: “Tom,” a digital informational entity known as a “cyberBrain,” is notably ambiguous about the cause of the conflict that immediately preceded the explosion, stating that “In 2032, however, *for reasons yet to be clarified*, two of the region's nations ... declared war on each other” (172, emphasis added). Tom goes on to state that, prior to the event, the North Atlantic Alliance's attempts at “diplomacy and gifts (bribery) [had] not been effective” in dealing with Region 6, thereby justifying the implementation of “a hands-off approach combined with Border vigilance, sanctions, and selective punishment (military action)” (172).

Both Tom's function as a supposedly objective instrument of the state, and his framing of the conflict as internal to Region 6 are revealing of the discursive, colonial logics used to reinforce the inevitability of capitalist globalization. By stating that Maskinia was “[formerly] occupied by sovereign nations that had achieved independence from European dominance in the twentieth century” but, over the course of history, “progressively lost any semblance of government, having long fragmented into warring factions and chiefdoms” (172), Maskinia is definitively established as a “there”, a space so far removed from the North that it is fundamentally, unquestionably, *other*. This version of global events effectively depoliticizes the global implications of the situation by absolving the North of any responsibility for the current state of affairs. While Tom acknowledges that the problems in Region 6 originated with the

creation of newly sovereign nations following the disassembling of colonial systems, he fails to name colonialism as a factor that directly contributed to that instability. Rather, his “objective” narration of Maskinia’s history frames the NAA as a benevolent entity that has attempted, on numerous occasions, to provide support to an underdeveloped, and thus inherently unstable, part of the world. When these “programmes of structural adjustment” were met with resistance, the North had no choice but to create the Long Border as a physical barrier between the “civilized” world and those who were beyond help (Massey 83), i.e. the “Barbarians” on the other side of the fence.

This is further suggested by the narrative events surrounding Holly Chu, “a naïve young XBN journalist” from Toronto who “was snatched and apparently torn to pieces and eaten” on live camera while on a journalistic expedition to Maskinia (12). While objectively horrifying, Holly Chu’s last moments are played and re-played endlessly across the NAA’s media platforms as a constant reminder of what those beyond the Border are capable of. In a televised national poll following XBN’s coverage of Holly’s abduction, 91.5 percent of respondents voted “cheerfully” to “Let them die!” (15), and Frank notes that Holly’s abduction scene will inevitably “become part of a game, [where] a Holly Chu lookalike with a big weapon will be the hero who teaches the Barbarians a lesson” (15). The symbolic power of Holly’s fate thus derives from her ability to remind the citizens of the NAA that they are inherently more “advanced,” “civilized,” and “human” than those on the other side of the Border. Moreover, the abduction of a young, educated woman—one whose online profile painted her as “a person with a conscience” who had previously posted “photos with children in Maskinia” and participated in online petitions to “*Bring Down the Border! OWEO—One World for Every One!*” (27)—reaffirms for the citizens of the North Atlantic Alliance that Region 6 is simply “behind” and its

inhabitants incapable of accepting, or even understanding, the support that is offered to them by well-meaning citizens such as Holly: “And there she is, our Holly, snatched away before our own eyes ... Who are those people who do this kind of thing? Who are these cannibals?” (64). The ideological superiority that derives from this assumption, however, vanishes when it is revealed that Holly is, in fact, alive and has joined the revolutionaries fighting to bring down the Long Border:

There was a brazen new image on her Profile. A thin smile on her face, wearing army fatigues, she was standing on a dirt road holding a red flag in one hand and a raised automatic weapon in the other. ... No, this was no joke. She was alive, and that picture, as we know, would soon find itself on a radical poster. All those messages of sympathy, the heap of bouquets on her Profile, had been replaced by vicious invective. *You bitch, you communist Asian cunt, you traitor* ... Heaps of shit. Overnight, Holly became the most hated creature this side of the Long Border. (126, emphasis in original)

As globalizing discourses necessarily require that the “developing” world be dependent on the “developed” world, the decision by “one of our best and brightest, from a good and accomplished family” to abandon the privilege afforded her by her citizenship disrupts the linear narrative and foundational assumptions that structure contemporary global relations (128). The media’s scapegoating of Holly as a “traitor” and “communist Asian cunt” can therefore be understood as an attempt to reclaim control over the master narrative of Western progress which is destabilized (albeit temporarily) by Holly’s rejection of her “natural” birthright, as a citizen of “the best and richest nation in the world” (16).

The implications of Holly’s transgression can also be seen on a global scale, as her conversion exposes the NAA as an unnatural, manufactured space that is dependent on the same

contradictory discourses of borderless-ness and border discipline that make up the mythical Island of Mist and Forgetfulness in *Salt Fish Girl*. Just as in Lai's novel, it is "that double imagination ... of the freedom of space on the one hand and the 'right to one's own place' on the other" that both allows Nu Wa to enter the Island's national boundaries with relative ease, and, later, justifies her enslavement and incarceration as a result of her "illegal" status once inside (Massey 87), the Long Border in Vassanji's *Nostalgia* is designed to legitimate a natural spatial hierarchy by reinforcing the ability of those who hold hegemonic power to selectively determine who—or what—is permitted to travel freely across global space. Frank notes, for example, that the Border is, at once, an integral part of a thriving tourism industry that grants citizens of the NAA the opportunity to "become aware of the less fortunate places of the world and at the same time be with friends on a holiday" (69), and a mechanism in an intensely dystopian regime of border discipline that utilizes "electromagnetic fields" and "electrified water" to target refugees attempting to cross it. The reversal of the boundary's porousness between Lai's Island and Vassanji's Border—from opening into the nation to spreading outwards from it—thus allows *Nostalgia* to shift the critique from the function of nationalisms in contemporary globalizing discourses to the spatial logics that permit "Capital, the rich, the skilled ... [to] move easily about the world, as investment, or trade, as sought-after labour or as tourists" while "the poor and unskilled from the so-called margins of this world are both instructed to open up their borders ... and told to stay where they are" (Massey 86). In this context, the implications of Holly's defection are made intensely apparent, as her role in the ransoming of nineteen "Peeping Tom tourists" not only violates the notion that the particular form of progress upheld in the West is both inevitable and inherently beneficial, but also exposes the extent to which the "developed" world—of which Toronto/Canada/the North Atlantic Alliance is at the centre—is actively

involved in the production of global inequalities, in order to preserve the spatial coherence that derives from the global development queue. Just as Leaked Memory Syndrome reveals the individual's reality to be an artificially implanted fiction, Holly's defection from "one of us" to "one of them" exposes the equally artificial production of local and global space by demonstrating that "the constant talking about [inequalities], the endless describing it in a particular form, is part of the active project of its production" (Massey 84).

3.3 Leaked Memory Syndrome

The intentional overwriting of space with narrative fictions is similarly exemplified in the novel's depiction of Nostalgia syndrome, as a condition in which "stray thoughts that [doctors] believe are from a former life move into the head—leak in" resulting in "a chain reaction [whereby] the mind cannot control that other life surging in from the past" (181, 97). A by-product of rejuvenation, Leaked Memory Syndrome is contracted when an individual has undergone treatment to preserve their youth indefinitely, or to escape a prior trauma by adopting a new personality—a process which requires the overwriting of existing memory and the implantation of "new narratives (fictions) played into the brain" (25). As the novel progresses, however, the reader learns that rejuvenation is not only a privilege afforded to the wealthy, but also an imposed punishment deployed by the state against those who threaten to rupture the "neat fabric" of the social order:

DIS [the Department of Internal Security] *publishes*—to use the Department's own terminology—new and harmless versions of formerly high-security personalities.

Refugees from beyond the Border, who've climbed walls and walked through electromagnetic fields and swum under electrified water to share in the privileges of our

civilized world; captured suspected terrorists and prisoners of war, physically mended after lengthy processing. All these are let loose into our streets as healthy, useful citizens from Peoria or Austin or Corner Brook.” (Vassanji 51)

While the Department frames the rehabilitation of terrorists as a “generous and progressive” policy that exemplifies “the goodwill and grace of our civilization” (226), the deployment of the same tactics against refugees seeking asylum exposes the state’s true objective of retaining control over the master narratives that constitute the “local” space of the nation. By implementing policies that systematically eliminate individual histories under the guise of national security, the NAA makes visible the mechanisms of control that allow those in power to claim that “the very term ‘free’ immediately implies something good, something to be aimed at” while, at the same time, “protect[ing] their fortress homes” from contamination by the “margins” (Massey 86). This contradictory imagination of global space is best summarized by Frank, who, upon learning of Holly Chu’s abduction, inquires rhetorically, “if you found yourself *there* in that bottomless misery, wouldn’t it be natural, as part of life’s programmed struggle to survive, through osmotic pull to strive to get *here*, the prosperous North Atlantic? As natural as it is for us to do anything we can to keep them there” (Vassanji 16-17, emphasis in original).

Nostalgia’s interpretation of this escalating tension between “two completely antinomic geographical imaginations of global space,” while dystopian in its representation, is thus consistent with contemporary narratives of globalization, which capitalize on the image of the world as a “space of flows” in order to legitimate the (re)production of the hegemonic order, while “[pretending] to a universality which anyway in practice it systematically denies” (Massey 87). I would argue, however, that the methodical elimination of history in the novel also engages a critique of Canada’s perceived “openness,” as a space that has been ideologically coded,

through its national art and literature,³⁵ as “a welcoming refuge, [with] the accommodating embrace and symbolic open arms of a pluralist nation” (Rollins 137). As discussed in the preceding literature review, representations of the spatial in Canada are often rendered apolitical as a result of their centrality to understandings of Canadian identity; however, this imagination of endlessly “open” space is, itself, inherently political, as it discursively conceals the assimilative demands of citizenship that are reinforced through “the Canadian institution of multiculturalism” (Fleischmann and Van Styvendale xii). In the introduction to *Narratives of Citizenship: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples Unsettle the Nation-State*, editors Aloys N.M. Fleischmann and Nancy Van Styvendale state that “the Canadian master narrative of progressive multiculturalism” is founded on the assumption that “as a particular geographic space ‘Canada’ is home to only one nation, a nation with a uniform citizenry—‘equal’ and the same” (xii). The liberal notion “that citizenship is the same for all,” Fleischmann and Van Styvendale argue, is rooted in a model of *universal citizenship* which not only privileges the Euro-American subject, but also requires the presence of an “other” to serve as a “referential standpoint [from which] we (citizens) check from time to time to make sure we are still *not* them” (Roberto Alejandro qtd. in Fleischmann and Van Styvendale xix). These narratives of citizenship are similarly reflected in the ideological structures of the fictional North Atlantic Alliance, where “progress” is directly linked to the elimination of “outdated ethnic identities” (Vassanji 8), and rejuvenation technology allows the state absolute control over the “official” history of the nation through the artificial engineering and implementation of cultural memory in the individual.

³⁵ See Rollins: “These national(ist) narratives draw from a variety of sources—including the art and literature of the nation (Mackey 71)—and ‘mobilize’ images of the land or homeland in order to construct a sense of national unity or oneness out of a diversity of populations” (119).

If, as the novel suggests, the underlying purpose of rejuvenation technology is (i) to eliminate those histories that threaten to disrupt the hegemonic master narrative of universal citizenship, and (ii) to provide the state with a tool for enforcing its assimilative demands, then Nostalgia syndrome, like Lai's dreaming disease, can be understood as a form of embodied resistance to the hegemonic social order, whereby the manifestation of history in the individual disrupts the fictional master narrative that has been inscribed on Canadian space. While space, here, does not directly function as a physical conduit for the disease, as it does in *Salt Fish Girl*, it is nevertheless spatial memory that is directly responsible for the unravelling of these implanted fictions in both Dr. Sina and his patient, Presley Smith. Specifically, it is the recovered knowledge of "a system of deep, naturally formed tunnels [in Maskinia] that were extended and used for protection in the aftermath of the Great Explosion" that reveals to the reader that the protagonist and his former patient were once brothers and members of the Freedom Warriors of Maskinia. After being captured by forces from the North Atlantic Alliance, Elim (Frank) and Amirul (Presley) were brought to Toronto where their memories were extracted and their personal histories overwritten, in order to transform them from "terrorists" into productive citizens of the "civilized" world, and advance the Canadian government's military operations south of the border (255-58). The significance of the tunnels is overlooked during this initial interrogation, and when, in the present, a special military force must enter the tunnels to retrieve the hostages, Presley is captured and the threads of history manifesting in his brain are pulled at once again until the fiction of his personality has been entirely unravelled (229). At home in Toronto, Frank similarly experiences a resurgence of repressed memories while watching the news coverage of the operation: "when the other day I saw on television the rescue operation at the compound in Maskinia, I knew I had seen the place, I could recognize those hills where I

would go for walks. And I saw my little brother's face blown off. Then I fainted, and Joanie revived me" (228). For the novel's main characters, then, Leaked Memory Syndrome materializes, first and foremost, as a return of spatial memory that cannot be reconciled with the fictions that have been implanted in their brains during the process of regeneration.

The distinctly spatial implications of the disease are further suggested by its metaphorization as a "worm" that burrows "into the conscious mind" from the recesses of the past (25). This comparison appears early on in the narrative when Frank likens its treatment to "digging" holes in the patient's memory, and states, "it is easy and amusing to picture [the patient's symptoms] as so many worms to be captured" (6). The dual implications of this spatial metaphor, however, become apparent in the final pages of the novel when Dr. Axe, of DIS, describes Amirul/Presley as a "worm [who] knew just where to go to survive" (257). Here, the derogatory connotation of "worm" in Axe's usage suggests that he believes Presley was both aware of his former identity, and that he intentionally sought out Frank (his former brother) as an ally who could protect him as he "wormed" his way into Northern society. Axe's statement that "It's in those [blood] relationships that the worm hides" (257) exposes "the exclusivist foundations of [universal] citizenship" that naturalize the existence of spatial and social hierarchies, while framing non-white and diasporic populations as "permanent scapegoat[s]" for the resulting inequalities (Fleischmann and Van Styvendale xix). Much like Holly's Asian-ness allows the media to claim that her image as a "curious, good-natured, and well-meaning Toronto girl" was an intentional deception ("We've been *bazonked!*"), Presley's inherent otherness—made visually apparent by his eclectic appearance³⁶—allows the authorities to frame him as a

³⁶ Following his initial meeting with Presley, Frank reflects, "His physical presence had all the appearance of a deliberate jest: the Everyman with variegated features. His equally cubistic Profile was not one a normal person would choose for himself" (51).

defect in the system, a disease that materializes to threaten the “progress” made in the civilized world (128). This rationale is similarly echoed by the hostages, who bargain with Holly for their release by pleading, “Your friends are barbarians, through no fault of theirs; it’s decades of poverty. And it’s in their genes. We come from a civilized heritage. They are cursed, they have no history, no civilization, no science of their own, no art” (Vassanji 190). Thus, while the NAA’s forced rejuvenation policy is justified under the utopian rationale that (i) “people—and nations—without long, painful memories are free of guilt” (25), and (ii) that the methodical elimination of individual histories will finally allow for the emergence of a universal citizenship, this is ultimately revealed to be another fiction intended to legitimate the natural superiority of the North, while ideologically constructing the Global South as an “incurable,” “diseased” appendage to the “civilized” world (Vassanji 116).

While the narrative’s representation of Leaked Memory Syndrome can therefore be said to build on themes of memory, history, and identity that recur across Vassanji’s oeuvre,³⁷ it is, I would argue, the critical dystopian framework that allows *Nostalgia* to interrogate the relationship between Canada’s national narratives—in particular, “the utopian rhetoric of Canadian multiculturalism and the role that it plays in the country’s image of itself as an open society” (Rollins 137)—and the spatial hierarchies that constitute the contemporary global environment. In a survey titled “Picturing Canada: Narratives of Home and the (Trans-)National Imaginary in the Work of M.G. Vassanji,” Jonathan Rollins notes that Vassanji frequently takes up the issue of Canadian space in his fiction and non-fiction writings by “appropriate[ing] the highly problematic yet canonical image of the vast, empty (or emptied) national(ized) space that

³⁷ See the introduction to *M.G. Vassanji: Essays on his Works*, where Asma Sayed notes “transnational issues and [a] preoccupation with history and politics, and concerns of home, migration, exile, loss, belonging, dislocation, violence, trauma, and identity as central to [Vassanji’s] writing” (15).

has played such an important role in efforts to define Canadian identity” (110). Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities and their relationship to nation-building, Rollins argues that Vassanji flips the master narrative of Canada as a spatial and cultural *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, in order to explore the negative implications of that openness and expose the extent to which “the official narratives of the national imaginary have traditionally been built on principles of collective amnesia or careful selectivity of memory” (119). By re-framing the “positively coded” rhetoric of “openness” through this post-colonial lens, the critical power of Vassanji’s works, according to Rollins, derives from their ability to demonstrate that “openness can also signal the opening of a gap or wound: one that separates geographically, culturally, generationally, and which is the space of loss and erasure” (142). In the Canadian context, then, this opening signifies “a colonial expansion achieved through a displacement, silencing, and [ongoing] erasure of difference” that is enabled through the conflation of open space with progressive “tolerance” (142). This “wound,” however, is also arguably the site of utopian hope in the midst of *Nostalgia*’s dystopian landscape,³⁸ as the pathologizing of memory here, much like in Vassanji’s previous writings, works “[to effect] a destabilization of the ideas of home and nation ... in which troubled absences become troubling presences” (128).

Just as the Dreaming Disease enables the land to fight back against corporate capitalism’s repressive ideologies, Leaked Memory Syndrome facilitates a return of those histories that the state has attempted to systematically eradicate, thereby opening a wound in the nation’s artificially homogenized social landscape that acts as an empirical reminder of that erasure, one that is observable not only to the afflicted individual but to those around them, as well. Frank notes that “in each case [of *Nostalgia*] there were traces of a former accent to link to a past”

³⁸ Much as Lai’s *Dreaming Disease* transforms the soles of the feet into a wound that opens up to allow for the return of histories that have been erased or forgotten.

(Vassanji 31), and his recognition that “there stood only the thinnest wall” between himself and Presley comes only after hearing him “rave” in a “strange patois” during a Nostalgia-induced episode:

The words tumbled slowly, vaguely out of that troubled face. And they began to have this effect on me, they drew me in, and I strained to listen, strained to listen, expecting that if I tried hard enough I’d understand them. I was not myself, I had no control over myself ... I knew there stood only the thinnest wall between us—between Presley and me, this language and myself—the locked door and the absent key. (195)

The utopian potential of Leaked Memory Syndrome thus derives from its ability to function as a “disruptive countercoherence” to “the official rhetoric of Canadian multiculturalism” (Rollins 137), by re-centering those histories that have been excluded from the national narrative inside the space of the nation, and, consequently, destabilizing the foundational myth of “openness” upon which Canadian identity has been constructed. Thus, as in Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, the pathologizing of the relationship between memory and history in the critical dystopian context grounds *Nostalgia*’s critique of history in an examination of space, and, in particular, the implications of distinctly Canadian spaces and the histories that have been (and continue to be) overwritten, erased, or neglected in their construction.

Conclusion

The ability of the Dreaming Disease and Leaked Memory Syndrome to destabilize the highly regulated dystopian environments in which they manifest is therefore directly tied to the novels’ representation of memory as a force capable of actively, continually shaping the space of the present. By depicting memory as a pathogen that lives in—and can thus be transmitted between—both individual bodies and the land itself, *Salt Fish Girl* and *Nostalgia* contradict the

neoliberal expectation that memory is necessarily confined to the past. Rather, disease is able to function as a site of utopian hope in the novels precisely because it fulfils the expectation that “memory, then, to be of use for Utopia, needs to disassociate itself from its traditional link to the metaphor of the storage, and identify itself as a process” (Baccolini 120). In Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, the Dreaming Disease complicates the notion of Canadian space as an archive of memory by removing it from the nationalist, settler-colonial frameworks in which it is most often understood, and transforming it into a conduit for the return of those histories that existed on the land prior to the formation of the Canadian nation-state, as well as those global and diasporic histories that have shaped the contemporary Pacific northwest. In the narrative, the land is thus both a repository of memory *and* a living agent capable of embodying multiple, coexisting trajectories; consequently, the Dreaming Disease offers a mode of resistance to the distinctly colonial imagination of land as an empty, unending surface to be built upon by depicting it, instead, as a living entity that has been, and continues to be, shaped by ongoing relations (Massey 4). Similarly, the representation of Leaked Memory Syndrome in M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* exposes the process by which national cultural memory is discursively depoliticized and deployed as a way to maintain spatial coherence in global systems of power. The forced overwriting of alternative histories, experiences, and past encounters with artificially created nationalist narratives in the novel mirrors the processes of erasure by which the Canadian nation-state has employed “principles of collective amnesia” and “careful selectivity of memory” to retain control over “the mythos and unity of the nation” (Rollins 119), a mythology that continues to take as its foundation an imagination of Canadian space as either *tabula rasa* (blank slate) or *terra nullius* (empty lands). Thus, the ability of Nostalgia syndrome to create noticeable ruptures in the artificially homogenized space of the North Atlantic Alliance exposes capitalist

globalization as a process that has been intentionally manufactured by those in power, and is continually reinforced by discourses of inevitability and the organization of global space into a temporal development queue.

The narratives' exploration of the utopian potential of memory in the context of global capitalism, however, is not unaffected by the power dynamics that constitute hegemonic systems. Just as the majority of the individuals who are violently, irreversibly affected by the Dreaming Disease are the PEU's already-marginalized populations, Leaked Memory Syndrome is directly responsible for the deaths of both Frank Sina and Presley Smith, while the unravelling of their individual fictions allows DIS to continue "publishing" new personalities and "stitching" up the cracks that appear in their carefully curated master narrative without consequence. Rather than suggest that these complications take away from or in any way counter the narratives' ability to locate utopian potential in the dystopian context, I would argue that they directly align with the expectations of the critical dystopia as outlined by Baccolini and Moylan in the concluding chapter of *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Here, the editors return, once again, to the importance of reclaiming "utopia" from its primary connotation as "an already achieved dream" (i.e. the "free-market utopia") in neoliberal, capitalist discourses by highlighting "the transformative and potentially subversive power of language" and the importance of reclamation as a process "that allows us to question shared assumptions and to envision and enact alternatives" (Baccolini and Moylan 246). In the novels, then, this reclamation of meaning is carried out through an interrogation of the relationship between memory, history, and landscape in the Canadian context and a destabilization of the foundational myths upon which Canadian identity has been founded. Thus, the preservation of hope in the novels is not dependent on the inclusion of a utopian solution to the problems of global

capitalism, but rather on the extent to which they challenge the notion that space necessarily exists on a fixed, linear timeline (Massey 9-12).

This investigation has argued that, in the Canadian context, the critical dystopia is not only concerned with interrogating the particular form of capitalist globalization that configures the world as a space of unbounded flows, but also with the spatial myths, images, and signifiers that ideologically link notions of tolerance, pluralism, and political “placelessness” with Canada’s expansive, “open” geography. As Massey elucidates, however, the imagination of space as existing on a fixed, linear trajectory has implications that extend beyond the boundaries of the individual nation-state, as conceiving of space as distinctly apolitical is, itself, a strategy that works to maintain hegemonic control over “the coherence of [global] space” while, in turn, enabling “the existence of only one history, one voice, one speaking position” (Massey 41). To bring together these considerations of both local and global space, I have focused on two novels that (i) respond to distinct moments in the unfolding of this particular form of globalization over the last two decades, and (ii) situate their critiques within two of Canada’s largest and most powerful “global” cities. Through this comparative examination of Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia*, and their respective treatments of Vancouver and Toronto, it can be seen that while each novel structures their dystopian critique around the individual spatial histories, connotations, and mythologies of their individual settings, they both utilize the conventions of the critical dystopia to prompt a critical reconsideration of Canadian space.

As there is limited scholarship that has attempted to define Canadian dystopian literature as a distinct category, the conclusions drawn from this analysis eschew generalizations about Canadian dystopias as a mode of narrative critique; rather, this paper has sought to demonstrate (i) the critical limitations of including dystopian fiction under the broader umbrella of Canadian

science-fiction; (ii) the centrality of space and processes of spatialization to critiques of capitalist globalization; and (iii) the ability of the critical dystopia to problematize the dominant imagination of Canadian space as a “nationalist self-portrait” and expose the ways in which “official narratives of the national imaginary” have erased, excluded, or discursively concealed those histories that fail to align with canonical understandings of Canadian identity (Rollins 115-119). Through the destabilization of these foundational mythologies, the Canadian critical dystopia can “begin to lay the foundations for a utopian change” by not only prompting a critical reconsideration of Canadian space within national boundaries, but by using the ideological construction of the Canadian landscape to engage a broader discussion of Canada’s role in the construction and maintenance of global spatial hierarchies (Baccolini 130).

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