

# Remapping Vancouver

## Composing Urban Spaces in Contemporary Asian Canadian Writing

### **The New Wave of Urban Space**

How is the phenomenology of Vancouver's urban spaces represented by contemporary Asian Canadian writers? The multiple and multi-generational journeys of Asian Canadians across Vancouver's urban landscape are poignantly captured in "A Map of the City," the last story in Madeleine Thien's award-winning collection of fiction, *Simple Recipes* (2001): the Canadian-born narrator, who is the daughter of Indonesian parents, remembers how she and her parents "would drive across the city, going nowhere in particular, all of us bundled into the Buick. Through downtown and Chinatown—all those narrow streets flooded with people—then out to the suburbs. On the highway, we caught glimpses of ocean, blue and sudden" (178). The narrator's journey here is symbolically important because it represents how the family's movement traverses the commercial downtown core, negotiates the traditional Chinatown enclave, then takes the freeway to the satellite suburbs, and finally glimpses the oft-celebrated ocean views that are unavailable from the traditional lower quarters on downtown Chinatown's Pender Street. Thien's stories use motifs of mobility through recurring images of highways, urban and suburban streets, and maps: moreover, by using both Asian Canadian and non-Asian Canadian narrators and focal characters, Thien avoids positioning herself as an implied author who speaks only from and for an Asian Canadian social space. Her socially mobile urban sensibility gives us a tangible and visceral feel for the hard pavement and prominent signage on Broadway, the frenetic traffic on Knight Street, the aging Hastings Street storefronts, and the well-mown suburban lawns of Burnaby. The range

of travel across the different community spaces within Vancouver and throughout its surrounding regions demonstrates a narrative identity that is obviously not confined to the abjected space of the ethnic Chinatown enclave.

Thien's imaginative remapping of Greater Vancouver belongs to a distinctive group of books by a younger and diverse generation of Asian Canadian writers, including Thien, Nancy Lee, Kevin Chong, and Larissa Lai. Thien's *Simple Recipes* (2001), Nancy Lee's *Dead Girls* (2002), Kevin Chong's *Baroque-a-nova* (2001), and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) represent significant departures from the earlier modes of civic historical recuperation practised by an older generation of now well-established writers in the national Asian Canadian canon, including Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee, and Wayson Choy. The urban spaces explored by Thien, Lee, Chong, and Lai are also significantly more diverse and more preoccupied by problems of social class mobility and globalization than the fiction of another established Asian Canadian Vancouver writer, Evelyn Lau, whose writings are more strictly focused on sexuality, dependency, and power and are precursors to the expansive urban themes of this group. Moreover, Thien, Lee, Chong, and Lai contribute compelling and distinctive visions of different Vancouver regional spaces, and my singling them out for special attention through the urban lens is an exploratory sketch of one arm of an ever-expanding and overdetermined body of urban literature that could conceivably include several dozen writers who have used Vancouver as the source and subject of their representations.<sup>1</sup> What is gained by grouping these writers together for the purposes of analysis is an enhanced understanding of the emerging spatial consciousness of a recent generation of Asian Canadian writers, a group that has been able to speak from greater socially mobile positions than their predecessors. Such an analysis also reveals how they are moving beyond some of the earlier preoccupations with historically racialized enclaves in order to address important contemporary phenomena such as group diasporas and the breakdown of traditional family structures across many ethno-cultural groups (Thien), the gendered spaces of street violence (Lee), the contemporary cults of celebrity (Chong), and the future trajectories of globalization and technology (Lai).

This essay explores the new Vancouver urban environment that is represented in this new "wave" of writers through some selective close analyses of the motifs of space and movement in the texts. I will first, however, outline some helpful principles of the social production of space and the concept of "urbanity" drawn from Liam Kennedy's *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (2000). Second, I will briefly summarize

the role of Vancouver in the earlier writers; and third, examine how the concepts of urban transparency and visibility are manifested in both the new Aberdeen Mall in Richmond and Douglas Coupland's *City of Glass*. Finally, I will demonstrate how the modernist promises of transparency, freedom, fusion, and mobility that are troped in the various structures of "glass" in Vancouver are problematized by the urban fictions of the new wave of Asian Canadian writers. Thien, Lee, Chong, and Lai use cityscapes as both the origin and sign of new forms of familial loss, anomie, homelessness, corporate control, and globalized violence. Their uses of urban space, visibility, and staging also suggest the epistemological yearning that Hana Wirth-Nesher, in *City Codes* (1996), identifies as arising from the modern city's perplexing promise of "plenitude" that is confounded by its delivery of "inaccessibility" (8).

### **Producing Urban Space**

The spatial theorizing of Liam Kennedy provides this study with two useful concepts: first, that city spaces are simultaneously "real" *and* socially produced through multiple discourses and genres; and second, that civic forms of "urbanity," or democratically healthy public interaction, have recently been displaced by inward turning architecture and regimes of surveillance.

First, Vancouver's physical geography and built environment have been heavily marketed as valuable *visual* commodities for decades, and tourists, realtors, businesses, and residents have all been attracted to the city's renowned viewpoints of mountain peaks, ocean, beaches, parks, and city architecture. But theorists of urban space remind us that such spaces and views are not simply perceived as unmediated physical settings. Liam Kennedy—who combines the social construction spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Edward Soja—emphasizes that urban spaces are social products or a "register of not only built forms but also of embedded ideologies" (8-9), and literary and visual works are important cultural agents that "produce and maintain but also . . . challenge and question, common notions of urban existence" (9). Hence, it is important to analyze literary and other modes of representation, to provide a "critical consideration of the conditions and effects of the signifying practices, discourses and images which give [urban space] legible form" (9). In *Urban Space and Representation* (2000), Kennedy and Maria Belshaw assert that "The production of urban space is simultaneously real, symbolic and imaginary; what it produces is a material environment, a visual culture and a psychic space" (5). This social production aspect of urban space is reiterated by many

theorists, including Deborah Parsons in *Streetwalking the Metropolis* (2000), who reminds us that “the urban writer is not only a figure within a city; he/she is also the producer of a city. . . . [and] the writer adds other maps to the city atlas; those of social interaction, but also of myth, memory, fantasy, and desire” (1). The emphasis on the regular addition of new maps reminds us that no Vancouver writer ever provides a mimetic, totalizing vision of city spaces nor do they simply fabulate independent spatial myths, but combine material history, visual facts, and narrative forms to assert a particular way of seeing Vancouver. Their books represent real contemporary phenomena such as immigration and business failure (Thien), homelessness and street violence (Lee), suburban isolation and celebrity worship (Chong), and the exploitation of labour and environmental collapse (Lai), but they also create forms of spatialized consciousness that are peculiar to the ideological interests of the writers.

A second concept that supplements Kennedy’s social definition of urban space is “urbanity,” or “the phenomenon of collectivity which emerges from the close proximity of strangers and face-to-face relations in public urban space” (3). Ideal city spaces, according to Kennedy, are designed to valorize social interactions, and the “erotic and aesthetic variety of street life, the close encounters with strangers, the freedoms of access and movement in public spaces” (3) that are essential for democratic citizenship—certainly the quest for the renewed vitality of North American cities has been the goal of urban activists and commentators like Jane Jacobs, in her now classic *The Life and Death of American Cities* (1961), to humanist sociologists like Richard Sennett in *The Conscience of the Eye* (1990). However, this harmonious fostering of plurality is now threatened as “public space becomes increasingly privatized, commodified and militarized” (Kennedy 3). In American urban centers (and, arguably, in Canadian cities as well), the loss of civic unity is signaled in such structures of exclusion and apartheid as the “in-turning mall, the indoor atriums of corporate office buildings, the proliferations of theme parks and festival marketplaces, all spaces that are rigorously disciplined through practices of gating, signage, and surveillance” (6). Kennedy illustrates the pervasiveness of surveillance here by noting (and echoing Foucault’s famous *topos*) that “The relation between power and vision, for example, is evidenced in many strands of urban life: in the surveillance of the urban population; in the scopophilic and voyeuristic desires (to look, to be seen) associated with the urban street and commodity relations; in the signage which directs and prohibits movement; and

in the sighting of bodies as erotic or dangerous” (10). The displacement of civic interaction by the urban garrisons of the glass residential tower, and the rise of the new regimes of surveillance and visual culture, are figured in different, even contradictory ways by Coupland’s *City of Glass* and Thien’s *Simple Recipes*, Lee’s *Dead Girls*, Chong’s *Baroque-a-Nova*, and Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*. But before we can turn to these framings of scopic and often voyeuristic forms of urbanity, I want to consider the traditional ethnic Vancouver spaces that have preceded them as they have been represented in novels by Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee, and Wayson Choy. Glass towers, urban voyeurism, and modern forms of surveillance have not yet arisen in the earlier texts that sometimes nostalgically recreate the spaces of a lost urbanity.

### The Traditional Enclave

For Kogawa, SKY Lee, and Choy, Vancouver has been a compelling site for their most significant work. Vancouver and the rolling ocean of the west coast are the central absent spaces that are achingly longed for by the Alberta-exiled Uncle Isamu and his niece Naomi in Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* (1981). Vancouver’s traditional Pender Street Chinatown is the key site of the rise and fall of patriarch Wong Gwei Chang and the saga of his family’s power struggles in Lee’s novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990). This same traditional Chinatown is the setting for the depiction of the nostalgic intergenerational reconciliation between Poh-Poh and Sek-lung and the revelation of tragic Chinese Canadian hostilities towards Japanese Canadians in the 1940s in Choy’s interconnected stories in *The Jade Peony* (1995). The images of the city in these texts range from the well-furnished Marpole home on West 64th Avenue (50) that is lost by the Nakane family in *Obasan*<sup>2</sup>, to the dragon-chair lined second-floor of the Chinese Benevolent Association building where the cigar-smoking patriarch Wong Gwei Chang holds court (73) in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, to the back alleys of Keefer and Pender Streets where Poh-Poh and Sekky scavenge for cast-off materials for their craftworks and chimes (146) in *The Jade Peony*. While these are selected and diverse locations from amongst dozens of possible examples, they represent fictional reconstructions of communities and city spaces that existed during the 1930s and the 1940s; and, in the case of Lee and Choy, these communities were centered in a marginalized ethnic enclave.<sup>3</sup> In these novels, the writers undertake to restore dignity and complexity to the bodies and communities that were constructed as a “cultural enigma” by the Anglo-European Canadians, “a glint of the Orient in an Occidental setting”

(Anderson 175). Kogawa, Lee, and Choy all explore forms of racist conflict and thereby “unmap”—to use Sherene Razack’s term for disentangling the complex layers of racism—the interlocking systems of oppression that conspired to hold their characters captive, whether in the internment camps of *Obasan* or within the bounded and often stifling spaces of Chinatown in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

Since these works focus on historic enclaves, it is not surprising that Asian Canadian critics such as Maria Ng have registered considerable impatience with the attention paid to the traditional Chinatown spaces, and her critical intervention in readings of *Disappearing Moon Cafe* attempts to discount the currency of the representative power of the traditional Chinatown spaces of this text. Ng argues vigorously that Chinese Canadian communities have become decentralized, heterogeneous, and mobile, with new immigrants now “established throughout the metropolis and in the satellite suburbs” (168) of Burnaby, Richmond, and Surrey. In the case of the Chinese Canadian immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, their “many varied Chinese residential and business neighborhoods also have changed the urban landscape and culture of cities like Vancouver” (168).

### **The New Aberdeen Centre**

A highly visible sign of how Asian Canadian movements from the older quarters to the new suburbs have changed the landscape is strikingly evident on Richmond’s Number Three Road. During the mid-1990s, scores of mainly Anglo-European Richmond residents complained, often in the local newspapers (see McCullough), about the proliferation of Chinese-language business signs amidst the booming development of Asian theme malls such as Parker Place, Yaohan Centre, and the Aberdeen Mall. Over ten years later, the suburban landscape has continued to change due to Asian Canadian developments, but local complaints over such developments have abated (perhaps appeased by the economic benefits fostered by such developments). The Aberdeen Mall has been demolished and re-built, even changing the shape of the municipal roadways that surround it (a rare municipal allowance in Richmond) to conform to the building’s curving shape. During the January 2004 unveiling of the new mall by developer Thomas Fung and architect Bing Thom, local design critics were enthralled by its hi-tech design and its “stunning custom coloured glass randomly arrayed over the mall’s ever-curving walls, a range of translucent and opaque panels that look equally gem-like by day or by night” (Boddy B1). Fung has brought into this

retail palace of glass not just the Japanese mega-retailer *Daiso*, but over one hundred diverse retailers and restaurants ranging from Trends Corea to Starbucks; and, as a strategy to welcome shoppers from outside the Asian Canadian communities, all the retailers have been required to use English signage and to have staff who can conduct business in English (Boddy B1). The vast sweeping interior of the new mall, its three-storied walls of glass, and its language policy all signify an attempt to create transparency, visibility, and legibility for the potential English-speaking patron. It scripts transparent vistas for a wide range of consumers, a transparency that is obviously different than the enclosed enclave atmospheres targeted by Ng's critique of the orientalized Chinatowns of Pender Street. It would also seem that such design features and signage are signals of a renewal of the urbanity that has been lost in the fortress-like malls and atriums critiqued by Kennedy, those emblems of a spatiality of surveillance and paranoia. However, one could also argue that the Aberdeen Mall reinscribes the culture of surveillance and voyeurism—and certainly commodity voyeurism and technological fetishism—in new ways.

The new urban sensibility that is symbolized in the sweeping glass curves of the new Aberdeen Centre has been identified by architectural critic Trevor Boddy as not just Greater Vancouver's "most visually dramatic retail operation" but representative of a "post-fusion culture now emerging here" (B4). This post-fusion culture mixes designs, languages, and styles and is linguistically embodied in Thom's architectural team for the project, a team whose "20 staff speak 18 different languages"; as well, the post-fusion style is characterized by Thom's key design architect, Chris Doray, who is a "neo-modernist designer . . . [and] an Ismaili Muslim raised in Singapore who studied architecture in London" (B4). But the post-fusion world view is also technologically manifested in the Aberdeen project's most stunning statement: a pulsing light-and-water-fountain installation in the mall's main vaulted reception area, a visual orchestration that emphasizes the interplay of the qualities of luminescence, fluidity, and the sublimity of electronically mediated change. The fountain's coloured spotlights and its pivoting jet-nozzles, which spray arcs of water in rhythmic pulses set to music, both create the spectacle and transfix the watching crowd as part of the surrounding "stage." The mall's commodities and the hyperbolic theatricality of the fountain, thus, are a good example of Charles Molesworth's comment that "the city is the stage where staging itself occurs. . . the place where everything is both available and vanishing . . . the stage in which all prosceniums are unfolding and

disappearing” (13-14). This staging function of the city collaborates with its market function, according to Molesworth, in order to mediate desire through the fluctuations of the available products of the market and the ever-vanishing, ephemeral effects of the stage. Between the swiveling lights of the Aberdeen Mall fountain and the goods on sale in the shop windows, “desire is always endlessly doubled” (Molesworth 22-23), a condition that might be “the central philosophical ‘truth’ of urban experience” (23).

### **Looking Through a City of Glass**

Visual transparency, cultural fusion, and the hi-tech illumination of Vancouver’s streets for the American film industry are some of the features of contemporary Vancouver that are highlighted by Coupland in *City of Glass* (2000). Coupland, renowned for his satiric fictions of North American popular culture and generational neuroses, provides an alphabetical listing of the landmarks, institutions, viewpoints, and cultural idiosyncrasies that are the ingredients for a complex Vancouver sensibility. His colloquial style, nominal seriations of Vancouver-area objects and products, and quietly comic “West Coast” idioms characterize his comments, which are matched with black-and-white and colour photographs of scenes from Greater Vancouver.

The sky-blue cover of the book contains a photograph of a cluster of condominium towers that were built around False Creek: grey clouds and dark mountains loom in the background, while the spiky masts of docked sailboats remind the viewer of the water which lies out of the range of the camera lens. The tall condominium towers, the visual manifestations of the book’s title, have been photographed from an angle that seems to exaggerate their height: they appear to be almost as high as the mountains and the clouds behind them. Coupland classifies the towers in a special entry that he titles “See-throughs,” and he states that these symbolize “a New World breeziness, and a gentle desire for social transparency—a rejection of class structures and hierarchy” (126). At the same time, the history of the development of these towers reveals their global and even postcolonial origins, since they were “built as contingency crash pads for wealthier Hong Kong citizens who were bracing for the worst” in the “changeover of rule from England to China” (126). The towers contain contradictory elements of both a “rejection of class structures” and the visible vertigo-inducing power of an affluent social class that has dramatically changed the face of a city in an extremely short period of time. Coupland also notes how the lack of curtains on these buildings has made the area into a site of voyeurism: “A friend from the States told his



mother that Vancouver was a city of glass buildings and no curtains, and everybody gets to watch each other. A voyeur's paradise, so to speak" (126).<sup>4</sup>

Visibility and voyeurism are part of the fusion culture that is constantly highlighted by Coupland's entries. Amongst the fifty-two entries, nine of these deal with aspects of Asian cultural influence in Vancouver, some of these being the predictable "Dim Sum" and "Feng Shui," but others are the offbeat "Japanese Slackers" and "Couples." The "Couples" entry features a black-and-white photo of a visibly Asian female bride and a white male groom, cropped so that their eyes are not visible. But the notion that Vancouver is a city of malleable images, identities, and postmodern indeterminacy is also suggested in the second entry in the book, "Backlot North," which features a photograph of a woman who is about to enter a trailer on a film set. Coupland notes that "Vancouver is North America's third-largest film and TV production centre" (6) often as a stand-in for American cities, and "there's a bit of self-loathing as we let our identity be stolen so regularly" (6). The "City of Glass," thus, is also the city as a projection screen, the background against which American narratives of criminal investigation and paranormal suspense can be imposed in the service of other, non-Canadian views of city life.<sup>5</sup>

Coupland concludes *City of Glass* with an entry on "YVR," the international air travel code for the Vancouver Airport. The entry is accompanied by a slick black-and-white photograph of two gleaming chrome luggage carts in front of the large-paneled panes of glass beside an elevated boarding gate. In the distance is the gleaming curved body of a Japan Airlines jumbo jet. The luggage carts, the walkway, and plane orchestrate an appealing visual sequence of the orderly, clean, and uncomplicatedly transparent formalities and seemingly optimistic pleasures of modern travel (there are no lineups for security checks, immigration officers, or scenes of passport scrutiny here). The airport, in Coupland's words, offers the traveller a crash course in "Vancouver style," with its smooth river rock . . . glass, glass, glass," and a "stunning gathering of West Coast Native art" (151). Coupland eulogizes Vancouver's variety as "a fractal city—a city of no repeats" (151), and in the imaginary voice of the flight attendant who welcomes the arrivals or greets the departures, he concludes: "So if you're arriving, welcome, and if you're on your way out, return again soon, and just think of how good the rain was for your complexion and how green the world truly is" (151).

But these comfortable cultural fusions and leisurely imbibed vistas of rain and glass are not so cheerfully appreciated from the streets inhabited by the characters in the fictions that I will turn to next.

### **Madeleine Thien's *Simple Recipes*: The Street as Refuge**

The Vancouver spaces of the seven stories in Thien's *Simple Recipes* are linked to the breakdown of domestic order and the confusion of private and public space: parental violence frequently forces vulnerable children to escape to the open spaces of the city streets, despite the risks. These stories explore parental insensitivity that is compounded by immigrant insecurity, or failures of adult imagination caused by diasporic exhaustion, and often viewed from the perspectives of the children: they witness the adult lack of charity, adult manic depression, alcoholism, brutality in disciplinary measures, and business failures. The special authority of the children who are witnesses to these adult failures is created through the quality of their own composure: they are dispassionate, clear-eyed recorders of their own suffering and the breakdown of the parent figures.

The climate of Vancouver, the domestic interior spaces, and the escape routes afforded by the streets play special roles in these stories. In the opening story, "Simple Recipes," the narrator poetically describes her connection to Vancouver's natural landscape, inscribing both the similarities and differences between herself and her immigrant father in terms of weather: "While I was born into the persistence of the Vancouver rain, my father was born in the wash of a monsoon country" (7). The abusive temper of the father is demonstrated when he beats his son with a bamboo pole for refusing to eat. When the daughter witnesses this violence, her initial love is transformed "to shame and grief" (18) for the violence has so traumatized her that she feels "loose, deranged, as if everything in the known world is ending right here" (16).

At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes how her father has carefully instructed her in the simple procedures for making rice and preparing fish. The opening domestic atmosphere depicts the comforting smells of cooking and the recollected pleasures of food and commensal ritual:

In our house, the ceilings were yellowed with grease. Even the air was heavy with it. I remember that I loved the weight of it, the air was dense with the smell of countless meals cooked in a tiny kitchen, all those good smells jostling for space. (8)

This memory of the domestic space of the kitchen changes after the father beats his son. The narrator's rejection of her father is especially evident in her own treatment of her adult domestic space when she states, "In my apartments, I keep the walls scrubbed clean. I open the windows and turn the fan on whenever I prepare a meal" (9). A more obvious rejection of her father's "simple recipes" occurs when she declares that she never uses the rice cooker that he presented as a gift to her, as if its use would also revive memories of his violence.

Other stories in Thien's collection feature sudden travel as a necessary escape from marital discord, parental abuse, imagined infidelity, or alcoholism. The escape routes consist of the coastal highway in "Four Days from Oregon," Vancouver's Granville Street and Knight Street in "Alchemy," the Trans-Canada highway and the Confederation Bridge in "Dispatch," and the intersections and suburban sidewalks of Burnaby in "House." These "road stories" show how the breakdown of the interior domestic order has literally driven families and young people to seek refuge on the streets. The diasporic rootlessness that troubles the Asian families in the opening and closing stories ("Simple Recipes" and "A Map of the World") also grips the other, non-Asian families and focal characters.

In "Alchemy," the narrator Miriam walks through malls, parking lots, and "Granville Street at night with kids and adults panhandling, to a bus all lit up, down a quiet street" (57) to the home of her friend Paula. Traffic noises from Knight Street provide the symbolic ambience in this story, and the narrator's mother warns her that "this was the most dangerous street in the city" (69). But the dangers of this street seem to pale when Miriam learns that Paula is afraid of sleeping alone in her own house—she has been the victim of her father's sexual abuse, assaults that apparently began in the garage when he would roll her under his car on his mechanic's trolley.

In "Dispatch," a Vancouver couple's relationship is tragically damaged when a husband declares his love for a distant childhood friend in a letter, then unintentionally leaves his correspondence on the kitchen table where his wife, who is a writer, discovers it. The old-time friend addressed in the letter rejects the married man's advances, bluntly instructing him to return to his senses, but his relationship with his wife is now strained. One month later, this woman is killed on the Yellowhead Highway in Saskatchewan after making a long-distance Canadian tour that has begun with the crossing of the Confederation Bridge that joins Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. The story, in fact, begins with the image of a car speeding over the Confederation Bridge, as imagined by the wife. Employing the familiar but eerily disengaged second-person point of view ("Your husband has never been unfaithful to you. But only a few months ago, you found the letter he had written to Charlotte" [85]), Thien rhetorically scripts sympathy for the wife of the "unfaithful" husband, and we learn that she is a writer for whom "news is a staple food" (81), and who is writing a "book about glass, the millions of glass fishing floats that are traveling across the Pacific Ocean" (81). Here again, ironically, is that icon of reflection, transparency, and visibility,

and here the glass floats are linked to the theme of global currents and forces; they reinforce how seemingly small symbols or imagined events can have a significant impact on daily living. The husband's own randomly left textual "floats," the letters, wash into the domestic space and change it forever. And his wife, who watches the news and weaves together the deep history of "glass," understands that the witnesses of global events are transformed by the content of what they witness:

There's a memory in your mind that you can't get rid of. The two of you in bed, lying next to one another like fish on the shore, watching images of Angola. Out on Oak Street there's the white noise of traffic, endlessly coming. Catastrophe. Your husband said that line again, "Too many cameras and not enough food," and the two of you watched a woman weep. (87)

In the final story in this collection, "A Map of the City," the narrator's father is an immigrant from Indonesia who tries to establish a furniture store, the "Bargain Mart" (163), on Hastings Street. His dream of business success is accompanied by the narrator's vivid fantasy of how the store will have the power to attract people from around the diverse communities of Vancouver. Her own fantasy specifically involves overcoming the barriers of space and time with a language of optimistic movement:

From where we lived in Burnaby, in the spill of houses beneath the mountain, to Maple Ridge and Vancouver, people would flock to my father's store, carting away sofas on their shoulders, tables in their arms. My father standing at the front, hands on his hips, young. (164)

Unfortunately, the father's modest manner makes him a weak furniture salesman, and his forays into other business enterprises fare no better. Never at ease with travel in his new country, he also "was suspicious of Canadian highways, the very ease of crossing such a country" (180). Defeated by his business failures, he embarks on a reverse migration, returning to his native Indonesia and attempting to reclaim some of the consolations of home.

The failed travelling of the father is contrasted to the narrator who is eager to journey across the city. When they drive across Vancouver, from the downtown area, through Chinatown, and then to the suburbs, she confidently declares, "I was the only one of us born in Canada, and so I prided myself on knowing Vancouver better than my parents did" (178). And when the narrator, her father, and her boyfriend examine a "map of the world" to measure how the political boundaries have changed over time, each has their own area of familiarity and expertise, zones that create further divisions between them:

My father knew Southeast Asia. Will knew the ancient cultures of art, the old foundations. . . . I loved Vancouver, the city wading out into the ocean, the border of mountains. There we are in my memory, each of us drawn to a different region . . . (213)

In Hana Wirth-Nesher's *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, the representation of the breakdown of the home is an important feature that distinguishes pre-modern and modern novels: "In the premodern novel . . . 'home' is a private enclave, a refuge from the intensely public arena of urban life. In the modern urban novel, however, 'home' itself is problematized, no longer a haven, no longer clearly demarcated" (19). In the stories of Madeleine Thien, Vancouver's homes are hardly havens, and more consolation is found on the road, or at least in travelling away from the sites of abuse, betrayal, and abandonment. Such problematizations of domestic space are imbued with even greater menace in the linked stories of Nancy Lee's *Dead Girls*, where refuge is found neither in the homes nor in the streets of Vancouver.

### **Nancy Lee's *Dead Girls*: The Street as Murderer**

Thien's Vancouver streets are often a refuge from domestic violence and abuse, and her characters usually are successful survivors: even the narrator's father in "A Map of the City," who attempts suicide, survives. However, in Lee's collection death is more obviously unavoidable: the stories are also coincidentally linked by a brutal series of murders that luridly filled the front pages of Vancouver's newspapers and the screens of local televisions. The systematic stalking and killing of Vancouver area women, many homeless, vulnerable, and caught in cycles of drug addiction and prostitution, especially haunted the public imagination of Vancouver from 1990 to 2002. Before the recent conviction of the murderer Robert Pickton in 2007, evidence linking the victims to Pickton's now notorious Port Coquitlam pig farm was publicized in 2004 (Culbert A1).

In Nancy Lee's collection of stories, conceived before Pickton's arrest but while the public consciousness was held in thrall by regular reports of the missing women, the lives of most of the fictional female characters are linked to a middle-class suburban Vancouver bungalow with a large backyard where Lee's fictive serial killer, a retired dentist named Coombs, has buried the remains of his victims, many of them prostitutes. These eight stories show how the lives of eight different women, and their friends or families, are either directly or indirectly affected by the murderer: in the first story, "Associated Press," a female librarian is involved in the jury for the trial

of Coombs (4); in "Sally in Parts," a working-class father, whose daughter once required special dental surgery, expresses his disgust for the untrustworthiness of the "middle class" that the dentist-murderer represents (46); in "Valentines," a girl who has not yet turned fourteen is threatened with a knife by a boyfriend who imitates the actions of the killer as a perverse form of humour (81); in "Dead Girls," a drug-addict, whose location and fate on Vancouver's downtown streets are unknown, provokes endless anguish in her parents who are "addicted" to news of her possible discovery, and the televised "hopeful high school photos; dead girls everywhere" (99). In "East," two middle-aged, tough, trash-talking women, desperate for sexual attention yet resentful of male sexual innuendo, find the newspaper photo of the killer dentist "attractive" in a "sick" way (135); in "Young Love," a drug-addicted nurse, ironically volunteering to serve as a first-aid attendant for a high-school dance-marathon to support anti-drug awareness programs, and who has observed Coombs in his dental lab, is tastelessly interrogated by a group of high-school parents about his peculiar habits (166); and in "Rollie and Adele," a homeless teenager, who occasionally works the streets, slimly escapes death at the hands of Coombs when she refuses to enter his clinically "spotless" white car with "the dashboard polished to a high sheen" (193-94).

By linking this cast of characters to the monstrous homicidal pit in the suburban middle-class backyard of the dentist, Lee simultaneously reflects, explores, and intensifies the spatialization of public anxiety about the murder of women on the street. By not confining the killer to the seedy reaches of East Hastings alleyways or the waterfront dockyards, Lee suggests that neither the mean streets of the Eastside, nor the grassy yards of suburban bungalows, nor the pristine chamber of a dentist's office can be trusted. The Vancouver spaces that are arenas or stages for targeting, grooming, and seducing the victims are multiple, both high-end and low-end, and all ranges between: settings range from the glass-windowed condominium in "Associated Press," to the suburban living room in "Valentines," to the prison grounds of "East," to the Seven-Eleven parking lot in "Sisters." Complementing these sites, Lee's narrative pacing and point of view underline the methodical, incremental, and inexorable slide of different women into the grip of male surveillance, power, and violence.

The power of the transparent aerial view from the towering glass condominiums of Coupland's *City of Glass* is fully realized and complicated by the opening and closing stories of *Dead Girls*. In "Associated Press," the first story, a symbolic social allegory of the seduction and nearly fatal constriction

of public memory is personified by a love affair between a public librarian and political journalist, an affair that is displaced by the librarian's second affair with an electronics salesman. The journalist, a regular traveller who photographs scenes of warfare, poverty and political injustice, seems to overwhelm the librarian with "more social conscience than you can bear" (3). Lee employs the second-person narrative voice throughout this story, and several others, to construct a more urgent, imperative, and uncanny personal address, as "we," the readers, rhetorically become the audience who cannot bear this hyperactive "social conscience" whose "love letters are diatribes, global history lessons. He woos you with the blood of political unrest" (3). But the regular absence of the journalist and the librarian's suspicion that he has other lovers—she finds "his toiletry bag stuffed with condoms" (8)—compels her to enter an affair with the salesman, a fellow jury member at the trial of the serial killer, the dentist Coombs.

It is important to note the spatial trappings of the elements of seduction that are employed in "Associated Press," elements that can be allegorized as the capturing of "public memory," represented by the librarian, by the promise of omniscient repose, smooth material comforts, and the modernist fetishes of scenic surveillance, technology, and expensive glassware—again, the recurring Vancouver motifs of glassy "surfaces" are employed in this work:

This boy, with his high-rise-view suite, black leather furniture and state-of-the-art home theatre system, is seducing you the old-fashioned way. South African Chardonnay in hand-blown glasses. Nina Simone in quadraphonic sound. You let your head loll back against the sofa, indulge in the ease of its smooth surface. (4)

After the initial seduction, the transformation of the librarian's consciousness is figured in her dreams of spatial power, an identification that begins to displace thoughts of her work in the library. Again, the motif of the glass surface is employed, but this time to figure a deepening narcissistic and self-congratulatory gaze:

This boy's apartment is a refuge, a high glass tank that shields you from the world. While you work your days in the stacks, pulling books for inter-library loan, you dream of the view from his balcony, the dark water of the inlet, the city lights laid out like a jewelled carpet. You imagine your reflection in the sliding glass door, a version of yourself that is cool and smooth to the touch. (20)

As the librarian's relationship with the salesman deepens, she is drawn slowly into riskier forms of sex, including bondage and asphyxiative foreplay: "You lose your heartbeat in his rhythm, then feel its return, an

urgent throb in your neck and head as the belt tightens. . . . You wonder in a moment of swoon if you will die here, a willing captive in your own bed” (17). The relationship comes to an end, however, when the librarian becomes pregnant and has an abortion. Before undergoing the procedure, a news photo of a bombed helicopter reminds her of the social commitment of the journalist, and the librarian then decides to also end her relationship with the man who sleeps “with a clear mind, dreams in quadraphonic sound” (33). It is not clear whether she will reconcile her close relationship with the agent of social conscience, the journalist, but it is clear that this agent of the “library” has avoided both literal and symbolic strangulation by the electronics salesman.

The librarian, agent of public memory, is one of the few women who averts personal disaster. In *Dead Girls*, other women also take risks on the dark edges of the city but with disastrous consequences. In “East,” Anna and Jemma cruise the highway in a mini-van, loading up on junk food and cigarettes, pathetically hitting on male teenage store clerks, stopping to smoke pot, narrowly avoiding self-induced combustion, and dissecting their lousy relationships with male losers. As the women weave their intoxicated way “East,” they encounter a university student and strip-mall store clerk who explains that “everything bad is east”:

Think about it, what’s at the western-most tip of the city? The university, right? . . . So, it’s downhill from there. As you move east the population gets poorer, there’s religious fanaticism, racial intolerance. . . . book bannings, drive-by shootings, murder suicides. That’s why they put the prison out there. (149)

The eastern journey of Anna and Jemma dramatically climaxes in their own self-inflicted arrest in a rain-soaked and muddy field beside the prison. Ironically, they seal their own identification as “easterners” within the moral spatialization of Vancouver that they have unwittingly accepted when they drive up to the walled compound of the prison yard, a central site of social surveillance, punishment, and regulated space. In their irritation with the imagined male prisoners, who are “cocky, confident, at home in their dry place” (154), and projecting Jemma’s anger at her husband, the two women begin throwing stones at the prison windows, finally breaking a pane of glass and setting off an alarm. When the police arrive and make sexist comments about Anna’s “wet t-shirt” (157), Anna strikes one of them with a rock, and the two women are quickly thrown to the muddy ground and handcuffed, symbolically brought to the same point of captivity and moral censure as the men they have despised.



The final story in Lee's collection, "Sisters," treats the bleak teenage wasteland of Seven-Eleven store parking lots where naive Aboriginal girls, bored with high school and skipping classes, become the prey of devious twenty-something males who lure them into emotional dependency with cheap gifts of cigarettes, rides in cars, junk food, and raucous parties. Lee is adept at recreating the oily machinations of the male character, Kevin, and his succinct but ominous racializing and sexual targeting of Grace. Kevin's attempts to control Grace's body and sexuality fail, but he then succeeds more surprisingly with Grace's older and seemingly more mature sister, Nita. Nita eventually leaves her small town to live with Kevin in Vancouver, sporadically calls home, then disappears into some dark, unknown life on the streets. At the end of the story, Grace travels to Vancouver to find Nita, contacts the police, circulates her picture, and walks several times down Hastings Street, clutching a hand-drawn map of the city. Finding no leads, she is advised at a pawnshop to go to the top of the Harbour Centre tower, where she is told "You'll see it all from there" (282). This final phrase is the promise of urban Vancouver, the promise of Coupland's glass towers, and the promise of the view offered by the electronics salesman's apartment in "Associated Press"—omniscience and transparency. But Lee's stories are subversions of this promise of omniscience, a form of indeterminacy that feminist geographers like Deborah Parsons in *Streetwalking the Metropolis* see as particularly evident in women's experiences of the city (Parsons 7). Lee shows that the aerial views do not offer mastery and that, for those who have lost someone to the streets of Vancouver, its streets are the darkest form of labyrinth:

At the observation level, she presses her face to the glass, holds her breath and stares at the city, serene and majestic under a perfect blue sky. Row after row of anonymous rooftops, the dense green patches of trees, the dark water of the inlet. She traces the streets below with her finger, the maze of roads traveling away, swimming and multiplying out to the horizon, stretching like ribbon to the ends of the earth. (283)

### **Kevin Chong's *Baroque-a-nova*: Satirizing Suburban Space**

While the fictional representations of Vancouver by Thien and Lee map the perilous sites where families are broken, children must flee, women are abused, and real victims are buried in a tragic urban landscape, Chong's *Baroque-a-nova* uses comic deflation to show a rather different enclave of Greater Vancouver: his territory is the underwhelming retirement zone and bedroom community of Ladner, a suburb that is south of Richmond

and Vancouver, a semi-rural community that thousands of daily commuters pass through on Highway 17.

Ladner's stasis, marginality, and quietude are the environmental factors that provide the perfect inconspicuous cocoon for Chong's central characters: the half-Native slacker, cynic, and high school student Saul St. Pierre, the only kid in his high school "whose father had long hair and didn't hold a regular job"(1); and Ian St. Pierre, Saul's father, an ex-folk rock minor celebrity once married to Helena St. Pierre, a native woman whose ethereal voice and startling beauty catapulted their seventies-era band to pop-cult stardom. Helena's recent suicide in Thailand is the event that begins the novel, and contributes to the retro-revival of the St. Pierre's musical status, along with a German hip-hop band's timely sampling of their pretentiously titled song, "Bushmills Threnody" (more simply, "Whiskey Blues").

Chong's comic technique is stylistically represented in his use of hilarious dialogue, deadpan one-liners, and funny caricatures of music groupies, television reporters, and celebrity biographies. Beneath the hijinks, though, is a distrust of mass media— indeed, a distrust of the urban stages and markets described by Molesworth—and a resistance to an artificial celebrity culture. Moreover, an important part of Chong's arsenal of satirical devices is his use of the suburban setting of Ladner to satirize characters like Ian St. Pierre, who is mired in an empty life (both of his former wives left him), or Saul, who literally watches life pass without him.

Ian St. Pierre's home in Ladner epitomizes the haunt of the washed-up ex-celebrity who has resigned himself to cut-rate anonymity but is only dimly aware of the passage of time and his relationships with others. Ian lives alone and Chong's description of the colour of his house reinforces a sense of Ian's arrested development, as it is "painted a thoughtful, nursery-school blue . . . on a street lined with modest houses, bric-a-brac homes with gnomonic statuary and fussy latticed gardens" (8). When his son Saul arrives for a visit, Saul notes that the kitchen has been "gutted, the floors ripped up, a piece of tarp covering a hole in the ceiling," and that his father has finally started to build the "glassed-in porch, a real yuppie add-on" that his second wife had requested many years ago when Ian and Jana were still a couple. Ian complains with an "avaricious refrain" that the project is costing him "Ten thousand dollars," but is unaware of how this effort will have no effect now on a wife who has already left him (9).

Ian's cultural limitations are also ironically symbolized in the description of his living room where an American and colonial "frontier" movie genre,

long outdated, takes up most of the space of the wall and crowds out another conventional symbol of western knowledge, a set of encyclopedias: “The carpet was thick and shaggy, patterned in a gray-black-blue marble swirl. A set of *World Book* encyclopedias and Dad’s dubbed movie collection—all Westerns—took up an entire wall” (10). Such renovations-in-progress (but embarrassingly late) and tacky furnishings are certainly far removed from the suave and glossy interiors of the glass condominium suite of the salesman described in Nancy Lee’s “Associated Press,” but are consistent with Ian St. Pierre’s style and even his music: the “genius” of the St. Pierre’s band “lay in flimsy balladry, schmaltz, and found success in the seventies churning out folk rock, mid-tempo and sad, with occasional orchestral flourishes . . . [and] honky electric piano and treacly arrangements, those dated wah-wahs and synths on the last two albums” (8).

There are no aerial views from glassy condominium towers in Chong’s overall representation of Ladner, nor are there dingy alleyways lined with brick-walled rear entrances: Chong’s Ladner is a mixed residential space of middle-class and more affluent districts where homes have separate suites for teenage children and three-car garages to keep their Range Rovers and Lexus vehicles (54). Characters are shown regularly hanging out at places like Pappalardi’s, “a family restaurant popular with old people in sun hats and white belts, and servers scooting around in their mushroom-gravy brown uniforms” (64). The local high school, fast-food drive-throughs, grocery store parking lots, a bowling alley, waterslides, and a karaoke bar provide most of the settings for the social life of the high school students in the novel. The narrator’s description of the central street of Ladner highlights the tidy attention to paint, small town renewal, and festive pride, with the past kept at bay through the containment of the “heritage museum”; all of the elements in his description bespeak of fastidious reconstruction, renovation, and renewal. These attempts at recovering a lost “urbanity,” or the unity of the public space described earlier by Liam Kennedy, are characterized as superficial and they exert no meaningful effect on the social lives of the Ladnerites:

Richard’s rental car was parked at the end of the drag, in the lot of the IGA. Much pride was taken in our renewed downtown core. There was the main drag with its brick and limestone facades, the fire hydrants newly painted red with white trim, the Home Hardware outlet and the tiny elm trees fenced in black wrought iron. Banners hung from the streetlights: “Renewing our Past!” and “Free Weekend Parking!” and “Visit the Harbor Front Mall!” A fire station had been converted into the new heritage museum . . . (66-67)

Unlike the tension-filled spaces featured by Thien and Lee, *Baroque-anova* features a banal suburban environment: the quiet townhouse complex where the protagonist-narrator lives, is “a collection of narrow salmon-colored buildings encircling a parking lot,” where the occupants are “either retirees and divorcees” or “young professional couples”: “people on their way up, or on their way down. There weren’t any children here. No one, it seemed went to the trouble” (18). The enervated, “slacker” atmosphere is also captured in the narrator’s self-deflating depiction of himself. Saul St. Pierre, who skips school at the beginning of the novel to protest the banning of a book that he has not even read, describes himself as “eighteen, slack-jawed and gangly”:

I dressed like a badass, a surly malcontent: I wore sixteen-holed combat boots, dark jeans, and a dull-green button up shirt, a tiny East German flag patched to its right upper sleeve. Yet I couldn’t grow a moustache if the fate of nations rested upon it. I was counting away the seconds of my last year of high school . . . (1)

Saul’s apathy is emphasized by his lack of significant movement. He literally meanders between the townhouse of his step-mother, Jana, his father’s house in the gnome-filled cul-de-sac, and the suite of his girlfriend Rose, who lives in an upscale area of Ladner, and has her own private entrance in the home of her parents. Chong also uses Highway 17, the freeway that channels traffic to the Vancouver Island ferries, as a contrastive motif in the life of Saul. Saul habitually (and immaturely) walks to the pedestrian overpass that overarches the freeway, and “spits” at selected passing cars. The scenes show Saul’s own inertia, stuck as he is in the enclave of Ladner, while an assortment of high-end and even rusty, older vehicles, including a “junky Datsun,” pass below him, all emphasizing that everyone is in motion except Saul:

I stood over rumbling cars at the intersection: sedans pulling motorboats, green Celicas and baby-blue Accords driven by men in suits—sunglasses installed on their prescription eyewear and parking stubs collecting on their dashboards—trucks with cabs, a Volkswagen Passat driven by two women in saris, a BMW with a body board on its roof, a junky Datsun rusted the color of a nosebleed. (16)

Amidst the lethargy of the restaurants, cul-de-sacs, and tacky living rooms frequented by the St. Pierres, the most energized space is that of the high school. Though the students impose their own leisurely style on the school with their “summer peasant dresses and sandals, their cutoffs and Converse All-Stars, their Texas, muscle-shirts, and pylon-orange track shorts” (89), one group does receive Saul’s grudging admiration for their projection of power, ambition, and cool comportment. The Sikh students, who make up

“two-thirds of the high school” (17) are noted for their studiousness and ambition, and Saul’s best friend is a Sikh named Navi, a brilliant organizer of social events and rallies, a “student photo artist, poet, musician, disruptive element” (92). Navi is an eccentric, and has a stronger friendship with Saul than with the other Sikh students; but the one unqualified positive space in Ladner’s culture seems to be the inter-cultural harmony in the school, and as Saul remarks, despite the absurdities of the book-banning, “we casually approved miscegenation” (45).

### **Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*: Satirizing Future Space**

Amongst the four contemporary Asian Canadian texts considered here, *Salt Fish Girl* is the most experimental, post-realist, and innovative vision of Vancouver as urban space. Her novel shuttles between the mythologized banks of the Chinese Yellow River in the pre-Shang dynasty, providing a creation myth of “bifurcated” (9) human creatures who are imbued with physical desire, then she vaults to a dystopic future Vancouver. Ironically re-named “Serendipity,” the walled, meticulously ordered futuristic city is separated from the murky and burned-out shell of the older parts of Vancouver, much of which lies under water after the earthquake of “2017” (111). Not surprisingly, none of the great glass condominium towers that have marked Vancouver’s modernist ascension have been left standing, yet this dystopic setting contains important elements of surveillance, staging, and commodity relations.

*Salt Fish Girl* weaves together myth, dystopic landscapes, and feminist subversions of patriarchal orders, and it also critiques the labour conditions of mass production sweatshops, while employing spatial tropes to allegorize current environmental, bio-ethical, and socio-political problems. The pungent odour of durian fruit—which has permeated the body of the protagonist, Miranda—is a key trope and represents how an organic, non-technologically modified essence can persist and thwart the power structures of Serendipity. Lai’s dystopia explores the separation of organic nature from the genetically modified and technologically shaped cyborg beings who inhabit a wasted landscape. She constructs post-apocalyptic, speculative fiction landscapes that have much in common with such films as *Bladerunner* or *The Matrix*, or even the dramatic narratives of Japanese Anime films. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Coupland’s city of glass, with its transparency, freedom, fusion, and mobility have been monstrously twisted into a landscape of illusion, entrapment, dangerous mutation, and enslavement.

The illusory nature of the world of Serendipity is ironically signalled by its very name: this is not a city that encourages improvisation, or leaves the discovery process to happy accidents, and the name itself is an illusory sham. This is a brutally regulated world, run by machines. Miranda's father, Stewart Ching, works in Serendipity as a tax collector, and he is required to wear a "business suit" (26) that transports his consciousness into a *Matrix*-like virtual reality. Consisting of a "dark mask" and a tightly-zippered body suit that makes him look like an "executioner"(26), the suit gives him special powers that can be observed by Miranda when she watches a special video screen that shows him in action:

On the screen I saw a man striding across a burning landscape. Crumpled buildings and burnt-out trucks and tanks were scattered everywhere, all smouldering dully. Inside some, tongues of dying flame still flickered. There was the sound of hammers clanking and sirens blaring and people calling for help. (26)

The father's work as a tax collector here looks initially like a "marvelous adventure" in which he rescues a woman and a child (27) from monstrous razor-clawed crows, and he shoots lightning bolts from his eyes and bullets from his cyborg-machine body. But after he swallows a "thin stream of digits," he is dragged by special policemen to a dungeon where he is brutally beaten by truncheons, and forced to disgorge a "stream of numbers from his mouth" (28). The tax collection scenes, observed by a horrified Miranda through a video monitor show how the pristine surface of Serendipity conceals an ugly and exploitive level of violence, bodily harm, and psychological sacrifice. Lai's walled city reminds us of Lewis Mumford's observation that cities, despite their positive function, can serve as a "container of organized violence and a transmitter of war" (qtd. in Pike 21).

Not only does the future space of Vancouver envisioned by Lai replace transparency with clearly manipulative illusions, but the freedom and mobility promised by modernity and technology have created greater confinement. Lai's fictional spaces here are full of "dungeons" in bombed out streets (28), and these are extensions of past prisons occupied by the historical character, "Nu Wa," who is locked in terrible prisons where guards have hosed "our beds down with cold water, turned out the lights and left us in the dark for three days" (142). The subversive feminist hero Nu Wa is also hunted by men who hope to cage her in a "pig basket" (182); and Miranda is later placed in a plexiglass cage in the ocean so that the villainous Dr. Flowers can observe her reactions to his experiments. All of these settings show how the spaces of Serendipity, past and future, are carceral ones.

Miranda does, however, achieve some limited success in escaping from confinement. Stewart Ching loses his job as a tax collector after Miranda appropriates the business suit for her own use, and employs the special powers to both give away the tax digits to the monster crows and destroy the receiver general with a blast of fire. Her rebel act results in the family's banishment to the "unregulated zone" (81). Here, they open a grocery store, outside the decaying old downtown core, in a building that is over one hundred years old (81). But this site, symbolizing an unregulated, organic, and more individualistic space, does allow the family to prosper. Miranda's mother "laid in a rock garden, scattered with mosses and succulents, and a little pond with lilies and goldfish," and Miranda's brother "developed a side business in bicycle parts and continued to thrive" (84). The narrative of *Salt Fish Girl*, after this relocation, however, does not show an easy solution to the family's conditions, and while the odour of the pungent and embarrassing durian abates around Miranda, her own mother is killed by a falling crate of durian fruit (87).

*Salt Fish Girl* uses the images of the walled city, illusions, and entrapment to comment on current social and environmental problems endemic to the west coast and to the modern condition. Today in Vancouver we cope with daily evidence of environmental change wrought by human industry, unforeseeable consequences of genetic modifications of foods and animal life, the corporate control of offshore working conditions far removed from the control towers of corporate executives, and the ill-effects of computer-mediated forms of labour that sever the body from feeling, intuition, dialogue, and compassion. All of these social problems are inscribed in the juxtaposition of Serendipity and the Unregulated Zone, social problems that are not confined to fiction but are part of the urban realities that contemporary readers inhabit as well.

### Epilogue

Lai's futuristic spaces critique the utopian promises of transparency that are represented in Coupland's *City of Glass* and in the Aberdeen Centre. Lai, like Thien, Lee and Chong, resists the exhilarating allure of the "urban sublime," that mixture of terror and wonder described by Christoph Den Tandt that overcomes a viewer when they "stand on the threshold of the city, beholding it as a mysterious totality" (xi), feeling a mix of "powerlessness and power fantasies," both "negative effects, no doubt, but also exhilaration" (x). The city of the unknowable, dreadful labyrinth is the dark side of postmodern global capitalism that, as Fredric Jameson contends (Den Tandt 7), establishes

illegible and inscrutable structures to control knowledge and maintain hierarchies: “the chief object of sublime dread in our urban societies is the labyrinthine information technology of post-World War II capitalism” (Jameson, paraphrased in Den Tandt 7).

By moving beyond the recuperative historical work of remapping the spaces of the older enclaves, Thien, Lee, Chong, and Lai have generated new perspectives on urban life that compel us to re-examine the ways in which urban spaces are controlled by pre-existing material, political, and economic orders. Thien’s stories show how both Asian Canadian and non-Asian Canadian families are affected by difficult and often disastrous adjustments to new homes and the North American market. Lee’s allegory of the seduction and near-strangulation of the agent of public memory by the agent of technology is a warning of the false promises of modern systems of surveillance, power, and totalization. Chong’s satire undercuts the pretensions of celebrity culture and the urban sublime, yet affirms the possibility of a renewed public conscience through the activist work of the Sikh student Navi. *Salt Fish Girl* is a dramatic representation of the decline of urbanity, the rise of regimes of surveillance, and the extreme commodification and militarization of public spaces.

The books by Thien, Lee, Chong, and Lai imply, in different ways, a political critique of the regimes and conditions that have eroded positive forms of urbanity. At this level, they are partly literary allies of such urban revisionists as Sennett and Jacobs. At the same time, their preoccupations with built spaces, rooms, views, and roadways express the type of epistemological yearning that is described by Wirth-Nesher in *City Codes*. At a higher level of conceptual negotiation, these novelists are city dwellers who confront “the sensation of partial exclusion, of being an outsider, by mental reconstruction of areas to which he or she no longer has access, and also by inventing worlds to replace those that are inaccessible” (Wirth-Nesher 9):

Cities promise plenitude, but deliver inaccessibility. . . . the urbanite . . . is faced with a never-ending series of partial visibilities, of gaps – figures framed in windows of highrises, crowds observed from those same windows, partly drawn blinds, taxis transporting strangers, noises from the other side of a wall, closed doors and vigilant doormen, streets on maps or around the bend but never traversed, hidden enclaves in adjacent neighbourhoods. Faced with these and unable or unwilling to ignore them, the city dweller inevitably reconstructs the inaccessible in his imagination. (Wirth-Nesher 8)

This urban epistemological social yearning, that desire to reconstruct “inaccessible” lives through the imagination, is manifested in the sympathies



that these writers construct for their characters and their conditions, sympathies that reach through the walls and windows of their worlds. As we read about the effects of diaspora, violence, or displacement, we will hopefully carry these lessons into our daily urban lives, wherever we might live, and perhaps even act to do our part in resisting the decline of urbanity or fostering some form of renewal. This is the hope offered, I believe, in the epistemological social yearning cultivated by the urban writer: that curiosity leads to sympathy, and sympathy will underwrite the actions that will lead to both imaginative alternatives and social change.

## NOTES

- 1 Along with the representations of Vancouver in well-known Asian Canadian works such as *Obasan*, *Disappearing Moon Café*, and *The Jade Peony*, there is a rich mix of other Vancouver-centered fiction and poetry, and a brief sampling of some of the essential writing could include the social satires of Anglo-Canadian upper-middle class pretensions in Ethel Wilson's *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* (1961); the intricate weavings of history, documentary, and voice in Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston* (1974) and *Ana Historic* (1988); the pathos-infused but playful meditations of George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984); the laconic and lusty street semiotics of Michael Turner's *Kingsway* (1994); the indictment of poverty and addiction, and the will to rise above the needle-strewn alleys of Hastings and Main, in Bud Osborne's *Hundred Block Rock* (1999); the intricate culinary fusions of Timothy Taylor's *Stanley Park* (2001), or architectural ambitions in his *Story House* (2006); and the startling step-by-step precision of Meredith Quartermain's syntax of street names and "memorials to the missing" (36) in *Vancouver Walking* (2005). Evelyn Lau's first collection of fiction, the 1993 *Fresh Girls and Other Stories*, is also set in Vancouver and is preoccupied with sado-masochistic relationships between dominatrices and their various clients: the story "Glass" features the narrator's self-lacerating and suicidal punching through of an apartment window, a gesture that expresses simultaneously her anger at her lover, her self-despair, and her contempt for a culture of surfaces.
- 2 On the afternoon of September 27, 2003, Joy Kogawa returned to the Vancouver childhood home on 1450 West 64th that had been confiscated and sold during the internment of Canadians of Japanese descent in 1942, and she gave a public reading on this site for the first time. Efforts by the Land Conservancy of British Columbia to preserve the home as a special heritage site and writer's refuge were finally successful in 2006, but a committee continues to solicit public support for the maintenance of the home. Further information can be found at the following website: [www.kogawahouse.com](http://www.kogawahouse.com). See Glenn Deer's recent photo-essay, "Revisiting Kogawa House."
- 3 Kay Anderson's seminal *Vancouver's Chinatown* provides a cogent analysis of the racialized history of this marginalization.
- 4 See Ethel Wilson's short story, "The Window," published in her 1961 collection *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories*. Wilson provides an early fictional treatment of voyeurism in Vancouver and its ironic reversal in a satiric story of an Englishman who buys a house

with an enormous window that overlooks Spanish Banks and English Bay. The reclusive Englishman, hoping to escape the social games and company so desired by his former English wife, finds himself the object of social admirers and the gaze of a thief who studies his movements through the window at night.

- 5 The popular television series about investigators of the paranormal, “The X-Files,” was once filmed at various Vancouver locations.

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