

TROUBLING DOMESTIC LIMITS:

Reading Border Fictions

Alongside Larissa Lai's Salt Fish Girl

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How could I possibly understand anything about the
secrets of the house I had been born into?

Larissa Lai, *Salt Fish Girl*

I LIVE AT THE WEST ENTRANCE of a haunted house called Canada. Its domestic space is superimposed upon indigenous land that its past and present inhabitants refer to as Turtle Island. Its minister of citizenship and immigration, who is currently Denis Coderre (2003, 1), talks of opening the front door and closing the back door to this house. Unfortunately, he does not address how the back door comes to be used because the front door is increasingly elitist and classist. The rhetoric against so-called “illegal migrants” masks the fact that Canada’s immigration policies systemically prohibit most low-income people of colour around the world from entering Canada and then blame those same people for not fitting into their restrictive criteria.¹ As Himani Bannerji (2000, 104) points out, “If one stands on the dark side of the nation in Canada everything looks different. The transcendent, uni-

¹ A great number of people who were born in Canada would not qualify to immigrate here if they had to be evaluated according to the point system. Its categories of evaluation for prospective immigrants are loaded with social implications, acting as a mechanism to allocate the prospect of citizenship to a few and to deny it to the many. Such excluded people would include the 600 Chinese people who arrived by ship in 1999 to the unceded territories of First Nations peoples (otherwise known as the coast of British Columbia). The response to these marine arrivals is a reminder of the virulent racisms that have long occupied the interstitial Canadian spaces demarcated by a history of head taxes and the Chinese Exclusion Act, to name just a couple of examples. The majority of these 600 Fujianese people were imprisoned and deported, a state performance of racial profiling that ignored Canadian responsibility in the creation of the global economic and social conditions that give rise to human migrations. Corporate media headlines such as “Go Home” and “Detained Aliens Investigated” conveniently overlooked the often negative impact of overseas projects funded by Canadian tax dollars through the Export Development Corporation as well as other ventures that arguably benefit the few at the expense of the many.

versal and unifying claims of its multiculturally legitimated ideological state apparatus become susceptible to questions.” From the dark side of the nation, this house bears more than a passing resemblance to the mythical Island of Mist and Forgetfulness and the futuristic PEU (Pacific Economic Union) in Larissa Lai’s novel *Salt Fish Girl*. Juxtaposing the novel’s speculative formations against some of the social texts that overdetermine the lives of many labouring subjects, I propose that we encounter an urgent need to reconceive home as world.

At the limits of government-sponsored multiculturalism² one finds the gaze of the undocumented migrant who has been detained at the Canadian border, the state’s scrutiny of the exploited (im)migrant³ labourer who toils long hours below minimum wage despite the purported protection of employment legislation, and the troubled unrest of those who refuse to look away from the economic contradictions and social contestations that position “Canada” within the flows of a global economy. This economy seems more driven by short-term profit than by long-term sustainability as it allows capital to move with unprecedented speed yet incarcerates numerous people who attempt to follow the latter’s paths. Issues of exclusion, citizenship, (im)migration, and the structural inequities between capital and labour, which are often mediated at the expense of (im)migrant labour, raise questions as to the futures of racialized agents and are interrogated through novels such as Larissa Lai’s (2002) *Salt Fish Girl*. This book joins the company of other West Coast novels, like Yuen-fong Woon’s (1998) *The Excluded Wife* and Lydia Kwa’s (2000) *This Place Called Absence*, that also investigate the migration experience through the perspectives of labour that has been devalued through gendering and racialization. Furthermore, unlike Chinese Canadian texts such as *The Jade Peony* by Wayson Choy

² As Himani Bannerji (2000, 44) points out:

In the very early 1980s Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau enunciated his multicultural policy, and a discourse of nation, community and diversity began to be cobbled together. There were no strong multicultural demands on the part of third world immigrants themselves to force such a policy. The issues raised by them were about racism, legal discrimination involving immigration and family reunification, job discrimination on the basis of Canadian experience, and various adjustment difficulties, mainly of child care and language. In short, they were difficulties that are endemic to migration, and especially that of people coming in to low income jobs or with few assets. Immigrant demands were not then, and are not now, primarily cultural, nor was multiculturalism initially their solution to problems. It began as a state or an official/institutional discourse, and it involved the translation of issues of social and economic injustice into issues of culture.

³ The usage of “(im)migration” signals how the bureaucratic process that distinguishes a migrant from an immigrant is not always clearcut. I know a number of people in the process of immigrating to Canada who do not know if their application will be rejected and their status converted to that of a so-called “illegal,” or deportable, person.

(1995), *Disappearing Moon Cafe* by SKY Lee (1990), *Diamond Grill* by Fred Wah (1996), and *The Concubine's Children* by Denise Chong (1994), all of which explore the history of the Chinese experience in British Columbia, *Salt Fish Girl* shifts the focus from the past to the future. Recognizing the importance of histories located both locally in British Columbia as well as overseas in Asia, Lai projects a futuristic scenario that traces the logic of contemporary capitalist relations.

Larissa Lai, the author of the novel *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995), and a longtime Vancouver-based community activist, writer, and critic, has for many years been keenly attentive to the social effects of racialization. In an article entitled “Asian Invasion vs. the Pristine Nation: Migrants Entering the Canadian Imaginary,” Lai (2000, 40) describes grassroots efforts in Vancouver to counter the media backlash against Fujianese migrants who arrived in Canada by ship in 1999, and she raises the following questions:

The crisis of this moment is one of legitimacy. Who ought to have the right to say who comes and goes? Those who were here first – aboriginal peoples? Those who planted a British flag on this soil? Or those who have been moving for centuries and continue to do so? Perhaps a little chaos is necessary in order to explore the answers to these questions.

Published two years after this article, *Salt Fish Girl* is informed by Lai’s witnessing of the immense gap between the discourses of acceptance and compassion that circulate in the name of the nation and the systemic violence of incarceration that meets those who are extra-legal – that is, who may be undocumented or structurally unable to gain access to the privileges required to enter through the nation’s front door.⁴ In some ways, such contemporary migrants are not so different from the Chinese Canadian paper sons who had to find creative ways to circumvent the unjust immigration laws that historically restricted Chinese immigration. As a number of contemporary scholars, such as Yasmeen Abu-Laban (1998), Sedef Arat-Koc (1999), Roxana Ng (1996), and Sunera Thobani (1998), have pointed out, contemporary Canadian immigration laws continue to affect racialized working-class people, particularly women, in ways that devalue their labour. Such devaluation, I would argue, contributes to the pressures that force people to turn to the “back” door instead of the “front” door when they come to Canada. The existence

⁴ The shortcomings and biases of the overseas screening procedure of Canada’s immigration system are explained in the National Film Board documentary, *Who Gets In?* (1995). Lai (2000, 35) describes this film in her article “Asian Invasion vs. the Pristine Nation: Migrants Entering the Canadian Imaginary.”

of a large and growing Chinese middle class notwithstanding, social inequities and poverty also continue to exist in the Chinese Canadian community (Li 1998, 136).

Introducing “a little chaos” into her writerly explorations, Lai intersects the tale of Nu Wa and the Salt Fish Girl in a mythical version of nineteenth-century southern China with the futuristic narrative of Miranda Ching’s trials and adventures in a geographical area that corresponds with Vancouver between 2044 and 2062. *Salt Fish Girl* alternates between the past and the future in ways that interrogate the contradictions of the present moment of history-in-the-making. In one stream of narrative, Nu Wa, a shape-shifter who falls in love and runs away with the Salt Fish Girl only to experience a life of poverty in the big city, leaves China to migrate to the City of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, where she experiences incarceration and labour exploitation. In the second stream of narrative, Miranda Ching’s family is cast out of its middle-class home in the walled city of Serendipity, which is run by the Saturna corporation. It is ambiguous as to whether the family’s expulsion is caused by Miranda’s interference with her father’s work as a tax collector or the stinky (cat-urine odoured) durian fruit smell that she exudes, making her a social outcast. Abandoned by the Saturna corporation, the Chings are left to fend for themselves in the Unregulated Zone outside the walled city, and they start a grocery store, a family business (which, historically, has been common for Chinese immigrants to Canada). Both the middle-class household in the walled city and the family grocery are sites of crisis, or heterotopias, that reveal how contested and contradictory domestic spaces can be. The complexities of commodified domestic spaces such as the Chinese grocery store in *Salt Fish Girl* evoke more questions than answers. Are such small-scale family businesses examples of community economic development that deserve more support? Are they exploitative situations best escaped as soon as possible? Are they vanishing or are they the stage for a return of the repressed? Could they be all of the above, depending on their contexts? *Salt Fish Girl* leaves these possibilities open.

Salt Fish Girl is deeply inflected with a sense of history repeating itself, materializing in contemporary forms. The mythical, the historical, and the futuristic conjoin in the novel, making home a multiple time zone, that is, a simultaneity of past and present stories as new immigrants experience hardships comparable to those experienced by members of earlier generations. In a sense, the novel responds to the question that Lai posed in an essay entitled “Political Animals and the Body of History”

(1999, 149): “How do we diasporized types make a homespace for ourselves given all the disjunctures and discontinuities of our histories, and for that matter, the co-temporalities of some of them?” If this homespace is to be an ethical one, then it must be large enough to recognize both the ongoing inequities that continue to structure the present moment as well as the upward class mobility that seems so visible to many. Indeed, in an era when the gap between the wealthy and the poor is rapidly increasing, Lai’s gaze towards the future would suggest that such tropes of class mobility are unreliable. The declining responsibilities of nations such as Canada and the United States in the realm of public welfare and the rise of corporate entities such as the PÉU and the walled Saturna compound in *Salt Fish Girl* follow a certain strain in the logic of privatization. When nation-states act to protect corporate interests at the expense of the general population, their differentiation from corporations atrophies. The receding visibility of national identities in the novel speaks to the ongoing privatization of public bodies and the betrayal of social contracts. If, as Asian American critic Lisa Lowe (1996, 98) suggests, novels have an important role in discursively materializing social norms and problematics, then Lai’s novel constitutes a starting point from which to contemplate and resist the futures that unfold from such privatization:

The novel [is] a cultural institution that regulates formations of citizenship and the nation, genders the domains of “public” and “private” activities, prescribes the spatialization of race relations, and most of all, determines possible contours and terrains for the narration of “history.” In other words, the cultural institution of the novel legitimates particular forms and subjects of history and subjugates or erases others.

In the face of the nation’s violent policing of citizenship, Lai’s novel dwells on the future effects of such exclusions. From the imprisonment of Nu Wa for being an illegal immigrant on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness to the expulsion of the Ching family from the walled city of Serendipity to the thousands of genetically engineered workers trapped in the factories of the future, space is demarcated through force and passages of confinement. Far from legitimizing the official history of the nation, *Salt Fish Girl* critiques it by exploring the subjectivities of those who, having been marginalized by the nation’s priorities, do not self-identify through the nation’s lenses.⁵

⁵ If the novel is an institution that can be reappropriated by formerly subjugated agents, then one must ask whether the nation too can benefit from such an occupation in ways that do

Occupying the liminal spaces where “a ‘here’ and a ‘there,’ a ‘near’ and a ‘far,’ a ‘familiar’ and ‘foreign’” (Miki 1998, 215) merge and become indistinguishable, Lai’s novel makes visible the heterotopias challenging the hierarchies that regulate and subordinate racialized labour. Heterotopias, as Lisa Lowe explains with reference to Foucault’s (1986) essay “Of Other Spaces,” are sites of crisis and deviation in which several incompatible spaces or temporalities are juxtaposed. As such, they “expose the untenability of the hierarchized divisions of space into domains of public and private, leisure and work, or legitimacy or illegitimacy” (Lowe 1996, 122). In *Salt Fish Girl*, we encounter the implications of occupying heterotopic spaces such as the shoe factory (prison) and the grocery store that are both residence and workplace for the Ching family. The conditions of being at once legitimate and illegitimate, at once public and private, trouble the borders that regulate “inner” from “outer.” As readers, we engage with what Homi Bhabha (1997 445) has termed the unhomely: “In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.”

The stillness is not passive; what is repressed from one outlet soon finds another path. Unable to articulate the violences of history within the walled compounds of Serendipity before she is expelled from it, Miranda manifests a durian smell that fills the house, coiling around furniture, creeping, leaking, and gushing into every room: “There was no escape from that terrible odour. It poured down [her family’s] throats when they opened their mouths to speak” (Lai 2002, 16–17). Resulting from a medical condition through which people come to embody their silenced histories, a condition pathologized as a “dreaming disease,” or “Contagion,”⁶ Miranda’s smell is an undeniable symptom of social

not merely replay cosmetic multiculturalism but also offer substantive social justice and equity for communal bodies experiencing the rapidly growing disparities inflicted by transnational corporations’ prioritization of profit at the expense of public welfare.

⁶ The medical condition manifests how memory can defy linear conceptions of time, as Miranda narrates: “We heard from our customers of a girl who smelled of cooking oil, who remembered all the wars ever fought. She could recall and recount every death, every rape, every wound, every moment of suffering that had ever been inflicted by a member of her ancestral lineage” (Lai 2002, 85). “I met a man who smelled of milk and could remember all the famines that had ever been caused by war. I met a girl who smelled of stainless steel and could recite the lives of everyone who had ever died of tuberculosis” (101–2). Miranda states, “At other times it seemed the most natural thing in the world that I should remember things that went on before I was born, things that happened in other lifetimes ... I did not think of myself as a child afflicted by history, unable to escape its delights or its torments” (70).

histories that are not speakable in the corporate compound and is inextricable from the house in which she lives:

In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world. (Bhabha 1997, 445)

Already invaded and structured by the force of capital, the domestic spaces in Lai's novel accommodate the massive discontent of Miranda, a character who is herself implicated, however reluctantly, in tolerating the social hierarchies that structure her life. The Ching household in the walled city of Serendipity houses both the family and the black rubber Business Suit, which has virtual capabilities and a video monitor that displays Miranda's father at work as a tax collector. At once physically in the basement of his house yet striding onscreen in the "burning landscape" of "crumpled buildings and burnt-out trucks" scattered outside, the father's work is both domestic and public. In a parallel vein, the grocery store to which the family moves after it is expelled from Serendipity is open for business as well as family life, constantly subject to the world-in-the-home at the same time that it functions as a home-in-the-unregulated-world. Lai herself has commented on the unhomely as a critical space for writerly exploration:

It seems to me that this cavity between the heimlich [homely] and the unheimlich, between the silence of self-erasure and the silence of the dead, precisely the place where language and history collapse, is the space that requires addressing. This place is also a place of sacrifice, for Canada has not been an easy country for its first generation of immigrants, those who remain forever outside the norms and expectations of mainstream Canadian society. The worn notion that immigrant parents sacrifice their lives and their very being for their children is not without basis. Many sacrifice the past for an idealized future that never comes. A future dreamt out of a past that has ceased to be. (2001, 47)

Miranda is not only an individual subject but also an extension of her parents' desires, dreams, and the object of their sacrifices; thus, she carries the weight of this history into social spheres that are oblivious to it. Lai continues:

We, as the children of those dreams must eke out an existence in a very peculiar present, in a strange and uncomfortable gap between nostalgic memory and hopeful dream. A present that denies history, one that at its surface claims equality for all, even as it uses the notion of equality to perpetuate the injustices of the past often blandly and sometimes violently, but with a coded sort of violence that is not seamless but has the full weight of capital behind it. It is into this bizarre, unhomely space-time that we have the task of writing. (2001, 46-47)

Attentive to the gap between the capitalist rhetoric of economic liberalization and the ongoing material effects of privatization on displaced and exploited human bodies in the global economy, Lai situates hope in the process of critical scrutiny and engagement rather than in the inflated platitudes of neoliberalism. Set on the Pacific Rim, *Salt Fish Girl* occupies that blurry space that can be simultaneously described as both “local” and “global,” both “home” and “world,” rendering problematic the binary constructs of national borders that immobilize labouring bodies while allowing transnational capital to cross with excessive velocity.

The two intertwining narratives – (1) Nu Wa’s migrations between China and the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness and (2) Miranda’s movements between the walled compound of Serendipity into the Unregulated Zone – destabilize the lines between “here” and “there.” Enticed to the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness by Edwina, the sister of the owner of the chain of hotels where Nu Wa ends up being a toilet scrubber and bedsheet changer, Nu Wa enters the City of Hope, with its eastern gate that proclaims “Progress” and its western gate that declares “Democracy.” Once drawn in by the allure of capital embodied in Edwina, Nu Wa is abandoned by her and informed by the hotel manager that she has no papers and is deportable unless she works for the hotel. While Edwina, exerting the privilege provided by capital, seems to appear and disappear at will, Nu Wa takes the fall for drug smuggling, forged documents, and illegal migration, and she is eventually imprisoned in Ville Despair, formerly Ville D’Espoir. The gap between false promises and experienced exploitation forms the space of Nu Wa’s experiences.

In Miranda Ching’s world, capitalist dysfunction has gone from bad to worse, consigning the immigrant dream of upward mobility into a downward tailspin. Unhomed and unhomely in the wake of her intrusion into her father’s Business Suit, Miranda and her family leave the purported “protection” of the Saturna corporation to eke a meagre living running a corner grocery store in the Unregulated Zone:

We stocked the shelves with the remains of our old life, traded books for kale and arugula, pots for pumpkins, and furniture for bread. A few U.S. and Canadian dollars still circulated, although the national banks were so enfeebled and so at the mercy of corporate whim that few people trusted those currencies. Some people accepted Saturna, Soni, Monsanto or Nextcorp dollars, but the trade wars had given rise to conversion inconsistencies and technical problems, especially in the Unregulated Zone where none of them were, strictly speaking, legal. (Lai 2002, 81-2)

Neither the currencies nor the people in this zone are fully legal, revealing the artificial and unreliable lines drawn between legality and illegality. In Larissa Lai's world, where the religion of capitalism has largely succeeded in proselytizing greed to the masses, the corner grocery store returns with a vengeance "over a hundred years old and [reeking] of mildew and rot" (81). History returns in the future to repudiate the myth of "progress" that drives a certain strain of immigrant desire. Functioning as both family business and residence, the store occupies a temporality that refuses the binary of past and present, a spatiality that refuses the oversimplified divisions of private and public, inner and outer. Time is not so easily divided into linear fictions of class mobility for the "remains of [the Chings'] old life" circulate in the present through economic transactions, enabling a future that is gripped so tightly by the past that the holder and the held bleed into one another. With its doors wide open for public and commercial transactions, the family business turns home into a site where one can read in the historical contexts of trade and migration, and, with them, the concentrated, contradictory work spaces of immigrant experience.

Known for their sale of fabulously smelly and delicious durians, the family suffers an immense loss when the mother is killed by a crate of the fruit that has accidentally dropped out of Miranda's hands. Helping her mother shelve the heavy, spiky, stinky fruit, Miranda experiences the death of her mother in slow motion: "The box seemed to fall in stop-frames, each following deliberately but inevitably from the previous as though it had been rehearsed for precision a thousand times over" (86). Durian, a fruit smuggled out of Hong Kong by Miranda Ching's great-grandmother (14), exudes the smell of discontent, embodied in Miranda (15), and materializes the cycle of birth and death that unpredictably exceeds the controls imposed by corporate hegemony. By selling the knowledge of a former insider now made outsider,⁷ the father somehow

⁷ Miranda states of her father, "He knew the tunnels beneath the city by heart. He knew the secrets of the Bank. He knew about the Game of tax collecting, how the Receiver General and

finds a way to make enough money to purchase a baby grand piano that appears in the back storeroom, marking the exact spot where Miranda's mother died:

In the evenings, after a drink or two, my father would sit on its shiny black stool and hammer out her tunes, singing in his rough gravelly voice that didn't resemble hers in the least bit. But slowly, as the years passed, the tunes changed, took on melancholy minor tones, slipped from their cheerful, perky rhythms to complicated and *irregular time schemes*. (96 [emphasis added])

Living in various states of consciousness that range from being caught in the past to occasionally being lucidly in the present, Miranda's father takes refuge in playing mad, eerie music on the piano and speaking to the empty space beside him. The site of commerce, the family store, is a haunted, interstitial space occupied by mourning and loss. In contrast to her father, who is fixed within this space, Miranda has a degree of mobility that renders her experience of the store as a temporary passage, a reference point to which she intermittently returns but cannot stay.

At the same time that the family runs the grocery store, Miranda's brother Aaron opens an auto repair shop at the back, "providing well over half the income the family made" (83). The combination of family grocery, garden, and auto repair shop makes for a subsistence living in an environment that is reminiscent of earlier barter economies: "when his clients couldn't pay cash, [Aaron] accepted other things – fresh meat, clothes, radios, eggs" (84). Embedded within the corporate hegemony of the PEU are simultaneous forms of small economy that, although discursively colonized under the force of capital, nonetheless present material alternatives that have quietly co-existed in the shadows of corporate wealth:

we continued to do reasonably, even as the big corporations, Saturna and Nextcorp among them, laid off workers and cut pensions to the point that my father began to think his dismissal had been a blessing in disguise. Workers flooded out of the corporate compounds and into the Unregulated Zone. Many people, my father's ex-colleagues included, could not work out ways to make a living. The missions were full, and people died in droves beneath the bridges and in the open-air rooms of half-collapsed buildings. (84-5)

razor disc birds connected to the more banal accounting softwares. He understood the narrative mechanisms of the Game that kept workers like himself hooked, in spite of real physical pain and suffering" (95).

The people dying in the streets are the logical outcome of the ongoing privatization of public spaces, the corrosion of the social contract, the attrition of diverse communal affiliations. Uncomfortably similar to today's Free Trade Zones, this futuristic Unregulated Zone is the rational extension of policies that exploit and discard labour for the sake of momentary profit. Devastated by the loss of his stable position and his wife, the father becomes a tragic figure on the border of sanity as the family fortunes erode in ways that resonate with the larger societal erosion of structures for mutual assistance. Yet the family business, while not without its difficulties and challenges, is more appealing than is the corporate compound insofar as it constructs a space that recognizes and acknowledges history, difference, and structural poverty more fully than the latter will allow. In contrast to the feverish stillness of the Ching household within the walled city's regulated norms, Miranda notices that the grocery store is "the one place where [she] could have a moment's respite from [her] smell, the one place where, nestled among the freshest and plumpest durians the city had to offer, [she] could blend with [her] environment[,] and those who passed through found the odour sweet and pleasant" (82). The complex processes of eking out a survival in this space depend on a wide range of human interactions, many of which have been excluded from the corporate compounds and, in this way, form a fuller engagement with more sectors of society. At the same time, the limits of this far from utopian space are very clear, as is evidenced by Miranda's desire to find a way to leave the family business in order to learn medicine. Bearing grief and guilt about her mother's death, Miranda decides that she must venture beyond the store if she is to gain some knowledge that could save her father and brother from the disasters that befall them in her dreams (96).

While there is an ambivalence to the grocery store in the novel's futuristic but familiar scenario, factories in the PEU make use of genetic engineering to extend to horrific ends the logic of exclusion from social equality. Encountering Evie,⁸ who is "point zero three per cent *Cyprinus carpio* – freshwater carp," Miranda realizes that there are at least 100,000 brown-eyed, black-haired women with identical genetic material, all named Sonia, most of whom toil their entire lives away in factories, denied any of the rights or protections to which humans are supposedly entitled. Consigned to servitude in compounds run by corporations such as Nextcorp and the shoe-manufacturing Pallas, very few of these racialized worker-prisoners manage to escape. Evie is an exception to

⁸ Evie was originally Sonia (113) but renamed herself Evie when she escaped.

the rule, and she manages to connect with a group of escapees living in a house in the Unregulated Zone, plotting economic sabotage, and building their own free society “from the ground up.” She and the other escaped Sonias create a domestic space that fosters rebellion and the possibility of independence from corporate domination. Marked by a wild durian tree in its yard, the dark, crowded house is filled with identical-looking Sonias 116, 121, 148, 161, 211, and 287 busily wrapping won tons. Furnished with benches, “makeshift cradles made from old fruit crates,” “a little pot-bellied stove,” and a “defunct electric stove” (224), the kitchen of the house is a testament to what can be scrounged and improvised from others’ discards.

The scenario that Lai sets forth is not so distant from the present. British Columbia is home to approximately 4,500 garment workers⁹ as well as to a comparable number of women participating in the Live-In Caregivers’ Program.¹⁰ Working in domestic spaces, these women are often excluded from the protections to which all citizen-workers should be entitled. This is because

employers are able to evade regulatory provisions, such as employment standards, and are participating in a wider political shift towards privatizing social and economic relations. The increased use of homework, as feminized labour, is one dimension of economic restructuring that is achieved through exploiting gender-related public/private distinctions between home and work. (Ocran 1997, 145)

The logic of privatization that is being executed by the current British Columbia government’s neoliberal cutbacks and layoffs, for example, mainly serves to further impoverish already vulnerable sectors of society, widening the gap between the wealthy and the poor (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2003). Policies that privilege employer interests at the expense of workers and that operate to implement these increasing

⁹ According to provincial figures, there were 4,470 fabric workers in 1998 in British Columbia (<http://workfutures.bc.ca/EN/def/occs/945__ei.html>). The exploitation of local and international garment workers implicates consumers: “I want to see / the real relations / but you’ve got Nikes on and I like you / so I have to try and understand. And if / that shirt’s from The Gap, then one arm was sewn / in Malaysia, the other in Sri Lanka. Why then / is it hard to ‘see’ ideology when you’re / wearing it? Is it ‘out there’? Or deeper inside / than even desire could get?” (Derksen 2003, 10). Sometimes that arm is sewn in Vancouver too. See Ocran (1997) and Yanz (1999) for more information.

¹⁰ Langevin and Belleau (2000, 33) point out that there are 7,000 to 8,000 women across Canada working in this program. Citizen and Immigration Canada (2003) statistics show that 4,662 women came into Canada through the Live-In Caregiver Program to work in the Vancouver area between 1998 to 2002. See also Thompson (1996), BC Work Futures (2003), Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2001), and <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pub/facts2002/vancouver/vancouver_1.html>.

income disparities rely in part on a process of racialization to devalue immigrant workers who, although physically within the borders of the nation, are nonetheless framed as the “other” against which norms come to be constructed. As many artists and scholars have observed, people who are “visible minorities” are often perceived as foreigners (Wong 1990; Yoon 1991; Creese 1991; Ng 1998; Das Gupta 1996; Ocran 1997; Li 1998), a situation that can induce what Roy Kiyooka (1981, 16) once termed “the old ‘yellow peril’ blues.” As the home/work spaces for such racialized subjects undergo continuing alienation from the protection of public employment standards, an ominous future seems more likely to follow than does the trope of upward mobility that has hooked so many an immigrant. *Salt Fish Girl* anticipates the dreaded future that such an increasingly commodified and oppressive system calls forth, offering a number of ambivalent scenarios in which domestic spaces are both violently appropriated by corporate might as well as tentatively reappropriated by racialized agents. From the family grocery store to the garment industry, Lai draws attention to the ways in which an engagement with racialized workers’ domestic spaces, doubly functioning as service industries, can destabilize the logic of a market economy that commodifies and exploits “expendable” labour with the assistance of the nation’s borders.

Through its unacknowledged economic dependencies upon the labour it constructs as “other” and “foreign,” the nation’s domestic space is always already constituted by the very people it excludes. In British Columbia, the nation’s westernmost port of entry, we are strategically positioned to see that those who have often been perceived as being outside the nation are already inside. That is to say, people who live with temporary status, in fear of being denied permanent resident status and thus eventually designated “illegal,” are already working in garment factories for minimum wage (or less) in Vancouver, not a far stretch from the workers in Lai’s *Unregulated Zone* or *Nu Wa* in the *Ville Despair*. Having been active in a women’s group called *Direct Action Against Refugee Exploitation*, which works with migrant Chinese women, I am in contact with a number of women working in Vancouver garment factories and am well aware of how the process for temporary workers applying for permanent status can seem contingent upon the whims of immigration bureaucrats (see DAARE 2003).¹¹ Reframing the binary of

¹¹ Wayde Compton’s (2003, 74) “Illegalese: Floodgate Dub for the Chinese Maroons, British Columbia, 1999-2000” points out the constructed nature of identity and status: “when jurisdiction cuts the earth to the bone, / the proper diction is the unspoken issue, and the flesh / of the people’s colour in the boats in the full in the belly of a dream / without papers or definition, in quotations, ‘refugee,’ a penstroke / from relief. languishing in the languaged exile of illegalese.”

“illegal” and “legal” in terms of temporary and permanent status provides one way of rejecting the stigmatization of so-called “illegal,” or extra-legal, workers. In a doubled movement, through its support of overseas economic ventures and the travels of its citizens, the nation’s inside is already outside, implicated in the displacement of peoples that arises from neoliberal “development” projects. With such a world as our home, Lai’s novel reminds us, through Nu Wa and Miranda, that we cannot afford to turn our gazes away from the sensibilities of what it might mean to live within the category of “illegal” or, more aptly, “extra-legal,” by virtue of one’s birthplace or lack of access to financial, social, and cultural capital. *Salt Fish Girl* challenges us to reconceptualize domestic spaces so that those who have been deemed “other” and “intruder” are recognized and valued for their contributions to this world we call home. The growth of global interdependencies calls for more complex frames of reference and recognition than do those within the limited identities regulated by current Canadian immigration legislation.

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