Necessary Storytelling:
Canadian Identity Fictions, Neoliberalism, and Alternative Topographies of Being

by

Ingrid Mündel

A Thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English and Theatre Studies

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

© Ingrid Mündel, 2014
This dissertation uses the notion of “storytelling for social change” as a starting point to explore the complicated links between movements for social justice in Canada and the current neoliberal capitalist framework. The project offers contrasting scales, genres, and temporalities for necessary storytelling, moving between national-scale fictionalized retellings of specific moments in Canada’s past (in Section One), North American / global-scale imaginings of a capitalist-infused and ostensibly borderless “end time” in a futuristic West Coast and a post-NAFTA Canada (in Section Two), and city-scale performances of “real” people’s experiences in the “now” (in Section Three). The discussion begins with an examination of the production of “strangers” within Canada, showing why and how the mechanism of stranger-making has been integral to legitimizing and reinforcing the physical and conceptual boundaries of a whitened (male and heteronormative) “majority” version of Canada. *Three Day Road, The Jade Peony,* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* emerge as three texts in an extremely rich and varied terrain of imaginative interrogations of the project of nationhood in Canada. The examination of these fictive
reconstructions of Canada gives way to an exploration of the shifting topography of resistance within globalization, a force often read as “threatening” to the nation but which, as *Salt Fish Girl* and *Fronteras Americanas* show, is in fact intertwined with its project in deeply contradictory and ambivalent ways. The analysis in the final section moves to examine “socially turned” performance practices to probe the double-edge of *necessity*; here I, on the one hand, examine the “story” of neoliberalism and its allegiance to “use” and “necessity” in ways that have rhetorical and material implications for broader projects of arts-based activism, community building, and social justice, and, on the other, investigate efforts that swim both in and against this utility tide to open up space for sustained and critical conversations about reclaiming subjectivity and the time of change from neoliberalism’s tyranny.
Acknowledgements

Deep gratitude goes to my advisor, Ajay Heble, for his incredible generosity, brilliant insights, and enduring commitment over the years. Ajay, you have been a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, and support. Without your gentle persistence, I likely would never have returned to complete this thesis. Many thanks also go to my dissertation committee members in both earlier and more recent incarnations: Ric Knowles, Belinda Leach, Christine Bold, and Maria DiCenzo. I have been motivated by each of your distinctive ways of being thoughtful, intelligent, and engaged scholars, and I have been sustained by all of your incisive questions, generous feedback, and attentive engagement with my work. My doctoral journey was also greatly enhanced by the lively conversations, friendship, and support of fellow graduate student travellers. Much love and thanks go in particular to Liz Groeneveld, Benjamin Authers, and Debra Henderson for their discerning questions, humour, and encouragement from the earliest days of my dissertation writing; and, in the sometimes-lonely final stretch of finishing this project, Michelle Peek was an amazing support, co-conspirator, and friend. Thanks for journeying alongside me!

I also owe huge thanks to an amazing network of friends, colleagues, and mentors across the University of Guelph who broadened my perspective, reconnected me with what mattered, and opened me to incredible new opportunities and experiences in the years between when I began my doctoral work and when I finally returned to complete it. I wouldn’t have finished this project without the encouragement and inspired examples of those around me, and the persistent reminders of the multiple ways academic work can be connected to and informed by broader struggles for social justice. Specific thanks here go to Belinda Leach, Linda Hawkins, and Carla Rice for their faith in me, and to Erin Nelson, Anne Bergen, Elizabeth Jackson, Barbara Harrison, and Lisa Wenger for keeping me going with refreshing, thought-provoking, heartening and (maybe even) world-changing conversations.

None of this would have been possible without the early and on-going nurturing, love, and commitment from my family. Thank you to my first and most engaged teachers, Mama and Papa, for continuing to remind me why and how stories matter and for giving me the space to think it through for myself. Thank you to my siblings, Karsten, Anneke, and Erika: you are not only constant sources of wisdom, clarity, and strength but are also my best friends. I am also deeply thankful to my siblings for their excellent choice in partners and children: my conversations with all of you have deeply enriched me over the years.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to Martin, Esmé, and Emile, as you are simultaneously what pulled me away and what brought me back. Big big thanks to my lovely, devoted, and brilliant partner, Martin: your questions, humour, passion, and energy continue to spark, provoke, and inspire me. And to my ever-engaged, ever-inquisitive children, Esmé and Emile, you well surpass me in the art of asking a good question, and you teach me every day what it means to listen, to love, to laugh, and to remain open to what we don’t understand.
# Table of Contents

Introduction................................................................. 1

Section One: National Ontologies of Storytelling.......................... 43

   Chapter 1 – Telling Strange (Hi)stories in Choy, Boyden, and Sears: Memory, Identity, Survival................................................................. 46

Section Two: Global Geographies of Storytelling............................ 82

   Chapter 2 – Telling Across Borders in Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas*... 89

   Chapter 3 – Global Capitalist Terrains of Resistance in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*.... 109

Section Three: Local Economies of Storytelling............................ 139

   Chapter 4 – Telling a Crisis: Creative Neoliberalism.......................... 141

   Chapter 5 – The Use of Storytelling: (Un)marketing Community in *Grocery Store* and *Get a Real Job*................................................................. 166

Conclusion................................................................. 207

Notes............................................................................. 215

Works Cited........................................................................ 221
Introduction

Storytelling, Neoliberalism, and Creative Destruction

This dissertation uses the notion of “storytelling for social change” as a starting point to explore the complicated links between movements for social justice in Canada and the current neoliberal capitalist framework. I turn here to novels, plays, and performances, specifically, to contribute to a large body of interdisciplinary work on storytelling and social change. Recent scholarship that takes up storytelling as a mechanism for social change examines, for example, the role of stories in political speech (in Nick Couldry’s Why Voice Matters), in anti-globalization protests (in Francesca Polletta’s It Was Like a Fever), in redefining agency for marginalized voices (in Mohan Dutta’s Communicating Social Change), or in anti-racism education (in Lee Anne Bell’s Storytelling for Social Justice) in ways that show broad and transformative possibilities for storytelling. However, as Thomas King points out, stories aren’t always so wonderful. He emphasizes the double-edge of storytelling in The Truth About Stories when he writes, “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (9). King retells a story from Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony about a witch conference turned sour because of a story. Witches come from all over for a contest “in dark things” (Silko 133). Finally, there is only one witch who has not yet participated in the contest; this witch doesn’t “show off any dark thunder charcoals / or red ant-hill beads” (Silko 134) like the others. Instead, this witch tells everyone to listen, saying, “What I have is a story” (135). The other witches laugh, but the storytelling witch cautions, “go ahead / laugh if you want to / but as I tell the story / it will begin to happen” (135). The story the witch tells is of the arrival of white skinned people who bring waves of death, fear, and disease. The other
witches become afraid and try to get the witch to take the story back: “It doesn’t sound so good / We are doing okay without it / we can get along without that kind of thing. / Take it back. / Call that story back” (138). But the witch replies, “It’s already coming. / It can’t be called back” (138). Silko’s narrative clearly shows the transformative effects of storytelling but in ways that seem, at first glance, to highlight more the danger than the wonder of stories. The witch’s story produces reality, a horrific, disturbing reality, clearly presenting the potentially devastating consequences of telling stories.

And yet, in recognizing the ability of stories to produce reality, Silko re-inscribes a kind of agency in how reality is perceived and produced. On another level, then, I see something quite hopeful in how the story of the witch conference is framed. The old man who tells the story of the witches to Ceremony’s protagonist, Tayo, explains, “I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people” (132). Recognizing damaging stories as stories that are produced relationally and in context brings attention to the terms of the telling, while it also gestures to our own part in telling, listening, and reinventing the stories that structure our lives. It might be more possible to deal with what is deeply dangerous, horrific, or disturbing in, for example, narratives of neoliberalism, when we realize that in our daily performances of selfhood, there is movement there to invent and re-invent, to push back against the damaging effects both of our own and of others’ stories.

My discussion therefore unfolds from within the paradox of storytelling, King’s articulation of the wonder and danger of stories, looking at the contradictory role storytelling plays in both perpetuating destructive normative logics and in potentially subverting,
challenging, and exposing them. The contradictory energy of storytelling is powerfully illustrated in the story told by Silko’s witch, a process where an act of creation wreaks destruction. At the same time, Silko’s narrative clearly exemplifies the process of “creative destruction” that proponents and critics of neoliberalism alike use to describe the project of capitalism itself. U.K. based performance scholar Jen Harvie looks at the history of the concept of “creative destruction” as it is taken up in relation to capitalism:

the concept of creative destruction is attributed to Karl Marx […] and is subsequently addressed in detail by Austrian-American economist Joseph Schumpeter. Many champions of capitalism have taken it up as a principally positive force. Prominent critics influenced by Marxism – such as David Harvey and Marshall Berman – have identified it as both socially damaging, but also […] potentially leading to the destruction of capitalism itself. (89)

The destruction and inequality produced by neoliberal capitalism is seen to be necessary to its logic, not some kind of unfortunate byproduct. Marxist geographer David Harvey suggests, “Creative destruction is embedded within the circulation of capital itself. Innovation exacerbates instability, insecurity, and in the end, becomes the prime force pushing capitalism into paroxysms of crisis” (Condition of Postmodernity 105). Like the creative, conjuring power of the witch’s story that is directly connected to its ability to wreak destruction, capitalism thrives on the production of inequality and crisis.

To think about “creative destruction” more specifically in terms of storytelling for social change, what I am interested in here is how individual creativity and stories of difference are at once pitched as central to both liberal democracy and capitalism, while these
same logics consistently undermine, silence, and limit the very bodies whose creativity and “difference” provide powerful fuel to their legitimating fires. Indeed the innovative edge of capitalism is figured, in part, through the creative entrepreneurial efforts of individuals, through their speech and actions. Yet, the processes by which everyone’s stories are made to “matter”—increasing the focus on individual change and choice—are directly related to how the social is imagined (or not). As political scientist Wendy Brown writes, “The model neoliberal subject is one which strategizes for her- or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded: indeed, it would barely exist as a public” (43). Brown’s point underscores that the “freedom” of the neoliberal subject lies in his or her ability to move and choose between available options, not to question the terms of those options themselves. Even more, Brown’s figuring of a neoliberal citizenry shows how the agency of the neoliberal subject is predicated on the active erasure of concepts of the public or the social. Brown writes, “The body politic ceases to be a body but is rather a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers” (43).

In Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism, Harvie, following from Richard Sennett’s work, similarly draws attention to the damage that neoliberal structures have on “constructive, human social relations” (56). Harvie writes, “I share Sennett’s commitment to understanding sound sociality not as based on the celebration of the individual but as interdependent, collaborative and mutually supportive. However, I also share his and others’ recognition that not all groups produce positive social relations; groups can be hierarchical, only superficially collaborative, exclusive and corrupt” (56). Her attention to the production of the individual in relation to groups and social systems in performance acknowledges their
mutual constitution, while also exposing the importance of formulating alternative possibilities for out-maneuvering neoliberalism—beyond reductively valorizing individual freedoms, at one extreme, or, at the other, promoting collectivity and collaboration as necessarily positive.

In this way, I join with a persistent chorus of scholars and activists, artists and critics, who are concerned with the reconfiguring and erosion of the concept of the public within neoliberalism, on the one hand, and with those who are justifiably concerned with blatant omissions and/or monitoring of particular voices and bodies within existing collective structures and discourses (such as Canada’s liberal pluralism), on the other. In taking up “storytelling for social change” as both a problem and a possibility, I want, in a sense, to reclaim storytelling for political change, to uphold it as a mechanism for examining and re-performing terms of selfhood, belonging, and “home,” while also pointing to the disconnect between the stories we tell and the systems and structures that constrain and define the terms of voice. The specific Canadian novels, plays, and performances that I discuss examine the dangers of hegemonic stories of, for example, liberal pluralism and global capitalism, while recuperating storytelling itself as a site to hold contradictions in productive tension. Storytelling understood in this way also necessarily requires an examination and redefinition of what we mean by “social change” or social practice, and I find performance practices and scholarship particularly helpful for refining and deepening understandings both of subjectivity and of art’s political function. What can attention to “social practice” and to the porous boundaries between art-making and politics teach us about dominant cultural logics and the imaginative contortions that might be necessary to take on neoliberalism’s destructive contradictions?
**Why Now?**

Loosely, the stories I look at here—in the form of novels, plays, and performances—were produced in Canada between the beginning of the 1990s to the middle of the 2000s, a decade during which growing critical attention has been paid to the effects of globalization on understandings of nationhood and national identity and to the rise of neoliberalism as a cultural logic. This time frame is also associated with a “return to the social” (3) as formulated by art historian and scholar Claire Bishop in *Artificial Hells*. She argues, with specific attention to trends in socially engaged art, “The conspicuous resurgence of participatory art in the 1990s leads me to posit the fall of communism in 1989 as a […] point of transformation” (3), going on to suggest that along with the historical avant-garde in Europe in the early 20th century and the “neo” avant-garde of 1968 “[e]ach phase has been accompanied by a utopian rethinking of art’s relationship to the social and of its political potential—manifested in a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated” (3). Bishop’s framing is perhaps most relevant to my discussion of performance art and socially engaged theatre case studies in my last two chapters; however, her attention to the “social turn” or return of art in the 1990s forms a critical back-drop to the questions posed and negotiated in the texts that I analyze in my first sections as well. Underscoring the “social turn” in the context of performance studies, Jon McKenzie suggests in his 2001 book *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, “it’s all performance to us” (3), in ways that are echoed in Thomas King’s oft quoted statement, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2).
McKenzie’s book unfolds around a similar paradox to the one I highlight above in relation to storytelling, where he suggests, “‘performance’ can be read as both experimentation and normativity” (ix). McKenzie explores the double-edge of performance, drawing on Jean-François Lyotard to investigate how the cultural logic of postmodernism is legitimated through a new performance paradigm, where an imperative to perform in both “subversive” and normatively produced ways “has come to govern the entire realm of social bonds” (15). Perhaps not surprisingly then, Bishop’s marking of the third phase of a social turn in art directly coincides with a similar “social turn” attributed to neoliberalism—that is, the point at which neoliberalism moved from being understood primarily as an economic doctrine (in the late 1970s and 1980s with the Regan-Thatcher era in the U.S. and U.K. and later in Canada, New Zealand, and parts of Europe) to emerge as “a social mode of being” (Derksen 21) in the early 1990s. Jeff Derksen frames his recent discussion of poetry, politics, and neoliberalism in *Annihilated Time* in terms of this temporal period, drawing on Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell’s formulation of the “roll-out” phase of neoliberalism starting in the early 1990s, which

turns on an intensified government intervention that projects neoliberalism beyond freeing the market to a broader engagement with “new modes of social and penal policy-making, concerned specifically with the aggressive reregulation, disciplining, and containment of those marginalized or dispossessed by the neoliberalism of the 1980s.” (21)

In this way, the recent “social turn” that has seen performance and storytelling practices “explode” into the social realm has been accompanied by a marked shift in how the social is
understood—where neoliberalism is not posited as solely an economic doctrine, but as a way of life. In Brown’s words, neoliberal rationality has emerged as “a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social” (37).

What most concerns me about a prevailing logic that “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, Brief History of Neoliberalism 3) is that the hegemony of neoliberalism continues to colonize our imaginations even as its failure as an economic policy has been demonstrated on a global scale, first with the market crash of 2008 in the U.S. that had world-wide reverberations, then again in 2011 with the Arab Spring, and with the ongoing crumbling of European economies. Examining some of the broader implications of the “slow drift of neoliberalism as a cultural logic” (31), Derksen asserts that “in some inverse manner, despite its call for the end of history and its heralding of the rapturous end-times of a continuous present of liberal democracy and capitalist growth, neoliberalism has made an urgency of the present” (31). He asks how we can isolate “a distinct historical period for neoliberalism, particularly when we can see that its philosophical tendrils reach across centuries, and its current moment, which appears to have cohered rapidly, is creatively destructing (rather than ending) before our eyes?” (31). Thus, another contradiction manifests itself in the temporality of neoliberalism, which both ushers in the “end of history” and constantly defers desire onto a future of possibility in ways that end up fetishizing the “now.” The contradictory time of neoliberalism belies any easy periodization, as Derksen points out, but it also makes the need to historicize all the more critical. Indeed, the “continuous present of liberal democracy and capitalist growth” (Derksen 31) that has allegedly brought an end to history also makes urgent the need to re-tell history, to engage
with multiple, interconnected, and more-sustained accounts of a present not only made legible through the unquestioned “timeless” frame of a neoliberal now.

**Storytelling as a Methodology for Social Change**

My desire to explore possibilities for renewed mechanisms for sociopolitical change that are modeled and enacted in specific ways of telling is thus motivated by a concern with the claims that are being made for stories (within a range of discourses), and by a desire to re-insert the link between the telling body and the broader histories, institutions, and systems that give that body voice. I therefore turn now to situate my own discussion of storytelling and social change in the “long neoliberal moment” (Derksen 9) in terms of more expansive histories of socially engaged approaches to storytelling in the 20th century. I then go on to unpack some of the troubling implications of neoliberalism for the specific projects of Canadian nationhood and for critical democratic practices more broadly. I move on to explain, in terms of my own methodological decisions, why I continue to see storytelling as a particularly resonant method for engaging (and rethinking approaches to) social change in the neoliberal era, and I end by offering a section-by-section overview of my argument as it coheres in specific texts and performance moments.

The importance of telling stories that are out of step with dominant ways of knowing has become a growing methodology for social change within oppositional social movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a methodology that works to “reconfigure existing domains, reterritorialize colonized spaces, and recuperate suppressed histories” (Butling 19). For example, in her oft-quoted speech at the World Social Forum in 2003, Arundhati Roy stated, “Our strategy should be not only to confront the empire but to mock it [. . .] with [. . .]
our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness and our ability to tell our own stories, stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe” (n.p.). Sherene Razack also gestures toward storytelling’s “remarkable potential for social change” (37), explaining, “In the context of social change, storytelling refers to an opposition to established knowledge, to Foucault’s suppressed knowledge, to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms” (36). Following from Razack’s definition, I use the phrase “storytelling for social change” to examine a number of interconnected trends that emerged in the 20th century to challenge the “univocal voice-over” (Kruger and Mariani ix) of dominant discourses and histories.

In the context of third world colonization and cultural imperialism, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was a pivotal figure in illustrating the importance of having “the oppressed” move from being objects of dominant narratives to becoming subjects of their own discourse. In his work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, published in 1970, Freire points to the transformative aspect of “speaking a true word”: “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” (88). A dialogic act of telling is central to Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed,” a dialogue that is made impossible when “the oppressed” are denied a voice by dominant ways of naming the world; he underscores that “Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression” (88). Reclaiming the right to speak and to tell different stories (which already connotes a dialogic relationship between listener and teller) has also become central to a number of other related and converging sites of inquiry—from
postcolonial studies, critical legal studies, and feminist standpoint theory, to anti-racist studies, critical pedagogy, and popular education—to name some.

For example, beginning in the 1980s, feminist standpoint theorists, from Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Dorothy Smith to Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding, argued that thinking from marginalized standpoints “offer[s] possibilities for envisioning more just social relations” (Hartsock 373) and that “the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political rather than purely ‘epistemological’” (372). The politics of making space for marginalized voices has also been articulated within critical pedagogy and popular education (by scholars and activists such as bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Valerie Walkerdine, and Sherene Razack), an area of inquiry that shares allegiance with Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed.” Razack describes a “critical” pedagogy as “one that resists the reproduction of the status quo by uncovering relations of domination and opening up spaces or voices suppressed in traditional education” (42). Within critical legal and race studies in North America the conventional role of storytelling in law has also come under scrutiny. Gerald Torres and Kathryn Milun argue that the legal system’s requirement to tell stories in a way that encodes only specific elements as readable, while other elements are rendered unintelligible, can prevent marginalized people from using their own voice to express their perspective / world-view (52). Critical Race Theory scholar Richard Delgado observes that counter-storytelling in legal studies and politics has become a powerful way to challenge the “prevailing mindset” as expressed in institutionalized histories, discourses, and political and legal systems, that “stories can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (61). In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, Kay Schaffer and
Sidonie Smith similarly point to both the catalysing and challenging role of the use of narrative testimony in human rights efforts.

More broadly, postcolonial studies, itself a hotly contested label and area of study,³ cuts across a wide range of disciplines and has, according to Homi Bhabha, emerged to “describe that form of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once-colonized Third World comes to be framed in the West” (qtd in Mongia 1). Despite the important critiques of the term “postcolonial”⁴—i.e. does the “post” mean “after” colonialism, or does it indicate “both changes in power structures after the official end of colonialism as well as colonialism’s continuing effects” (Mongia 2)?—“postcolonialism” nevertheless is a booming area of study that surfaced alongside various decolonization movements to grapple with the question of representation and voice for peoples subordinated under imperialism.

Decolonizing efforts and independence movements throughout the colonized world emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—signalled by important moments, from the 1917 Balfour declaration in the Middle East and Gandhi leading the 1931 Salt March in India, to the anti-apartheid movement begun in South Africa in 1958. As Chela Sandoval observes, “The other world knowledges that transformed twentieth-century Western thought were generated not only in the west’s imperial confrontations with difference, but during the season of anti- and de-coloniality that followed” (7). Early twentieth century decolonization movements’ attention to independence and self-identification necessitated a focus on “telling our own stories” as a way of shaking off the version of the world imposed by former colonizing empires. In her analysis of colonizing encounters and resistance
movements, Sandoval foregrounds the centrality of “the voices of subordinated peoples” to the new disciplines, critical methodologies, and practices emerging out of these encounters:

[T]he primary impulses and strains of critical theory and interdisciplinary thought that emerged in the twentieth century are the result of transformative effects of oppressed speech upon dominant forms of perception—that the new modes of critical theory and philosophy, the new modes of reading and analysis that have emerged during the U.S. post-World War II period are fundamentally linked to the voices of subordinated peoples. (8)

These independence and anti-colonial movements dove-tailed in the 1960s and 1970s with movements in Europe and North America that brought attention to processes of internal colonization—that is, showing colonization as occurring not only between but also within nations (Black Power Movement, Chicana/o Movement, Feminist Movement, Civil Rights Movement etc.). These movements also engaged in acts of self-definition that involved finding new ways of representing identities and voices that had historically been silenced or subjugated inside the belly of the beast. The “insider-outsider” understanding of colonization and oppression saw these mid- to late-20th century social movements in North America working across national boundaries to consider systems of domination as globally interconnected phenomena.

During this period of proliferating (and usually masculinist) human emancipation movements, both “white” and “third world” feminisms emerged to nuance and complicate the often evolutionary, patriarchal, progress-oriented impulse of these movements (see, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Leslie Marmon Silko, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Audre Lorde, or Angela Davis). As these pan-American Indigenous, feminist, and non-white artists,
activists, and scholars attested, storytelling can play a pivotal role in valuing different voices than the ones who have spoken the loudest in dominant histories. The focus on *storytelling* as a method of asserting alternative perspectives and forging connection among disenfranchised voices has been crucial in feminist and Indigenous movements that challenge the exclusionary tellings of History.

The tracing of this brief historical genealogy is particularly important in the context of the “transformative forces” characterizing the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, forces that Sandoval describes as the “increase in human populations, the generation of totalitarian political regimes (unique to the twentieth century), growing urbanization, space exploration, nuclear power and weapons, the development of new media for the indoctrination and education of the masses, and the globalization of capitalist economies and cultures” (8). The theoretical categories and oppositional terrain that surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s also form the primary historical backdrop to my investigation of more “contemporary” oppositional works and movements (from the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century), as many of the texts I examine respond to, intervene in, are constrained or enabled by, the theoretical landscape engendered by these earlier social movements.5

**Challenging Canada?**

As I discussed in broad strokes at the outset, the question of how to challenge the domestication of stories of difference in the specific context of nation-transgressing globalization, nation-bound, official multiculturalism in Canada, and, finally, of neoliberalism (as both state-enabled and globalizing) is an important problematic around which this discussion of “storytelling for social change” revolves. Linda Hutcheon points to the
increasing presence of minority voices in Canadian narratives (both historical and fictional) in the second half of the twentieth century in her 1988 work *The Canadian Postmodern*:

[T]he 1960s saw the ‘inscription’ into history of those previously silenced ex-centric: those defined by differences in class, gender, race, ethnic group, and sexual preference. And the seventies and eighties have seen their ‘inscription’ into fiction […]. Female, gay, and various ethnic voices can now be heard, and the postmodern interest in the ex-centric has, I think, contributed both to this new valuing and to the challenging of all kinds of ‘centrism’ (andro-, hetero-, Euro-, etc.). (11)

Also addressing the mounting audibility of other voices within Canadian literature and history, Smaro Kamboureli speaks to the emergence of ethnic anthologies in the mid 1970s and mid 1980s, arguing that “this writing […] makes present what rendered it absent […] [and] stands on the threshold of what Canadian literature has become since those ‘strangers within our gates’ took it upon themselves to cross the boundary separating those who are silenced, who are written about, from those who give voice to themselves” (132).

While Kamboureli and Hutcheon emphasize an increasingly “mainstream” trend within Canadian literature to make room for difference, in celebrating the inclusion of other voices in dominant narratives it is also important, as Kamboureli suggests, to look more specifically at the terms of that inclusion. For example, in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, having those “strangers within our gates […] giv[ing] voice to themselves” should in fact be expected in an “imagined community” (Anderson) that has an official national policy of multiculturalism (as of 1988) defined by its recognition and celebration of difference. Thus, the question that remains is not if other voices are being heard, but how and why they are being heard: in what contexts and in what ways? As Arun Mukherjee contends,
multiculturalism’s “recognition of difference” can, on the one hand, allow for skirting the responsibility of acknowledging specific genealogies of difference by suggesting that “we’re all different,” that “we’re all immigrants” (69). On the other hand, despite the homogenizing and hence rather impotent conceptual acknowledgment that “everyone’s different” within a multicultural Canada, the banner of difference is often employed in ways that reinforce colonialisitc dichotomies of self / other by equating “difference” with “visibility” (read: being non-white), a move that allows whiteness to remain the privileged and invisible centre of Canadianness. Gesturing toward this slippery double move of both evoking and dismissing “difference” within the ideology of multicultural nationhood, Himani Bannerji comments, “at the same moment that difference is ideologically evoked it is also neutralized, as though the issue of difference were the same as that of diversity of cultures and identities, rather than those of racism and colonial ethnocentrism” (109).

The tension, where efforts to “make change” are seen as inevitably complicit in the alienating, hierarchical, and underhandedly violent systemic forces particular to the late 20th and early 21st century, is a tension explored by an increasingly vociferous range of scholars and critics. The problematic elements of Canadian multiculturalism’s “celebration of difference”—where difference is paradoxically rendered visible and invisible, named and contained—are further reinforced by recent suggestions offered by, for example, Andrew Potter and Joseph Heath (The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed), George Yudice (The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era), Jason Hickel and Arsalan Khan (“The Culture of Capitalism and the Crisis of Critique”) and Alexandra Chasin (Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market) that global capitalist networks actually feed off of difference and dissent. It seems that at the same time there is an ever-more
pressing need to confront and challenge global injustices, the ways in which social justice
efforts are articulated and carried out are often saturated with the cultural patterns and rhetoric
that perpetuate these injustices in the first place. For example, in ways that resonate with
theories of capitalism’s “creative destruction” that I discuss above, as well as with
McKenzie’s arguments about performance (rather than Foucauldian discipline) being
necessary to maintaining normative logics, Yúdice examines the notion of disorganized
capital, i.e. that capitalism needs new markets and constant change in order to thrive (32).
Yúdice suggests, “the failure to repeat normative behaviour as the constitutive feature of
subversive performativity may actually enhance the system rather than threaten it. The system
feeds off of ‘disorder’” (33). My engagement with the concept of storytelling and social
change thus takes into account this performative paradox—that “subversive” stories that get
told within framing narratives of global capitalism and liberal pluralism are complicit with,
even as they may be positioned as counter to, these hegemonic logics.

Making specific links between an ever-expanding global capitalism and the logic of
multiculturalism, Daniel Jones claims that official multiculturalism operates as “ideological
camouflage,” writing, “the state promotes indigenous cultural production to conceal the
reality of transnational capitalism and vested interests in the continued growth of production
and consumption of mass culture” (23). The potential radicality of telling “different” stories
can thus be undermined by capitalist and nationalist logics that are premised on the need for
expanding networks of accumulation, on one level, and on a potentially homogenizing
celebration of difference, on the other. Indeed, Butling wonders if “difference itself has, to
some extent, become normalized under the twin banners of multiculturalism and
globalization” (45). In other words, is it possible that the symbolic (and not necessarily
economic) “recognition of difference” within the multicultural, liberal pluralism that has emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century in Canada, is less an indication of progress on the level of social justice and equity, and more a move to recognize and tolerate cultural difference within the framework and rhetoric of global capitalism, ultimately working to manage and / or market diversity? How, then, do we prevent marginalized stories and minoritized identities from becoming part of carefully articulated consumer publics, “diverse” publics that are necessary to sustaining the incorporating logic of liberal pluralism and corporate capitalism in Canada?

Emphasizing the fraught relationship between telling stories and corporate representation and construction of “alternative” identities, Anishinaabe author and storyteller, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias writes,

> Stories are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture thinks [. . .] Yet, Native images, stories, symbols and history are all too often used by Canadians and Americans to sell things--cars, tobacco, movies, books. (98-99)

Chasin also draws compelling parallels between consumerism, representation, and citizenship, asking “what [is] the connection between identity-based political and social movements in the twentieth century and the niche marketing that [seeks] to capitalize on identity-based communities?”(xv). What happens when the arts are used to rehabilitate, facilitate, and create ideal citizens—ones who can fit into, rather than disturb, the hegemonic fabric? This project takes up an exploration of the forgetting / remembering problematic that also productively and necessarily informs my analysis of particular global capitalist trends
where a new kind of forgetfulness seems paradoxically to emerge out of *too much* knowledge and *too much* remembering. How do we proceed with “giving voice” to the voiceless and engaging in acts of recuperative history telling when resistance itself seems to be premised less on new knowledge and uncovered histories than it is on the bottom line?

In *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, Arundhati Roy explores how “crisis” and “resistance” are skilfully churned out as commodities within a heavily mediatized global capitalism:

>[R]esistance movements are increasingly being ensnared in a sort of vortex of crisis production. They have to find ways of precipitating crises, of manufacturing them in easily consumable, spectator-friendly forms. We have entered the era of crisis as a consumer item, crisis as spectacle, as theatre. […] The disturbing thing nowadays is that Crisis as Spectacle has cut loose from its origins in genuine, long-term civil disobedience and is gradually becoming an instrument of resistance that is more symbolic than real. (7)

Keeshig-Tobias, Chasin, and Roy draw attention to the consumption, commodification, and marketing of identity and resistance in ways that have implications for how social justice is understood. Their comments also, however, indicate that we may not get very far with challenging the commodification of difference if we don’t simultaneously bring attention to how the cultural logic of global capitalism relies on crisis and spectacle, and depends on the production of that difference and inequality in the first place.

Fredric Jameson offers a grim picture of the potential for social change within postmodernism, writing,
in our own period . . . late capitalism has all but succeeded in eliminating the final loopholes of nature and the Unconscious, of subversion and the aesthetic, of individual and collective praxis alike, and, with a final fillip, of eliminating any memory trace of what thereby no longer existed in the henceforth postmodern landscape. (5)

Similarly, Gabriele Helms comments in her introduction to *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, “resistance is always necessarily embedded in the structures it seeks to undermine or subvert”(9). Jameson’s and Helms’s assertions gesture toward a pressing question that further complicates discussions around the re-incorporation of difference within capitalism by moving the emphasis to examine the production of that otherness in the first place: How is it possible to engage in social change when our histories and our identities are always already produced and defined within the discursive parameters of liberal democracy and global capitalism, “the current hegemonic ideological coordinates” (Žižek 545) that are themselves enabled and defined by acts of silencing, exclusion, and violence?

As I indicated above, I am concerned with the effects of neoliberalism in particular, as the global economic logic that has joined forces with postmodernism to become, according to many theorists and scholars the cultural logic of our time. According to Harvey, the “neoliberal state” works actively to produce policies and frameworks that privilege corporations, moving away from a model of embedded liberalism, thereby “diminish[ing] its role in arenas such as health care, public education, and social services” (76). Harvey defines neoliberalism as
a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. (A Brief History of Neoliberalism 2)  

Drawing on Raymond Williams’ “structure of feeling” concept, Patricia Ventura echoes this claim in arguing that neoliberal culture extends the logic of the market into all aspects of existence, redefining success, failure, and individual agency along economic lines: “Neoliberal culture […] impels us […] to look to ourselves rather than larger social-welfare structures or society as the source of our success or blame for our failure—indeed, to define ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in market terms. In short, to become entrepreneurs of ourselves as Foucault terms it” (2).  

Another challenge to telling “different” stories is posed by the particular constructions of otherness and associated protectionist immigration policies that have emerged post-9/11 in Canada and the U.S. In light of these border-protectionist policies that work to project boundaries of safety and contain whiteness against the contamination and the amorphous threat of a “terrorist” otherness, the material effects and real hazard of dominant stories is made all the more evident. But what is also made evident is the importance of finding ways to “give voice” to difference that do not simply confirm and cement the boundaries around otherness. Edward Said makes an important comment about the paradox of borders: “Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory,” he cautions, “can also
become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity” (185). I want to nuance further these very important critiques of nation and ineffectual government policies by keeping an eye on what the current alternatives are to state-based policies. In the context of the globalization of neoliberal policies, the ability for people particularly abused by neoliberal structures of power to rely on social assistance is severely compromised. While government and institutional policies and practices have justifiably been critiqued for their exclusions, omissions, and racist actions, it is dangerous if these critiques move towards advocating for a complete dissolution of state-based policies in favour of what appears to be the current alternative—“freely” subjecting measures of equality to the neoliberal market-place. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of freedom mobilized in its name, the neoliberal state paradoxically resorts to increased levels of policing and coercive tactics (which I explore in more detail in chapter four). Neoliberalism’s process of “creative destruction” can therefore be mapped onto the tensions within storytelling practices and social justice efforts alike, where mutually constitutive concepts (such as equality and inequality, freedom and discipline, speech and silence, or individual and collective action) are sometimes figured as opposites rather than as interdependent and affiliated categories.

What Now?

In this context, what are the options? How do we continue to advocate for a critical democratic project that stands behind a future of possibility and not simply in opposition to the ineffectuality of existing logics? Judith Butler underscores the necessity of continuing to engage the idea of a critical democratic project in her discussion of international human rights:
Indeed, I think we are compelled to speak of the human, and of the international, and to find out in particular how human rights do and do not work, for example, in favor of women, of what women are, and what they are not. But to speak in this way, and to call for social transformations in the name of women, we must also be part of a critical democratic project. (*Undoing Gender* 37)

Butler suggests that we must assert a right to exist, to speak, and to engage in the conditions of life at the same time that “we must also subject our very categories to critical scrutiny” (38).

In the interest of subjecting my own chosen categories to critical scrutiny, then, why use the concept of “storytelling for social change” here? Why not “art” or “culture” more broadly? Or why not literature or performance, more specifically? In other words, why persist with using a language and framing that in the current neoliberal moment may seem increasingly evacuated of the radical, oppositional meaning it might have held in the 1960s and 1970s? In a way, my methods might better be understood within the more defined boundaries of cultural or performance studies—and yet, I turn now to explore some of the continued resonances and reasons for my decision to use this particular vocabulary, which include: to align with longer, interconnected social justice efforts that use stories to re-examine and rewrite history; to bring attention to the social construction and performance of identity while also finding ways to move toward others; to explore the theoretical and material implications of forgetting and remembering; to carve out a space for critically interrogating what’s at stake in trying to think *across* disciplines; and, most broadly, to bring together my interest in storytelling as both a problem and a possibility with my concern with
the implications particular neoliberal brands of “the social” have for understandings of selfhood, belonging, and change.

Retelling (Hi)story

As I gesture to above, part of my interest in using the language of storytelling and social change is out of a desire to re-engage history at a time when neoliberalism has proclaimed the “rapturous end-times of a continuous present” (Derksen 31). Storytelling is mobilized in efforts to recuperate and recover forgotten histories and to see how lost or obscured stories of the past may intervene in our understandings of the present. Rather than viewing history as a passive receptacle of “the past” where representations are definitive and fixed, a variety of current critical projects engage in explicit acts of unmaking or remaking historical representations (intellectual projects evident in “new” academic disciplines, from ethnic studies, cultural studies, globalization studies, to queer theory, women’s studies, and New Historicism, that expose “Western rationality as a limited ethnophilosophy” [Sandoval 8]). Offering a useful definition of the “re” in remaking (rewriting, reclaiming, restaging) histories, Butling suggests that the “Re posits later, spiral, and / or reverse movements rather than the single line and forward thrust of avant-gardism […] [It] involves rewriting cultural scripts and reconfiguring literary / social formations. The goal is to change, not conserve, past and present constructions” (21). This version of historiography, in fact, involves reconsidering the project of history itself, to see history as inextricably linked to the “here and now” and to current understandings and abuses of received identity categories.

In the introduction to their 1989 edited volume entitled Remaking History, Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani suggest that
The past several years have seen the development of alternate histories, recoveries of neglected and forgotten cultures and the recuperation of names and faces. Simultaneous with the elaboration of critical theories problematizing the construction of the subject and the relationship between knowledge and power, this process of recovery has been essential to challenging masculinist and Eurocentric visions that rely on linear narrative and promote totalizing concepts. (x)

While Kruger and Mariani point to a trend of recovering alternative histories emerging alongside the postmodern critique of the centered subject, many critics find this to be, at worst, an impossible alliance, and at best, an uneasy one. Recent work on storytelling for social change has first needed to find a way around or through critiques of linear narration, centred subjects, and the use of personal experience as the foundation for resistance. For example, Shari Stone-Mediatore’s book *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance* points to the problems posed to socially engaged storytelling practices by feminist and poststructuralist criticisms:

Feminists and poststructuralists have argued that we can no longer trust stories of experience to challenge ruling worldviews, for such stories are themselves constituted through ideological lenses. Stories that relate the experiences of marginalized groups may reveal the existence of difference or oppression, the argument goes, but such stories risk reinforcing the ideologically given categories of identity, difference, and separate spheres of life that structure narrative discourses as well as our own ‘experience.’ (1)

Many critics and scholars—from Thomas King to Hutcheon—find a way around or through these critiques by getting back to some of the very terms by which storytelling becomes
critically engaged or “radical”: by pointing to the story aspect of storytelling for social change.

**Performativity**

Rather than relying on the term “history,” with its associations of objectivity, linearity, and fact, recuperating the word story points to the narrativization, the performative, creating aspect, of any telling, even “truth” telling. Like Freire’s focus on the word, on naming as an act of creation / transformation, Stone-Mediatore describes storytelling as a kind of ‘making’ insofar as it draws on received discursive ‘materials’—that is, narrative matrices and story images that are given in past stories—and ‘works’ on these materials—that is, rearranges received narrative matrices and redescribes actors, actions, and places—so as to provide a new way of articulating a political phenomenon as a story. (37)

In terms of Canadian fiction, Hutcheon also points to storytelling as a kind of making by suggesting, “For many Canadian novelists […] the act of making fictions is an unavoidably ideological act, that is, a process of creating meaning within a social context” (10). She recuperates the “postmodern” for what she calls “engaged fiction,” or “historiographic metafiction,” “fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities”(13). Recuperating and retelling obscured histories thus becomes less about precise, factual representation, and more about how representation itself is an act of creation, allowing writers and tellers to present “expanded or polished [facts] to suit the truth of fiction” (Ondaatje 168).

At the same time, the recognition of the “story” aspect must also be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the “telling” part of the equation—that no marginalized experience
narrative, performance event, or piece of fiction is an iteration on its own but “makes meaning” in specific contexts and through specific dialogic relations. In order to explore more specifically some of the tensions and possibilities with how meaning is made, I draw on recent scholarship and case studies in socially engaged art practices. I see possibility in storytelling strategies that acknowledge subjectivity as both constructed and relational, and I look at these strategies alongside the alternative social, collective possibilities posited by the performance of such relational, storied identities. I use storytelling to point to the performative force of language, to the contextual and highly complex nature of speech and action, and to the importance of linking what and how we say with the spaces and material pressures that often dictate how that saying means. In other words, I follow from Butler in seeing identity as performative, as a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Bodies that Matter 2).

My interest lies specifically in the relational and performative aspect of storytelling because it is exactly this—the connections between people, the “space of current relations” (9) as Nicolas Bourriaud made clear in the 1990s—that appears to be dangerously compromised within neoliberal capitalism. Bourriaud discusses the emergence of “relational art” in the 1990s, art that takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context” (14). In a similar way to the growing interest in the methodology of storytelling for social change from the 1960s and 1970s on, the “relational art” practices detailed by Bourriaud are marked by a desire for action, engagement, connection, and voice in the face of the increasing social instability and passivity produced by capitalism. However, a heightened desire to perform, experience, and participate in “the social” emerges at the very same time that “the social” itself is collapsing as a meaningful category from which to engage
critically with capitalist injustice—a tension art and performance scholars Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson, and Jen Harvie examine in detail in their recent monographs on the implications of neoliberalism for socially engaged performance practices (in *Artificial Hells*, *Social Works*, and *Fair Play*, respectively). Desire for larger-scale connection and engagement is also evident in, for example, the turn to mass reading events such as CBC’s Canada Reads, the adoption of “community engaged” pedagogy methods across higher education institutions in North America, and in a range of other art practices that take the “social” as their medium. While I don’t examine these interconnected trends explicitly (except as they relate to community art and performance practices in my final section), my attention to the production of the subject in defining social narratives is motivated by an interest in the *specific* resonances of socially engaged storytelling at a time when the “social” is invisibly over-determined by capital. As we push to immerse ourselves in the “social” and the “real,” we perhaps paradoxically become less capable of seeing the framing, the story, the contingent nature of the “reality” that is responsible for engendering our keen sense of disconnect from each other in the first place.

In stressing both the creating / re-naming aspect (the story) and the dialogic, situated aspect (the telling) of storytelling for social change, it’s also important to be cautious of a reductive and ungrounded intellectualism that might read the recuperation of the “storiness” of storytelling as an assertion that individuals have the power to change the world simply by re-reading (or re-telling) it. In light of the recognition that “we do not change reality merely by interpreting it differently,” Stone-Mediatore acknowledges that “those stories that work with language to indicate the muted contradictions of everyday life, the diffuse agencies of multiply oppressed people, and the values and social relationships that ruling logics efface
can nonetheless intervene in the processes that determine what gets recognized—and responded to—as real, significant, and possible” (9).

**Counter-narratives, Counter-memory**

The language of storytelling and narrative also brings renewed focus to the tensions between hegemonic stories and personal stories, between speech and silence, and between forgetting and remembering. In “Postmodern Counternarratives,” Michael Peters and Colin Lankshear write, “Counternarratives […] serve the strategic political function of splintering and disturbing grand stories which gain their legitimacy from foundational myths concerning the origins and development of an unbroken history of the West based on the evolutionary ideal of progress” (2). They go on to point to a second, more specific sense of “counternarratives” that better fits with my understanding of “storytelling for social change.” In this second use, counternarratives emerge as “counter not merely (or even necessarily) [to] the grand narratives, but also (or instead) [to] the “official” and “hegemonic” narratives of everyday life: those legitimating stories propagated for specific political purposes to manipulate public consciousness by heralding a national set of common cultural ideals”(2).

What I find most compelling about Peters and Lankshear’s second use of “counternarrative” is that, for them, counternarratives also include the notion of Foucault’s “counter-memory” and the concept of specific, localized counter-practices. They also suggest, “Such counternarratives are, as Lyotard explains, quintessentially ‘little stories’—the little stories of those individuals and groups whose knowledges and histories have been marginalized, excluded, subjugated or forgotten in the telling of official narratives” (2). The concept of “counter-memory” has emerged as important to theorizing and using alternative (hi)stories, where storytelling is foregrounded as a process by which subaltern and / or colonized groups can work to keep *memory* alive in the face of colonialism and cultural imperialism.
Adopting this notion of counter-narrative or storytelling as a kind of “counter-memory,” Christine Bold, Ric Knowles, and Belinda Leach explain in their essay “Feminist Memorializing and Cultural Countermemory: The Case of Marianne’s Park,”

The struggle to keep the memory of hidden, everyday, and private violence fresh, public, and continuous—to resist what we call active forgetting—is a complex process. It involves entering into negotiation with mechanisms of social control that work hegemonically to naturalize attitudes and behaviors that disappear from consciousness and the public record at the same moment at which, and through the same mechanisms with which, they are internalized and made available as modes of control at all levels of society […]. (127)

The process of entering into acts of remembering or, more precisely, to resist active forgetting (a process that may paradoxically offer a way to name and contain difference) again points to the primary tension I would like to address in relation to alternative tellings. How do we tell without having these tellings made readable in ways that dull or obfuscate the critical potential of the tales? Or, from another angle, how can a refusal to tell become a radical act? Bold, Knowles, and Leach write, “The danger of unwritten, unrecorded history is that it disappears; the strength is that it can enter into active memory without becoming encrusted as specific individual events” (131). What then, is the relationship between alternative histories and memory? Between specific performance moments and possibilities for change? How do we address both the danger and the possibility of refusing naming while simultaneously considering the importance and dangers of demanding renaming?

Gayatri Spivak formulates the same problem in terms of my central metaphor of reading and telling stories. She makes a seemingly contradictory assertion that “telling our
own stories” does not necessarily mean that we need to engage in “the transformation and displacement of a writing into something readable”; and by “readability,” I think she means hegemonic readability—a process of encoding stories of difference so that they are understood and heard within dominant logics, a process that can lend itself to domesticating, and hence forgetting, difficult stories in the act of making safe. At the same time, Spivak nevertheless posits that we need not give up (for strategic purposes) a practical notion of power that suggests that by claiming a right to speak we enter into dominant cultural and political spaces as subjects with power:

[W]hen we push ourselves, or the objects of our study, forward as agents of an alternative history, our own emergence into the court of claims is not dependent upon the transformation and displacement of a writing into something readable. By that reasoning, we simply discover or uncover the socius and secure the basis of cultural or ethnic power through the claim to knowledge. By that reasoning, power is collective, institutional, political validation. I do not advise giving up this practical notion of power. If, however, we ‘remake history’ only through this limited notion of power as collective validation, we might allow ourselves to become instruments of the crisis-management of the old institutions, the old politics. (270)

The last sentence in this quotation again stresses the importance of not abandoning the “old” notion of power as “collective, institutional, political validation,” but in a way that emphasizes that this old understanding of power (central to the efforts of a lot of identity-based social movements begun in the 1960s and 1970s, for example) is not enough. Rather, Spivak demands that “In the current global postcolonial context, our model must be a critique
of political culture, political culturalism, whose vehicle is the writing of readable histories, mainstream or alternative” (271).

Form

While the concept of storytelling for social change, as articulated by Razack or within popular education and theatre practices, for example, usually refers to the telling of “real” stories by people excluded or marginalized within dominant hierarchies, throughout this thesis I put pressure on the notion of “storytelling for social change” to look at a variety of potential sites where some form of imaginative narrative is used to tackle social justice issues. Of course, all of the completely fictional narratives I address (alongside “personal,” and history-based narratives) are, on some level, informed by and caught up in real experiences of capitalist exploitation, or immigration, or activist efforts, but in ways that are, in some cases, not necessarily rooted in a particular community or identity group. To pick a fairly extreme example, I am interested, for instance, in how a text like Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl operates in a way that positions it almost outside history, outside the nation, outside conventional time in its invocation of a mythic temporality. These elements make Salt Fish Girl almost the opposite of other pieces I look at, such as the socially engaged performance Get a Real Job and Grocery Store that I discuss in my final section, stories that are historically and spatially rooted, that are community specific, current, and local. At the same time, Lai’s text does remain rooted, foregrounding both the material effects of national, patriarchal, and capitalist fictions, privileging the local while recognizing the fraught machinations of the global.

Further on the level of genre, there is certainly a difference between a dystopic text like Salt Fish Girl and more representational texts like Joseph Boyden’s Three Day Road; however, I think both narratives nevertheless represent productive and necessary approaches
to thinking about agency, domination, and social change. While it could be argued that presenting unravelling narratives and dystopic visions is perhaps not the most useful when people are searching for graspable variables of oppression and wanting to engage in site-specific challenges to corporate exploitation, for me, texts like *Salt Fish Girl* provide compelling sites for thinking through how power operates to produce and mark particular individuals as “other.” Such texts, in short, offer theorizations of the contradictory nature of domination and dissent that have been as effective as dense theoretical texts that address similar issues.

On the flip side, postmodernism’s assault on realism makes it somewhat unpopular or perhaps more tricky to talk about “real stories” and “real people” making “real change” without feeling as if one is falling into celebrating some kind of positivist approach to narrative, or re-inscribing a faith in the centredness, free will, and interiority, of the bourgeois individual. Of course, this kind of either/or approach is necessarily reductive: just because realism has serious ideological baggage, does not mean that experimental novels are the answer (or that they don’t also carry a host of equally problematic ideological assumptions). Offering quite a nuanced assessment of both the limits and possibilities of realist novels, Barbara Foley acknowledges,

The tendency of realistic narratives to dissolve contradiction in the movement toward closure; its characteristic opposition of the social to the personal, and its displacement of social critique onto personal ethical choice; […] its co-optation of the reader into agreement with the discourse occupying the apex of the text’s implied hierarchy of discourses—these defining features of novelistic realism can indeed undermine, if not cancel out, the proletarian novel’s espoused political commitments. (261)
However, she goes on to suggest that “I find myself more in sympathy with various forms of the ‘tendency’ position voiced by critics who grant the limitations of conventional realism in articulating an oppositional politics but who still argue that many proletarian texts do manage to give fictional embodiment to such a politics” (262). For example, Foley suggests that even in a predominantly realist mode, a story can productively show the self or the individual in relation to their broader social determinations (258). Showing individual actions and identities as historically and socially constituted allows room for thinking about individuals and about choice and agency, but in a way that recognizes the material and discursive parameters (or limits) to these individuals and their choices.

**Interdisciplinarity**

The language of storytelling also allows me to bring together an analysis of different imaginative processes and to use contrasting methodological approaches: here close textual readings of novels and scripts sit alongside broader cultural analyses of texts, performance moments, and experiences. In this way, I conjure into the equation the person quietly writing or reading a story (a complex process described in nuanced ways in Daniel Coleman’s *In Bed With the Word*) alongside the body experiencing an immersive performance or telling personal stories at a popular theatre performance. These contrasting methods point, on the one hand, to my wish to reclaim contemplative solitude, to make space for “thoughtful, slow, critical, and appreciative reading” (Coleman 41) as a mechanism for challenging capitalism’s feverish pace and the increasing hunger for immediate gratification, quick fixes, efficiency, and immersive experiences. On the other hand, I want to consider what might be possible from the spaces and within discourses (of community art and social engagement, for example)
that are seen, paradoxically, as either wholly compromised sites for social change or as the space and way to tackle the world’s most pressing social issues.

I borrow here from Jackson’s assessment of the productive disorientation that can come from bringing together distinct artistic and scholarly traditions (in her case, visual art and theatre). She writes, “I have found the act of placing different genealogies in conversation […] to be helpfully defamiliarizing, exposing as it does some of the critical assumptions, lingering resistances, and perceptual habits that continue to lurk in the practice of performance criticism and the practice of visual art criticism” (3). While Jackson acknowledges that terms such as “social practice” can be “resolutely imprecise” (13) they have the effect of moving conversations across disciplines and bringing together otherwise potentially disconnected scholarly, activist, and artistic communities. Speaking about a 2008 “social practice” themed conference she attended, Jackson recalls a panel where presenters “vacillat[ed] between hyperbolic spoken-word spectacles on sex and race with quieter chronicles of neighborhood cooperation around the environmental values of local growing” (13). While this kind of lumping together may end up confusing the terms of the conversation—undermining participants’ ability to access shared language or make assertions based on common knowledge or histories—the potential disorientation can also elicit more careful attention to the terms of inclusion in particular discussions and allow for an acknowledgement of both the limits and possibilities of disciplinarity.

On another level, I initially selected this particular grouping of novels, plays, and performances because I wanted to trouble binaries between, for example, complex and simple, constructed and real, literary and popular, mediated and experienced. These are
divisions that need interrogating particularly at a time when the “common sense” efforts and hard-work of the “ordinary” individual are promoted within neoliberal narratives as the forces driving change. As such, the work to challenge expertise and to locate possibility and agency in everyone—to make space for everyone to tell his or her story—is an effort that I applaud, at the same time that I recognize that this is actually the exact rhetoric used within neoliberalism to promote a kind of anti-intellectualism that discredits critical scrutiny of abuses of power, and that undermines attempts to show how the playing field is not level for all. The assumption that the more active, engaged, and participatory an artistic or pedagogical experience is the greater the potential for social change is a claim that I actively examine here. I suggest that nuanced, theoretical, engaged attention to the construction of subjectivity, to the terms of inclusion in dominant discourses is not antithetical to social justice efforts, and that this kind of deep thinking is necessary; however, I also argue that neoliberalism’s particular co-optation of the language of community and performance, of storytelling and “creativity,” does not mean that this language, or the immersive, grounded, experiential energy which they invoke, should be abandoned.

My use of “storytelling for social change” in this idiosyncratic way allows me to examine and work across some of the boundaries constructed between performance and literature, between activism and community-building, between individual and collective concerns, between art and life. In short, I follow from Bishop in wishing to “debunk[] some of the binaries upon which the discourse of politicised art has relied” (18). And yet, while I employ the notion that challenging stories and social justice efforts are, like dominant discourses, mediated and ideologically constructed, I attempt to do so in ways that suggest that there is a difference, that there is something at stake in what stories we tell, how we tell
them, and when, as the stories we tell have material effects on bodies and on lives. I hope that at least I am working to listen, retell, and remember, rather than to invalidate further stories that are out of step with dominant ways of knowing (or, of “not knowing” as the case may be).

**Section Outline**

**Overview**

I turn now to elucidate how my theoretical and methodological questions play themselves out in the specific chapters of my dissertation. What perhaps most clearly stitches together my discussion throughout is my consideration of the storied, performing body as a critical locus for investigating the limits and potentials of imagining resistance to unjust economic and cultural narratives. Derksen, asserts, “it is precisely at the scale of the individual and through the role of the state that the disjunctures of neoliberalism become most vexed” (22). For this reason, my examination of storytelling for social change in the recent neoliberal moment begins with an examination of the fiction of the Canadian nation and its relationship to producing and policing terms of identity, remembering, and change. I then move on to explore the framing of the individual in global discourses, of pan-Americanism and post-nationalism, through a kind of spatial storytelling that re-positions where and how “home” is imagined. My final section takes a look at the performance of the locally situated “economic” individual—in often overlapping roles of, for example, artist, employee, citizen, activist, and consumer—within and beyond neoliberal discourses of change. In all three sections, my analysis turns to examine the uneven production of the individual through the lens of the nation, the globe, and the city, respectively. I explore how these particular performances of selfhood and subjectivity are imagined in dialogue with the framing,
contextualizing stories of nationhood, capitalism, and globalization in ways that clearly show movement—between hope and despair, between individual voices and collective concerns, between isolation and belonging—movement given form in the process of storytelling itself.

Sections

The first section, “National Ontologies of Storytelling,” focuses most explicitly on constructions and deconstructions of the Canadian nation. In this section, I analyze the ways in which Djanet Sears’ *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, and Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* expose how dominant imaginings of “Canada,” in Michel Foucault’s words, “do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction, the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized” (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 28). I look at Sears’ play in terms of its participation in recuperative storytelling efforts—presenting storytelling as a way to reconstruct history by making obfuscated stories newly visible. In my analysis of *The Jade Peony*, I explore storytelling as a mode of remaking identity, while my discussion of *Three Day Road* focuses on telling stories as a method of survival and as a way to challenge cultures of fear and domination. The texts I discuss here locate, identify, and create a sense of being in relation (rather than a specific sense of “home”) through stories themselves, invoking the historicity and locality necessary to tell stories in ways that make strange what is seen as normal and right, and in the process problematize the very mechanisms of stranger-making.

In Section Two, “Global Geographies of Storytelling,” I examine how discourses of otherness (that I examine in Section One in relation to the specific logic of Canada) are perpetuated by global capitalist logics that further the imperialist efforts associated with the
project of nationhood while simultaneously by-passing some of the limits posed to capital by nation-states. In the first chapter of this section, I use Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas* to explore questions of migration, hybrid identities, and border crossing as they are articulated in nationalized spaces, showing how borders perhaps operate less to demarcate and define actual geographic spaces than they do to mark differentially the *bodies* that move (or aren’t permitted to move) through these spaces. In the second chapter, I discuss Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* to lay the groundwork for considering the implications a “borderless” global capitalism has for alternative subjectivities and social justice. The novel and play that I examine in this section show a kind of geography of storytelling—here counter-stories become home, become spaces to inhabit, to map on bodies, on land, and on relationships. That is, Verdecchia’s and Lai’s stories become maps, not of territories, but of possible new ways of being, sketching out an alternative topography of being in the face of the temporal dislocation brought on by the affiliated destruction of national and global logics.

In Section Three, “**Local Economies of Storytelling,**” I give precise attention to questions that are raised in less depth in the two previous sections by focusing on the interconnected production of the economic subject and “the social” within neoliberalism. I situate my discussion here within broader trends of performance and social practice, exploring the limits and resonances of the language of utility and necessity to unpack the challenges posed to socially engaged storytelling by the neoliberal push for proving social impact. In Chapter 4, I think through the complex terrain of “creative” resistance within neoliberalism by tracing the relationship between art and activism, culture and critiques of capitalism through a reading of a protest-themed 2009 benefit event at the Art Gallery of Ontario. My final chapter looks more specifically at stories as advocacy and intervention—discussing two “community
engaged” performances specifically—and the implications of these performances for imagining alternatives to neoliberalism. I examine Winnipeg performance artists Lori Millan and Shawna Dempsey’s art intervention, Grocery Store, and the popular theatre play Get a Real Job by call-centre workers in Sudbury, Ontario, as resonant approaches to staging critiques of neoliberalism that are attentive to our complicity with capitalist structures but that nevertheless find “the courage to risk contact” (Julie Salverson, “Taking Liberties” 251) in storytelling practices that, in Sara Ahmed’s words, “reshape the very bodily form of the community, as a community that is yet to come” (180).

Overall, I suggest that a key ingredient to challenging the obfuscating logic of neoliberalism is to demonstrate the link between material injustice and the powerful and arbitrary stories of belonging that mark particular bodies as other within their logics. My discussion throughout is therefore focused on the intersection of the performative force of dominant narratives to produce and define bodies, on the one hand, and the body as a site of re-telling and re-performing the terms of selfhood, on the other. While they represent “voices” from a range of locations and perspectives, these particular stories are not meant to be metonyms for the broader experience of the particular identity-based groups or social movements with which they (may) intersect; rather, they are examined here as very particular, historicized engagements with the terms and limits to voice within the nationalized space of Canada, the ostensibly “borderless” global world, or the neoliberal “creative” cities within which they unfold. While I am aware that this kind of comparative methodology can reinforce a reductive sameness-in-difference logic, I am quite interested in the tensions this approach produces. I see my work here to be documenting the processes by which these particular configurations of stories work—in contrasting, and sometimes opposing ways—to show the
fault lines, inconsistencies, and silences in dominant ways of framing identity, while also advancing claims for (however nebulous or loose) social connection and public dialogue through storytelling practices that push against the limits of (neoliberal) hegemonic rationality. This has to do with the kind of critical-affirmative posture that I hope to emulate here. It seems that I continue to encounter mounting theorizations of the problematic elements of social justice efforts, theories, for example, that emphasize the potential positivist or empiricist dangers of using marginal experience narratives to critique hegemony; that foreground the problematic centrality of essentialist conceptions of identity to a variety of identity-based social movements; or that pinpoint the continued perpetuation of sexist and racist hierarchies even within supposedly collectivist, consensus-based non-profit arts-based or activist organizations. It almost seems easier to dwell on the limits and pitfalls and hegemony-perpetuating elements of oppositional projects than it does to recognize traces of radicality, or to stand behind various efforts for social change. But what’s at stake in unilaterally dismissing or further invalidating critical democratic projects and tactics that already lack currency within dominant economies of power?

At its most broad, then, this project attempts to model a kind of movement between critique and connection outlined by Daniel Coleman in his book In Bed With the Word. Coleman uses the language of discernment to describe a practice of reading “that simultaneously individualizes us by placing the words on the page between us and the world and connects us by drawing us out of ourselves through imaginative projection toward the thought and experiences of others” (125). He refers to the importance of being “nourished by this double process” by “learn[ing] a discerning attentiveness so that the voice in the book can do more than echo back to us our own pre-existing views” (125). Gesturing toward the need
to bridge the chasm between how we might read or theorize identity and change and how we perform that change, Coleman goes on to assert, “We must perform the text to bring it to life” (127). What follows, then, is a performance of sorts, and one that continues to stretch toward making meaning of life in ways that are open to change and possibility and, to borrow here again from Jackson, open “to a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imagining” (14).
Section One

National Ontologies of Storytelling

Through the very loss of a past (the sharing of the loss, rather than the past as sharing), [the loss] comes to be written as Home. It is the act of forgetting that allows the subject to identify with a history, to find out, to discover, what one has already lost: what is already lost is the fantastic ‘we’ of a nation, city and house. (Ahmed, Strange Encounters 78)

Throughout this section, I examine texts that re-tell history “to unsettle our familiar sense of ‘home’” (Stone-Mediatore 43) in Canada and that use “strange” tales to destabilize received understandings of Canadianness. In doing so, I provide a combination of exploring the fiction of nationhood and analyzing specific historicized critiques of the nation. One of the many “philosophical tendrils” (Derksen 31) of neoliberalism is entwined with both past and current understandings of nation-states, which are, in Brown’s words, “receding, however slowly and unevenly, as the basis of collective identification and collective action” (19). Because my most urgent concern is with the creative destruction wrought by neoliberalism’s current embeddedness as a cultural logic, I begin my discussion by examining complex stories that engage the contested and damaging colonial legacy of the liberal democratic Canadian nation (and later the nation’s complex affinity to neoliberal logics), using it as a starting point to consider how to reclaim sites of collective identification and action without ignoring the challenges plaguing existing invocations of collectivity. I explore how (hi)stories of difference can be mobilized to re-assess our “home’s darkest corners” (Stone-Mediatore 43)
and be used, not just to “add” to existing narratives of the nation, but to make us ask critical questions about how the fiction of the nation functions. Shari Stone-Mediatore offers a useful analysis of how telling or re-telling histories can enable storytellers to use the “strange” to unsettle hegemonic and naturalized understandings of political or historical phenomena. She explains that by giving voice to the “odder elements of our history” (43) we may be able to reach new understandings of our “homes.” However, she stresses if understanding makes us ‘at home in our world,’ it does not necessarily make us comfortable with or accepting of the world as given. On the contrary, when a storyteller modifies her received narrative resources in response to the strangeness of specific historical phenomena and when she presents her story as only one historically contingent proposed interpretation of that phenomena, then her story makes us at home in the world only to unsettle our familiar sense of ‘home’ and to emphasize our responsibility to examine our home’s darkest corners. (43)

If I follow from Stone-Mediatore’s suggestion, telling a story in and of itself is a commitment to a kind of provisional unity and coherence, a commitment to saying something, to “making” a difference. At the same time, presenting one particular perspective of a historical event or past phenomenon does not necessarily mean that the teller is simply re-instating another generalizing and exclusionary “master-narrative.”

Indeed, Polletta’s recent analysis of storytelling in protest and politics suggests that “[n]arrative’s capacity to produce multiple meanings, to elide forms of authority, and to hold opposites in productive tension all make it a useful rhetorical tool with which to question the existing distribution of power” (175). So how is it that we can speak from within the tension of, rather than swinging between, over-generalizing and over-particularizing, between
comfortable grounding and utter dislocation? How do we speak from a site of strangeness as a way to reach understanding—without making strange (hi)stories either too safe to precipitate change, or too disorienting for listeners to “understand”? Stone-Mediatore suggests that “by creating a fusion of stories between strange and familiar worlds, [a] narrative [can] help[] us to assimilate within our worldview the odder elements of our history while it encourages us to rethink and revise our worldview in response to those oddities” (43). But how is this delicate and dialectical balance achieved?
Chapter One

Telling Strange (Hi)stories in Choy, Boyden, and Sears: Memory, Identity, Survival

Written in the space of loss and from a position of unhominess, the stories that I examine in this chapter show how, on some levels, Canadian national origins and boundaries have been (and continue to be) constructed through the abjection of racialized and gendered bodies. Engaging stories of strangeness and of “home,” I argue that texts such as Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*, Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, and Djanet Sears’ *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* expose and challenge this abjection by making dominant histories strange (that is, denaturalizing the normative by telling other histories) at the same time that they offer storytelling itself as a process and space of survival, of provisional belonging, and of recovery.

The texts by Choy, Sears, and Boyden take their place among a large number of Canadian novels and plays that work to tell parts of Canadian history that have been forgotten, invalidated, or mis-remembered. For example, plays like Djanet Sears’ *Harlem Duet* and George Elliott Clarke’s *Beatrice Chancy*, and books such as Clarke’s *George & Rue* and Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place Not Here*, draw on historical moments, figures, and documents of little told stories of Black communities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario—linking these stories to histories of racism, migration, violence, and activism in North America. Other texts talk about troubling moments in Japanese and Chinese Canadian history: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, and Choy’s *All That Matters* tell stories that ask us not to forget the implications for today of Japanese internment during World War II, while Sky Lee’s *The Disappearing Moon Café* gives historical context to racist immigration policies and dominant attitudes toward the Chinese Canadian community in Vancouver’s Chinatown.
Other texts, such as Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* and Aritha Van Herk’s *Places Far from Ellesmere* contest masculinist reading and writing strategies, using gender to write Canada in ways that question dominant representations of women in both literature and history. Margaret Sweatman’s *Fox* re-envisions the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, while Sharon Pollock’s play *The Komagata Maru Incident* addresses the events surrounding the brutal mistreatment of 376 potential immigrants to Canada of East Indian origin, who arrived in the Vancouver harbour in 1914 but were never allowed entry into Canada.

Many of these stories, stories that ask us to remember, to acknowledge racist and sexist histories, to confront systemic injustice, and / or to take responsibility for “our” complicity, are also fraught with the contradictions and difficulties surrounding social justice efforts. These contradictions manifest themselves, for example, in the conflicting perspectives on racism and activism held by Othello and Billie in *Harlem Duet*, in the tensions between Obasan’s absolute silence and Aunt Emily’s urgent speech in *Obasan*, or in Slash’s (in *Slash*) or Kae Ying Woo’s (in *Disappearing Moon Café*) recognition of social and political conflict within their respective familial and / or identity-based communities. Importantly, in many cases these contradictions are not glossed over, but rather are foregrounded as important parts of community responsibility and social change. That is, while many of these stories take some kind of (variously politicized and articulated) “identity” as a starting point for the critique of dominant histories and ways of knowing (or not knowing), these identities are almost never articulated as homogenous, coherent, or *a priori*—rather the various racialized, gendered, and classed subjectivities are themselves taken up as sites of contestation and debate, at the same time that they are used as starting points for challenge and change. Taking a theoretical cue from the wealth of Canadian novels that engage in efforts to remember and re-imagine
Canada, in this chapter I argue that the contradictions and difficulties in thinking about “identity” and “Canadian identity” need not lead to the dissolution of the notion of identity or subjectivity as such, but rather requires that we constantly engage in the work of negotiating and advocating for spaces and ways of thinking that are less hierarchical, less racist, and less sexist.

Before considering more specifically the kinds of counter-histories presented in Choy’s, Boyden’s, and Sears’s work, I want to flag a few issues surrounding the invocation and mobilization of particular identity categories in efforts for social change. What I deal with most here when I refer to “identity-based social movements” are movements that articulate themselves around what James Jasper calls “collective identity.” For Jasper, collective identity “consists of perceptions of group distinctiveness, boundaries, and interests, for something closer to a community than a category. The most familiar are caste, class, religion, race or ethnicity, sexual preference, and gender. There are also collective identities based on geography, notably nation, region, and neighborhood” (86). In a rhetorical differentiation that is relevant here, Jasper stresses that collective identities only become “movement identities” “when a collection of groups and individuals perceive themselves (and are perceived by others) as a force in explicit pursuit of social change. Although often conflated, collective and movement identities are not the same thing” (87). In my work here, I do muddy the waters a bit between Jasper’s definition of “movement identities” and his description of “collective identities,” as I argue that collective identities, even if not currently mobilized in “political” ways (in day-to-day, naturalized uses of the category of “woman,” for example), are nevertheless the product of antagonism and difference and hold a complicated and shifting relationship to dominant ideologies and practices. Many of the stories and theories addressed
here take up various “collective identities” in the “explicit pursuit of social change,” speaking from within and beyond particular identity sites and social movements to join in the negotiations and challenges also pursued “on the ground” in street protests and activist organizations. While the kind of activism mobilized within and through these texts is certainly not the same as the kind of “activism” expressed through organized street protest, I think our current definitions of what constitutes activism or critical engagement are sometimes too narrow to account for the multiple levels and ways in which people engage in social change. Drawing lines of solidarity between various efforts for social change (without collapsing important, democratizing differences, and without giving up efforts to critically nuance sites and methods of engaging social justice) is, in my mind, increasingly relevant in a neoliberal climate where it seems any kind of non-violent collective effort or opposition is seen as suspect and where resistant narratives are dismissed as “just stories.”

Just as “identity” is not represented in a singular or coherent manner within contemporary Canadian novels, the process of telling and hearing stories is also taken up and presented in a variety of ways. In some cases, stories are presented as sweet, to be longed for, but they come quietly and need to be coaxed: “If she kept still enough, she would hear [the story] […] Turned to the wall she could feel the story crawl over her shoulders and up her neck, she could feel it like something brown and sweet making the hair at her neck tremble” (Brand, In Another Place Not Here 33). In other cases, stories are shown to change and shift, are hard to pin down: “All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery” (Kogawa, Obasan 25). In Wayson Choy’s All that Matters, Kiam-Kim presents
his Grandmother’s stories as narratives to be both wary of and swept up in, presenting the fragile intersection of conflicting ways of seeing: “When I was almost ten, I stood with one foot deep in the rippling waves of Poh-Poh’s storytelling while my other foot stood firmly on dry ground. I would watch over my siblings, catch them if they slipped into Poh-Poh’s beguiling waters, as I had often slipped in my dreams, half believing trains to be iron dragons” (121-2). In Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of the Lion*, Patrick Lewis reaches to stories for security: “All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives […] The books would conclude with all wills rectified and all romances solvent” (82).

In contrast, texts like Aritha Van Herk’s *Places Far from Ellesmere* show stories as constantly in process, as fragments, where “the words are stirred, mixed, like pieces of a jigsaw, broken up into their separate shapes and the whole picture lost, left to be reconstructed by another, a different hand” (113). In Sky Lee’s *The Disappearing Moon Café* and Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the stories that are not told hover suggestively in the spaces of the stories that are spoken loudly. For example, at one point, in *Not Wanted* Japeth “had grown calm and fallen silent” because “he had come to the end of all the words that could tell his story” (79) which is in marked contrast to Mrs. Noyes who “was a woman and she could not speak. Aloud. But only think in silence and go mad” (243). On the other hand, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, Kae worries about having spoken, has a “misgiving that telling of our history is forbidden. I have violated a secret code. There is power in silence” (180). Whether the process of telling stories emerges as tentative, dangerous, secure, fragmented, muffled, or too loud, it is relevant that all of these texts grapple self-reflexively with the *how* of critical narration and meaning making.
These multiple ways of telling what Ahmed refers to as “narratives of migration and estrangement” (77) foreground how categories of the “minority,” the “migrant,” or the “marginalized” should not be invoked as fixed tropes whereby those who are made homeless (in a variety of ways—materially, discursively, economically) are defined solely by virtue of their not being “at home.” Rather, the telling of complex histories, ones that are written against the grain of “loss” and of “forgetting,” requires an examination both of the processes by which particular subjects are produced as outsiders, and of the ways in which “home” is constructed and monitored. While in this chapter, I focus on three narratives about bodies racialized within the whitened and nationalized space of Canada, my focus on these “other” stories is simultaneously an examination of the invisible place of whiteness in producing racialized subjects against which whiteness becomes mapped as the “norm.” Ruth Frankenberg points out that “the formation of specifically white subject positions has in fact been key, at times as cause and at times as effect, to the sociopolitical processes inherent in taking land and making nations” (2). Therefore, it becomes important not just to examine the production of “strangers” within Canada, but to foreground why and how the mechanism of stranger-making has been integral to legitimizing and reinforcing the physical and conceptual boundaries of a whitened (male and heteronormative) “majority” version of Canada. Part of this work involves negotiating not just the telling, but the space in which the tellings occur and the temporary communities that are imagined or experienced through these stories.

For example, Frank Davey’s discussion of a variety of Canadian novels in Post-National Arguments (from The Diviners and Fifth Business to The Temptations of Big Bear and The Wars) addresses the sorts of spaces the novels create—suggesting that ideas of “the
nation” or even “the social” are being replaced by an appeal either to the supremacy and autonomy of the individual or to a universalizing, extra-social vision:

Most of the novels construct ambiguous binary models of the post-national culture and its alternatives—models in which the alternative term is often not nation […] but the individual. Such a model should perhaps not be surprising, since the reduction of the significance of national boundaries, the reduction of regulations over travel, trade, and the transmission of information, tends both to increase the range and opportunities of the individual and to strip the individual of state protection. […] What the conclusions of so many of these novels provide is not a ‘caring’ society but an isolated protagonist, obliged in the classical liberal model to pull herself up The Main by her own bootstraps, or to console herself with visions of transcendence. (262)

In contrast, as if in response to Davey’s assertions, the three texts I examine here—Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God, The Jade Peony, and Three Day Road—locate, identify, and create a sense of being in relation (rather than a specific sense of “home”) through stories themselves, invoking the historicity and locality necessary to tell stories in ways that make strange what is seen as normal and “right,” and in the process problematize the very mechanisms of stranger-making. All three texts tell important stories that offer challenging visions of Canada at the same time that they are laced with theorizations of the necessity and value of the very process of telling stories. As such, I have matched my analysis of these three texts with a discussion of the kind of storytelling they each advocate. In the case of Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God, I look at Sears’ play in terms of its participation in recuperative storytelling efforts—presenting storytelling as a way to reconstruct history by making obfuscated stories newly visible. In my analysis of The Jade
Peony, I explore storytelling as a mode of remaking identity. Finally, my discussion of Three Day Road focuses on telling stories as a method of survival and as a way to challenge cultures of fear and domination.

**Recuperative Storytelling: Djanet Sears’ Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God**

Sears’ play *Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* participates in retelling an invisible(d) history of African Canadians in Negro Creek, a place in the Holland Township of Grey County, Ontario. The play centres on a historical moment of re (or mis) naming: in the mid-1990s, the Holland Township council renamed Negro Creek “Moggie Road” after a nineteenth-century white settler, a move that foregrounds the very active mechanisms through which particular histories are forgotten or “lost.” Using this moment to trace the history of African Canadians in Grey County, Sears offers a genealogy of subjugated knowledge that, to borrow from Foucault, represents “the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically” (“Two Lectures” 203). The act of writing over Negro Creek with a white settler’s name symbolically makes invisible a particular history of African Canadians, invoking the characters in *Adventures* as “strangers” in Canada. At the same time, Sears’ play tells a history of erasure and protest as a way to make visible the story of African Canadians, and in the process *make strange* normative understandings of the history of Grey County.

The story in *Adventures* primarily follows Rainey, a woman who is in perpetual grief over the loss of her daughter and who is at the point of divorcing her husband, Michael. Rainey’s soul-searching anguish (which leads her to begin graduate degrees in both Science and Religion) is contrasted by Rainey’s father, Abendigo’s and his friends Ivy, Bert, Darese, and Gilene’s mischievous efforts to reclaim—from museums, golf courses, people’s lawns
etc.—artifacts that depict Blackness in stereotypical and problematic ways. Fueled by Michael’s impassioned sermons about covert resistance, liberation theology, and Martin Luther King Jr., the group call themselves “Lotsa Soap” for the “Liberation Of Thoroughly Seditious Artifacts Symbolizing (the) Oppression (of) African People” (43). Once reclaimed, the artifacts are carefully re-painted, like the Black garden gnome that Abendigo and Ivy decide “will need a little help from our paint brush […] A few scoops of stucco, a drop or two of enamel and you’ll never have to smile like that again” (34).

Along with their liberationist efforts, Abendigo and crew join Michael in protesting the renaming of Negro Creek to Moggie Road. Abendigo tells Rainey, “They want to take away this place. Just like they did Juma Moore’s soldier’s jacket. And I won’t let them. Our blood is in this soil” (45), adding later, “They can’t just erase us from nearly 200 years of history” (46). Abendigo’s efforts thus work, on the one hand, to resist institutional mechanisms that work to make invisible a particular African Canadian history, and, on the other hand, to challenge the unjust ways in which Blackness *is* made visible—through stereotypical representations of otherness. In this way, metaphors of visibility and invisibility surface throughout Sears’ play, bringing to mind the paradox of the politics of visibility central to Canada’s policy of multiculturalism. George Elliott Clarke articulates the paradox in relation to a history of African Canadians when he states, “African Canadians also suffer the implacable truth that, as an officially ‘visible minority,’ they are, in fact, largely invisible in Canadian public affairs” (*Odysseys Home* 34). Clarke goes on to quote Canadian historian James Walker who asserts that, historically, “Blacks were out of sight and out of mind for most white Canadians, an ‘invisible’ minority despite their physical distinction, occupying the
unskilled and service employment ranks and living a separate existence” (in Clarke, *Odysseys Home* 35).

Despite the “visible” minority status of Black Canadians, Sears shows the ways in which Blackness becomes invisible when it is produced in a specifically classed framework. For example, as Ivy prepares for one of Lotsa Soap’s heists to reclaim “seditious” artifacts by taking off her coat to reveal a housekeeper’s uniform underneath, she remarks, “Take off my coat and suddenly no-one can see me” (15). At the same time, Abendigo’s Blackness is seen as an exception in the context of his position as judge within a predominantly “white” profession—he is considered “special,” different:

You’re not like other Blacks. You’re a very special Black. This is what he tells me.

And I realize….My friend John Sheppard helped me to realize that after all those years of trying, of setting an example, of trying to make them understand that we are as good and as bad as everyone else, I realized that all of it was for nothing. I was an anomaly to him. A freak. (45)

While Ivy becomes “invisible” once she pretends to be a house-keeper, Abendigo is highly visible—“a freak” and “an anomaly”—as a Black man who has supposedly crossed a boundary of whiteness in becoming a judge.

In her novel *In Another Place Not Here*, Dionne Brand similarly negotiates questions of visibility and invisibility in relation to the politics of blackness and whiteness, where being invisible is about being somehow “ordinary,” not strange:

In Sudbury, if they conform to some part of the puzzle, they are convinced that they will be rewarded with acceptance. Ordinariness […] Preparing to take nods at their
unspoken Blackness, smile deferentially and disprove every day, by their quietness, the town’s judgment on their blackened souls.[…] It does not matter that in this white town, they will remain odd, they will never be noticed as fully there. They are imaginary. They have come as far north as they could imagine. And they have imagined themselves into the white town’s imagining. (142)

Verlia hears the subtext of what her Aunt and Uncle are saying: “They are saying, ‘Look, it is easy—you can imagine yourself out of your skin and no one will notice. It’s only if you make yourself visible. If you blend in and mix there is no problem’” (142). In both Brand’s and Sears’ work, speaking and acting out signify moments of visibility—moments where Blackness pushes beyond the boundaries of “the white town’s” or the white country’s imagining. For both Brand and Sears, reclaiming and writing are acts of making visible, but acts that nevertheless call on a different kind of agency to determine how Blackness is represented.

These acts of “making visible,” however, still hold a complicated relationship to dominant logics (something I discuss in more depth in sections two and three). An important question emerges out of these negotiations: on whose terms is visibility being read, particularly in a country that works to recognize “visible minorities,” a process that makes readable and reifies a particular version of otherness at the same time that whiteness remains one of the unproblematised centres of a “normal” Canadian identity? How can one tell stories of difference, stories that jar dominant renderings of place and space and that make tactical use of what currently emerges as lack and loss, establishing in Foucault’s words, “a historical knowledge of struggle” (203), without reinforcing the invisible supremacy of whiteness? Or
without perpetuating the sameness of difference reified in Canada’s dominant national policy of multiculturalism?

At the same time that *Adventures* operates to “make visible” a little known history of Black settlement, Sears’ play also uses the “material” to comment on the immaterial. The material injustices experienced by African Canadians are addressed through the reclamation of artifacts, “material” that represent an intersection between a history of silencing and misrepresentation and a genealogy of reclamation and resistance. Rainey is caught in a different way between grasping for what is material and feeling overwhelmed by the things she cannot understand or describe, torn between the, at times, conflicting truths presented to her by the “hard facts” of science and the ethereal mysteries of God. Despite all that she “knows” as a doctor and as an academic, Rainey feels rootless, lost, out of place. Her own perplexity with the unknown, manifesting in her inability to control the deaths of those close to her, leads Rainey to want to take root, both figuratively and literally, in the soil of Negro Creek. As a result of Rainey’s sense of disconnect she takes to absorbing things as if to remind herself of her physicality, eating aspirin, cigarette ashes, dirt, and she ends up growing a tree inside her: “I yearn for chalk to dry the flood inside me and that’s why I pop aspirin […] that’s why I’ve got me a hole in my belly—it’s white willow bark. Aspirin, it’s willow bark. SO I’ve got a tree growing inside me” (20).

Rainey’s desperate search to connect with something concrete, material, dovetails in interesting ways with the recuperative use of “material” represented by the acts of reclamation performed by Abendigo, acts that also gesture toward a broader search for connectedness with place and history. I wonder if all the focus on the material, on the earth of Negro Creek, on the objects reclaimed and re-invented, is not perhaps part of a search for a stable sense of
identity, for a sense of “wholeness” emerging out of the particularities of history, and of place. I do think Sears’ examination of the link between place, memory, and identity is more complex than this reading of her use of “roots” would suggest. Roots represent a kind of connection between things, not an “origin” per se. In some ways the grasping at / for the “material” foregrounds that it is not the reclaimed artifacts or the earth of Negro Creek that would give Rainey or Abendigo a sense of identity and rootedness, but rather that the process of historicizing, of connecting to broader histories and memories forges a sense of interconnectedness to other things and people that counters the individualizing and sublimating pressures of dominant ideologies. Sears speaks about how through her play she attempts to create a “‘living set,’ a 15-piece acappella chorus that is both the principal component of the physical set, as well as the non-verbal vocalese soundscape which accompanies the entire story” (iv). Sears shows music, story, and choreographed movement “as parts of one form” (v) in the same way that she makes links between the history of oppression of African Americans, African Canadians, and of being connected—through story, movement, music—“to the many worlds in which I stand” (v).

The process of telling stories, of thinking one’s self, can become a way of being “at home.” Nandita Sharma argues that “home” “is actually experienced […] as a process, a practice, and a relationship—not necessarily a place. Home is organized in, through, and across spaces and consists of various linkages and interdependencies” (162). Part of Abendigo and Co.’s efforts to reclaim names and pieces of the history of Grey County is to foreground the ways in which place is marked by varying and conflicting histories, stories that differently position people occupying the same space. In this way, Sears’ play opens up a space to show the material markings of this difference at the same time that she acknowledges
the importance of understanding the production of difference in terms of genealogies of place and identity.

**Identity Fictions in Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony***

At this point, I would like to turn to Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*—a novel that shows how stories and words are integral both to unjustly producing and to *remaking* identities and representations of otherness. By offering a re-telling of the World War II period in Canada from the perspective of Vancouver’s Chinatown, this “true” story unsettles familiar senses of home in ways that are committed to reconsidering what the current Canadian hegemony upholds as “normal” and “true,” while also showing the possibility for re-naming. Here, Canada is rewritten from the perspective of a community whose arrival and existence in Canada was paradoxically both needed (for labour on the railroad) and unwelcome:

Most Chinatown people were from the dense villages of southern Kwangtung province, a territory racked by cycles of famine and drought. When the call for railroad workers came from labour contract brokers in Canada in the 1880s, every man who was able and capable left his farm and village to be indentured for dangerous work in the mountain ranges of the Rockies […]. ‘Go to Gold Mountain,’ they told one another, promising to send wages home, to return rich or die. Thousands came in the decades before 1923, when on July 1st the Dominion of Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and shut down all ordinary bachelor-man traffic between Canada and China, shut off any women from arriving, and divided families. Poverty-stricken bachelor-men were left alone in Gold Mountain, with only a few dollars left to send back to China every month, and never enough dollars to buy passage home. Dozens
went mad; many killed themselves. The Chinatown Chinese call July 1st, the day celebrating the birth of Canada, the Day of Shame. (17)

Subverting the celebratory connotation of Canada’s birthday, Choy’s story begins with the recognition that Canada Day is only a celebration for some—for those who feel “at home” in Canada. Choy goes on to write about the destitute and starving Old China bachelor-men who “had been deserted by the railroad companies and betrayed by the many labour contractors who had gone back to China, wealthy and forgetful […] China men were shoved aside, threatened, forgotten” (18). Providing the historical frame of Chinese migration to Canada and Canada’s own active process of forgetting the “strange” bodies that remain within Canada, Choy unpacks the seemingly impossible paradox of a “Chinese-Canadian” identity. What “Chinese” signifies in the context of Canada is, in this way, complicated by a history of violence and racism toward Chinese immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century, a history that needs to be remembered to recognize the slippery logic, and ultimately the arbitrariness, of stranger-making.

By writing from the complicated space of Vancouver’s Chinatown through three Chinese-Canadian child narrators—Jook-Liang, Jung-Sum, and Sek-Lung—Choy challenges the very terms through which understandings of Canadian history have been conventionally stabilized. Homi Bhabha writes, “the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both” (28). Examining the production of both Chinese and Canadian identity, Choy explores how a “Chinese Canadian” identity is a necessarily problematic site in a historical context that views these categories as opposites. In my discussion of The Jade Peony, I focus primarily on Sek-Lung’s narrative.
Early in his narrative, Sek-Lung makes clear that “nothing was simple: I was the Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants who were not allowed to become citizens. The words RESIDENT ALIEN were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I were a loitering stranger” (136). Through Sek-Lung’s negotiations of and inability to adequately define himself through either category, Chinese or Canadian, Choy challenges the injustices of racist immigration policies, and shows variety and complexity within the Chinese community in Vancouver. In view of the historically potent division between Japanese and Chinese Canadians, Vancouver’s Chinatown of the 1940s also becomes a space for dramatizing the broader battles of World War II—battles that are tangible in the visible and symbolic boundaries created between Chinatown and Little Tokyo, and between Chinatown and other parts of Vancouver. Choy writes from a point of productive crisis between binaries of “Canadian” and “Chinese,” and of “Japanese” and “Chinese,” in a way that points to the material effects of history, and the material effects of “fictions” on bodies. At the same time, the violence implicit within fixed identity fictions is examined alongside the possibility for new stories and ways of thinking.

Throughout the novel, Sek-Lung works to make sense of his identity: “All of the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born ‘neither this nor that,’ neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born mo no—no brain” (135). While Sek-Lung is “born without understanding the boundaries,” he is constantly taught in different ways and from different people where and what the boundaries are and how he stands in relation to them. Choy, through Sek-Lung’s negotiation of—and perplexity with—the discursive systems that work to “produce” him, reveals identity as constructed while nevertheless making Sek-Lung an agent in finding new stories and new
ways of speaking his self. According to his family and “all of the Chinatown adults,” Sek-Lung is “mo no,” brainless. Sek-Lung is considered “brainless” because he lacks fluency in the discourse of Chineseness. His mistakes in properly “naming” his relatives—calling Third Uncle, “Great Uncle” (129), for example—reflect his inability to name himself, to “correctly” produce himself within the discourses that interpellate him.

As Sek-Lung tries to sort through how to be properly “Chinese,” to prove that he has a brain, it is clear that “Chineseness” is anything but clear. Sek-Lung confesses, “Everything was a puzzle to me. Everyone was an enigma,” (134). As Sek-Lung negotiates how to correctly perform his Chinese identity, he is puzzled by his inability to discover a coherent script from the fragments of stories available to him. Sek-Lung muses, “I never possessed enough details, in either language, to understand how our family, how the countless cousins, in-laws, aunts, and uncles, came to be related” (133). Sek-Lung consistently describes his lack of understanding of Chineseness through metaphors of puzzles and mysteries, accentuating the “gaps” and uncertainties between how Chineseness is represented and how he performs, or fails to perform, his position in his family and larger community. For example, Sek-Lung reflects, “Every Chinese person, it seemed to me, had an enigmatic status, an order of power and respect, mysteriously attached to him or her” (131).

Sek-Lung’s desire to understand himself as unambiguously Chinese conflicts with the lack of coherence between the stories that are presented to him. Samira Kawash speaks of the space between fixed categories or binaries as a space of perplexity in a way that resonates with Sek-Lung’s experiences. She writes, “perhaps it is precisely this perplexity that demands our attention, not as a puzzle to be solved but as a condition to learn to inhabit” (218). Choy weaves a sense of ambivalence, of strangeness, and of perplexity into the language that Sek-
Lung uses in the negotiation of his identity, reinforcing Kawash’s discussion of learning to live *through* strangeness to challenge what is not quite “right” about normative narratives and dominant ways of being. As Kawash explores, inhabiting perplexity does not mean an inevitable descent into postmodern relativism. She argues, “without absolute assurance of the right or the just, we are faced with the continual, and necessarily political, demand of responsibility not just for one time or for one decision but at each instant, in each relation. This means more political engagement, not less, more challenging, more questioning, more struggling to expose and counter the violence disguised and justified in the name of self-evidence, nature, justice, or common sense” (218).

Choy’s discussion of the literal creation of false “paper” identities that enabled Chinese immigrants to enter Canada in the WWII period provides an interesting play between “real” and “falsified” identities. Sek-Lung explains,

. . . these persons were also tied to us by false papers to obtain immigration visas, they became “paper sons” or “paper uncles,” heirs to a web of illegal subterfuge brought on by laws that stipulated only relatives of official “merchant-residents” or “scholars” could immigrate from China to Canada. (132)

In order to maintain a sense of Chinese unity, the Chinatown community participates in falsifying identities to bring people to Canada. The “false” papers are evident (and materially necessary) fictions in maintaining security / unity within Chinatown, which is powerfully emphasized when Sek-Lung describes what would happen if the “false” identities were unmasked:

One careless word . . . and the Immigration Demons would come in the middle of the night, bang on the family door, demand a show of a pile of documents with red
embossed stamps. Then the Immigration Demons would separate family members and ask trick questions. Then the certain “family” members would disappear. Households would be broken up. Jobs would be lost. Jail and shame and suicide would follow.

(135)

Here “words” (stories, in a sense) are given the power to both destroy and create identities, in the same way that discourses deny and shape specific subject positions. Also showing the link between stories and lives in Vancouver’s Chinatown, the main character in Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*, Kae Ying Woo challenges her nanny’s dismissal of a prophecy as being “just a story” by stating, “in the end, entire lives are nothing but stories” (209). In order to participate fully in Chineseness, Sek-Lung must conceal both the falsified “paper” identities and gloss over the gaps within and between the various “versions” of reality that interpellate him. By mapping out the construction of the fictive identities and the power of these documents to determine the position of the Chinese immigrants in Canada, Choy seems to hint simultaneously at the real and the fictional aspect of any identity and any telling.

More specifically, in the example of the “paper” relatives, Choy emphasizes, to borrow an interpretation from Stuart Hall, that even if we understand identities to “arise from the narrativization of the self [. . .] the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity” (4). Even if the Vancouver Chinatown inhabitants recognize the foundations of Chinese identity to be shaky, for them, clinging to the “old” certitudes seems to be a less risky space than negotiating the terms of a new emergence. At the same time, the “fictive” aspect of these identities makes them no less *real* in terms of the material consequences and pressures marking “Chinese” bodies. Thus, while the liminal space between categories of Chinese and Canadian can be read hopefully—
as a site of re-negotiation that can allow for re-thinking the self—it also “threatens disorder,” to borrow a phrase from Kawash, “a disorder that seems violent and frightening in its very unpredictability” (166). The “freedom” implied by poststructuralist theorizations of liminality is quietly anchored by a recognition that the “paper” identities are necessary fictions, just as the fictional and arbitrary boundaries created between Canadianness and Chineseness are boundaries that cannot be transgressed without severe consequences (as in the example of Meiying, which I will address shortly).

Although Sek-Lung speaks Chineseness in terms of puzzles, enigmas, and riddles, he seems, at some points, to find some kind of stability in understanding that Chinese means not Canadian. A unified, universal notion of “Chinese” conflicts with the fragmented, contradictory “cultural shreds and patches” (Gellner 56) of narratives that Sek-Lung experiences and that “story” him in different ways. Sek-Lung counters his Chineseness by wanting to narrate himself through English, the seeming gateway to Canadian-ness. At one point, he declares emphatically, “I’m going to speak and write only English!” (136). Sek-Lung reasons further that “If Chinese was impossible to know correctly, I would conquer my second language” (138). Through Sek-Lung’s mobilization of a Canadian identity (because, according to his father “We are also Canadian” [133]), Choy highlights the boundaries that construct this historically specific notion of Canadianness, with Sek-Lung clearly outside.

Therefore, as Sek-Lung attempts to name himself within Canadian discourses, he becomes puzzled in a different way. When Sek-Lung, upon misnaming an important visitor to the house, defends his “disobedience” by arguing, “What’s the difference what you’re called! My huhng-moh gui, my red-haired demon friend, says if you drop a plate in a restaurant, a dozen Chinks will answer” (140). The importance of being named correctly and of
positioning himself within Chineseness becomes irrelevant in the equalizing, fixed, and othering gaze of Canadianness. At another point in Sek-Lung’s narrative, Choy writes, “On streetcars and in shops where only English was spoken, people ignored you or pretended they didn’t hear you or, worse, shouted back, “WHAT? WHAT’S THAT YOU SAY? CAN’T YOU SPEAK ENGLISH!?!?” (177). Sek-Lung’s exclusion from Canadian discourse, the force with which he is defined by what he is not, is constantly reiterated through both physical (containing the “Chinese” within Chinatown) and discursive boundaries (evident in the news reports, movies, and magazines that spew out news about the war). There is a violence with which Sek-Lung is racialized, a violence that suggests that the threat of the stranger and the need to demarcate “strange” space from what is “normal” are the very terms upon which notions of Canada are stabilized.

Further complicating the “us” vs. “them” polarization between Canadian and Chinese identity, Choy also explores the significance of the Japanese / Chinese binary in the historical context of World War II. Seven-year old Sek-Lung describes with delight the “endless movie-inspired war games” (170) he plays with other “bloodthirsty boys” (170). “We were, of course, all ‘good guys’ fighting the dirty Nazis and Japanese” (170). It is no surprise, then, that when Sek-Lung does refer to himself as Chinese, he does so to make clear that he is not Japanese. Within Chinatown, Sek-Lung constantly hears Chinese being differentiated from Japanese: “‘You remember: we Chinese,’ all of the Old China men drilled into my brothers and me, between the sips of tea and hacking up the bad waters, ‘Never forget, we together Chinese’” (202). Naming himself within the echoes of the Old China men, Sek-Lung proclaims, “I was Chinese and would never surrender” (202).
In the games and tales circulated in Chinatown, the Japanese are represented in distorted, fictionalized ways, revealing the careful constructedness of the “enemy” within the Chinatown imagination. Showing the role of the media in reinforcing the sense of threat and fear of the enemy, Choy writes, “The enemy was everywhere. The Vancouver Sun newspaper said so. Newsreels said so. Hollywood and British movies said so. All of Chinatown said so, out loud” (171). Picking up on the divisive spirit of the war Sek-Lung narrates, “I absorbed Chinatown’s hatred of the Japanese, the monsters with bloodied buck teeth, no necks and thick Tojo glasses; I wanted to kill every one of them” (196). In the peripheral spaces of Little Tokyo and Chinatown, the battle of identification is played out in the violent (discursive) marking of racial boundaries that rewrite the battle being fought between the larger “imagined communities” of China and Japan. Choy blurs the lines of battle to suggest that the enemy “Chinatown” is fighting—a distorted, cartoon-like Japanese—is, in fact, the enemy of the uncertainties and perplexities of living.

The boundaries between and within ethnicities are further complicated by the supposedly invisible difference (in the leveling gaze of whitened Canadians) between the categories of Japanese and Chinese. Sek-Lung expresses the slipperiness of the Chinese or Japanese signifiers when he comments, “Of course, sometimes a guy from another class mistook me for a Jap” (196). Through the discursive and physical marking of ethnic barriers, Choy depicts how the communities of Chinese and Anglo Canadians attempt to reinforce clear racial boundaries with particular vigor when threatened by the shadow of ethnic ambiguity. For example, near the end of the novel Sek-Lung explains, “Sometimes [Kaz] pinned on the I AM CHINESE button that Meiying got for him, and we met . . . between the boundaries of Chinatown and Little Tokyo” (223). This comment is layered with the
suggestion of both the discursive markers of difference (that the Japanese Kaz plays with by wearing the I AM CHINESE button), and the physical boundaries between Chinatown and Little Tokyo, boundaries that rearticulate the discursive systems of the war that produce and legitimize difference.

His babysitter, Meiying, who crosses into Little Tokyo to meet her Japanese boyfriend, Kaz, primarily motivates Sek-Lung’s transgression of the physical boundaries between Chinatown and Little Tokyo. While Sek-Lung is able to lie his way out of his disobedience, Meiying is not as lucky. Foregrounding again the material effects of nationally produced identity fictions, Meiying ends up dying as a result of a failed abortion attempt a week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Her death is framed not only as a result of her having disobeyed the dividing line between Japanese and Chinese, but also because of her being Chinese in Canada. When Meiying is initially found, still alive but in pain, the ambulance takes its time arriving because, as Mrs. Lim (Meiying’s mother) says “We are Chinese; they take their time” (237). By the time the ambulance arrives with its reluctant attendants who do not particularly want to negotiate Mrs. Lim’s rickety stairs, Meiying is dead. Through Meiying’s death, Choy reminds us of the devastation that is caused by the inflexibility of identity fictions that attempt to keep “other” bodies within carefully managed spaces.

Beyond showing the possibility for violence in enforcing essentialized identities, *The Jade Peony* also hints at opportunities for change. Before Sek-Lung’s Grandmother Poh-Poh dies, Sek-Lung shares the closest relationship with her and is particularly drawn to her ability to evoke rich images from her past “through her stories and games” (144). Sek-Lung is inspired the most by the “quick-witted skill her hands revealed in making windchimes for our birthdays” (144). Like the stories that Poh-Poh tells, her windchimes “were not ordinary,
carelessly made chimes [...] Each one that she made was created from a treasure trove of glass fragments and castaway costume jewellery” (145). Poh-Poh’s windchimes are carefully constructed out of bits of garbage, of things left in “the back alleys of Keefer and Pender Streets” (145). Even though Poh-Poh’s hobby causes some dissension and shame in the family, making them concerned about what the neighbours will think, Sek-Lung soon begins to accompany her on her foraging expeditions. Sek-Lung learns the significance of gathering bits of the past, pieces discarded by others, as a way to create something different.

Despite the confusion Sek-Lung faces with the multiple narratives that compete to define him, immediately after Meiying’s death Sek-Lung shows his agency in negotiating the puzzle of living by renaming Stepmother. Because of the laws against polygamy in Canada, Poh-Poh takes the discursive authority to name or translate Father’s “second-class wife” as “Stepmother” (“In Canada, one husband, one wife” [131]). Here, as in other instances in the novel, in the translation of terms from Chinese to Canadian a shadow remains of what was, that is powerfully reinscribed on the stating of what is now. Poh-Poh’s mis-naming of Stepmother in order to “simplify” the intricacies of the Chinese ranking system and to comply with the Canadian legal system, produces a “new” and inadequate position for Stepmother. Near the end of the novel, Stepmother expresses her uneasiness with her own name when she tells Father, “Even Jook-Liang and Sek-Lung—my own two children—call me Stepmother” (235). At the very end of the novel, it is significant that Choy leaves us with a moment of renaming. Sek-Lung, speaking through the pain of Meiying’s death says to Stepmother, “Mother . . . I’m here” (238). While possibly insignificant in the grander scheme of things, Sek-Lung’s moment of renaming is layered by the complexity of Stepmother and Sek-Lung’s relationship to Meiying and their roles in challenging the Chinese / Japanese binary. Sek-
Lung’s renaming of his mother is significant as it both challenges Poh-Poh’s discursive authority to position Stepmother within notions of Chineseness and stresses the inventive and on-going nature of both identity and belonging. By translating Stepmother as “Mother,” Sek-Lung is also representing himself in a changed way, reiterating himself into his relationship with his mother by translating his “self” in a way that affirms his intimate connection to her. Despite the difficult puzzle of living that Sek-Lung experiences as a racialized subject, he is nevertheless able to engage in a process of creation that is necessarily anchored in his particular history but that moves toward the possibility of a different future. Through his invocation of Poh-Poh’s windchimes, Choy suggests it is possible to create something new even out of inherited garbage, fragments, and puzzle pieces of identity.

**Storytelling as Survival in Joseph Boyden’s Three-Day Road**

Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* also re-envisions Canada through an engagement with the World Wars. In this case, Canada’s involvement in WWI is taken up from the vantage point of three Cree Canadians whose lives are touched—in brutal and profound ways—both by the war being fought in Europe and by the colonial war being waged on First Nations communities in Northern Ontario. The story is loosely based on real-life World War I Ojibwa hero Francis Pegahmagabow and participates in specific recuperative history-telling efforts alongside its examination of how the *processes* of storytelling and remembering (public and personal) are enacted and theorized. I have explored how the idea of Canada as home produces particular subjects as strangers in specific spaces and specific historical moments—Chinese and Japanese Canadians in Vancouver in the 1930s and 1940s, Black settlers in Ontario from the 1800s on—in ways that link these moments to existing constructions of Otherness in Canada. In the case of Indigenous communities in Canada at the
turn of the 20th century, the relationship between the production of “strangers” and particular, contextualized notions of Canada as home takes on a different dynamic. Sharma discusses the ways in which the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* that produced the Americas as open, empty lands to be discovered and cultivated by Europeans “was, of course, very useful in the ‘founding’ of ‘White settler societies,’ such as Canada” (9). She goes on to suggest that “the notion that indigenous peoples were never at home on these lands worked to depoliticize their homelessness after the advent of colonialism and the official redistribution of land to White settlers” (9). In this way, the colonization of and appropriation of land from First Nations people emerges as the first step in establishing the national boundaries of a whitened (and supposedly “democratic” and “tolerant”) Canada—where “stranger” natives are paradoxically made homeless by being *kept in place* through the reservation system. *Three Day Road* is written into this paradox of hominess, using storytelling as a way to challenge the isolating and destructive logic of fear that is shown to be a cause of, and response to, the brutality of war and colonialism; storytelling emerges in the novel as a life force necessary for survival, connection, and healing.

*Three Day Road* begins with the post-war return of Xavier Bird to Northern Ontario and the reunion of Xavier with his last living relation, Aunt Niska, a Cree medicine woman. The story of the two making their journey by canoe back home is interspersed with Xavier’s feverish recollections of the war and with Niska’s focused and persistent narration of memories from her past. The third figure of the novel remains physically absent from the frame of the canoe journey home, although Xavier’s best friend, Elijah Whiskeyjack, is omnipresent in the tales that Xavier and Niska share with each other throughout. The stories that Niska tells Xavier are often “not [] happy one[s],” yet, as she stresses in her telling of a
particularly unhappy story, “something in me has to tell it. There is truth in this story that Xavier needs to hear, and maybe it is best that he hears it in sleep so that the medicine in the tale can slip into him unnoticed” (240). In her stories, Niska links the experiences of the colonial subjugation of Indigenous people in Canada—a form of subjugation that is institutionalized through the residential school and reservation systems—to the bifurcating logic of WWI. Moving back to the turn of the previous century, she speaks about the influence of “the pale ones of the Hudson’s Bay Company” (43) on the Cree of Mushkegowuk, of Cree children being sent to residential schools in Moose Factory, of her own alienation as a child afflicted with waking dreams of a frightening future, and of her fraught relationship with a French Canadian man. The stories that Niska tells are ones of panic and strangeness, of domination and coercion, stories that show fear to be the powerful undercurrent to creating and maintaining binaries between colonial forces and native communities, between the “bush” Cree and the natives living in Moose Factory, and between members of the same family.

At the same time, Niska works to explain her visions of the future, visions that have troubled and nurtured her all her life, suggesting that they “were random, confusing, frightening or joyful. And when I returned, I had to scoop the fragments from the waters of my confusion and try to piece them into a story I could understand” (198). In this way, her role is as story-maker. Niska, however, moves beyond her role as story-maker, finding ways to use her stories for a specific purpose. In the act of re-telling her stories, Niska works both to make visible the “invisible walls” dividing and categorizing bodies, and to find a way around the seeming impossibility of breaching these multiple dividing lines. Throughout their journey, Niska tells stories to Xavier—who is despairing, sick, and addicted to morphine—to
heal him, and, more importantly, to challenge the culture of fear. Early in the narrative, Niska
tries to figure out what she can do to help her nephew after she hears him cry out: “The sound
of it, the animal fear at the very bottom of that cry, makes me think something I haven’t
thought about in a long time. It is the story of my childhood. Now I tell it to you, Xavier, to
keep you alive” (33). Later, Niska recalls what her father did for her:

    I remember when I was a child and came to my father scared or hurt. I remember what
he would do to help me. He made stories for me. About me. About how he imagined
me before I was ever even born. I have no medicine that will help Nephew, but in
these memories I find something […] I cannot let him go without telling him his story.
(325-326)

In both instances, Niska’s storytelling is positioned in opposition to fear; the act of telling, of
linking a personal history to someone else’s future, represents an act in the name of living. By
re-telling these stories alongside more intimate stories of personal longing, Niska is able to
tell against the grain of fear and of the bifurcating logic of war, using narrative to stitch
together a new meaning of survival and interconnectedness.

    While Niska feeds Xavier stories, Xavier floats in and out of his memories of the war.
Interestingly, Xavier’s tales and memories are in many ways more the stories of his best
friend Elijah, a young man who was also partly raised by Niska in Northern Ontario. When
Elijah first joins Niska and Xavier in the bush, Niska remembers how much Elijah loved to
talk: “For hours he could talk about anything, the stars, the rivers, the school, the people that
he knew, places he didn’t know, far away across the ocean. Late each night I would fall asleep
to his chatter. You lay beside him, Nephew, your eyes open wide as you listened to his
stories” (247). The way that Niska and Xavier share stories is contrasted sharply by how the
gregarious Elijah uses language. Elijah’s speech is urgent, incessant, performative, shape-shifting like the Weesageechak trickster who is his namesake (143). At the same time, however, Elijah’s talkativeness is sometimes shown, as the novel progresses, to be a strategy of avoidance and fear rather than a method of playfully reaching out to people. For example, during the war, Elijah begins to speak in a British accent:

    He began talking this way to get the others to laugh, but he likes it now. Makes him feel respectable. He told me there’s a magic in it that protects him […] I’ve got my animal manitous. Elijah’s got his voices. He says he couldn’t speak in his old voice even if he wanted to now. It’s gone somewhere far away. (127)

By inhabiting Britishness, Elijah feels respectable, secure, using language as a shield to the extent that his “old voice” is no longer accessible to him. In fact, in most cases Elijah seems to be controlled by his feverish need to tell, rather than because he is an agent of the telling. Xavier comments, “I know Elijah can’t keep anything from me, has never been able to. To tell me what he thinks and does releases a sort of pressure from inside him” (133). Elijah’s urgent speech is contrasted by Xavier’s careful silence: “Elijah tells me I just stared into the fire after he told this story. I didn’t say anything. I was always like this with Elijah, he says. Quiet and calm and listening, but never saying what Elijah needed to hear” (315).

    Eventually telling stories is no longer enough for Elijah to avoid the pain and fear engendered by the war. Using morphine becomes another strategy of avoidance. Xavier relates, “Elijah truly considers trying the morphine again tonight. He tells himself it is because of the bad feeling he’s got about this raid. What he cannot yet face is that he wants the morphine to wash away a fear that he feels for the first time in this place” (135). Along with the morphine, his soon legendary success as a sniper—the power he gains from both this
recognition and his skill as a killer—becomes a further way for Elijah to keep himself from having to face the fear of the war. Nevertheless, Elijah continues to fuel and justify both of these techniques of avoidance with his relentlessly eager tongue. Xavier remarks, “I remember him learning to love killing rather than simply killing to survive. Even when he went so far into that other place that I worried for him constantly, he still loved to tell me stories. He never lost his ability to talk” (249).

Elijah and Xavier’s relationship also carries another dynamic, teetering on an axis of visibility and invisibility that furthers my earlier discussions of racial politics and visibility in Adventures of a Black Girl. Elijah’s urgent speech allows him to move toward others, while Xavier at times feels invisible: “Elijah can out-talk even the officers with his nun’s English and his quick thinking. The others in our section are drawn to him and his endless stories. I am forced by my poor English to sit back and watch it all happen, to see how he wins them over, while I become more invisible. A brown ghost” (60). It is relevant that even in his invisibility, Xavier is racialized. Therefore, in some instances visibility is something that Xavier desperately wants—he wants to be recognized within the legitimizing gaze of the Canadian army in the same way that Elijah is recognized both by his ability to speak English better than anyone, and by his success as a sniper. In contrast to Elijah, Xavier reflects, “Me, I’m clearly invisible to the officers. How is it that Breech refuses to recognize that it isn’t only Elijah out there killing Fritz? We are a team” (165).

The times when Xavier and Elijah are marked as “other,” however, when they step outside of the accepted boundaries that produce them as racialized subjects, Xavier wants nothing more than to be invisible. Getting on the train on their way to join the Canadian army, Xavier and Elijah are told by a uniformed man “‘No Indians in this car.’ He pointed down the
aisle. ‘You belong four cars to the back.’” (149). Marked as belonging elsewhere, “four cars to the back,” Xavier and Elijah are made visible by their literal transgression of the boundary of whiteness, a forceful disciplining act that makes Xavier wonder “Did we not pay the same price for tickets as the wemistikoshiw? […] Do we not wear clothes just as fine as theirs?” (150). When Xavier tries to counter his feeling of invisibility by introducing himself to some soldiers from another division as “Xavier Bird. I am a sniper with the Southern Ontario Rifles” (286), his effort to identify himself is over-written by the response of one of the soldiers; he is told “You’re a drunk Injun, is what you are” (286). Thus, in a sense, it is not either visibility or invisibility that Xavier lacks at any given moment; rather, Xavier lacks the agency to determine when he is marked as visible and when he can slip by unnoticed.

Xavier and Elijah’s inability to determine when they will be “recognized” or not illustrates the implications of the kind of colonialist recognition that Daniel Heath Justice explores —where Indigeneity is determined based on what he describes as essentialist “quantitative categories,” blood or genetics, “depend[ing] ultimately on an eventual supposition of erasure and vanishing” (245). Heath Justice goes on to write, “Recognition in the service of the nation-state is a way of containing the range of Indigenous self-determination and concerns […] [and] focuses attention on constructions of lack, loss, and vanishing, and thus turns concerns of Indigenousness toward a more circumscribed set of considerations that are themselves determined by the nation-state” (246). In this sense, colonialist recognition or visibility is the mechanism by which Indigenousness is erased, as founding narratives of Canadian nationhood are premised on the discovery of “empty lands” where Indigenous peoples were never considered “at home.” Indeed, the politics of visibility / invisibility negotiated in Adventures and Jade Peony has an entirely different resonance with
Indigenous communities in Canada. Heath Justice cautions, “Indigenousness is not ethnic difference” (250), going on to quote David Bedford and Danielle Irving-Stephens who write, “Aboriginal cultures are not simply one more strand of a multicultural tapestry. Their traditions, which probably most Aboriginal persons want to preserve, are not easily compatible with the bourgeois, liberal democracy to which the remainder of Canada is committed. Being treated as equal Canadians amounts to culture genocide” (11-12). The container of nationhood, in this instance, cannot simply be “expanded” to add Indigenous flavour, as the container itself is produced through the erasure and vanishing of Indigenous bodies.

The impulse behind the management of otherness represented in debates around the politics of visibility and of recognition in Canada is, ultimately, an impulse of fear. In a post-9/11 era, there has been an emergence of what many critics and scholars refer to as the “culture of fear,” where the so-called “war on terror” is used to justify increased levels of policing and coercive tactics toward people identified as threatening. At the same time, the overt efforts to manage otherness in the form of, for example, strict and unjust immigration policies in North America, are, I would argue, part of the other, less obvious efforts to distinguish “us” from “them” evident in Canadian policies and practices that make minorities “visible” in a paradoxical move to keep whiteness safe and otherness in its place. Three Day Road not only links the bifurcating logic of the current culture of fear to its extreme enactment on the battlefield, but asks how we can overcome our complicity in giving in to fear. The question of responsibility is posed by Xavier when he acknowledges, “I fight my own struggles just as Elijah does […] We all fight on two fronts, the one facing the enemy, the one facing what we do to the enemy” (301). While Elijah deals with his own complicity
and fear through a consistent campaign of avoidance and denial, Xavier wrestles with his fear and panic by remembering his Aunt Niska. In a particularly intense moment on Vimy Ridge, Xavier narrates, “I try not to think, but a memory of me playing on the muddy shore of the Great Salt Bay comes to me, a presence near me, my watchful aunt protecting me. You, Niska. I don’t know why I think of you now as bullets zing by my head so close that they whisper to me […] I begin to mouth your name over and over, like a protection against the bullets” (218). Later, Niska recounts another time when Xavier is confronted with intense fear after finding himself lost in the woods:

A fear you had not known before must have bloomed low in your stomach then. It must have rushed up until it flooded your mouth like the taste of bad meat […] I’d warned you before of panic’s danger. It comes quick like an accident does, out of nowhere. Even then you knew not to let it take you. You stood there for a while and you must have thought of the stories I had told you around the fire, of men deep in winter being eaten alive by their own fear. (327)

In this way, throughout the text, Xavier and Niska unravel stories of fear and panic, using the process of storytelling itself as a mechanism to confront and overcome fear’s divisive effects. Near the end of the novel, Niska herself is overcome by a feeling of helplessness, not knowing what to do in the face of Xavier’s experiences of war:

I have tried to figure out what Nephew needs, what will help to staunch his wounds before it is too late […] what Nephew suffers from has been inflicted in a place I do not understand. What he has gone through I will never fully understand […] I have seen flashes of the killing and of the earth exploding in fountains of mud, but that is a
small taste of the reality, even though the images haunted me for days. A fever is eating him alive. (325)

Despite her inability to understand fully what her nephew has experienced, Niska nevertheless tells stories to connect to Xavier in the way that her father did for her when she came to him “scared or hurt” (325). Yet, in addition to struggling with her own efforts to understand, Niska also realizes that in the telling, she must find a way for Xavier to hear.

With all the focus on talking and telling stories in *Three Day Road*, it is significant that Xavier, the central character, is presented primarily as a listener (to both Elijah’s and Niska’s tales), but a listener who, paradoxically, loses his hearing. At one point, Xavier finds he is having difficulty understanding the orders of a general: “It isn’t that I can’t understand English. I’ve become good at that. It’s my ears. They ring constantly and sometimes I can’t hear anything at all” (208). As a listener, Xavier becomes defective—overwhelmed by noise and over-hearing, he is no longer able to truly listen. Therefore, at the same time that storytelling is presented as a life force, the novel shows storytelling as relational and dialogic by drawing attention to the necessity of listening. Niska tells Xavier, “The world is a different place in this century, Nephew. And we are a different people. My visions still come but no one listens any longer to what they tell us, what they warn us” (45). Xavier’s literal deafness forcefully underscores the importance and difficulty of making sure that these kinds of stories—stories that trace a genealogy of oppression and suffering left in the wake of colonialism and war—are heard. Importantly, Niska is not daunted by the task of ensuring her war-deafened nephew will hear. She realizes, “If I choose my words right, and speak from that place inside that tells no lies, he will hear” (326). In the end, the stories told throughout
the novel, their enforcement of a connection between teller and listener, and their challenge to the conflict-ridden, binary logic of fear, end up giving Xavier a reason to survive.

**Conclusion**

I have unpacked three texts that actively engage in efforts to re-tell history and that foreground stories both as the fictions that produce us and as possible sites for change. Each text, in different ways, juggles questions of visibility and home in the context of the nationalized and whitened space of Canada, shows moments of suppression and injustice from the past to be histories of the present, and tells complex stories about identity, belonging, and loss in ways that do not offer easy answers but that commit to asking difficult questions about what often remains “invisible” (i.e. whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity) within dominant notions of Canadianness. As these stories show, part of the work to construct and maintain whiteness as central to the project of Canadian nationhood involves producing and managing “strangers” within Canada. While I spoke about the concept of fear primarily in relation to *Three Day Road*—as something that is both marked as existential panic in the face of death and as a fear of the “other”—the concept of fear runs through all three literary examinations of the production of the outsider within Canada. On some levels, it is the fear that the supremacy of whiteness (or heteronormativity, or masculinity) will be recognized as arbitrary, as a powerful and destructive story, that leads to the intense interest in (as both fetish and site of revulsion) the face of otherness. In this way, these stories clearly invoke the nation as a site for a conversation about what the “we” of Canada excludes, and, yet, also suggests that such a collective reckoning shouldn’t simply be abandoned as a result of the troubled history of nation-building. In the next two sections, I
move forward from my discussion of “alternative” histories in Canada—histories that challenge not only dominant notions of “Canadianness” but that critically examine the process of identification itself—against the back-drop of broader questions concerning nationhood, neoliberalism, and representation. What is the importance and what are the limits of recuperative storytelling, or counter-telling narratives of the Canadian nation as a site that is bound up with global economic and ideological forces? 8
Section Two

Global Geographies of Storytelling

“What the map cuts up, stories cut across.”

(Michel de Certeau 129)

As I demonstrate in Section One, Canadian literary texts and scholars of Canadian literature have long expressed both an interest in and concern with the telling of Canadian history. For example, Hutcheon’s examination of “historiographic metafiction” in Canada in *The Canadian Postmodern*, Wyile’s exploration of the speculative nature of Canadian historical novels in *Speculative Fictions*, and Manina Jones’ investigation of the links between “fiction” in Canadian writing and Canada’s long-standing documentary tradition in *That Art of Difference*, all point to what Jones characterizes as “the historical-referential and literary character of Canadian writing” (5). No longer solely concerned with “building a nation” through imagining a distinct Canadian culture in prose, performance, and poetry, contemporary Canadian fiction is distinguished in recent scholarship for its tendency to contest and rewrite dominant history in Canada. Gabriele Helms suggests that “many contemporary Canadian novels call into question ideas of Canada as a benign and tolerant country” (3) while Wyile argues that contemporary Canadian “[w]riters of fiction […] have increasingly occupied themselves with finding and telling the stories of those left out of traditional history” (5). Wyile’s analysis of recent historical fiction in Canada in *Speculative Fictions* is consciously positioned as a more contemporary extension of an already thirty-year-long history of scholarly concern with Canadian fiction and alternative histories—from
Davey’s *Post-National Arguments* and Marie Vautier’s *New World Myth*, to Martin Kuester’s *Framing Truths* and Marlene Goldman’s *Paths of Desire*. The debates and questions raised in existing scholarship of Canadian historical fiction certainly show Canadian literature to be a productive site for contesting unjust representations and for constructing alternatives to dominant histories.

While interrogating unjust representations and historical methods is central to re-thinking Canada, what sometimes gets lost in these discussions is why, with the seeming wealth of diverse representations and resistant voices in Canadian literature, systemic racism, sexism, and class-based oppression continue to be a cause for much concern. Or why, with “mass reading” events where many of these critical, engaged texts are in broad circulation, do discussions continue to proceed in ways that often reproduce the dominant distortions explicitly challenged by the stories themselves? While a now fairly hegemonic “we” may be busily engaged in re-envisioning Canada to make room for “other” stories, it’s important that these incisive engagements are simultaneously linked to existing institutional, economic, and systemic manifestations of injustice, which includes attention to the ways in which our “selves” as listeners and readers are dominantly produced, constrained, and framed in relation to the critical stories we may encounter. My reason for wandering into this already well-travelled terrain, then, is to signal the continued importance of taking up questions of representation and resistance in the context of the imagined community of Canada, at the same time that I want to suggest we need to move our critiques beyond a singular focus on the “nation” to consider how the project of nationhood is deeply complicit with global capitalist and imperialist forces.
As I indicated in the introduction, in taking up two dominant stories, those of nationhood and history in Canada, as sites for examining representation, resistance, and voice (as I did in Section One), this project is also necessarily mapped onto two further stories: neoliberalism and global capitalism, stories that are continuing to alter current understandings of Canada. It is the purpose of this section to begin teasing out a tension that I see emerging out of the shifting terrain of nationalism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, a tension that can best be described as a troubling disjunct between what “we” (in this case a hegemonic “we”) imagine to be home and what this home actually means for those who are displaced, unnamed, or in other ways policed by national boundaries. To point to a question asked implicitly by both Verdecchia and Lai, what does Canadian (or any) national identity really mean in the context of globalization? The idea of “Canada” and Canadian identity has been consistently presented as under threat, both in early 20th century anxieties about sovereignty and nation building, and in the current era of neoliberal globalization and transnational corporations. However, the relationship between the “state” and “capital” is more complicated than this basic formula—of global capital threatening the strength and sovereignty of the nation—would suggest: national logics have always been informed by, and defined in relation to, global systems of economy and governance. Sharma points out that “what many theorists of globalization fail to consider is the fact that national state power and nationalized identities have never existed outside of or in opposition to larger spatial relationships but have been constituted through racialized, gendered, and classed relations that have always been global in scope” (44). She goes on to name, for example, the prior globalizing processes of “colonialism and imperialism [as] the very systems through which nation-states emerged as the dominant global system of governance” (47). Therefore, in order to avoid falsely
dichotomizing “the nation” and “global forces,” I turn to consider the increasing hegemony of neoliberalism as a story that operates through national, economic, and global logics to produce classed, gendered, and raced subjectivities that exist / express themselves / are mobilized both within and outside the nation. While in Section Three I focus more specifically on how the logic of neoliberalism narrows our radical imagination, this section attends more broadly to stories emerging from spatial disjunctures and tensions between national identity and these global capitalist forces.

In the first chapter of this section, I use *Fronteras Americanas* to focus in particular on questions of migration, hybrid identities, and border crossing as they are articulated in nationalized spaces, showing how borders perhaps operate less to demarcate and define actual geographic spaces than they do to mark differentially the bodies that move (or aren’t permitted to move) through these spaces. In the second chapter, I use *Salt Fish Girl* to lay the groundwork for considering the implications a “borderless” global capitalism has for ideas of alternative subjectivities and social justice. While Section One explores the ways in which storytelling offers possibilities to make visible, recuperate, shine light on our “home’s darkest corners,” the texts I examine here show a kind of geography of storytelling—here counter-stories become home, become spaces to inhabit, to map on bodies, on land, and on relationships.

The notion of the hybrid, border-crossing subject, of dialectic, liminality, or “third space” politics (within diverse areas such as postcoloniality, deconstruction, cultural studies, feminism, and materialist theory) posits that we need to challenge the politics of polarity, of black-and-white thinking, if we are to move toward negotiating democratic possibility. Since the notion of the dialectic has been central to theorizations of change and history (see G.W.F.
Hegel’s rational model of dialectics, Marx and Engel’s dialectical materialism, Frederic Jameson’s dialectical criticism, or Derrida’s use of deconstruction), it’s an important starting point for considering how to change unjust historical representations and to change how we think (about) history. As in Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, true dialogue between master / slave or oppressor / oppressed is necessary for challenging and transforming these polarized power relations. However, by the same token, if we do not recognize and name existing power relations, and show the self and other as mutually constitutive, we have no starting point from which to negotiate change.

Gloria Anzaldúa offers an imagistic description of the politics of polarity in *Borderlands / La Frontera*:

[I]t is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank shouting questions, challenging patriarchal white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and for this, it is proudly defiant [...] Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed. (78)

In order to unlock the drama between opposing forces, Anzaldúa stresses the importance of “living in the borderlands.” Unlike borders, which “are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (25), Anzaldúa suggests that a “borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It
is in a constant state of transition” (25). However, while it is somewhat easy to formulate the questions, and even to propose a “third space” of strangeness and uncertainty emerging from between polarities, how do we know when we’ve truly exceeded in “elud[ing] the politics of polarity [to] emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha 56)? How do we avoid polarization when one side of a particular binary is so clearly privileged over the other? And what does this so-called third space look like?

Many critics and scholars who work to destabilize binaries, formulate the struggle between opposing forces (thesis and antithesis) as a struggle that will eventually lead to a return to wholeness (synthesis), a conception drawing on the Hegelian “rational” model of dialectics. For example, at the end of Borderlands / La Frontera, Anzaldúa offers a clear definition of a “new mestiza subject,” a subject representing a return to wholeness out of the fragmentation of the borderlands. Other models propose a continual re-making of “home,” so even as there are efforts to “unsettle our familiar sense of ‘home’” and to “examine our home’s darkest corners” (Stone-Mediatore 42), they are done in ways that privilege becoming over being, and that constantly push to find the strangeness at work in our naturalized ways of seeing.

Some scholars of Canada (such as Stephen Slemon, Alan Lawson, and Gabriele Helms) position Canada itself in a kind of “in between” space, between the binaries of colonized / colonizer, First World and Third World. Lawson uses the term “Second World” to describe “more or less that part of the colonial space occupied by the postimperial, so-called settler-colonies” (67). He upholds the “Second World” as “a polemical reading position that finds a peculiar power in the dynamic relation between those apparently antagonistic, static, aggressive, disjunctive—even dis / abling—binaries with which we have inscribed our
cultural condition” (68). What’s at stake in even this representation of “Canada,” Canada as an ambivalent home, a home between binaries, particularly when we read stories from perspectives that are clearly not “at home” in Canada? For example, looking at how “Canada” operates in relation to “people assigned a ‘migrant worker’ or ‘illegal’ status in the countries in which they live, work, and sometime die” (4), Sharma explores the relationship between national borders and “ideas of home, and in particular, how borders make many people homeless in the very places where their lives are lived” (4). She goes on to state,

it is the very construction of an always-limited sense of homeliness in the Canadian ‘nation’[…] that makes migrant workers non-members of Canadianized society […] There is a materiality to the ‘differences’ between ‘citizens,’ ‘immigrants’ (i.e., permanent residents), and migrant workers; this materiality is based in the relationship between ideas of nation and those of race, gender, and class. (4)

Following from Sharma’s description of Canada as a nation produced with an “always-limited sense of homeliness,” I attempt to “think” Canada in terms of its fraught relationship to and participation with both nationally and globally articulated discourses and institutions that “manage” bodies in terms of raced, classed, and gendered distinctions. This is because I am more interested in how the fiction of Canada functions in conjunction with globally spun hegemonic stories (the story of neoliberalism currently being the most damning one) to discipline and mark bodies.
Chapter Two

Telling Across Borders in Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas*

I begin my focused interrogation of the role of storytelling *across* borders by turning to Verdecchia’s exploration of history making, identity, and nationhood in his play, *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders*. *Fronteras* is not concerned with *specifically* examining the value or the vision of a Canadian national project, but rather with showing how particular subjects are racialized both within and outside nationalized spaces. In this way, *Fronteras* is both about and *not* about Canada in a way that usefully points to the limits of existing understandings of nationhood for counter-hegemonic efforts, and that sketches out a new critical space for investigating injustices—one that is simultaneously linked to the effects of globalizing logics and to the process and practice of home, rather than to some *a priori* or geographically constrained understanding of identity. I deliberately use the version of the script based on the 1993 production because I am interested in its emergence from the middle of debates related to the North American Free Trade agreement (which went into effect in 1994). Verdecchia offers a prescient and incisive interrogation of the material effects and limits of the global economic “progress” symbolised by NAFTA in ways that powerfully underscore the *long* history and broad effects of the neoliberal “moment.”

The title of Verdecchia’s play explicitly positions it among other borderland texts of the Americas. By situating the play within the metaphor of the “American” borderlands, Verdecchia carefully negotiates the borders that construct divisions within and between bodies and nations, probing distinctions between actors and audience, between the North and the South, between “Saxons” and “Latinos,” between “official” and “personal” histories, and between constructions of the U.S.A., Canada, and Mexico. In a move similar to Anzaldúa’s
differentiation between “the border” and “the borderland,” Verdecchia asks the audience to see the borderland as an unstable space of “crisscrossed negotiations” (Saldivar 283), a space where multiple, intersecting borders simultaneously weave and unravel the stories of nations and peoples. Verdecchia speaks from the borders of meaning to suggest that we have to live within the tension and strangeness of remembering, rather than forgetting specific border wounds—wounds produced by colonial, economic, and political forces.

Though the title of the play invokes the metaphor of the border as the site for negotiating the symbolic and physical boundaries that mark and order spaces and bodies, throughout the performance Verdecchia increasingly problematizes the notion of the border:

Where and what exactly is the border? Is it this line in the dirt, stretching for 3,000 kilometers? Is the border more accurately described as a zone which includes the towns of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez? Or is the border—is the border the whole country, the continent? Where does the U.S. end and Canada begin? (21)

Verdecchia’s string of questions about the “nature” of borders exposes both the arbitrary division of nations that is signified by a border and the impossibility of adequately defining borders (even as it is equally impossible to live beyond them). This passage implicitly suggests that the more potent question, perhaps, is how borders—both geographically and conceptually speaking—are used.

At another point, Verdecchia clearly foregrounds the “fiction” of maps and borders when he states that in his quest to locate and identify himself, “[m]aps have been of no use because I always forget that they are metaphors and not the territory” (20). Exposing the fluid nature of borders and their relationship to reinforcing social and economic hierarchies, Verdecchia’s careful probing into the shifting, metaphoric nature of maps and borders is
coupled with an equally incisive interrogation of how underneath the “story” of borders and of national identities, “are living, breathing, dreaming men, women and children” (77). It is from this particular theoretical cross-roads—where living bodies and stories of national identity collide—that my discussion of Verdecchia’s play unfolds. Beginning with an exploration of the fiction of identity, I move on to address how Fronteras Americanas nevertheless highlights the responsibility we have (as academics, as students, as people speaking from or in solidarity with aggrieved populations) to challenge, remember, and re-tell the stories that shape our lives. By performing from a cross-roads of productive strangeness, where “to choose / is to go wrong” (74), between equally problematic notions of “Latinness” and “Americanness,” Verdecchia challenges “us” – the “dominant settler” or “Saxonian” members of his audience – to find alternate ways of scripting ourselves.

“Maybe a little history is required to put this all in order”

Taking up Stone-Mediatore’s suggestion that (hi)stories become critical when a storyteller presents his or her story as a “response to the strangeness of specific historical phenomena and when she presents her story as only one historically contingent proposed interpretation of that phenomena” (43), Verdecchia locates his play in history, while simultaneously alerting his audience members and readers to the interested methods of historiography itself. In the context of Chicana/o studies, Carl Gutierrez-Jones feels it is necessary that, “as the theorization of border cultures moves beyond its path breaking initial stages . . . [it] become more self-conscious about the contours of historiography” (101) and, later in the same essay he “calls on theoreticians of border consciousness to pursue a historically layered inquiry” (102). Fronteras Americanas clearly addresses the challenges that Gutierrez-Jones emphasizes, by playing with history to foreground that “living the
“border” requires an active process of remembering national histories of injustice, even as the play simultaneously challenges historiographic models that claim to offer authoritative or objective accounts of a coherent national past.

In terms of the presentation of narratives of a coherent national past, David Storey explores the mechanisms by which nations mobilize versions of the “past to justify their current existence and to provide a rationale for territorial claims [. . .] ‘National’ histories tend to present a relatively seamless narrative through which the members of the nation can trace their collective past”(77). Within current approaches to historiography there is an increasing trend to challenge this “seamless” presentation of national histories. For example, in Theatres of Memory, Raphael Samuel challenges the objective claims of historical narratives by re-inscribing the link between history and memory. He argues

that memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; that it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers – and that it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative other to it. (x)

Samuel focuses on the collective, necessarily dialogic and subject-shaping dimension of historiography that is erased within totalizing, “objective” representations of the past. Similarly, Ric Knowles comments that

[current models of historiography recognize that the past, insofar as it is external and objective, can only exist as fragments, ‘facts,’ and documents that are, in their own cultural terms, impenetrable. They recognize, that is, that ‘truth’ inheres not in the
facticity or actuality of events but in the ways in which ‘we’ understand them and construct their histories. (The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning 121)

By presenting the dialogic constructedness of history out of fragments of “fact” (facts that are themselves products of historical and cultural narratives), recent approaches to historiography make room for subaltern perspectives—perspectives that are paradoxically both necessary to, and suppressed within, hierarchical or absolute versions of history. Wyile, for example, speaks to the ways in which contemporary Canadian novelists who are interested in re-telling history have begun, “[i]n the process of unearthing the untold or obscure stories of the past,” to “contribut[e] to an investigation of the role of representations of the past in the construction of social, political, cultural, and, not least of all, national discourse” (Speculative Fictions 5).

Participating in efforts to unmake and remake histories, Verdecchia points to the responsibility of remembering, the responsibility of both locating ourselves within and working to re-imagine the way history marks bodies (through, for example, interconnected nodes of race, class, gender, and sexuality). By splicing together normally unassociated elements of Canadian, or European, or Chicano/a history, Verdecchia provides a history of the Americas that is both consciously constructed and consciously counts hegemonic understandings of “American” history. Verdecchia’s “Idiosyncratic History of America” revisits particular histories of injustice and suppression in the Americas, moving across national borders, to remember, for example, that in 1500 “Pedro Cabral stumbles across what we now call Brazil—Portugal, fearing enemy attacks, discourages and suppresses writing about the colony” (30). At another point, Verdecchia recites,

1542: The Spanish Crown passes the Laws of the Indies. These Laws state that the settlers have only temporary concessions to these lands while the real owners are the
Native Americans. Curiously, the Spanish Crown does not inform the Natives that the land is legally theirs. An oversight no doubt. (30)

Verdecchia also intersperses statements such as, “The first settlements appear in the highlands of Mexico” (28) and “Britain occupies the Malvinas Islands” (31), with moments of emerging U.S. imperialism: “U.S. acquires control over the Panama Canal” (31).

These broad histories of the Americas—that Verdecchia pieces together in seemingly random snippets, and that nevertheless point to a not-so-random theme of exploitation and injustice following in the wake of colonization and national expansion—are positioned in relation to the personal histories of “Verdecchia” and Wideload. By playing “himself,” Verdecchia exposes the construction of his own subjectivity, and angles another challenge at authoritative or “objective” modes of representation. *Fronteras* further reveals the constructedness of subjectivity through both establishing and problematizing a distinction between “Wideload” and “Verdecchia.” Initially Wideload seems to be an outrageous, highly fictionalized stereotype and “Verdecchia” is a supposed representation of the “real.” However, later in the play Verdecchia confesses to the audience, “I should state now that I am something of an imposter. A fake” (49), which ironically contrasts with Wideload’s subsequent comments, “I am by no means an estereotype. At least I am no more of an estereotype dan dat other person in de show [ . . . ] I’m the real thing. Don’t be fooled by imitations” (56). Both Verdecchia and Wideload are equally “real” in that they are equally constructed. Through Verdecchia’s self-conscious construction of both “Verdecchia” and Wideload and his splicing together of multiple narrative threads and perspectives, we are asked to question our rigid defence of the conceptual and physical borders in our lives, and to
recognize our participation in perpetuating and repeating the borders that mark out the specific spaces from which “minority” bodies are permitted to speak.

While the voices of Wideload McKennah and “Verdecchia” dominate as the only two “official” voices in the play, their narratives are constituted through a variety of personal, historical, musical, and media threads that effectively show the many ways stories shape lives. For example, media and movie fragments, like the Drug Cartel “silent” movie that Wideload McKennah “dubs” for the audience (60), or his earlier discussion of the Hollywood fashion magazine construct of the “Latin Lover” (42), are combined with music refrains, from the re-occurring tango that punctuates Verdecchia’s performance throughout, to accounts of events in popular Canadian memory (for example, Verdecchia’s non-sequitor about the Montreal Canadiens winning the Stanley Cup in 1969 [32]).

Wideload’s treatment of the “Latin Lover” stereotype offers a good example of how, despite the fragmented presentation of stories in the play, Fronteras nevertheless offers coherent and direct challenges to dominant stories. In this case, Wideload’s performance shows dominant representations of Latinos to be related to broader histories of domination and exploitation in the Americas. Wideload argues,

When a Hollywood trade-magazine and major newspapers tell me de movie feels authentic and when the movie is pre-sold because its stars are sexy Latino love gods and macho and cause dey wear great clothes, I begin to suspect dat dis movie is another attempt to trade on the look, the feel, de surface of things Latin. It goes back to this thing of Latin Lovers being archetypes of men and women built for pleasure. Whose pleasure mang? Your movie-going pleasure? The pleasure of de Fashion-Industrial-Hollywood complex? Think about it— (47)
According to Verdecchia, by trading in on the “surface of things Latin,” the Hollywood industry produces Latino stereotypes for an Anglo gaze while simultaneously catering to a desire for (an exoticized) “difference” in filmic representations. In this way, the stereotypes of Latinos perpetuated by the Hollywood film industry serve to commodify and domesticate “Latin” difference at the same time that “real” people (produced as “Latinos”) are erased as agents of these representations, and are further reified as objects of economic and national exploitation.

In another important counter-telling of a hegemonic “American” story, Wideload explains how in the dominant story of “the war on drugs,” the drug lords are presented as “de bad guys. We know dey are bad because dey have manicured hands, expensive jewellery, even more expensive suits and….dark hair” (62). Actively decoding the representation, Wideload remarks, “Dis movie shows us a lot of things. It shows us dat drugs wreck families: in dis case de family of de nice white guy who is trying to stop de drug dealers—nobody in his family uses drugs—it’s just he spends so much time fighting drugs dat his family falls apart” (62). Wideload’s interrogation of “the war on drugs” movie invites the audience to consider how the stories we tell are related to reinforcing hierarchies of privilege that justify and naturalize exploitative policies and practices. Most importantly, Wideload foregrounds what does not get told in this particular version of the “war on drugs” story:

It does not show us for example dat profits from de sale of cocaine are used to fund wars like de U.S. war on Nicaragua which left some 20, 000 Nicaraguans dead. Dis movie does not show us dat right-wing Miami-based terrorists, major U.S. drug traffickers, de Medellin Cartel, Syrian drug and arms dealers, de CIA, de State Department and Oliver North all worked together to wage war on Nicaragua. (63)
In placing this information about how an interested U.S. economic engine drives the war on drugs, alongside a mainstream representation of the “moral” reasons for the U.S. undertaking the attack, Verdecchia calls into question the original, naturalized framework of these accounts. In this way, Verdecchia works to re-envision objective historiographic designs in his negotiation of a history of the Americas that provides a space to investigate the ways in which particular bodies become positioned within or outside borders as “managed” objects within historical and national narratives.

“Going Home”

As I mentioned, Verdecchia’s “Idiosyncratic History of America”—that both challenges traditional historiographic approaches and offers other ways of telling American history—is carefully linked to the personal stories of Verdecchia and Wideload. By focusing on the personal histories of Wideload and Verdecchia, Fronteras Americanas presents a micro-level analysis of how the big stories of nation, of politics, and of economics relate to the appropriation and containment not only of territories and boundaries but also of “living, dreaming, breathing men, women, and children” (77). Like Sek Lung in the Jade Peony, both Guillermo Verdecchia (the character) and Wideload McKennah initially attempt to name themselves within the dominant stories available to them, a process that exposes the limits of existing categories of human and of home. For example, a slide about the term “Chicano” is projected on a screen as Wideload tries to puzzle through what exactly a Chicano is, and whether or not he fits the term: “Chicano: a person who drives a loud car that sits low to the ground? a kind of Mexican? [. . .] a Mexican born in Saxon America?” (26). Wideload rejects this description for himself, as he states “I don’t qualify as a Chicano. I wasn’t born in East L.A. I wasn’t born in de southwest U.S.A. I wasn’t even born in Mejico. Does dis make me
Hispanic?” (26). He goes on to problematize “Hispanic” and “Latino” as well: “De term Hispanic, for example, comes from the Roman word, Hispania [. . . ] Many people who today are referred to as Hispanic have nothing to do wif Hispania. Some of dem don’t even speak Hispanish” (27). He comments, “the term Latino is also confusing because it lumps a whole lot of different people into one category” (27). Through Wideload’s struggle to name himself, Verdecchia links naming with processes of containment and exclusion: despite the various terms available to define Wideload, he discovers that all of them work to make sense of identity in fixed and hierarchical terms.

“Verdecchia” (the character) also discovers, like Wideload, that he is unable to place himself within the stories that name him. In the section called “It Starts” (27), Verdecchia juggles various possible “beginnings” to his confused sense of self. Initially Verdecchia suggests “[i]t all starts with Jorge,” only to interject with “it actually . . . starts in France,” and later, “or it starts in the City of Sludge: Kitchener, Ontario” (28), until “Verdecchia” begins wondering if “[m]aybe it starts with Columbus” (29). As Verdecchia tries to trace himself back to the moment where he got lost (“I’ve known that I’ve been lost for quite some time now – years and years – but if I can find the moment that I first discovered I was lost, there might be a clue” [27]), he seems to be searching for the one seamless narrative of origin that would allow him to locate, to be placed, to discover the map. By emphasizing the impossibility of clearly defining himself as a Canadian, as an Argentinean, even as an Argentinean-Canadian, Verdecchia effectively challenges the terms by which particular bodies, like his, are racialized as “Latino.”

The moments when both Wideload and Verdecchia rename themselves further emphasize both their desire and inability to correctly place themselves within hegemonic
stories. For example, Wideload translates himself in order to be recognized within Anglo discourses. He explains to the audience, “when I first got here people would say, ‘Sorry what’s de name? Facoondoe?’ […] So, you know, I had to come up with a more Saxonical name […] I go by the name Wideload McKennah now and I get a lot more respect, ese” (24).

Through Wideload’s renaming of himself in order to gain “respect,” Verdecchia plays with the heavily loaded word “respect” that particularly invokes discourses of Canadian multiculturalism and pluralism, reinforcing how words of “tolerance” or “respect” mask processes of domestication and exclusion

“Verdecchia” also renames himself during the performance when he recalls a significant moment in his childhood where his teacher, Miss Wiseman, agonizingly distorts his name:

‘Gwillyou – ree – moo . . . Verdeek – cheea?’

I put my hand up. I am a miniscule boy with ungovernable black hair, antennae and gills where everyone else has a mouth.

‘You can call me Willy’ I say. The antennae and gills disappear. (33)

In order to be considered “normal” within Canadian discourses, “Guillermo” renames himself, erasing his own ethnic genealogy that is marked in a name that symbolically alienates him from being included in hegemonic discourses of Canadianness. Though it is a simple act of renaming (and Verdecchia is able to make himself fit within the dominant narrative, a kind of agency not necessarily made available to many who live in Canada but are unable to call Canada “home”), the moment is doubly charged with reminders of the often
invisible borders that determine what is normal and human, and what is too strange, too other to be recognized within received stories of Canadianness.

The fraught process of identification is further exemplified in Verdecchia’s conscious rehearsal of his Argentinean identity. Verdecchia’s decision to “go home” to Argentina is layered both with his conflicted notions of home and with his inability to correctly perform an Argentinean identity. Before going to Argentina, Verdecchia finds himself frantically rehearsing (and in some cases buying and consuming) his Argentinean identity:

I have spent the last fifteen years preparing for this. I bought records and studied the liner notes. I bought mate and dulce de leche. I talked to my friends, questioned my parents and practiced my Spanish with strangers […] I’ve spent the past fifteen years reading newspapers, novels and every Amnesty International report on South America. (37)

In searching for the narrative that will give him a sense of home, Verdecchia finds himself “putting on” what he perceives to be his Argentinean identity.

Even after his return to Argentina, one of the potential sites where he feels he may have lost himself, Verdecchia expresses his continued confusion: “I throw up in the bidet and I just want to go home – but I’m already there – aren’t I?” (50). Within hegemonic Canadian ways of seeing he is distorted, incomplete, an alien, and yet as he strives to find wholeness in Argentina, he finds himself home-sick, still searching. Verdecchia tells his doctor, “I feel Different. I feel wrong, out of place. I feel not nowhere, not neither” (51). He knows he is something, just not entirely Argentinean and not completely Canadian either, as these
categories position him, at times, in conflicting and mutually exclusive ways. Verdecchia finally asserts, “[a]ll sides of the border have claimed and rejected me” (51).

To return to the questions with which I began this chapter, Wideload and Verdecchia’s preoccupation with naming themselves and with correctly performing their identities masks a deeper need to find “home.” Mayte Gomez comments that Fronteras Americanas “deals with two kinds of borders: those within the American continent, which result in stereotypes of the south: and those within the individual, which bring about a personal struggle to find home” (26). So where and what then is home? Near the end of the play, Verdecchia finally seems to overcome his literal “home”-sickness by speaking / naming / telling himself from the space of the border – “I’m not in Canada; I’m not in Argentina. I’m on the Border. I am Home” (75).

However, what does it mean to be “at home” on the border? Sharma makes the point that any category that distinguishes members from non-members mobilizes a “bifurcating power” that denies the ways in which home “is actually experienced: as a process, a practice, and a relationship—not necessarily a place. Home is organized in, through, and across spaces and consists of various linkages and interdependencies” (162).

Like Sharma and Stone-Mediatore, Verdecchia does not propose a home of safety and closure; rather, he gestures toward a home that is both comfortable and strange, a home in process, a home that emerges in the telling. In ways that are relevant to re-thinking existing configurations of home, Butler speaks to both the risks and the importance of re-making our understandings of what constitutes the human. She asks,

What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one’s epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally
assumed to be? This means that we must learn to live and to embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world, not knowing in advance what precise form our humanness does and will take. (Undoing Gender 35)

At the same time, “learning to live the border” and learning to re-think “the human” remain fairly abstract challenges, challenges that may offer little concrete relief to the everyday complexities of living. Importantly, Butler goes on to qualify that while perhaps we cannot predict the specific permutations of “the human,” this “does not mean that we cannot struggle for the realization of certain values, democratic and non-violent, international and antiracist” (36). On the one hand, by recognizing the imagined nature of the dominant fictions that hegemonically monitor and order our lives we (and I am including myself here within a “we” of those who are at times made objects in various ways within dominant fictions) can perhaps use our own agency to become the subjects of fictions that are more equitable. On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that the imagined nature of hegemonic stories does not make the physical effects of these fictions any less real—indeed we need to take the material effects of these fictions as the starting point for critique.

Materiality and the Stories We Tell

It’s crucial to note that despite theorizing the fictive and metaphorical nature of maps, of nationhood, of the border, Verdecchia also points to the physical consequences and material dimensions of that imagined line. He explains, “The border is dangerous” (21), and later, “The border can be difficult to cross. We will have to avoid the Border Patrol and the trackers who cut for sign” (21). Re-reading Fronteras in the context of post 9-11 “security” measures that target (im)migrants and visible minorities, I think Verdecchia’s incisive
attention to the violent underbelly of border fictions is particularly timely; while a globalizing neoliberal logic continues to make porous national, regional, and institutional borders, it has, paradoxically, become increasingly difficult for visible minorities, immigrants, women, and otherwise disenfranchised people to cross the same borders over which money flows freely.

At the same time, Verdecchia does not imagine the Canadian border as a fixed geographic line, but represents it as a moving, ideological, and socially produced marker that means different things for different people at different times. In a section of the play entitled “Border Crossings,” *Fronteras* acknowledges the difficulty “other” people face trying to get across the border. Verdecchia is met with mild resistance as he tries to cross the border back into the United States. Frustrated, he asks, “Come on what is this? I’m a Canadian citizen—we’re supposed to be friends. You know, Free Trade, the longest undefended border in the world…all that? [to the audience] I had less trouble getting into Argentina” (57). The section ends with a dry yet pointed acknowledgement that “[s]ome things get across borders easier than others” (57). Sharma puts it another way:

borders do not affect everyone similarly. For a small, select group they are mere formalities. Business people, government officials, certain states’ armed forces, tourists, and the personnel of legitimated international governmental and non-governmental organizations, for instance, traverse them practically at will and with very little thought. On the other hand, borders never leave others alone. In particular, for people assigned a ‘migrant worker’ or ‘illegal’ status in the countries in which they live, work, and sometimes die, borders follow them to school, to work; indeed they encounter borders in every aspect of their lives. (4)
In light of the shifting yet material nature of borders, I want to re-visit the significance of Verdecchia’s suggestion, “I am not falling apart, I am putting together. I am building a house on the border” (78). Gutierrez-Jones argues that celebrations of the borderland or the bordered / hybrid subject can potentially serve to essentialize this “third space” in a way that perpetuates woundedness rather than moving toward changed ways of seeing, performing, or telling the self. He argues that “what one finds” in some texts that develop the metaphor of the borderland are “representation[s] of resistance that remain[] tied to institutional histories, [] representation[s] tied in ways that may reinforce the perpetual wound, the perpetual crossing, rather than offer deconstruction and mediation” (101). At the same time, by highlighting a kind of disembodied border consciousness, a “subject beyond borders,” the bordered subject is “freed” from the complexities of the historical processes and conflicting narratives that shape his or her specific subjectivity. Anne Nothof provides a reading of Verdecchia’s play that in a way does interpret the borderland as a space beyond borders, arguing that Fronteras Americanas “imagine[s] the possibility of ‘dancing’ in a space which precludes borders, of playing ‘a tune beyond us, yet ourselves’”(3). In contrast, I argue that by living on the border, Verdecchia is not advocating for a place “beyond borders” or “beyond the subject.” In fact, at the same time that Verdecchia calls into question the borders that define him, he recognizes the danger of suggesting we’re “beyond” them, particularly when being “border free” is another way of re-writing hegemonic scripts to favour, on the one hand, the will of money and markets, and to deny, on the other, the material effects of existing borders.

Near the end of the play, Verdecchia quotes an IBM advertisement: “Somehow the word ‘foreign’ seems foreign these days. The world is smaller, so people are thinking bigger,
beyond borders” (77). Stated in a play that was first performed in 1993, shortly before the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, and that was re-staged in 2011 (in a revised version) at a time when the hegemony of neoliberalism continues unabated despite mounting evidence of its devastating affects, Wideload’s comments are telling: “Señoras y señores, we are re-drawing the map of America because economics, I’m told, knows no borders […] Free trade all de way from Mêjico to Chile—dis is a big deal and I want to say dat it is a very complicated thing and it is only the beginning” (77). Verdecchia foregrounds that the language around borders becomes slippery at best when the freedom of borderlessness is invoked in the name of economic free trade, of money flowing where it wants, while the physical crossing of borders becomes increasingly difficult for “others.” Indeed, Wideload goes on to make a statement that effectively illustrates the interconnectedness of the stories we tell and the material parameters that enable or constrain the ways in which we are “permitted” to live:

I wish to remind you, at this crucial juncture in our shared geographies, dat under dose funny voices and under dose funny images of de Frito Bandito and under all this talk of Money and Markets there are living, breathing, dreaming, men, women and children. I want to ask you please to throw out the metaphor of Latin America as North America’s ‘backyard’ because your backyard is now a border and the metaphor is now made flesh. Mira, I am in your backyard. I live next door, I live upstairs, I live across de street… (77)

Recognizing our interconnectedness to the “others” in our lives (in this case, North America’s “other” of Latin America) becomes an important starting point for taking responsibility and for telling stories that are less violent, less racist, less hierarchical.
I want to end this chapter by emphasizing a moment in *Fronteras Americanas* that further accentuates our lack of neutrality. Upon arriving “home” in Argentina, Verdecchia finds himself in his hotel room observing the death of a man who was shot in the street outside. This experience comes on the tail of Verdecchia’s amused perusal of tourist guides as he travels through Chile. He reads a description of Chile “as very cosmopolitan” (37) and Chileans as “a handsome stylish people known for their openness and hospitality” (37) alongside a similarly detached, anthropological observation “that under Pinochet, Chile enjoys a more stable political climate than it did in the early seventies” though “reports persist of government-sponsored assassinations, kidnappings and torture” (38). The detached, clinical tone of the guidebook spills over into Verdecchia’s equally clinical observation, once he has arrived in Argentina, of the man dying outside in the street. The violent death that Verdecchia observes is sanitized by the frame of his own camera and by the detached click of the camera shutter:

I take photographs as the man in the suit, his lower body apparently immobilized, reaches wildly for the legs that surround him [...] I take photographs with a Pentax MX and a 35 mm. F 2.8 lens as the dying man, one of his shoes lying beside him, his gun on the road, gives up reaching for the legs around him. I take photographs [...] as he dies and I take photographs as the policemen (all men) talk to each other and I wonder if anyone has seen me and I take photographs as the policemen smoke cigarettes and cover him up [...] (39)

After the policemen cover up the dead man, Verdecchia’s narrative abruptly shifts to problematize reading the photographer as neutral: “[...] and I take photographs and I realize that I have willed this to happen” (39). Despite adopting the seemingly neutral gaze of the
photographer, Verdecchia eventually recognizes that he is in fact complicit in the death he has observed. In his silence, in his *not doing* (because, as Verdecchia asserts “NO AMBULANCE EVER COMES”) he gives in, like everyone else around him, and, in effect, lets the man die. In this way, Verdecchia asks questions about degrees of responsibility and complicity in our own shaping and enactment of hegemonic scripts that produce and exploit marginalized bodies, making evident the violent implications of the stories we tell, the lives we imagine and live.

By the end of the play, “Verdecchia” (the character) recognizes the importance of committing to what Verdecchia (the author / performer) has been engaging in throughout: actively remembering histories of racism and violence as a way to take responsibility for a future that *is* “democratic and non-violent, international and antiracist” (Butler 36). Engaging in a process of remembering becomes Verdecchia’s way to overcome his homesickness. El Brujo tells him “I remember the night Bolívar burned with fever and realized there was no way back to the capital; the night he burned his medals and cried, ‘Whosoever works for the revolution ploughs the seas’” (71). Failing to think of memory beyond personal, individual memory, Verdecchia retorts with “You remember that do you? […] That was what 1830 or something” (71). Finally, after El Brujo asks again “What do you remember now?” (72), Verdecchia falls into a kind of rhythm of remembering, slowly seeing himself as embedded in and complicit with (rather than clinically detached from) broader histories and narratives of injustice that stretch out from personal memory to include memories of a past that lives on in Latino stereotypes, in North American labour practices, in (Anglo) American and Canadian government policies and economic agreements, and in his own understanding of himself. He recalls both personal pain and fear, and imagines the pain and fear of others, from
remembering the French invasion of Mexico and the Pastry War, to recalling “an audition where I was asked to betray and insult everything I claim to believe in” (73). In these acts of remembering, Verdecchia confronts his own part in perpetuating particular stereotypes at the same time that he acknowledges the identity violence underlining seemingly “harmless” stereotypes. At the end of the play, Wideload turns to the audience / reader, asking us to engage in acts of remembering: “who remembers José Imanez? […] Who remembers de Frito Bandito? Who remembers Cheech and Chong? Who remembers de U.S. invasion of Panama?” (75).

By locating “home” on the border, in history, and in relation to “others,” Verdecchia demands that we take responsibility for current conditions of homelessness. In continuing to perpetuate institutionalized narratives of what Canada is, we (Canadians who are permitted to call Canada “home”) participate in creating conditions of homelessness, exclusion, and exile even for many people who live geographically within the borders of Canada, people whose bodies are bordered in ways that make it difficult or impossible for Canada to be called home. In this way, Fronteras Americanas calls for a new story of home, a story that sees “home” as a process linked to material experiences and practices, rather than as a fixed space of origin tied to pre-determined understandings of identity. That is, by making Canada strange and by re-thinking home as a process, Verdecchia opens up a space for imagining democratic possibility in ways that are committed both to challenging material injustices produced under global capitalism and to de-naturalizing the dominant stories that currently justify existing and inequitable conditions of life.
Chapter Three

Global Capitalist Terrains of Resistance in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*

Moving forward from Verdecchia’s attention to storytelling as a process and as linked to specific, localized material experiences, I turn now to Larissa Lai’s second novel, *Salt Fish Girl*, which addresses questions of activism and social justice in a story primarily situated within a future North American west coast, a dystopia where extreme corporate control is reinforced by cloned labour, where genetically modified food is considered “safer” than the wild variety, and where history and memory are figured as diseases. Here I move even further away from my examination of the grounded (hi)stories of marginalized subjectivities, exploring Lai’s novel as fertile theoretical ground for thinking about the “geographies of storytelling” more specifically in terms of the temporal dislocation and disembodiment of global capitalism. What can a dystopic novel like *Salt Fish Girl* teach us about space, place, and resistant subjectivities when most methodologies of storytelling for social change anchor disruptive possibility in the localized telling of “true” stories of marginalized or disenfranchised groups / individuals?

Despite its overt evasion of the “present”—in its unfolding in a future narrative that is interspersed with 19th century China and pre-Shang dynasty narratives of the “past”—I argue that Lai demonstrates the continued viability of using fiction to challenge injustice within the current postmodern, global capitalist moment. Many science fiction scholars, such as Darko Suvin and George McKay, have been drawn to science fiction’s potential to imaginatively combine the aesthetic and the political, to *use* other worlds in literature as a way of giving readers a shifted perspective on current realities. At one point in his essay “Metapropaganda: Self-reading Dystopian Fiction” McKay writes, referring to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,
“Reading here has explicitly extra-textual significance: it is not an innocent pastime—it is not a pastime at all—but a deeply subversive act” (5). In a later essay, McKay argues that reading any science fiction could be considered deeply subversive, re-emphasizing a claim that Suvin first outlined in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. In *Metamorphoses* Suvin argues that science fiction is the literature of “cognitive estrangement”; the cognitive aspect of Suvin’s definition roots science fiction within the shifting, uncertain, temporal moments of “the here and now,” while leaning into the future on the reigns of possibility, implying a hope for change. Thus, in the words of Patrick Parrinder, “by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective” (4). The overtly metafictional potential of science fiction has also been increasingly emphasized in recent scholarship, leading critics such as Jean Baudrillard to hail science fiction as the literature of postmodernism. Indeed, in “It’s not ‘about’ science, it’s ‘about’ fiction, and it’s ‘about’ about” George McKay emphasizes science fiction’s ability to foreground the constructedness of both fiction and “reality”:

Science fiction is predicated on what I term a double difference. Not only is it different because—like all fiction—it is “written” and not the “real” world, but also it seeks to displace or problematise the real world with its own imagined one . . . That’s its difference from other fiction, that it visibly offers a constructed fictional world.

(52)

Lai’s text is particularly interesting in light of McKay’s suggestion that science fiction texts construct obvious fictions to problematize, and indeed to influence the “real” world, offering science fiction up both as a literature playfully cognizant of its own constructedness and as a literature of political engagement.
In the previous chapters, I have been emphasizing some of the factors that complicate current engagements with social change in Canada, not to suggest that social change is impossible or to invalidate attempts at “making a difference” but to gesture toward the tensions out of which all of these stories emerge, tensions that I think Lai in fact uses to advocate for a more just and equitable world. In a similar vein to theorizations offered by Sandoval and Yúdice, Lai’s novel posits that our inability to stand outside of dominant ideologies does not mean the inevitable failure of resistance projects, but rather necessitates finding new avenues and possibilities for social change. I explore here how Lai’s disruption of the local / global binary perhaps offers a glimpse at the kind of storied path that might be forged out of the contradictions characterizing hegemonic subjectivity, where the very terms of our subjection are the ones that give way to possibility. More specifically, Lai’s interrogation of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity in the novel occurs at the intersection between the construction and marginalization of certain bodies as non-white, non-male, (even non-human) and the late capitalist paradigm that is premised upon, enabled and maintained by, these very constructions of otherness. By foregrounding the commodification and domestication of difference within global capitalism, Lai’s critique, rather than being diffused or dissolved, is in fact sharpened in its emphasis on the ever-mounting importance of telling stories in ways that are pointedly levelled both at corporate exploitation and at capitalist (re)framings of dissent and otherness. I think Lai’s novel itself takes up what Wyile describes as “a delicate balancing act,” “to make the study of writing in Canada relevant without capitulating to the forces of commodification, and to break out of homogenizing narratives of national literature while still nurturing writing grounded in Canada, in all its specificities and diversity” (“From Roots to Routes” 223). Thus, in this chapter, I trace the ways in which Lai
theorizes a complicated kind of “new” resistant subject, one that shows the dangers of our embeddedness within global capitalism, while simultaneously calling attention to the urgent necessity of, in Roy’s words, “tell[ing] our own stories, stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe” (“Confronting Empire”).

**Spatial Storytelling**

To provide a brief overview, in *Salt Fish Girl* Lai weaves together three primary narrative threads: 1) a take on a Chinese creation story involving Nu Wa (who, by various accounts, is said alternately to be a goddess and creator of humankind, or a general healer and procreator after human catastrophes), 2) a historical narrative taking place in 19th century and early 20th century China and 3) a dystopic, futuristic narrative unfolding in a corporate controlled North American west coast, 2044. All narratives merge with and interrupt each other, together becoming a kind of poly-vocal, idiosyncratic (hi)story of Nu Wa as it eventually becomes clear that the unnamed narrator of the 19th century sections, and Miranda of the future, are both re-incarnations of Nu Wa—a realization that gradually emerges for Miranda in vivid dreams of her previous lives.

I want to begin my discussion of *Salt Fish Girl* with the future narrative, exploring the ways in which Lai’s critique of capitalism is anchored in her construction of the corporate space of Serendipity, “a walled city on the west coast of North America” (11), as “normal” and “safe” in contrast to the illegal, abnormal, dangerous representations of the “Unregulated Zone”—the space outside of corporate-controlled Serendipity. It is perhaps worth noting that the name “Serendipity” gestures toward the act of finding pleasing or valuable things by chance, which, in the context of the hyper-consumerism of the city, suggestively highlights the manufacturing of pleasure, pointing to the ways in which consumerism becomes a kind of
opiate. Indeed, as I’ll discuss more fully later, the citizens of Serendipity are fed “solutions” and dreams in the form of consumable products that they weren’t looking for in the first place.

Similar to her evasion of “the present,” Lai avoids situating her novel in a clearly demarcated “Canada”; in her envisioning of a post-national North American west coast, she theorizes the shifting and rupturing of nationally-based identities within global capitalism, highlighting the ways in which alternative histories and identities are potentially commodified and domesticated within a capitalist framework of interpretability, a process that ties notions of citizenship more overtly to consumption than to nationhood. Interestingly, the initial division Lai constructs between the corporate space of Serendipity and the non-corporate space of the Unregulated Zone seems to suggest that there are spaces outside and beyond the penetrating logic of corporate capitalism and the myth making that happens within the set, physical boundaries of Serendipity. Lai shows how the controlling, myth-making apparatus that works to legitimize Serendipity and present a particular Euro-American and decidedly corporate version of the world as the “real” and “right,” operates by defining itself in opposition to what is wrong, to what Serendipity is not. Yet, by mapping her constructions of Serendipity onto the perceived threat of the Unregulated Zone, Lai exposes how the “safety” of Serendipity is more about providing a space to forget “unpleasant” histories and erase connections between corporatization and exploitation than it is about dealing with any actual threat from the Unregulated Zone.

Throughout the text, advertising images and media constructions vigorously mark boundaries between the supposedly safe corporatized, mediatized world of Serendipity and the unpredictable, menacing space of the Unregulated Zone. Near the beginning of the novel
when Miranda and her family are still “safely” living within the walls of Serendipity, the TV
booms, “You’ve tuned into Running Dog TV [. . .] broadcasting to you [. . .] at the very
borders of Serendipity. I could throw a stone into the Unregulated Zone. Very dangerous,
ladies and gentlemen, very very dangerous. But you’re always safe when you’re watching
Running Dog” (20). Miranda is further introduced to binary constructions of a “safe”
Serendipity versus a threatening Unregulated Zone in her on-screen comic books and in the
conversations of her parents. At the end of one of Miranda’s visual, interactive stories, a
version of the Unregulated Zone emerges: “an ominous city arose and flooded the screen with
its brilliant lights. A woman ran down an abandoned road, past broken shop windows and the
bombed-out frames of houses. On her feet she wore a pair of blue and silver running shoes
that shone with a dazzling light. ‘Bloody Pallas,’ I muttered” (35). (Later when Miranda visits
the “actual” Unregulated Zone with her father, she finds the Unregulated Zone strangely
familiar, because, she realizes, “it was […] the city of the Pallas advertisement” [37]). The
advertisement that frames Miranda’s engagement both with her story and, later, with the
Unregulated Zone, presents Pallas shoes as a way to escape the danger of the Zone, a way to
run away from its vacated, dark, and all the more threatening, because undefined, danger.
Further perpetuating the fear of the amorphous otherness of the Unregulated Zone, Miranda’s
mother comments at one point, “No one goes there these days but thugs and desperate people
[ . . .] It isn’t safe” (32). Miranda’s father expresses similar alarm, referring to the durian that
is solely available in the Unregulated Zone, “Only barbarians eat those kinds of things. You
know if it doesn’t have a Saturna sticker it isn’t safe” (32).

Yet, even as Miranda and her family live within the physical and ideological confines
of Serendipity, Miranda’s strangeness exceeds its discursive boundaries, threatening the
“safety” of the corporate space. Aimee, Miranda’s mother, at sixty-three years old gives birth to Miranda after eating a durian fruit from the Unregulated Zone, “where law-abiding corporate citizens like them are not supposed to go” (14). Miranda narrates that her mother “wanted [the durian] so badly, she would have taken the risk, but my father said that wild things weren’t safe. She knew that. She wanted it anyway” (14). In this way, Lai discursively links the durian with the illegal, uncontrollable otherness associated with those living in the Unregulated Zone, while further linking Miranda through her durian-tainted conception to this unruly, strange world. Miranda’s mother’s act of defiance—eating the “unsafe” durian fruit from the Unregulated Zone—and the durian smell that is integrated into Miranda’s own body odour, participate in constructing Miranda as “strange,” other, seeping out from between the cracks of what is “normal” or “legal.” Lai describes the smell of the durian as “intriguing, yes, and familiar too, and also illicit—the smell of something forbidden smuggled on board in a battered suitcase, and mingled with the smell of unwashed underwear” (13).

Miranda, whose origins are tightly wrapped up with the signifying otherness of the durian, is racialized and marked as different by her smell, even while living in Serendipity, a smell which also becomes linked to her Asian-ness. In school, Miranda notices her classmates leaning away from her, taunting “Go away, Cat Box” (21). Her father, concerned about her difference, wants to “correct” Miranda by taking her for treatment (22), to which Miranda’s mother responds, “We agreed that we wouldn’t make her feel self-conscious about the smell, didn’t we? It’s hard enough that she’s the only Asian child in her class, and surely she is aware of that” (23). In this way, Miranda’s parents work to “normalize” Miranda while simultaneously attempting to make their efforts at normalization invisible—to make Miranda feel that she is “naturally” normal. In fact, at the moment when her father explicitly mentions
her smell, Miranda admits, “I was cross with my father. I did not want my smell to be acknowledged. Once you speak something you make it real” (36).

Resonating with interested constructions of hegemonic Canadianness, Miranda’s ability to fit within the manufactured “safe” space of Serendipity, to be a proper “law-abiding corporate citizen,” is dependent upon her denial and suppression of otherness, of the parts of her self that do not fit into normative narratives of identity. Speaking about so-called “official” Canadian history, Manina Jones comments, “what cannot be assimilated to the culture-specific iconic story form […] [is] relegated to the marginal realm of incomprehensible, the foreign, the unfinished” (123). She goes on to suggest that both “different tellings” and “tellings of difference […] are placed on the periphery of the historical record, whose conventional reading also suppresses contradictions, inconsistencies, and elisions in the record itself” (123). The narrative mechanisms of suppression that Jones gestures toward, evident in attempts to contain Miranda’s difference, are highlighted again later in the book once Miranda is no longer living in Serendipity. In a conversation she has with Evie, her lover, Miranda is told, “You have to ride the bus or you never find out what’s going on. I suppose you read the papers and believe what they say” (157). Thus, Lai not only shows the ways in which media and other discourses in Serendipity create and maintain particular stories about “safety” and manufacture a fear of otherness, but she also makes connections between these media constructions and mechanisms that work to suppress “what’s actually going on.” Lai makes clear how hegemonic narratives (in this case the narratives of safety constructed within the boundaries of Serendipity) are buoyed and defined by silencing the narratives that do not fit; in fact, the dominant stories themselves must appear *not to be* stories, must appear naturally “right,” naturally safe. As with “official” versions of
Canadian history that are given “a very particular contour through […] absences, silences, exclusions and marginalizations” (Bannerji 107), the corporate rather than nationally “imagined community” of Serendipity is positioned as a physical and discursive space that asserts itself by a denial and disavowal of voices that do not fit.

The Island of Mist and Forgetfulness—which is introduced during the sections in which Miranda recalls her past life in China in the late 1800s and early 1900s—is also a space that obfuscates memory and history, monitoring the encroachment of other stories, other bodies. Miranda’s previous incarnation is lured away to the City of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, an Island that had been “unmoored from history, [had] lost its connection with the past or the future and floated into the sky” (139). Once she walks under gates proclaiming “Progress” and “Democracy” to enter the fog shrouded City of Hope, the unnamed narrator begins to forget her previous life and language: “With each breath I felt a new language enter me […] I felt my old language gushing away from me” (126). As with her representation of the manufactured ideological space of Serendipity, Lai depicts the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness as an imagined space where citizenship and inclusion are premised on forgetting and suppression of previous identities and histories. The narrator cannot return home because she forgets her “old” language, forgets the way home. Later on, further reinforcing her confusion about the strange, mystifying Island, Miranda’s previous incarnation reflects, “I did not understand where I was, or how I had come to this place. In my home village I had heard stories of men who invented South Sea islands, and sold gullible dreamers citizenships in places that did not exist, for outrageous sums” (135). In this way, Lai marks the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness and Serendipity as spaces of manufactured dreams, where “so many desperate and hopeful people” (136) buy into the dreams of
“progress” and “democracy” announced on the gates on the way onto the Island, but soon discover, as “Miranda” does, that they are actually inhabiting “godforsaken place[s], where there wasn’t a respectable job to be had for love or money, where everyone was either a scam artist or the victim of one” (134).

Lai actively shows how the interested constructions of a safe Serendipity and of a euphorically forgetful Island, revolve around disconnecting citizens of both places from history and memory, insulating them from the damaging or disruptive stories that may expose the dreams manufactured within and about these spaces as dreams. Thus, on one level, in her depiction of Serendipity and the Island, Lai seems to posit a notion of culture and ideology as false consciousness, as something, to borrow from Frank Mort, that can be “foisted on gullible populations by hype and the lust for profit” (167), but which can also be peeled back to reveal the “godforsaken place” underneath. Yet, on another level, Lai makes it evident that simply knowing—making visible and gaining access to the stories that counter the dominant narratives of safety in Serendipity, or recognizing the exploitation happening underneath all that mist on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness—does not necessarily dislodge these dominant narratives from their position of supremacy. Indeed, once the physical walls of Serendipity begin to crumble, once the dream of Serendipity begins to show obvious cracks, the novel shows that the mechanisms of corporate control were never contained within the physical boundaries of Serendipity but are imprinted on the very bodies and psyches of even those living within the Unregulated Zone. However, before discussing in more detail how Lai shows narratives of corporate capitalism and its attendant racism and sexism marking bodies and configuring them in toxic (yet also potentially liberating) relation to one another, I want to examine more specifically the role stories—counter stories, alternative “(hi)stories” (Heble,
“Putting Together” 251)—play within the corporate narratives invoked throughout the novel and in relation to Miranda’s understandings of her otherness.

**Telling Other Stories**

Despite the suggestive ways in which Serendipity and the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness mark spaces of de-historicized forgetfulness, or of a particular, monitored kind of remembering, *other stories*, “different” stories, do in fact emerge throughout the text—through the stories of Miranda’s mother, through the stories of Nu Wa and Fu Xi, and through the (hi)stories remembered by those who have the “dreaming disease.” In fact, Lai makes evident that Miranda ends up perpetuating the hegemony of Serendipity not because she “doesn’t know” or has been induced into forgetfulness, but perhaps because she knows all too well, is overwhelmed by knowing.

Throughout *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai juxtaposes spaces and places of forgetting and historical un-mooring with the hyper-consciousness and multiple stories that splash Miranda’s narrative. Miranda’s “story” is constantly awash with *other stories*—stories that persistently seep into the present, even with the controlling apparatus of the heavily corporatized Serendipity trying to keep those in Lai’s novel “unmoored from history,” losing connection “with the past or the future” (139). Throughout the text, Lai depicts the ways in which “the past was leaking through into the present” (105), portraying historical and mythic narratives “of the past” as continuous with, and as constant modifiers of the present, not as static or isolated blocks suspended in a time “before.” Miranda comments,

> Sometimes the intensity of my dream world frightened me […] 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 realize that
other people did not have these memories. I did not think of myself as a child afflicted by history, unable to escape its delights or its torments. (70)

Beyond her dreams, which connect Miranda to her past life in China at the turn of the 20th century, and to herself as the creator Nu Wa, Miranda connects to the stories and dreams of her mother, Aimee, most overtly through her mother’s songs. Miranda recalls, stressing the importance of Aimee’s memory to Miranda’s own understanding of herself, “they were the tunes we sang as we stocked the shelves of our store, tunes we sprayed vegetables to, tunes we hummed as we unloaded crates of durian. My father said that Serendipity had been built on the resplendent refrains of those songs” (93). At another point, Miranda hears “my mother’s voice at the back of my mind reminding me of the importance of keeping old games, old stories alive. Sometimes it was difficult to hang on to that, especially […] when the glittering technologies of the new world beckoned” (65). When Aimee dies in a tragic “accident” involving a crate of durians, Miranda is given the rights to her songs, to her stories in a sense. Pouring over the hand-written manuscripts of her mother’s music Miranda perceives “the familiar motion of my mother’s body, now just a trace of life, but not life itself” (91). She recognizes that “there was a story in the papers”(91), a story emerging from the gaps between the faded sheets of music.

Even though, as Miranda says, “I wasn’t around when the songs were made”(93), her mother’s songs are presented as a living past that continues to modify and define Miranda’s experiences of the present, songs that were only indirectly and yet now quite literally her stories. Miranda “takes on” her mother’s songs in a heightened way when she herself gets up on stage at the New Kubla Khan (the place where her mother had famously performed in her youth) to sing one of her mother’s songs. Re-inventing her mother’s image (“she’s looking a
little rough around the edges, but I’d say that girl is the splitting image of Miss Aimee Ling”[195]), Miranda sings Aimee’s “Clara Cruise” song, reflecting, “As I sang, I felt a presence at the pit of my belly that could be no one but her. My long-lost mother. I felt a sense of comfort that I had not felt in a very long time” (196).

Miranda has a similar, reiterative connection to the story of Nu Wa, which, as Lai makes evident as the narrative progresses, is in fact Miranda’s story. At one point Miranda is told by her father “the story of Nu Wa and Fu Xi, the snake-bodied brother and sister who were supposed to have created the first people” (187). Like Lai herself, Miranda engages in radically re-envisioning the Nu Wa creation story in pictorial form (showing history as a process, as meaning making), providing multiple versions and visions of the story that morph with memories and images of her own immediate past: “I began to draw pictures of a woman with my mother’s face, and then, where the neck should start, a slender coiled body, green and delicate, covered in millions of tiny, luminescent scales” (186). In another one of her many re-interpretations of the Nu Wa and Fu Xi story, Miranda undermines the heteronormativity of the version her father has told her and depicts “Fu Xi as a woman, emerging from the glossy surface of the lake to embrace Nu Wa”(187), drawing a lineage between Fu Xi and Nu Wa in a previous life and Miranda and Evie in “the present.”

Muddying distinctions between history, memory, and myth, the fragments of story —i.e. the creation story of Nu Wa, the stories of a reincarnated Nu Wa in 1800s China, and the stories of Miranda’s mother’s past—simultaneously disrupt, and give an uneasy coherence to, Miranda’s narrative. Importantly, these stories are Miranda’s “own” not only in the sense that she literally gains the rights to her mother’s stories, and is viscerally linked through her dreams to the Nu Wa creation story, but also in her active participation in re-writing and re-
envisioning these stories. The moments when Miranda listens to and engages with these other stories offer a significant counterpoint to the places in the novel where she is positioned as a victim with no agency in marking the boundaries of her otherness.

Also interspersed with the stories of her mother and of Nu Wa are the strange tales that Miranda encounters as a result of an epidemic called the “dreaming disease,” stories that persistently leak into Miranda’s framing narrative and that further threaten to disrupt the “unknowing-ness” of Serendipity. In this way, Lai situates Miranda’s hyper-memory in the context of what Serendipity’s media depicts as a sickness, a disease. While working as an intern at a Doctor’s office, Miranda finds out about the dreaming sickness; Dr. Seto tells her “none of the corporations want to acknowledge it. But some call it the dreaming disease” (100), going on to explain, “they say it spreads through the soles of the feet” (101). While Miranda does not think of herself “as a child afflicted by history” (70), the dreaming disease comes to be represented by the corporatized world of Serendipity as just that—an affliction of history and historical memory. While eventually the dreaming “disease” leads people to drown themselves, earlier in the novel Miranda observes that the “disease had not yet reached the point of epidemic. In fact, there were not yet any indications that this strange disorder was causing any real harm, except, perhaps, at a social level” (71).

The stories that emerge from the dreaming disease, however, become marked as dangerous and threatening to the order and safety promised by Serendipity. Even seemingly innocuous, fictional stories are considered symptoms of the disease. For example, Miranda tells of “a woman who reeked of radishes […] Her tales were clearly not based in any sort of factual reality, and yet there was a resonance to them that I couldn’t quite put my finger on” (102). At another point Miranda recalls, “I met a girl who […] could recite the lives of
everyone who had ever died of tuberculosis” (101-2). She narrates, “We heard from our customers of a girl […] who remembered all the wars ever fought” (85), adding “The stories she told were terrible” (85). The stories, which Lai marks as both historical and fantastical, penetrate into the safety of Serendipity to the point at which they become framed as threatening, terrible, even dangerous, much like the Unregulated Zone itself. Thus, on the one hand, Lai constructs Serendipity and the Island as sites where critique and processes of remembering are actively suppressed to the point at which “none of the corporations” even “want to acknowledge […] the dreaming disease” (100), enacting the kind of “narrative regime” (Jones 123) that, in David Carroll’s words, “demands that all alternative narrative possibilities be repressed or subsumed into it” (74). Miranda herself becomes threatened by the pain and intensity of remembering, declaring at one point, “The dreams were too much. They were more than I wanted” (211), and later wondering, “If memory could not be washed away, perhaps it could be cut” (212). On the other hand, however, Miranda’s comments highlight her own internalization of the disciplining narratives of Serendipity, shifting the focus from external corporate mechanisms of denial and suppression to Miranda’s own (capital-inflected) disavowal of her body and stories. Sandoval argues, “citizen-subjects have become so surrounded and ‘trapped’ in our own histories of domination, fear, pain, hatred, and hierarchy that the strategic adversary under postmodern times has become our own sense of self” (164).

The important histories and memories, the other stories that define Miranda, thus become marked as traps within capitalist and liberal democratic narratives, traps that define Miranda’s relationship to her self in negatively gendered and racialized terms. That is, Miranda’s identity is marked in terms of her difference, of her durian-tinged illicitness, of
being *not normal,* hence, Miranda, like the Unregulated Zone itself, is nevertheless defined even though in oppositional terms *within* the dominant frame of capitalist representation. Lai’s construction of the Unregulated Zone and its inhabitants resonates with what Butler describes as

> those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject […] This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and life. (*Bodies that Matter* 3)

Interestingly, Lai depicts Miranda dealing with her “difference” and her memories not by renouncing the narratives that mark her as a history afflicted *other,* but by trying to escape, forget, and wash away her otherness. Therefore, while Miranda is externally disciplined at various points in the novel, she eventually participates in disciplining herself in collusion with the corporate narratives that mark her and her stories as dangerous, as other. Lai’s novel thus suggests that knowing or making visible “different” stories is not enough if processes of “knowing” are not linked to a critique of the dominant discourses that construct and police the boundaries of that otherness. Ajay Heble contends that in critiquing “official” Canadian history, not only do “we need to be attentive to what, in [R.] Radhakrishnan's words, has been ‘systematically repressed’ from history,” but also “to ask questions about the possible social, political, and cultural ramifications of that repression” (250). Joan Scott also argues that “[m]aking visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics” (25).
Marketing Difference

In some instances in *Salt Fish Girl*, when other stories *are* spoken, when they do “get out,” with, for example, Miranda singing her mother’s song on stage or with the dreaming disease proliferating on the streets of the Unregulated Zone, they become framed and re-framed within the naturalized paradigm of commodity culture. In this way, Lai brings attention, on one level, to the production of difference within capitalism, and, on the other, to the ways in which “stories of difference” may in fact be *used* to satiate capitalism’s lust for new markets, “recast[ing] marginality as a palatable, and thus consumable, cultural product” (Kamboureli 167).10 More specifically, despite Miranda’s own bodily difference and tentative alliances with historically marginalized stories (the stories of her family, the stories of Nu Wa, and the stories that emerge from the dreaming disease)—which present “an opposition to established knowledge, to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms” (Razack 36)—Lai depicts the commodification of difference within global capitalism by having Miranda use her agency to participate in marketing these very same stories. Even though Lai initially creates a clear physical demarcation between the corporate space of Serendipity and the space of the Unregulated Zone (“A double layer of chain-link fence and razor wire separated the part of Serendipity that was still under corporate control from the part that wasn’t any longer” [191]), through Miranda’s capital-infused experiences in a post-Serendipitous world, Lai shows the language and logic of capital permeating even the spaces previously considered “outside” corporate control.11

In her depiction of Miranda’s relationship to her mother and to her mother’s songs, Lai makes perhaps the most obvious link between processes of telling other stories and processes of capitalist commodification. Miranda’s favourite song, Aimee’s “Clara Cruise”
song, is not only important to framing Miranda’s sense of self, it also presents the potential danger of material fixation:

*The pretty shoes of Clara Cruise*

*They danced her till her heart did break*  
*They danced her till her feet gave out*  
*Like horses on roundabout*  
*They danced her till her love had passed*  
*Until she breathed her gasping last*  
*And then they danced her ragged bones*  
*To the faint and haunting tones*  
*Of lovers crying Clara Cruise*  
*You should have loved us*  
*Not your shoes*  

(92)

On one level, the Clara Cruise song works to criticize being controlled by material things—Clara Cruise is not dancing, she is *being danced*; however, once Miranda agrees to have the song “re-told” within the framework of an advertisement, within what Yúdice refers to as the capitalist “paradigm of interpretability” (166), the song is co-opted to celebrate the very thing (materialism) it appeared to be critiquing in the first place. When Miranda is first approached by Adrian Withers, of a Pallas ad agency, to sell the rights to her mother’s Clara Cruise song “in the service of shoe sales” (202), he admits that what he wants is actually an edited version of the piece: “I’d like to buy your mother’s shoe song. It’s only the first verse I’m interested in really, but of course I’ll pay for the whole thing” (197). Of course, the first verse has no
trace of the anti-materialist implications of the song. Rather, de-contextualized from the rest of the song, the first verse becomes an innocuous celebration of shoes:

Here’s a song for Clara Cruise
A pretty girl who loved her shoes
Redder than a red red rose
The patent leather showed her toes
She fell in love with them on sight
The soles they made her feet so light
The pretty shoes of Clara Cruise
She danced in them throughout the night (91-92)

While Adrian, according to Miranda’s rationalizations, appears to be giving Aimee’s song “a second life,” the opportunity to “introduce her genius to a new generation who hadn’t heard it the first time around” (202), the fact that the Clara Cruise song comes to its “second life” stripped of its anti-materialist connotations foregrounds the use of Aimee’s identity difference at the expense of her political edge. The domestication of Aimee’s difference is made even more obvious when, later, in a part of the Unregulated Zone, “where the bare-foot terminally unemployed lived […] [Where] [t]he destitute wandered shoeless and hungry and dreaming with an intensity that only the destitute can dream” (231), Miranda comes across “a billboard of my mother’s look-alike dressed in an old-fashioned Chinese suit with cloth buttons up the side and a pair of Pallas runners” (231). The re-made image of Miranda’s mother locates Aimee in an exoticized Chinese past (she is “dressed in an old-fashioned Chinese suit”), marketing and commodifying her identity difference in the interest of shoe sales. In this way, Lai shows the processes by which, in Wyile’s words, “consumerism […]
disengag[es] identities from their specific contexts, [...] essentially making them available as commodities, a process that clearly erodes or reshapes history” (254).

In a similar exemplification of the disengagement of identities and histories within consumer capitalism, Miranda also ends up selling her pictures inspired by the Nu Wa creation story to another branch of the Pallas advertising agency. Darling Tom, the woman at the agency who first examines Miranda’s drawings, is particularly interested in the images that are “accessible,” in the drawings she feels can most easily be re-framed for advertising: “These are interesting [...] The others are great, but these are a bit more accessible, I think” (234). Darling goes on to ask, wanting Miranda to “reinterpret” her work, “You think you can redo these images to show that the Little Mermaid wants legs and feet so that she can wear Pallas runners?” (235). Thus, Miranda’s historical and personal rootedness, however tenuous, in the story of Nu Wa is undermined by the explicit de-contextualizing and marketing of an “accessible” version of her art. Highlighting the historical unmooring and detachment of images and identities within global capitalism, Stuart Hall argues,

> The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places, and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached—disembedded—from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear ‘free-floating.’ (622)

The corporate re-framing of Aimee’s songs and Miranda’s images highlight the process of historical detachment to which Hall refers. Here both the “history” of Nu Wa and Aimee’s identity difference are decontextualized and reconfigured as “free-floating” commodities.

The novel thus illustrates the ways in which capital can saturate even the encoding and recoding of cultural “difference.” Through Darling Tom and Adrian Withers, *Salt Fish Girl*
models processes of “giving voice” to and “making space” for other stories, but, as Yúdice puts it, in a way that is “structured according to corporate arrangements and protocols,” foregrounding a “new regime of accumulation” (362). Commenting on the imbrication of culture and capitalism, Barbara Godard suggests that culture is “positioned as a countervailing force within a social whole subordinate to ‘economic’ ends. Beauty, knowledge, health, community—nothing must interfere with the bottom line!” (78). Yúdice also speaks of the ever “greater penetration of capital” (166) and the “permeation of the entirety of social spaces by consumerism” (166), echoing Jameson’s suggestion that “within neo-colonial postmodernism” it is impossible to move or speak “outside the massive Being of capital” (48).

However, despite the novel’s depiction of the ever deeper penetration of capitalism into social spaces—to the point at which even potential sites of resistance are commodified in the interest of, for example, shoe sales—Salt Fish Girl does not suggest that Miranda is an unknowing, innocent pawn in the game of capital or that her acts of “selling out” are inevitable in the face of ever-expanding corporate control. By showing Miranda’s awareness of corporate exploitation and by refusing her the marker of innocence, Lai is able simultaneously to contextualize (socially and historically) the production of Miranda’s otherness, while nevertheless holding Miranda accountable for “buying in” to the same hegemonic narratives that mark her as other. For example, after signing away the rights to her mother’s song, Miranda explicitly foregrounds her knowledge of the broader implications of her actions: “It wasn’t as though I didn’t understand where the shoes came from. Evie had described to me in lurid detail the mad, dark factories, the greed that drove pay ever lower as contractors moved their factories to more and more desperate places” (202). Later, when
Darling Tom passes Miranda the contract that would “sell” Miranda to the advertising agency, a seduced and properly drunk Miranda “tried to straighten up, tried to read the tiny swimming words in the restaurant’s dim light, but gave up after a couple of clauses” (239). She signs it with a “It’s okay […] I’ll sign it now. I trust you” (239) even when she knows she should “take it home and look at it” (239).

Miranda also “knowingly” participates in commodifying the threat of the dreaming disease, making it intelligible within a dominant frame of representation where “history” and “memory” are marked as problems and where buying shoes is presented as the only viable solution. After both signing away the rights to her mother’s song and agreeing to re-interpret her drawings for the advertising agency, Miranda acknowledges, “But my great crime was not my participation in the banalities of the advertising world. It was not the slow undermining of women’s self-worth through the glamour of passivity” (243). Instead, Miranda suggests that her “great crime” is her participation in marketing the dreaming disease, in capitalizing on the threat of the disease by paradoxically suggesting that poverty and despair are escapable only by buying into the very progress-oriented narratives that engender the binary of threatening and threatened bodies in the first place. Re-framing for the advertising agency the prevalent rumour that the dreaming disease is contracted through the soles of the feet (243), and her observations of “kids with plastic bags inside their shoes, […] those who wandered barefoot, […] eyes swimming with grief and history” (244), Miranda tells Darling Tom, “I was thinking, suppose Pallas were to advertise shoes as protection against the dreaming disease. Memory-proof soles. I think they would sell really well” (244). In this way, Miranda participates in both augmenting and commodifying the “threat” of the dreaming disease, using it further to entrench and justify the exploitative practices of corporations like Pallas, Saturna,
and Nextcorp. Absurdly, buying paradoxically becomes both the problem and the “solution” to the loneliness, despair, and poverty spilling out of the consuming logic of capitalism. Lai thus signals the ways in which corporate tautologies merge with “official” history to obfuscate interrogations of the subjugating logic of capital itself.

While, on one level, Miranda’s acts of “selling out” may seem to endorse Jameson’s suggestion that resistance is impossible in the face of global corporate expansion, on another level, by saddling Miranda with the responsibility of recognizing her complicity, Lai makes it clear that the continued perpetuation of hegemony is not necessary or inevitable. Miranda isn’t positioned as an evil perpetrator of capitalist crimes, but she is nevertheless shown in her seemingly “harmless” consent, to be, in fact, consenting to the continued nullification of non-white, non-male bodies like her own. Miranda’s observations of and participation in the slippery terrain of the advertising world emphasizes the necessity of negotiating and engaging strategies for challenging exploitation that go beyond (but do not invalidate) the work of making exploitation “known” and of recuperating repressed histories to, as Heble puts it, “ask questions about the possible social, political, and cultural ramifications of that repression” (250). As Razack suggests in Looking White People in the Eye it is necessary that we anchor our visions for change in an acknowledgement of our complicity in perpetuating hegemony, in continuing to tell, or allowing for the telling of, the same old dominant stories of whiteness, of patriarchy, of heteronormativity. Razack endorses a “notion of a politics of accountability as opposed to a politics of inclusion,” arguing, “[a]ccountability begins with tracing relations of privilege and penalty. It cannot proceed unless we examine our complicity. Only then can we ask questions about how we are understanding differences and for what purpose” (170).
To look at it another way, while Miranda seems to have agency in deciding whether or not she will give in to the Pallas advertising agency, her acts of “selling-out” nevertheless remain within the dichotomy of either / or, self / other. Resonating with the binary observation of Nu Wa’s 19th century incarnation, that on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness “everyone was either a scam artist or the victim of one” (134), Miranda operates at times as a “victim” of corporate logic (in the production of her durian-tinged Asian, female, queer otherness) and at other times as a “scam artist” in her conscious participation in these same narratives of injustice. Miranda is eventually given access to “the system” (within which she has already been marked as other) but only on the terms offered to her within existing cultural scripts, “scripts” that are literally exemplified by the contracts slid across the table by Darling Tom and thrust at Miranda in a back alley by Adrian Withers. While Miranda’s conscious act of “signing in” to hegemony, signing the contracts that Darling and Adrian “make available,” suggests that she has a degree of agency and that she, in Peter McLaren’s words, does not “simply consume culture passively as [a] mindless dupe[]” (173), other parts of the text show the ways in which the same narratives that work to produce her as other also work to manufacture the illusion that she really has no choice but to “buy in” if she does not want to remain a victim. Ironically, Miranda is given the pleasure of both: by “buying in,” she further ensures her victim status.

However, Lai doesn’t freeze Miranda within the binary logic of being either “a scam artist” or a “victim of one” (134), as either predator or prey within a system of consumer capitalism, but moves to stress the importance of engaging in site-specific challenges to corporate exploitation. Miranda’s involvement with Evie and the Sonias (who are part of a female clone series produced by Dr. Rudy Flowers for the express purpose of factory labour)
gestures toward Sandoval’s “new forms of identity, ethics, citizenship, aesthetics, and resistance” (37) that Sandoval argues are necessary for effective cultural critique within postmodernism, forms and engagements that not only speak from within, but also in needed opposition to, dominant narratives. Lai’s novel shows, on the one hand, the importance of recognizing the ways in which acts of resistance are currently bound by normative institutions and discourses in North America that present the current corporate hegemony as the invisible, not-to-be-questioned framework within which all acts (even resistant ones) should be produced. On the other hand, Lai suggests that while perhaps we cannot stand self-righteously outside and beyond dominant narratives, it is, in fact, out of the recognition of our “insideness,” of our complicity with (and construction by) dominant ways of knowing, that new possibilities for challenge and change can emerge.

**Necessary Storytelling**

Sandoval’s call for “new resistant subjects” and new forms of citizenship, ethics and resistance surfaces as a vital response to Foucault’s assertion that the “political, ethical, social, and philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us […] from the type of individualization which is linked to the state” (in Sandoval 164). It is through Miranda’s engagement with Evie and her clone “sisters” that Lai most overtly “promotes new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the kind of individuality which has been imposed on us” (Foucault in Sandoval 164). At the same time, the story of Evie and the Sonias further illustrates the ways in which the racist and sexist discourses enabling capitalism mark and literally produce other bodies. Robyn Morris observes,
Designed as a vast source of expendable factory labour by their genetic scientist father Dr. Rudy Flowers, the Sonias are coded as ‘other’ not simply by their multitudinous similarity, their motherless birth, their slave status, or even their human / fish genes, but by their dark hair and eyes. Cloned predominantly from the DNA of Third World and Indigenous peoples of the past, the Sonias of the future wear, on their skin, the same physiognomy of difference that raced their forebears. (82-83)

Thus, on one level, in her construction of Evie and the Sonias, Lai suggests, in keeping with Foucault’s theorization, that capital deeply penetrates representation, penetrates our very understandings of ourselves and our bodies; on another level, she also implies that critique and resistance itself must emerge out of and directly address the discursive disciplining of our bodies, address “the type of individualization” exercised within the hegemony of late capitalism.

Even though Miranda, with her characteristically defeatist attitude, wonders who will actually read the anti-Pallas and anti-Saturna pamphlets that she passes out along with Evie and “a bunch of raggedy-looking students” (188), Lai, in her depiction of the Sonias, moves the focus from measuring definite “effects” of resistance to the ongoing, reiterative process of social change itself. At one point Miranda describes a gathering of the Sonias, illuminating the network of solidarity produced through the Sonias’ radical interventions:

They were chatting rapidly in a language I could not quite get a hold on, though I recognized a smattering of Chinese, a few words of Spanish, some French, some English. Four of them were busy wrapping a seasoned mixture of pork, bamboo shoots and black fungus into won ton wrappers. Two held young infants in their arms—girls, if their ragged baby dresses were any indication. (222)
The Sonias write stories, sayings, and questions into the soles of Pallas running shoes, living together in an all-female household where a new generation is born from the freak fertility of genetically modified durians. They imprint stories and questions in cement, in shoe moulds, on walls that “tell the stories of individual Sonias’ lives,” or are “inscribed with factory workers’ poems, some with polemics, some with drawings” (249); they ask probing questions, “What does it mean to be human? / How old is history?” (237), or expose overt injustice, “materials: 10 units / labour: 3 units / retail price: 169 units / profit: 156 units / Do you care?” (238).

Despite the failure of Evie and the Sonias’ plan to infiltrate shoe factories with these altered shoe moulds, their multiple generative acts nevertheless represent a refusal to be docile, a refusal to continue uncritically producing themselves both physically and discursively within corporate narratives that mark them as non-human, enslaved, racialized, and gendered others. Instead, the Sonias overtly take on their literal production within narratives of corporate capitalism, asserting themselves as “the new children of the earth, of the earth’s revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation” (Lai, Salt Fish Girl 259). Thus, Lai’s critique of global capitalism is a critique that is directed locally, at the very mechanisms through which the Sonias have been given the ultimate marginalized status of non-humans. The “new resistant subject” offered by the story of Evie and the Sonias is like the one Donna Haraway formulates in “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” a subject who speaks both within and beyond the dominant social order, who “is the ‘illegitimate’ child of human and machine, science and technology, dominant society and oppositional social movement” (167). Evie and the Sonias’ dissent underscores Yúdice’s suggestion that,
To be sure, the buying and selling of experiences [...] at the center of the capital order make it possible to harness not only the labor and desire of producers and consumers (e.g., the tourists and the indigenous persons who perform identity) but even their politics, which easily shade into commodities [...] But it is also the case that the same ‘disorganized’ capitalism that spawns myriad networks for the sake of accumulation also makes possible the networking of all kinds of affinity associations working in solidarity and cooperation. (34)

The stories produced by, and told of, Evie and the Sonias, and Lai’s novel itself, become necessary stories, as stories that foreground radical possibility emerging from the process, from the telling, rather than from what has been told.

Near the end of the novel, Lai writes, “[t]his is a story about stink, after all, a story about rot, about how life grows out of the most fetid-smelling places” (268). Miranda’s love-making with Evie is marked as an act that pushes the boundaries of “corporate homogenization” with its liberating, eroticized strangeness:

When she kissed me it was like both eating and drinking at the same time. The stench that poured from our bodies was overwhelming—something between rotting garbage and heavenly stew. We rode the hiss and fizzle of salt fish and durian, minor notes of sour plum, fermented tofu, boiled don quai—all those things buried and forgotten in the years of corporate homogenization. (225)

Miranda and Evie’s loving seems to operate out of what Sandoval calls “desire-in-resistance,” a kind of resistance “that can permit oppositional actors to move—as Audre Lorde puts it—‘erotically’ through power” (165). In this way, the loving of Evie and Miranda, the solidarity fostering activities and stories of the Sonias, and Miranda’s (and Lai’s) re-envisioning of the
story of Nu Wa, all emerge from within the rotting framework of the capitalist order as acts that rewrite and de-naturalize cultural scripts that work to reify, both in “official” history and in stories of the future, the supremacy of whiteness, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Morris argues that Lai’s novel “offer[s] ways for a new generation of writers of colour to resist and challenge the reproduction of not only racial, sexual and gendered, but also generic stereotypes” (93). Indeed, Lai’s story intervenes in past constructions of identity, piecing together alternative (hi)stories for a future that does not simply “make room” for difference, but re-positions and re-makes racialized and gendered subjects as agents in the telling of “stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe” (Roy, “Confronting”), stories that are out of step with even as they emerge out of the capitalist order. Lai’s novel thus serves as a compelling and nuanced intervention into debates around telling different stories as a way to challenge the production of otherness within dominant national and corporate narratives in North America. Lai juxtaposes, on the one hand, Serendipity and the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness as sites where difference is contained and suppressed within the threatening and paradoxically over and depopulated space of the Unregulated Zone, with, on the other hand, a post-Serendipitious, postmodern space where both making difference and making difference visible are marked as necessary to invisibly sustaining the logic of capital. I have been using Lai’s Salt Fish Girl as a departure point to acknowledge the impossibility of standing outside the dominant, while simultaneously emphasizing that there is something at stake in “buying in” to a corporatized playing field where notions of culture, identity, and even resistance are marked by an increasingly naturalized relationship to capital. While Lai certainly does not provide a fixed “solution” to injustice under capitalism, her text nevertheless gestures toward multiple, mutating possibilities for challenge and change,
possibilities that make overt the constitutive link between corporate expressions of power and
sexist and racist constructions of subjectivity. Situated within, yet speaking beyond, the
spectre of dominant histories and national narratives, Lai’s novel asserts, “[b]y our difference
we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into
the future” (259; my emphasis).
Section Three

Local Economies of Storytelling

In its current hegemonic articulation as neoliberal global capitalism, capitalocentric discourse has now colonized the entire economic landscape and its universalizing claims seem to have been realized. A distinctive social imaginary—a heady mix of freedom, individual wealth, unfettered consumption, and well-being trickled down to all—convenes a series of myths that constitute the (illusory) fullness and positivity of “capitalist” society, masking the social antagonisms on which this presence is posited. (Gibson-Graham 56)

All of the plays and novels I have examined this far are challenging, imaginative works that theorize the importance of telling different stories. These stories are not only stories of dislocation, strangeness, of un-homeyness, but also of possibility and tentative connection, where the process of telling itself becomes an emergent site of home and of belonging, speaking from within dominant logics but in ways that re-make and re-define the very terms of home and of human. In a sense these texts join Butler in offering tentative, hopeful answers to her question, “How, then, is subjection to be thought and how can it become a site of alteration?” (Psychic Life of Power 11). As Butler goes on to assert, “A power exerted on a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (11). I have explored how particular hegemonic discourses, both nationally bound and nation-transgressing, deny and constrain voice in particular ways, but that the stories gathered together here theorize specific ways through this denial. More importantly, perhaps, the range of stories
acknowledge their constitutive relationships to broader hegemonic discourses, while also suggesting that it is critical to start from an acknowledgement of our complicity with these systems while linking to the embodied, material, expressive sites of storying.

Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* provides the more specific frame for investigating the production of the *economic* subject. It is to this economic, labouring subject as a site of becoming, limit, and possible location for storying change that I turn in this final section. What can we learn from Lai’s co-opted-turned-generative subject in *Salt Fish Girl*? And what happens when the new “resistant” subject, storying herself into a better future is actually beginning to star in her own emerging narratives of neoliberal success, like the anti-materialist “Clara Cruise” song that is decontextualized and dehistoricized and used to sell shoes? Lai’s novel powerfully depicts the limits to subjectivity and possibility for change within global capitalism—but how do these limits play themselves out beyond the boundaries of the novel?

In order to “think” these questions beyond Lai’s text, I turn now to a differently situated understanding of story as cultural work / artistic practice as a way to focus my examination on some of the dangers and broader implications of how art’s social function is taken up at the site of the “local” in neoliberal times. More specifically, I examine (in chapter 4) how the neoliberal subject is “storied” in ways that sketch out lines of change and flight that in some ways seem quite compatible with social justice efforts, but that may in fact decontextualize agency and provide very particular coordinates for the kinds of individual expression and change possible. At the same time, I suggest (in chapter five), that in re-framing our *use* of stories—showing them to be differently or multiply interested—these same coordinates for neoliberal change may become sites for something quite different.
Chapter 4

Telling a Crisis: Creative Neoliberalism

The central concern of this chapter is to consider how the specific story of neoliberal subjectivity impacts how critical art practices are defined and produced. What happens to the relationship between aesthetics and political activism when the role of “culture” is increasingly figured along economic lines? And, more broadly, in what particular ways are existing social change efforts limited by neoliberal capitalist framings? My exploration of the uses for which stories and art are increasingly deployed within neoliberal narratives serves to open up a more expansive conversation about some of the contradictions characterizing neoliberalism, contradictions with devastating consequences. That is, by tracing some of the neoliberal contradictions in terms of the specific case of the Canadian “arts and culture” sector (and cultural critique more broadly), I point to how the hegemony of neoliberalism functions to promote narratives of economic possibility, freedom, and access at the same time that environmental degradation and structural inequalities are on the rise—i.e. increased job insecurity, widening income gap, precarious labour practices, continued feminization and racialization of poverty, etc. As I mentioned at the outset, sustaining this kind of critical examination of the project of neoliberalism is necessarily risky: the danger in pointing to the ways in which even our critiques and best intentions are circumscribed by powerful and destructive narratives is that we capitulate to these logics and negate attempts to imagine alternatives. What I hope to do here, in contrast, is to begin at the pronounced or perceived defeat of culture as a site for effective critique of existing injustices as a way to point to other ways forward. I am offering this discussion, then, in the spirit of hopeful critique (or “discernment” to borrow again from Coleman), where I position critique both as a form of
advocacy against neoliberalism’s most pernicious contradictions and as a way to forge connection and perform new ways of being.

My interest in examining the neoliberal subject more precisely emerges out of my concern with whether the process of imagining different futures remains a theoretical exercise with little bearing on the work of political transformation. Emilie Cameron, speaking about the proliferation of interest in a range of storytelling approaches within the discipline of human geography in the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, asks “Does storying a hoped-for future represent a radical intervention into the constitution of social and political life, or an abandonment of the ‘real’ work involved in transformative politics?” (582). Following from Cameron, I wonder, does documenting the possible emergence of new subjectivities and ways of being in the texts I have examined so far actually serve to reify possibility, reify “change”? Does this kind of nuanced imagining in fact defer or stand in for the work of systemic change?

The perception of the death of using art / culture for effective challenges to capitalism was made abundantly clear in a recent event held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The AGO’s “Massive Uprising” fundraising gala, held in March, 2009, illustrated this apparent failure by staging an ostensible homage to anti-capitalist art (and “culture as protest” more broadly) for the explicit purpose of money-making. The AGO’s online press release for the benefit event announced the theme:

Prepare for rebellion at Massive Party, the Art Gallery of Ontario’s first on-site benefit since its grand reopening. On April 2, co-chairs Gillian Hewitt and Som Seif will host 1,600 guests for an evening of defiant music, consumerist cocktails, hedonistic hors d’oeuvres and provocative artists’ projects […] Guests will encounter a variety of
protests throughout the evening as part of the Massive Uprising theme. Riot police will be on hand to quell the uprising and keep the peace, while partygoers will be inspired to make love, not war. (Art Gallery of Ontario)

The fundraiser, which also marked the re-opening of the AGO after Frank Gehry’s renovations, showcased capitalist protest as entertainment in what can be read as a cynical, albeit clever, manoeuvre that both highlighted and perpetuated the neutering of political protest under capitalism. The event featured anti-war art and 1960s style protest in Anitra Hamilton’s silhouetted bomber aircraft 5 O’Clock Shadow, in Emelie Chhangur’s Power to the People Button, and in a variety of hippy led “sit-ins” and bed-ins (both a recreation of Yoko Ono and John Lennon’s famous intervention, and another with a naked gorilla-masked woman lazing in front of a “War is Over” poster). In Morsels for the Masses: Populist Art at Popular Prices!, the corporatization and commodification of art was performed in a marathon five-hour sale by Franco Mondini-Ruiz who liquidated his entire inventory of art (half-eaten tacos, doughnuts-turned-ash-trays), while a forty-eight-foot depiction of a “post-crash, post-consumer exhortation” (AGO) was offered up by Eric Mathew’s The Future is Now.

Mathew’s piece contrasted sharply with David Armstrong Six’s installation We Admitted We Were Powerless, where a collection of rickety wooden signs bore repetitions of the three phrases “No Rest,” “No Time,” “No Hope,” and with Christof Migone’s Disco Fall, a stripped disco ball hanging above a jumbled pile of reflective shards.

I use the example of the AGO benefit to launch my discussion here, not because it was set up to engage in any kind of actual critique of corporate capitalism, but because its performance of protest betrayed an underlying assumption, presented as fait accompli, that using art as a site for capitalist critique is impossible. As such, we might as well enjoy the
edgy aesthetics of protest and indulge in the ironic playfulness of using anti-capitalist paraphernalia to raise money. Kirsty Robertson notes in her discussion of the “Massive Uprising” event that the AGO benefit did provide an explicit frame for telling the story and limits of recent challenges to neoliberal capitalism: “Here was the rise of finance capitalism, alter-globalization protest and police, the celebration of creative industries as an economic boon for faltering post-industrial economies, and a crushing recession, all performatively worked into a party for the city’s economic and artistic elite” (“Capitalist Cocktails” 476).

There seem to be two parallel stories unfolding here, represented in both Robertson’s reading of the event and in the collection of art pieces I detail above. On one level, the AGO “performance” is heady, playful, revelling in 1960s nakedness and nostalgia, cleverly turning stodgy Marxist critique on its head by appropriating the language of populism and the masses to sell art (Mondini-Ruiz), and, more broadly, to raise funds for the oft maligned institutionalized art-world itself. Another story told at the AGO, best depicted in Disco Fall, suggests in contrast that the party is in fact over. It seems the ways out of the neoliberal paradox posited at the benefit were either to submit willingly to the inevitable commodification of art and artistic critique, to celebrate the ironies and embrace the new kind of generative possibility offered within the coordinates of capitalism, or to be a buzz kill and mourn the loss of what was, to “admit[] we were powerless” (as the title of Armstrong Six’s installation proclaimed).

But how did this happen? That is, how has a critical mass of scholars and artists arrived to pronounce the death of art as a site of capitalist protest at the same time that “culture” and “creativity” seem to be having a heyday? A range of critics and scholars in fields from culture and performance studies to sociology, geography, and labour studies
explore and document the recent global rise of the language of “creativity” and the “creative class” in promoting economic growth. In Canada, Imre Szeman has recently examined the increasingly pervasive celebration of “the economic impact of innovation and creativity,” which, he argues, is also making its way into Canadian government discourses: “If organizations such as the Creative City Network of Canada (CCNC) or the series of Creative Places + Spaces conferences organized by the non-profit group Artscape are any indication, the idea that creativity is essential to economic growth has been swallowed whole by urban governments across Canada” (16). The emergence of the widespread rhetoric around the importance of culture to the economy in the U.S. is explored in detail in Yúdice’s influential book The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era. Yúdice argues, “it is nearly impossible to find public statements that do not recruit instrumentalized art and culture, whether to better social conditions […] or to spur economic growth through urban cultural development projects” (11). He goes so far as to say that culture-as-resource […] is the lynchpin of a new epistemic framework in which ideology and much of what Foucault called disciplinary society (i.e., the inculcation of norms in such institutions as education, medicine, and psychiatry) are absorbed into an economic or ecological rationality, such that management, conservation, access, distribution, and investment— in ‘culture’ and the outcomes thereof— take priority. (1)

In the U.K., Jen Harvie similarly attends to a marked shift in government rhetoric starting in 1997 where “New Labour fiercely pursued this model of creative economy” (67), exploring “how artists, arts and culture are currently being instrumentalized as economically important”
(64). What are the implications of this recruitment of culture for economic growth, Yúdice’s “new epistemic framework,” and where does it play itself out?

Perhaps one of the more obvious places to look for the rhetorical deployment of culture as beneficial to the economy is in public discussion and debate emerging in response to funding of the arts. A huge surge in debates around the arts and its ties to the economy occurred in the 1990s, precipitated by cuts to public funding of the arts in both the U.S. and Canada. What became dubbed as the “culture wars” spun questions of arts funding into the moral / ethical realm with debates about what kind of art should be funded with taxpayers’ money. Of course, justifying the arts along financial lines during times of economic austerity is a well-documented, if not necessary, response. Alan Peacock argues, “in periods of stagflation, when government support at all levels may be circumscribed…arguments for support based on economic impact are likely to be deployed more intensively’” (in DiCenzo 6).

For example, in 1995 from the middle of the “culture wars,” Canadian Theatre Review published an issue entitled Creative Economies in which a range of theatre practitioners and scholars examined the same trends and tensions that re-emerged most recently after the market crash / recession beginning in 2008 and with Stephen Harper’s announcement of massive cuts to the arts in October 2008.12 Both “culture” and “anti-culture” camps used the economic as the basis of measuring value in both the North American culture wars of the 1990s and the “mini” culture war sparked by Harper’s cuts. The “old argument,” evident in the “culture wars” and in many of the responses to Harper’s $45 million cut to federal arts grants, posits culture as either good for the economy (so it should be subsidized), or bad (art is a luxury expenditure that governments shouldn’t fund on the backs of “ordinary
tax payers”). Harper, in a much-quoted statement in defence of the cuts, appealed to the “ordinary” (neoliberal) subject:

I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren't high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up – I'm not sure that's something that resonates with ordinary people. (CBC News)

Justifiably impassioned responses to the cuts showed variations on a theme characterized in commentaries like the one James Leach published on Hamilton’s “Raise the Hammer” blog: “A recent study into Canada's arts community crunched some numbers and showed that for every dollar of government money pumped into the arts, it generated $3 in return. That sounds like an investment, not a subsidy.” He goes on to link art to urban renewal in Hamilton, writing, “one only needs to wander up James North to see how vital the arts can be in our everyday life and society. Real estate values are up, stores are renovated and occupied, crime is down and new businesses are moving into the area thanks to the recent influx of art ventures and artists.”

While supporters of the arts used the language of economic impact during the mini culture war erupting over Harper’s cuts to justify continued government funding and to posit the necessity of “art” to life, Harper-supporters tended to take a more dismissive stance on the money-wasting elitist luxury of the arts; however, the obvious lines demarcating these camps are perhaps more of an anomaly than they once were. The same rhetoric around the necessity of art and creativity is now being mobilized in the very spheres that were once seen as hostile or at least indifferent to the arts. That is, the kind of defense of the arts presented by Leach—it’s “an investment,” it’s vital to our cities because it brings real estate values up, crime down,
and businesses in—is now also being mobilized within business circles and government discourses, not to defend art per se, but to promote economic growth. The Creative City Network of Canada is unflinching in its assessment of the necessity of the arts to prosperity: “Growth is inevitable when culture is used as a tool. It brands, creates job growth, spin-off businesses and competition” (Dang, Finnigan, and Warfield, “Making the Case for Culture”), stating elsewhere that culture is “the economic engine that drives municipalities toward growth and prosperity” (Dang, Finnigan, and Warfield, “Culture as an Economic Engine”). Szeman, in his analysis of this trend, writes, “For artists and arts and cultural groups, this attention to the material conditions of creativity might not seem to be a problem […] Instead of being a drain on economies, around the world the arts and culture sector is now seen as a potential financial boon” (17).

But what has accounted for this shift? Richard Florida, associated with his popularization of the notion of “creative industries” and of a “creative class,” is one of the figures most credited with this recent shift in the perception of the arts. In stark contrast to the conservative public devaluing of art and creativity during the so-called culture wars, where political leaders argued that art and artists should be left to compete and be defined by the logic of the market, Florida suggests that arts, culture, and creativity are in fact essential to economic prosperity. The persuasive power of the language used to defend the arts from neoliberal attacks are thus turned on their head to argue for the absolute centrality and necessity of artfulness to neoliberal life.

However, Florida’s documentation and valorization of the rising “creative class” at the beginning of the 21st century is really only a symptom of the much deeper and gradually spreading virus of neoliberal logic on social life (which I discuss in more detail below). Craig
Medvesky asserts that the shift toward neoliberal government policy was evident in the U.S. after “the 1989-90 congressional reauthorization hearings for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), reflect[ing] a crucial turning point in the history of the arts, during which the State adopted a fiscally conservative, neoliberal funding rationale for public arts expenditures.” The terms originally outlined in the Arts and Humanities act, the act which created the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, stated, “it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging to freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent” (in Medvecky). This national policy-level attention to “material conditions” (however real or imagined this attention may have been), disappears entirely with the neoliberal rationale that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s which promoted, in Arthur MacEwan’s words, “running society as an adjunct to the market” (172). Florida’s attention to the “creative class” and the increasingly celebratory rhetorical deployment of culture as an economic boon signals an ever more marked movement away from “thinking” value as anything other than what the market dictates. And artists no longer need to be propped up by enabling “material conditions”; rather, in a stunning reversal, artists are now deemed essential for propping up the flagging economies themselves.

In this way, the de-fanged representation of protest at the AGO feeds into current trends celebrated by theorists such as Florida, who see creativity and the “creative class” as key to economic success. In his critique of Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Szeman writes,

> If everyone is participating in the same narrative of social development through creativity—artist and IT workers, professors and bankers—what remains of art is to
furnish the capitalist economy with ideas indirectly, through the spark or flash of a new concept that might emerge when a software designer is standing in front of a canvas denouncing technological capitalism. (33)

By providing a creative edge to capitalism, the role of the arts and of “creativity” as mobilized by Florida is to provide the sense of cultured cool that makes a place livable. In “The Culture of Capitalism and the Crisis of Critique,” Jason Hickel and Arsalan Khan point to the ways in which the counter-culture of the 60s has translated into furnishing capitalism with a “rebellious spirit,” writing, “To be counter-cultural, one would simply have to consume the commodities symbolically associated with counter-culture. The new spirit of capitalism was itself a rebellious spirit, and this has left an indelible mark on the culture of the American Left” (212).

Therefore, the broader invocation of creativity as essential to economic innovation is perhaps less about the arts and culture sector itself, and more about borrowing associations of edge and rebellion to re-package capitalism as cool, making neoliberalism more palatable to a broader base of lefty progressive types. Art translated into “creativity” is in this way happily dislodged from either its detached place on the shelf of high modernism or from any unsavoury political / propagandist moorings, being set free in a “value-neutral” zone to be invoked and mobilized to confer a sense of edge or innovativeness where needed. Bishop comments on this “problematic blurring of art and creativity: two overlapping terms that not only have different demographic connotations but also distinct discourses concerning their complexity, instrumentalisation and accessibility. Through the discourse of creativity, the elitist activity of art is democratized” (16).
However, it isn’t just the edgy aesthetics or innovativeness associated with the arts or arts-based methods that are being more broadly celebrated in dominant neoliberal discourses. The trope of the artist also seems to have had a neoliberal make-over. That is, at the same time that art and creativity are being invoked as critical for economic and entrepreneurial success, the image of the artist has also shifted according to cultural critics such as Gregory Sholette. He writes,

A new, affirmative image of artist as entrepreneur is even making its way around business circles as free-market economists and neoliberal policy wonks praise the very qualities that once pushed artists to the social margins—deviation from standards and routine, non-linear problem solving, and outright contempt for authority and work itself. It is an unorthodox outlook that has paradoxically become the new ‘creative’ engine of twenty-first-century capitalism. (“Speaking Pie to Power” 28-29)

At the same time, this “recent” configuring of the enterprising artist as ideal neoliberal consuming subject has a much longer history and roots in the 1960s counter-cultural movements (a story also told at the AGO benefit), where the expression of freedom and individuality was promoted as a way to challenge the perceived suppression of individual agency and autonomy of totalitarian and “mass” market capitalism. Speaking to this trend, Hickel and Khan point out the irony that the challenges to the structure and conformity characterizing Fordist capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to an even more malicious form of capital, pointing out that “the celebration of ‘individual identity’ and the construct of the unique, creative self provided capitalism with fantastic new market opportunities” (212). Shannon Jackson comments on this trend in performance and visual art practices with more specific attention to the time period from the 1990s onward (after the fall of communism)
writing, “If institutions were not to be trusted, if regulation constrained, if bureaucracy was a thing to be avoided, and if disciplining systems of subjugation were everywhere, then a generalized critique of system pervaded not only neoliberal policy circles but also avant-garde artistic circles and critical intellectual ones where freedom was increasingly equated with systemic independence” (Social Works 24).

The “new” creative self is therefore one that seems remarkably open to leftist concerns, smoothing over the historical antagonism between “the market” and culture. Florida writes, “regional economic growth is powered by creative people, who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to ideas” (249). As one reviewer of the AGO party commented, “The ‘massive uprising’ theme encouraged its 1,600 attendees to fight for a whole slew of causes, foremost their right to party” (Sprott). Protest in this account is reduced to individualized “causes,” the meanings of which are seen as interchangeable and therefore irrelevant, and “thank-god no one was fighting for animal rights” or else the attendees might not have had the fortune of tasting the mini bison burgers (Sprott).

Why else—beyond the capitalist fetishizing of difference as integral to selling the “new” and the “edgy”—are art and creativity, and the figure of the “artist” more specifically, being taken up as the new face of entrepreneurial success and possibility? And how has this been made possible, particularly given that “the artist” or artistic efforts were often positioned historically as “immaterial” or “unproductive” labour, placing artists in a zone often thought of as antithetical to capitalist productivity? Sholette offers a troubling but persuasive answer:

By constantly retraining to meet new work conditions, and by drawing on social networks made up of other, semi-employed artists, and also family members, friends, and the occasional patron or grant, most artists have learned to survive in a society of
redundancy and risk. As such, artists might be models for the ‘new economy,’ though they might equally attest that survival is not affluence. (31)

The hungry, passionate artist becomes the ideal citizen-subject within neoliberalism, the economic subject who is sufficiently disciplined to be thankful for the crumbs s/he receives and will take the opportunity for poorly-paid passion over security.

Furthering Sholette’s claims, cultural critics such as Miwon Kwon and Andrew Ross and performance scholars, Lara Nielsen, and Harvie, argue that artists have emerged as “model” entrepreneurial subjects because of their winning combination of often being well-educated and demonstrating apparent comfort with flexibility, precarity, and low-pay. Ross writes that artists act as model neoliberals because of the assumption that they are “willing to accept non-monetary rewards—the gratification of producing art—as compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labour” (6). Szeman adds that in addition to being a “model of a kind of labour done for intrinsic purposes,” artists also make space for their labour “outside of the formal institutions of work” (30). Reflecting on this trend, Kwon observes, “the artist used to be a maker of aesthetic objects; now he or she is a facilitator, educator, coordinator, and bureaucrat,” (53) having become, in Nielsen’s words, “the service economy entrepreneur extraordinaire” (5). Harvie calls the enterprising artist of neoliberalism the “artepreneur,” examining the specific implications of this reconfigured role of the artist for broader social engagement.

The immaterial, unproductive, anti-status quo work of the agitating artist thus becomes refigured as innovative kindling for the neoliberal market: the flexible, hard-working “creative” who is no stranger to adversity, to working in precarious, surplus labour conditions, but who manages to “pull up those bootstraps” nevertheless. The kind of “home”
that is imagined within neoliberalism is one of perpetual precarity, one that is contingent and shifting, and yet the creative neoliberal protagonist, unencumbered by history, telling his or her story in “the market,” is one who can allegedly self-motivate and turn potential obstacles into possibility. What, then, are some of the larger implications for the role of the “creative” individual at the centre of the arts revitalization narrative—as enterprising edgy subject / author of his or her own story, and as flexible, risk-taking adaptor to economic challenges that are posited as inevitable and universal?

Recent discussions around “cultural” or “creative industries” as broader systems of production point to the trend in an increasing focus on “creatives” as individuals. Referring to Ross’ recent work on the “creative class,” Martha Rosler observes that “Ross points to the allure of the ‘creative industries’ idea for a wide array of nations […] long before Florida’s particular configuration shifted emphasis away from the industries and to the very person of their denizens.” Florida’s shift from the systems to the “creatives” themselves as the saviours of our cities is not surprising given the neoliberal push to unburden subjects from history, context, and systems (beyond the “free” system of the market). The collusion of neoliberal rhetoric around freedom and possibility and the revolutionary subject of human liberation movements in the 20th centuries both position charismatic individuals as the site of change, as the hope for the future (see, for example, Saldaña-Portillo). The use of the same progress-oriented / developmentalist rhetoric for both the vanguard and the mainstream has perhaps in part facilitated this easy transformation of the agitating artist into entrepreneur extraordinaire. Indeed, as Harvey cautions, “Any political movement that holds individual freedoms to be sacrosanct is vulnerable to incorporation into the neoliberal fold” (A Brief History of Neoliberalism 41), going on to suggest,
Neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces ranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power. (41)

As Lai’s novel also illustrated, by decontextualizing and dehistoricizing identity and making agency / change / possibility the property of individuals, both neoliberal discourse and identity-based social movements can end up making invisible the market framing of what success and failure mean.

In Rosler’s assessment of Florida’s “creative class” thesis, she is quite pointed about the cost of the individualized focus on the free-floating creative as the solution to capitalism’s ills:

Florida offers the prospect of a category of ‘human resources’ who will, all unbidden, and at virtually no cost to anyone but themselves, remake your city quite to your liking. Rather than portraying the right to the city, as Harvey had termed it, as the outcome of struggle, Florida’s path to action is predicated on the inevitability of social change, in which the working class and the poor have already lost.

Rosler’s analysis points to the exclusion and violence underpinning the celebration of “creatives” as saviours to cities and their flagging economies, positing that the very success of this remade entrepreneur depends on making invisible both the unquestionably destructive edge of capitalism and the bodies—of the working class and poor—“who have already lost.” Harvie takes up the concept of “creative destruction” to emphasize her concern with the neoliberal recruitment of the “artrepreneur,” where a “risk of cultivating entrepreneurial artists is that it becomes increasingly accepted that destruction is necessary in capitalist
processes of creative destruction to produce growth” (78). Like Rosler, Harvie is acutely aware that it is not just “technologies that are at risk of ‘creative’ destruction and replacement, but workers, livelihoods—in so many words, people” (78).

In a prescient analysis from his 1990 book, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey draws on the economist Schumpeter to show how the enterprising hero of modernism was also fashioned as “the creative destroyer *par excellence* because the entrepreneur was prepared to push the consequences of technical and social innovation to vital extremes. And it was only through such creative heroism that human progress could be assured” (17). Harvey’s analysis suggests that perhaps the neoliberal “creative” is not so new after all and is really only a repackaging of the heroic artist / entrepreneur of modernism: “If ‘creative destruction’ was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the artist as individual had a heroic role to play (even if the consequences might be tragic)” (19). The translation of the artist for neoliberal times powerfully underscores Andrea Fraser’s assessment: “We are living through a historical tragedy: the extinguishing of the field of art as a site of resistance to the logic, values and power of the market.” Again, the defeat evinced by Armstrong Six’s installation at the AGO benefit, “No Rest,” “No Hope,” “No Time,” seems fitting here. The party is over.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the playful performances of protest and of challenges to capitalism during the AGO party were only part of the story. One review of the event captured a conversation between a partygoer and AGO event staff:

“I hope you’re being paid to do this,” said a stout patron, well-suited in navy, the label indubitably Italian.

The twenty-ish girl operating the elevator, wearing an event staff shirt, smiled briefly in response.
“Are you paid?”

She demurred. Was it because she was unpaid and embarrassed? Unpaid and not allowed to say so? Paid and guilty, because earlier that day, the AGO had cut twenty-three permanent, unionized jobs and left forty-three contracts unrenewed? Guilty because bragging about a job—even if a temporary event staffing job—is far out of vogue by now anyway? (Prickett)

Staged shortly after the market crash of 2008-2009, the stark contrast between the playful, parodic performance of an enervated critique of capitalism and the very real material effects of the market collapse were further heightened by the AGO’s layoffs that same day (Prickett). Sarah Prickett’s attention to the “far out of vogue” question of labour is a reminder of why being un-trendy is all the more critical—particularly when a globally expressed failure of neoliberal economics with the 2008-2009 market crash in the U.S. did not garner the kind of wide-spread protest / critique that might have been expected.

As such, the rhetoric of neoliberalism provides ever-more expanding opportunities for the use of art and stories, as effective marketing tools, as framing devices for new entrepreneurial ventures, and for conferring a sense of edge and cool to urban centres. And artists are everywhere, their “out-of-the-box” thinking being posited as necessary for generating innovative new ideas and for raising the appeal of our cities and communities, creating a “heady mixture of art and capitalism” (Cronin and Robertson 7). Yet the prevalent invocation of art, stories, and creativity as necessary to economic success and happiness is occurring at the very same time that government cuts to social and cultural programs are accumulating rapidly, and where “risks” are no longer mitigated by a broader social safety net, but are to be born by individuals alone. While cuts to the arts may not seem particularly
catastrophic in a world where the ill effects of capitalism’s violence are being felt in tragic and unprecedented ways, my reason for tracing this “creative” shift is to show how the “freedom and possibility” rhetoric of neoliberalism, increasingly apparent at the site of the so-called culture sector, is enabled exactly by the violence and exclusion of voices, stories, bodies, and ideas that threaten to undermine the hegemony of its logics.

In Canada, the “management” of diversity within the official policy of multiculturalism nevertheless afforded different avenues for funding and support to historically marginalized voices; as such, the neoliberal shift in government funding rationales that increasingly appeal to the “marketability” of particular art and artists participated in writing out voices that might not appeal or sell more broadly. Addressing the fraught relationship between the domesticating impulse of “official” multiculturalism and the possibilities enabled by the funding of “diversity” beginning in the 1980s, Rinaldo Walcott writes,

The recourse to funding art on the basis of its marketability is one which, in the context of a racist Canada, has the potential to cut minority artists right out of the field of representability. This concern must not be taken lightly. In fact, this concern sits at the heart of how the nation understands itself and who might and does belong to it. In fact, depending upon who is doing the reading or assessment, most Black art is in some ways oppositional to the nation. But simultaneously the nation and the narrative through which its bureaucracy works also finds it difficult to imagine blackness within its realm. (208-209)

Thus, both the public defunding of the arts occurring in Canada and the U.S., and the simultaneous valorisation of storytelling and creativity in diverse spheres (from business to
social service sectors) is not merely about the emergence of a re-configured role for art, but rather signals a change to the very ways in which we understand the role of public culture and of radical critique more broadly.

In light of the “free trade,” “free markets,” and “individual freedoms” espoused by neoliberalism, the fact that a growing number of people experience life in ways that are anything but “free” requires that we ask questions about how neoliberalism functions and in whose interests. The violent contradictions underpinning neoliberalism are obvious, for example, at the site of the nation and of national identity, as I have argued in previous chapters in a less circumscribed way. Harvey examines the ways in which state involvement has been central (rather than in opposition) to neoliberal restructuring and how an increase in policing and coercive tactics is necessary to maintaining the so-called freedom of the marketplace—this, despite the neoliberal policy of pulling back to let the markets “do their thing.” Harvey notes that in the U.S., forms of surveillance and policing have proliferated, and that “incarceration became a key state strategy to deal with problems arising among discarded workers and marginalized populations” (77). In a similar vein, Mohanty writes, “while neoliberal states facilitate mobility and cosmopolitanism (travel across borders) for some economically privileged communities, it is at the expense of the criminalization and incarceration (the holding in place) of impoverished communities” (“Transnational Feminist Crossings” 970).

The costumed “riot police” on hand at the AGO benefit gestured toward the cost of this neoliberal freedom, the human cost of what is required to keep those markets supposedly unencumbered. In her discussion of the AGO event, Robertson observes,
And just a few months later, the streets outside the gallery would erupt in protest as police chased down activists who had gathered against the G20, then being held by heavily guarded barricades just blocks away. It would be one of the most brutal suppressions of protesters in the city, and indeed country’s, history. (*Tear Gas Epiphanies* 3)

The freedom imagined and loudly celebrated by neoliberal logics appropriates the notion of freedom to allow free reign for capital accumulation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to make it an individual’s responsibility to get the most out of the system and an individual’s own fault if s/he does not. In this way, “the social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility […] leav[ing] larger and larger segments of the population exposed to impoverishment” (Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 76). The story we are left with is one where “the market” is uncoupled from social and political spaces and processes, and the enterprising individual / consumer is the protagonist who is able to act out his or her desires in this supposedly “free” space. As such, the notion that anything—including our critiques of capitalism—could exist beyond the frame of the market is being called into question by both the left and the right.

The not-so subtle damning of culture as a site for capitalist critique in the AGO benefit seems much more sinister as a narrative unfolding alongside the seemingly unrelated economic re-structuring of the AGO. Indeed, Sholette asks, if artists are caught up in new forces of entrepreneurship and instability, what becomes of the line between aesthetics and political activism that was a significant feature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture? Has it been jeopardized, or simply abandoned altogether? And if the mainstream art world has indeed forsaken its role as
society’s insubordinate critic, then from what overlooked corner or bedraggled intellectual and artistic shantytown will the challenge to neoliberal hegemony emerge, assuming cultural resistance is even still a possibility today. (“Speaking Pie to Power” 27-28).

What has all of the nuanced *imagining* of different worlds and possibilities really done? Are critics who proclaim the failure of the “cultural turn” perhaps right? Teresa Ebert is quite pointed: “Cultural critique […] has made it impossible to understand social injustice, class differences, and the violent rule of capital as objective historical reality. It has turned them into effects of oscillating signs that disrupt the formation of meaningful words and coherent statements” (ix). Hickel and Khan also explore the failure, more specifically, of academic cultural critique, its attention to tolerance, mutability, and a rejection of fundamentalism as the fatal flaw that has prevented any strong or organized antagonism to the cultural logic of neoliberalism.

Hickel and Khan’s article goes on to examine how neoliberalism co-opts the anti-elitist, populist language of the democratic left, producing a new “market populism” where the market space is valorized for its freedom and egalitarianism, and the state is figured as the intruder on the market’s unbridled freedom. As such, “the market” now holds the place formerly occupied by “the public” or “the social good.” Hickel and Khan, among others, point to very particular instances where the “answer” to capitalism’s ills (poverty, environmental degradation etc) are offered up within the coordinates of capitalism itself in ways that actually serve to perpetuate the very injustices the “solution” is supposedly alleviating (for example, with charity models that perpetuate a naturalized position of want, or with environmentally friendly products that rely on the same capitalist system that produces environmental
degradation in the first place). They push Ebert’s claim further by proclaiming in no uncertain terms, “the logic of capitalism and the logic of resistance against capitalism have converged” (206).

While these arguments are certainly troubling and persuasive and are, ultimately, concerns that I share, this kind of critique—when it stops at critique—also does something else. It posits as all-powerful a logic and rhetoric that is not singular or universal, and it reads “change” in ways that assume a unifying structural coherence to change-making efforts. In a sense, the staging of cultural protest at the AGO and, for example, Hickel and Khan’s, Ebert’s, and Yúdice’s (and also my) exposure of the complex imbrication of culture and capital may operate in a similar fashion to neoliberal hegemony: while pointing to the nuances of how identities are produced and policed within capitalism, this all has the potential to silence possibilities for change, further perpetuating the assumption that neoliberal capitalism is larger-than-life and beyond human capability to confront or re-write. That is, the damning of cultural critique as a site of change perhaps performs a similar denial of voice and a submission to the terms of neoliberal rationality by positing that we are always already owned and therefore cannot “free” our expressions or challenges to oppression from the all-controlling logic of the market. Laclau and Mouffe characterize this position when they suggest, “the forces of globalization are detached from their political dimensions and appear as a state to which we all have to submit” (xvi). Echoing Margaret Thatcher’s deterministic statement that “there is no alternative” (to neoliberalism), cultural critique that posits the inevitable failure of resistance projects as a result of the postmodern “explosion of culture” (Jameson 48) offers up neoliberalism as the only framing logic for our identities—whether they be resistant or compliant ones.
Thus, the two contrapuntal stories that emerged in the AGO event—the one that celebrated the possibility, freedom, and expansion of “losing” art to capitalism (literally capitalizing on the neoliberal freedom ethos), and the other that mourned the same loss—are really flip-sides of the same coin. Both end up deterministically undermining or denying systemic inequality, as both seem to see expression, agency, image, story, as divorced from, or as ineffective in dealing with, material realities. That is, both “positive” neoliberal discourse and “negative” cultural critique that suggest that “there is no alternative” beyond the logic of neoliberalism end up writing over possibilities for change, negating closer scrutiny of our being and materiality in history, in moments of becoming, and in moments of resistance where the boundaries of economic rationality are exceeded. Our inevitable complicity is seen as the end point, rather than the starting point.

Although I am wary of reinforcing a false dichotomy between the discursive and the material (or the “imagined” and the “real”), I use these temporary distinctions here to draw attention to the slippery logic motivating neoliberalism. Indeed, given that I am arguing from a position that understands identity to be socially constructed and performative, the “imagined” and the “material” are necessarily interconnected. Therefore, in order to shift the ways in which current stories mark and discipline bodies, we simultaneously need to shift how we imagine ourselves and our relationships to local and global phenomena. The issue for me is not whether we (academics, teachers, activists, students, women etc.) should be focusing on “material” rather than “discursive” injustices (a binary reinforced by theorists such as Ebert); rather, I’m concerned about what’s at stake if what we imagine stands in for critiques of how power works to produce racialized, classed, and gendered bodies in contextualized and localized sites. For example, the reality that there is a growing global
disparity between the rich and the poor means that at the same time that there appears to be more equity and representation for oppressed groups within dominant institutions—more women in “high profile” jobs, more men of colour holding important political positions—the feminization and racialization of poverty continues at an alarming rate. However, if we use stories to imagine justice in ways that are carefully linked to existing inequities, both in how, for example, people of colour are represented within neoliberal discourses and in how these representations are tied to justifying the continued economic and physical exploitation of, for instance, “brown” bodies, I think stories aren’t simply important, but are absolutely necessary to our critical democratic projects and processes.¹⁵

I have been bandying about the same question from multiple angles: how can we use stories to make change given our psychic imbrication with neoliberalism, given the injustices implied and enacted by dominant constructions of our identities and notions of home, given the undecidability of our tellings and of how they will be heard / received? Ultimately, what I have been talking about here in terms of the shifting role of the “arts” and “artists” (broadly defined) in neoliberal times serves to bring attention to some of the blatant contradictions characterizing neoliberalism, tensions that both circumscribe, but perhaps also open up possibilities for, agency and change. I want to think about these tensions and possibilities now in terms of a few specific case studies of “socially engaged” performance events, taking one last stab at sketching out possibilities for reclaiming our stories from particular neoliberal configurations of subjectivity. Moving toward an answer while acknowledging the complexity of taking up “community” as a site from which to negotiate change, I look now at the targeted use of “socially turned” (to use Bishop’s phrase) storytelling and performance as
a possible way to re-populate—with (hi)stories, with humour, with other accounts of space and time—the dehistoricizing territory of neoliberalism.
Chapter 5

The Use of Storytelling: (Un)marketing Community in Grocery Store and Get a Real Job

The novels and plays that I have addressed so far are helpful for exposing how power has historically expressed itself, through and beyond national logics, to perpetuate unequal divisions of resources and access, and to define and police bodies through narratives of exclusion and exile. Building on these critiques, I want to spend some time in this final chapter examining storytelling as political intervention in a few examples of what is variously described as popular, community-based, or socially turned performances in Canada, performances that use culture for explicitly social and political purposes. When I talk about activist or socially engaged performance in Canada, I acknowledge it as an amorphous label that represents a loose and wide-ranging assemblage of theatre and performance practices that have a long and storied history, and are still going strong in new / old configurations and in different sites.16

As I discussed in the previous chapter, much scholarly attention has recently been paid to the increasing appropriation of culture for a range of uses, from economic to social. In a conversation that surfaced between articles and during workshops, Canadian activist theatre practitioners such as Julie Salverson, Ruth Howard (Jumblies Theatre), and Laurie McGauley (Myth and Mirrors Community Art) have been musing recently (and publicly) about the shift from the language of “popular” or “political” theatre practices to “community-engaged” art. In her introduction to Community Engaged Theatre and Performance, Salverson points to the increasingly permeable territory between what’s termed ‘community engaged theatre’ and ‘popular theatre.’ What were once posed as mutually exclusive...
political divides—activist goals striving for social change, community building practices stressing celebration and affirmation—are now more likely to exist side by side. Is this because it is harder to find explicitly political theatre companies, or because politics itself is being reshaped and redefined so that either everyone—or no one—considers his or herself political anymore? (xii)

While McGauley suggests that she gravitated toward the “new” language of community art because she wanted to represent her artistic practice as being about both creating and resisting (in Howard 5), Howard wonders if “whatever we mean by ‘community arts’ [is] less political” (6). Running alongside the “culture-led” economic development trend that I explored in the previous chapter, the proliferation of community-focused artistic practices (both new and translated) is emerging at the same time that there is increasing pressure on higher education institutions, municipal governments, and non-profit agencies to prove community impact. In a recent article, “For the De-incapacitation of Community Art Practice,” Marc James Leger proclaims quite unambiguously that “community art [is] the official art of neoliberal capitalism.” As the neoliberal push for measurement and impact increases, it is hard not to read this drift into “community arts” as an effective neoliberal mechanism to domesticate and draw boundaries around where and how critique can happen.

The particular generic dictates of community-oriented performance and art have also come under fire by scholars such as Alana Jelinek, who reads radical art in terms of its easy absorption into neoliberal impulses. Jelinek suggests that

there is an ongoing injunction for practitioners who espouse a leftist or radical politics to make art in a particular way, namely in the tradition of lifelike art. Lifelike art includes relational, dialogic, participatory, and community-oriented practices […]
[and] is assumed to carry, by its very nature, a revolutionary or democratic politics.

(93)

She goes on to argue, “Art practitioners in the lifelike tradition, instead of embodying or enacting a subversive disruption, now value measurement, populism and efficacy, which are all neoliberal values and values notably absent within the artworld prior to the rise of neoliberalism” (94). While her reading is perhaps too reductive\(^1\) for thinking through the multiple levels and ways in which resistance to injustice may play out, Jelinek’s discussion of community-oriented art points to the possible effects of an unproblematized adoption of “social utility” rhetoric in community-based art practices. In some cases, the use of storytelling or art in community-building can also serve a rehabilitative function—using art to re-integrate those who are on the margins, to provide heart-warming narratives to elicit support for charities, or as the animating force for human rights causes.\(^2\) The danger here lies in seeing marginalized or outsider subjects as the problem in need of “fixing” without giving simultaneous attention to the mechanisms that produced and pushed these voices and bodies to the margins in the first place.

What is perhaps equally concerning about the increasingly prevalent promotion of community art is that the arts and culture sector is now being asked to take over issues that used to be the responsibility of the state. Darren O’Donnell joins the “expediency of culture” (Yúdice) discussion, writing, “artists [are] expected to step in where the state and the economy have failed” (92). In her contribution to Nato Thompson’s *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, Claire Bishop is similarly pointed about what she calls the “community arts movement”: “From an agitational force campaigning for social justice (in the early 1970s), it became a harmless branch of the welfare state (by the 1980s): the kindly
folk who can be relied upon to mop wherever the government wishes to absolve itself of responsibility” (“Participation and Spectacle” 38). While the increased attention to the arts playing a social and not only economic function (cultural tourism, gentrification, the new “creative class,” art as therapy and rehabilitation etc.) can mean new streams of funding for activist cultural workers interested in challenging injustice, not just to add local flavour and support the production of “fitter, happier, more productive” (Radiohead) corporate citizens, the challenges of keeping critique and possibility alive beyond these logics are very real. For example, while Honor Ford-Smith endorses public and private institutional support for community art, she nevertheless cautions that community art’s “incorporation into these agencies as a cultural category has important consequences for notions of both ‘community,’ ‘artists’ and ‘art’” (85). She goes on to argue that without careful scrutiny of the practices of Canadian cultural institutions, “community art is in danger of becoming a process which can be used both as a brightly packaged form of welfare and as a means for the manufacture of the myths which justify traditional narratives of Canadianness and the Canadian status quo” (85). In other words, the increased attention to “community arts” is not necessarily about providing a space for the arts to say relevant things about life or the social in general; rather, it may be a strategy for ensuring that the arts serve a particular (neoliberal) conception of the social that is produced and policed by capital.

But this is not a new conversation. In a decades-old Canadian Theatre Review issue, Creative Economies, for example, a range of theatre scholars and practitioners grappled with concerns to do with arts funding, capitalist rhetoric, and a “theatre in crisis” (Filewod, “The Spectre of Communism” 3), concerns that are still vital to current thinking about the complex relationships among culture, community, and neoliberalism. In the editorial to this 1995 CTR
issue, Filewod points to the limits of invoking “community” in the interest of justifying artistic practices, arguing, “the language of community coincides neatly—too neatly, I fear—with the instrumental language used by the conservative right to repudiate the very foundations on which the theatre industry—sorry, community—is built” (3). He goes on to suggest that we “need to find new arguments to support the arts” (3) which, as his initial comments indicate, becomes an increasingly challenging task in a neoliberal climate where appeals to producing art for the “good” of community are inevitably translated into economic terms. Ric Knowles returns to Filewod’s critique in another editorial for a more recent issue of CTR on improvisation, acknowledging, “The ‘c’ word (community), of course, has become so compromised through its use in rhetorically shoring up the neoliberal inclusionist/exclusionist agenda that it’s only good for grant applications and web sites” (“Improvisation” 3). Knowles goes on to add, however, that “the wish to subvert the entrepreneurial individualism of neoliberalism nevertheless needs to function in the (on one hand) difficult, power-inflected and (on the other hand) stimulating, improvisatory realm of the social, where ‘community’ is constantly negotiated, neither taken for granted nor sedimented” (3).

The coalescing argument that art and artists are now globally being made legible through sole recourse to their (economic) usefulness and (social) productiveness is critically important to acknowledging the space—both conceptual and lived—that cultural workers, artists, scholars, and activists inhabit. Culture, as both Knowles and Filewod indicate in their caution around the conservative and neoliberal instrumentalizing of “community,” is always already interested, and, in fact, is not something that can be separated out from the broader discourses that it is invoked to sustain or critique. Indeed, this kind of careful attention to how the language of culture, community, or creativity is used—in loose, undefined, haphazard
ways—to support a particular managerial, impact-oriented neoliberal logic is absolutely necessary as we work in spaces and places that use “the arts” as sites from which to negotiate change. But how can we move through these critiques to the kind of understanding of the social that Knowles outlines, “where ‘community’ is constantly negotiated, neither taken for granted nor sedimented” (3)?

Critics such as Szeman and Yúdice respond to the neoliberal paradox by either explicitly or implicitly privileging a return to a notion of a “disinterested” or autonomous culture, an analysis marked by a wistful wishing that there was a space where notions of culture or community could be read as separate from existing narratives. I think this kind of analysis, while compelling, may signal a desire to retreat from rather than move through the understanding that culture is always already compromised, and has implications for how we imagine change and create space for challenging systemic injustice. Even Bishop, known for her incisive critiques of the problematic overtones of much “socially turned” art and the limited (positivist) vocabularies often used to evaluate their “success,” acknowledges the impossibility of maintaining critical distance in how we speak about or interpret art. Softening her (self-described) characteristic polemic exemplified in her article “Participation and Spectacle” which I quote from above, Bishop writes in her introduction to Artificial Hells, “The hidden narrative of this book is therefore a journey from skeptical distance to imbrication: as relationships with producers were consolidated, my comfortable outsider status (impotent but secure in my critical superiority) had to be recalibrated along more constructive lines” (6).

Thus rather than advocating for a return to disinterested culture, I believe we should be hoping for a renewed scrutiny of how our communities are constituted, for whom and for
what, re-asserting the importance of a kind of critical engagement that takes into consideration the very interested parameters of the institutions and discourses that we define and that define us. But we also must continue to direct attention toward promoting an expanded understanding of the purposes and processes of socially engaged storytelling, as practices that can push against economic rationality and potentially redraw the links between representation and material realities. Jackson argues that socially engaged art practices can offer such expanded registers for, rather than a dismissal of, art as a category, writing, “the de-autonomizing of the artistic event is itself an artful gesture, more and less self-consciously creating an intermedial form that subtly challenges the lines that would demarcate where an art object ends and where the world begins. It is to make art from, not despite, contingency” (Social Works 28). Bishop draws on Jacques Rancière and Félix Guattari to suggest similar “alternative frameworks for thinking the artistic and social simultaneously” (“Participation and Spectacle” 40), where “art and the social are not to be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension” (40-41).

To return to the primary question animating this chapter, then, how specifically are artists working against and / or through the neoliberal appropriation of the language of community and social good in performance and storytelling practices that are produced and performed in, with, for community, and for explicitly social purposes? Margaret Werry sees performance studies as fertile ground for examining neoliberal politics, suggesting, “performance studies’ purchase on the micro-practice of relational and embodied behavior makes it uniquely suited to the study of neoliberal governance” (26). Taking a cue from Werry, while I think the immersive / participatory edge of socially engaged performance may be easily domesticated within neoliberal language, I argue that community-situated
performance practices that offer a combination of a clear attention to the terms of their construction and an articulated purposefulness for something other than capital gain can also effectively make visible the normalized neoliberal framework of value; that is, attention to the social in performance and the performance of the social—to “relational and embodied behaviour” (Werry 26)—may allow us to think in more nuanced ways about how to wrestle with what is destructive in the stories that structure our lives. Here I explore examples of artistic interventions that have found creative ways of using and challenging neoliberal impulses by locating themselves at the centre of conversations about social injustice, and from a place of acknowledged complicity, where the desires and discourses of policy, community art, storytelling, activism, scholarship, and neoliberal governmentality intersect.²¹ Rather than reading these particular performance moments as the “new face” of neoliberal hegemony, or as a yielding response to the hegemonic pressures to instrumentalize “arts and culture,” I posit that they are written onto these logics in ways that trace different, longer, more expansive histories of being, resistance, humanness, exceeding the terms currently offered to subjects within neoliberal discourses.

I argue two things here: first, I suggest, in the performance examples that follow, that by making the market framing of our identities and agency visible through our stories, the neoliberal story is exposed as a contradictory, historically contingent version of identity and possibility, not some kind of transcendent, unbounded truth to which we must all submit; the second is that, despite—or maybe even because of—community-engaged art’s seemingly cosy relationship with neoliberal rationality, art-based community making, to borrow George Lipsitz’s term, may offer nuanced opportunities for simultaneously resisting and creating, for
challenging what is and for celebrating (read: radically imagining) what else might be possible.

Making evident the longer history of both community art-making and of capitalist re-appropriations of the very notion of “community,” the community play *The Spirit of Shivaree*, and Richard Paul Knowles and Edward Little’s 1995 discussion of the performance, “*The Spirit of Shivaree* and the Community Play in Canada; or, The Unity in Community,” adds depth to the conversation about how to challenge the definitional tyranny of neoliberalism today. *The Spirit of Shivaree* developed by Dale Hamilton, offered a re-telling of the history of Rockwood, Ontario, connecting the Mackenzie “Farmer’s Revolt” of 1837 with the efforts of Rockwood in 1991 to challenge Toronto-initiated pressures to develop the area. Little and Knowles argue that in some ways the play operated with a conservative, reified understanding of community (where community is defined by what it excludes), but also afforded opportunities for advocacy, intervention, and critique of the terms by which these very notions of community are constructed and affirmed (21).

Little and Knowles’ reading of *The Spirit of Shivaree* also points to the play’s enactment of the convergence of the public and the market in ways that are relevant to my discussion here:

Culminating as it did in a theatricalized auction, the opening sequence framed the entire play within the context of community celebration as commercial exchange […] If *The Spirit of Shivaree* presented itself, then, as a carnivalesque and celebratory mingling of people, styles, and genres—as a fair—it did so in full consciousness that carnivalesque play occurs within a public place, *platea*, or ‘market square’ that exists within and is dependent upon lines of economic force that are external to it. (29)
The play’s subtle exposure of the compromised apparatus of community under capitalism emerged at a time when neoliberalism was increasingly being positioned, not just as the only alternative for solving national economic crises (as it already had been since 1978-1980 with the economic policies of Thatcher and Reagan), but also as the defining cultural logic of our time, i.e. of our identities, histories, our very understandings of humanness. Harvey writes,

In so far as neoliberalism values market exchange as ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs,’ it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. (Brief History of Neoliberalism 3)

As the synopsis of The Spirit of Shivaree indicates, “the plot revolves around the selling of the entire township by auction” (Dale Hamilton 1), foregrounding how “all human action” is increasingly defined by the “contractual relations” of the marketplace. The Spirit of Shivaree made visible the market apparatus in ways that opened up space for a productive discussion about the limits of this framing. The play thus became a mechanism for re-imagining the concept of the public—where the public market / fair that opened the play was re-deployed as a town hall at the end—asking participants to consider the terms by which a community is defined and celebrated, disenfranchised and undermined.

Speaking more broadly about the rise of the language of “community engagement” within higher education in ways that coincide a little too tidily, perhaps, with Prime Minister Harper’s neoliberal restructuring, Amber Dean writes, “What we might gain from grappling with insights from these fields is a recognition of the futility of trying to define a community
in advance of a shared struggle, and an acknowledgement that the ‘we’ of any community is the very thing that needs to be worked towards” (12). Dean draws on the work of postcolonial theorist Andrew Schapp to elaborate on her claim. He writes,

the conflicts of the past can only be ‘resolved’ and community thereby ‘restored’ by a reductive representation that silences political objections that question how such a ‘we’ is possible in the first place. Yet it is precisely the possibility of such questioning that is the enabling condition of a reconciliatory politics. (26)

Similarly echoing both the dangers and possibilities of using community as a site of negotiation, Little and Knowles suggest that through participating in the simultaneous celebration and contestation of a particular community in The Spirit of Shivaree, “the audience is encouraged actively to engage in its own, purposeful, history-making, and to negotiate its past and future history in a marketplace of open debate and exchange” (27). The township became the site for a focused negotiation of the “we” of a community in flux, an examination of the importance of place, togetherness, and how we story ourselves in the face of the encroachment of (capitalist) logics that nevertheless are us.

I want to spend some time considering the importance of making space to negotiate a community’s “past and future history in a marketplace of open debate and exchange” (Little and Knowles 27) in my discussion of the performance art piece, Grocery Store, and the popular theatre production, Get a Real Job. Both performances, though strikingly different from each other, offer a re-imagining of the spaces of change, written as they are onto and out of the changing logic of the cities they emerged from, Winnipeg and Sudbury, respectively. But they also re-imagine the neoliberal subject by speaking from localized experiences of displacement and precarity, transforming sites (both cities and bodies) of capitalist
exploitation / appropriation into locations from which to envision change. What I suggest here is that perhaps it is not the *use* of culture of which we should be suspicious; the global capitalist / postmodern “explosion of culture” (48) that Jameson bemoans is perhaps better read as a reducing of culture, a diminishment of culture to a single measure of economic exchange. Rather, I suggest we need to return to a more *expansive* understanding of the uses of culture—the various, generative, life-affirming possibilities of use that exceed and undermine the neoliberal “tyranny of the exchange value” (Harvey in Bollier).

**Community Exchange in Grocery Store**

Late July, 2002. Word starts to spread about a grocery opening up somewhere in the Exchange. Something about it not being in a traditional storefront, but for a limited time only. Curious. The flyers recall old Tom Boy and IGA circulars from the 50's and 60's, promising affordable, fresh (and even organic) produce along with traditional staples and sundries.

A couple days after the grand opening, I discover the generically titled Grocery Store in the gallery at aceartinc. It’s like stepping into a time machine, but one that takes you into an idiomatic space, the same way that life in 2002 was envisioned to be Jetsons-tastic fifty years ago. The red-and-white colour scheme is fabulously kitsch, right down to the tiles. There’s shopping baskets, a functioning cash register and, as promised, coolers with tofu, veggies and dairy. Shelves are stocked with necessities like toothpaste, tampons and cat food. But there’s this strange ambient-noise-loop muzak, and that eerily-sinister-yet-congenial lilting voice over the P.A.: “Attention shoppers…grrreat deals, grrreat savings…just for you…” It’s a little disorienting. But it all begins to make sense after a while: the packages’ corporate logos are obscured with Grocery Store stickers, and working the checkout in matching polyester uniforms are local multimedia / performance artists (not to mention hilariously provocative shit-disturbers) Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. (Olson)
Actively participating in debates around the gentrification of downtown Winnipeg’s Exchange District, and addressing the need for access to affordable, healthy food in the city’s core, performance artists and activists Dempsey and Millan formed the Co-op Collective with Jake Moore and Zab in 2002. Together they started up a fully functional grocery store (aptly named “Grocery Store”) for three weeks in a downtown art gallery. Literally instrumentalizing “art” by using art to sell food, the Co-op Collective’s performance intervention cut right to the heart of debates not only around urban planning and “real-life” services in Winnipeg’s downtown core, but also, more broadly, to the challenges and possibilities for art to promote social dialogue and change in the neoliberal era. While perhaps a peculiar example to choose in a thesis on storytelling for social change, given that Grocery Store: Live in the Exchange! provided no scripted “story” and had no explicit plot, the performance intervention is notable in its opening up of a space for collective tellings of a future for Winnipeg’s downtown that refused to ignore either neoliberalism’s destructive edge or the unruly bodies it might leave in its wake. The Grocery Store intervention told a different kind of story, one in which the viewer / consumer / participant who walked through the door became the protagonist for different tellings of the downtown Exchange, of community, of what can or cannot be possible through market coordinates. (And, indeed, the work of the Co-op Collective can be seen to emerge out of a broader tradition of what Bourriaud calls “relational” art where, in Harvie’s words, the audience’s “immersion […] in a shared environment requires those audiences to experience the artwork in relation not only to ‘itself’ but also to each other” (5). I address the implication of this in further detail below).

For decades, Dempsey and Millan, collectively known as Finger in the Dyke Productions, have been using art as a tool for wedging open spaces of possibility from within
the contradictions in dominant logics—from unsettling “nature” in *Lesbian National Parks and Services* (ongoing) from its heteronormative connotations, allowing it to speak “for anomaly, deviance and the entire queer rainbow” (Dempsey 4), or reimagining the (male, ageless, virile) superhero in *Unruly* (2008) as a middle-aged sessional women’s studies instructor who has “the ability to quote poetry out of her ass” (Dempsey 4), to re-writing the histories of famous figures in *Bedtime Stories for the Edge of the World* (2012) for their “own lesbian feminist ends” (Dempsey in Enright 118). In a recent interview related to the “Winnipeg Now” exhibit, Millan states, “It’s not a secret that we want to reshape culture as best we can. We do what we do because we’re trying to create better possible futures” (Enright 117). As such, Dempsey and Millan launch their critiques against systemic injustice as a way to move actively toward better possible futures.

In the case of *Grocery Store*, Dempsey and Millan made explicit use of culture to participate in a process of envisioning a better possible future for Winnipeg’s downtown area. Wading into the art and utility debate in a recent forthcoming article, “Art is Not Peace, but Neither is it War: Strategies for Creation and Social Change,” Dempsey states unequivocally, “Art positioned in opposition to practical necessities is a spurious dichotomy” (7). *Grocery Store* thus takes us right to the “creative class” debate at a time when the gentrification push was becoming evident in Winnipeg’s Exchange District. Heritage Winnipeg calls the Exchange District (originally named for Winnipeg’s Grain Exchange) “one of the most historically intact turn-of-the-century commercial districts on the continent.” Allegedly, architects from Chicago and elsewhere came to Winnipeg to “leave their mark on Winnipeg’s expanding skyline” (Gillies, “Putting History on Track” 2). Working hard to weave together the Exchange’s celebrated history as an architecturally vibrant commercial district with the
bohemian, artsy reputation it has been developing more recently, a 2009 publication commissioned by the Winnipeg Art Council, “Ticket to the Future: The Economic Impact of the Arts and Creative Industries in Winnipeg,” makes a strong case for the kind of neoliberal use of culture that Florida and his advocates promote; “the arts” are figured in the report as Winnipeg’s economic engine, an enhancer of the quality of life for citizens, as an attraction for tourists and skilled workers, and as a marker of Winnipeg’s uniqueness as a city. The report goes so far as to say, “Arts and culture are completely integrated within the economic fabric of the city” (Prairie Research Associates 1).

Representing this kind of “culture-led economic development” (Dang et al, “Culture as an Economic Engine”) thesis in an even more literal form, a 2011 report from the Manitoba office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives offers an argument for turning the Exchange District into a site for literally performing “the most interesting aspects of Winnipeg’s evolution” (Gillies, “Putting History on Track” 8) as a way to attract development:

In the summer months, actors could be deployed around the Old Market Square, portraying characters—war veterans, nurses, railway workers, suffragettes, and business people—living in the summer of 1919. They could act out short 20-25 minute plays throughout the day around the Exchange, and during streetcar tours board the trams to speak with passengers. As well, food carts could be set up along the streetcar line selling foods, like perogies and latkes that would have been popular in Winnipeg in 1919. An historical newspaper or magazine stand could be situated along the route, along with a jazz ensemble to perform music appropriate to the era. (Gillies, “Fast Facts: Putting Winnipeg on Track”)

180
The scenario envisioned in the report seizes on a very useful role for the arts—re-enacting the history of Winnipeg, providing interest and historical appeal as a way to make it a “place that is attractive and exciting for both citizens and visitors” (10) with the ultimate goal of “nurturing business” (10) and “spur[ring] development in the downtown” (8). The re-telling of history combined with a proposed new rail line in the Exchange District appears to be a lucrative vehicle for revitalizing Winnipeg’s downtown in ways that combine citizens’ wishes for a sustainable and business-friendly community: “It is an interactive historical experience, where visitors ride through the city’s past on a vintage, environmentally-friendly streetcar, meeting characters from early 20th century Canada while seeing, hearing (and potentially tasting) Winnipeg’s history” (8). However, the “history” that Benjamin Gillies’s vision brings to life necessarily surfaces as a reductive “highlights reel” of Winnipeg’s past, a use of culture only valuable in so far as it is capable of generating financial value—i.e. of attracting tourists, condo purchasers, and businesses to the downtown. For example, the General Strike of 1919 and the women’s suffrage movement are plotted as key “points of interest” along the proposed rail line tour (seemingly interchangeable with other moments in Winnipeg’s history) with no interrogation of how these moments might actually suggest a disruption to the “business as usual” thesis advanced by the re-development plans.

Indeed, on first blush, Grocery Store seems to be advancing the same thesis, i.e. that the arts are necessary to the economic prosperity of our cities. Grocery Store appears overtly positioned as a response to dismissals of art as “irrelevant,” announcing as they do in their promotional video for the project, “art does indeed provide.” But the way “art provided” in the performance was not merely along neoliberal lines of generating investment potential. Rejecting their casting as the new heroes of neoliberal development—the artistic van-guard
paving the way for edgy, innovative capitalist living—Dempsey, Millan, moore, and Zab re-appropriated the art gallery space (often figured as the “place[] where protest goes to die” [Robertson 474]) to examine the needs of those most affected by the re-development plans. Is this art? Or is this life? Does it matter? It seems the Co-op Collective managed to work their way through the questions plaguing activist art in an era of heightened capitalist instrumentality without fetishizing or reifying the answer.

**Repopulating (Hi)story**

The *Grocery Store* “set” brilliantly conjured the aura of neoliberalism’s supposed triumph over history, “the end of history” proclaimed by American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama argues that the end of the Cold War coupled with waves of democratization and market reforms across the world signalled an end to the ideological antagonisms that shaped twentieth-century history. Like the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness in Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, the anachronistic 1960s-style décor and the generic “Grocery Store” labels pasted onto all the products gave the art space a “time-outside-of-time” feel. As multi-media artist and Winnipeg resident Christopher Olson notes in his account of the exhibit, “It’s like stepping into a time machine, but one that takes you into an idiomatic space, the same way that life in 2002 was envisioned to be Jetsons-tastic fifty years ago.” The “weirding” of time in *Grocery Store* seems to point to the skewed use of Winnipeg’s past as a prop for gentrifying the Exchange. Olson points to this history-as-prop-for-economic-benefit phenomenon when he writes, “Our ‘important historical neighbourhood and part of our heritage’ has become less of an entity to be celebrated and more of a sales pitch.”
By exposing the flaws in the end-game logic of neoliberalism, the Co-op Collective’s re-fashioning of the art gallery carved out space for the telling of different stories. The key elements of the history of Winnipeg’s Exchange district—from booming manufacturing centre (1881-1918) and famed site for labour struggles (Winnipeg General Strike, 1919) to the hip, “slightly bohemian” (Gillies, “Putting History on Track” 8) cultural hub it is considered today—were brought to the fore in the Grocery Store occupation, but in ways that invited negotiation with the very terms of the Exchange’s “community” and with the people that differently inhabited the space. For example, in reflecting on the possibilities opened up by Grocery Store, Olson gives his story of the Exchange, from his experiences selling prints and paintings alongside his father in the Old Market square and unearthing treasures in used book stores, to admiring the graffiti in back alleys and attending punk shows with the “black-clad and spiky-haired Albert street crowd” (Olson). Acknowledging the mutually constitutive relationship between place and identity, Olson writes, “this corner of downtown has grown up with me. Or I have grown up with it. Whichever.”

Dempsey similarly reflects on the experience of Grocery Store in ways that point to the contingent community that surfaced over the course of the three-week project:

The store became a meeting place and site of discussion for garment workers, artists living in illegal lofts, business people and the residents of the neighbourhood, the urban poor. Everyone frequented the grocery store because it was useful to them—it served their needs—and in the process it also served ours in becoming a place where citizens could come together and reimagine their city. (8)

Grocery Store became an intentional space for telling stories, not only about the different paths people carved through and in the Exchange, but also about the possible futures
unfolding. Here, to return to Dean’s words, the “‘we’ of any community” became “the very thing that needs to be worked towards” (12). Olson’s account explicitly addressed the kind of community that might be imagined or erased in the proposed re-development: “Do more cafes and nightclubs make the neighbourhood more inclusive or exclusive, and to whom? What does revitalization mean for the area, its inhabitants and, most importantly, the poor and marginalized who are part of the fabric of the Downtown Core?” He goes on to ask, “How does pricey loft space deal with the larger issues such as child poverty and addiction?” As Olson’s probing questions indicate, the tellings opened up by Grocery Store brought attention to issues concerning the displacement of “the poor and marginalized” in the proposed re-development scheme. Harvie points out the same destructive contradiction of the push for “creative” urban renewal in her study of socially engaged art practices in London. She writes, “While advocates of the creative city argue that it is precisely such cities’ liveability that produces their prosperity, I explore here the inverse equation—that London’s cultural strategies designed for prosperity adversely affect liveability for its most vulnerable citizens” (114-115). By directly engaging Winnipeg’s version of the “creative city” narrative through art, Grocery Store exposed the interested terms by which “liveability” is determined while not relinquishing creativity itself as a site for engaged critique.

In a sense, the terms of the social contract in the Exchange became the art project—a conscious framing of the on-going performances and layers of stories that define and constrain understandings of “community.” Here was the AGO’s “Massive Uprising” party re-staged with a twist. While the staging of the “Massive Uprising” party was marked by an ironic awareness of the ways in which even our critiques of capitalism can get folded back into an opportunity to sell more, Grocery Store opened up the capitalism / art-for-change
nexus in ways that actually destabilized the terms of the debate. Rather than presenting the usual duality of capitalism vs. critics of capitalism, and showing the latter to be increasingly ineffective in staging a critique that isn’t always already prey to the machinations of the former, *Grocery Store* somehow made it possible for the consuming subject and the agent of change to be one and the same. The artist statement accompanying the brief promotional video of *Grocery Store* points to the intervention’s “repurposing of the art gallery into [a] responsive cultural space that examined the economic realities of neighbourhoods and problematized the idea of cultural currency” (moore). Pushing against the “Creative Cities” barometer, where the Exchange District was actively being refashioned as a new cultural hub, the Co-op Collective posited a different kind of *use* for art beyond equipping capitalism with a creative edge. Dempsey writes, “Our historic Eaton’s building was about to be torn down to build a hockey arena, and bistros and web design firms were displacing long-time residents of the downtown” (8). *Grocery Store* became useful in making evident the ways in which the “culturalizing” of the Exchange participated in the displacement of those who might not fit the “new” image, and made overt the link between capitalist accumulation and dispossession / displacement. By cleverly using a self-conscious combination of culture *and* commerce to critique the impact of the neoliberal use of culture, *Grocery Store* managed to push past the reductive neoliberal re-appropriation of the avant-garde “art into life” axiom, offering up an expanded conversation both of how we think of “art” and of how we value life.

On a more pragmatic level, as questions about space use and the future of the downtown community were feverishly being bandied about in public discourse, *Grocery Store* calmly showed up on the scene, selling $6,000 worth of food in three weeks and providing important evidence of the need for a grocery store in the downtown core. Consumer
participants were also encouraged at check-out to participate in “a mail-in-coupon campaign to the mayor requesting real-life downtown services” (Finger in the Dyke Productions), sketching out specific parameters for engaging in direct, public intervention into municipal decision making. The mail-in coupon announced,

Get Real Value!

Accessible green space! Real-life services! Grocery stores! Laundromats! Public transportation that works!

These are just some of the things people need every day. By encouraging basic services, not entertainment facilities, we can create livable [sic] downtown neighbourhoods. Support real urban renewal. (Dempsey and Millan)

By writing participants into the story, and passing them a “coupon” to use by election day, *Grocery Store* highlighted the need to understand the slipperiness of the logic of capital from a place that recognizes our complicity with those structures—our thinking, breathing, working imbrication—not as a submission to the inevitability of neoliberalism, but as the space from which to negotiate change. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes,

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. [Let’s] set aside the sympathy we extend to others … for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others. (102-103)
Rejecting the role of citizens as innocent bystanders to the inevitable unfolding logic of the
market, *Grocery Store* used art as a vehicle for community-building *through* activist
intervention, productively exposing the terms of the community being built with careful
attention to how “the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others” (Sontag 103).

As I note above, *Grocery Store* is a prime example of the kind of “participatory,”
immersive or “socially turned” performance art practice that Bishop, Jackson, Nato
Thompson, Kirsty Robertson, Jelinek, and Harvie, among others, examine. My reading of it
also falls into a number of the kinds of traps that Bishop points to in her discussion of existing
approaches to analysing socially engaged art—where the art is measured *only* based on its
efficacy as a tool in promoting broader social agendas, of “serving” some kind of ameliorative
purpose, or of opening up an ostensibly participatory space where the audience members are
“given” agency in determining how the piece unfolds. Bishop’s concern with these kinds of
readings and practices is that aesthetic and political questions are collapsed, rather than held
in productive tension, undermining the importance of dissonant relations to democratic
society. She writes, “Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian
order—a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy”
(“Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 66). I think, however, that *Grocery Store* asks us to
see art and performance in broader and more nuanced terms than this might suggest. Rather
than bringing “art” and “politics” together in ways that make art’s function only relevant in so
far as it *serves* the social (i.e. serving the needs of the community through providing
groceries), *Grocery Store* asks us to recognize the performance, the construction of the social
and our on-going participation in reaffirming its terms. Here the *Grocery Store* installation
draws attention to the art and performance of consumption and of community (ex)change,
both in the gallery space and beyond. Re-casting social change as art, as an unfolding story, asserts it as a creative constructive force without positioning it somehow outside or beyond unsavoury entanglements with what is destructive in dominant ways of seeing and being. That is, exploring more broadly the kinds of “use” art may have does not, to my mind, undermine its legibility as art. And, as self-consciously social art, *Grocery Store* manages to provide a healthy dose of the distancing and disruption defended by Bishop, while nevertheless providing a space for engaged dialogue about the terms of the social contract existing in the Exchange District.

*Grocery Store*’s bringing together of the art space and market space opened up the contradictions characterizing “common-sense” neoliberal capitalism, and, indeed of political performance, in fresh ways. Participants were invited into the gallery, and by overtly performing the contractual relation of market exchange, the fiction (and the construction of consent) of the neoliberal subject was made overt. The kitschy, fetishized presentation of a 1960s futuristic grocery store and the “eerily-sinister-yet-congenial lilting voice over the P.A.” (Olson) addressing the shoppers simultaneously defamiliarized the space of art engagement and capitalist consumption (and its eerie, placeless now), bringing renewed attention to the market apparatus while recuperating the space for alternative modes of performance within multiple discourses: part activism, part consumer behaviour study, part art gallery subversion, part community service. In this way, the “exchanges” that took place in the store over the course of the three weeks, to borrow language from Nick Couldry, were “based in the social grounding of human experience and the communicative (not merely economic) exchange through which individuals orient themselves to the world” (135). That is, the exchanges were traditional market exchanges of money for food, but they were also
exchanges that made explicit the constitutive, performative parameters of community engagement, acknowledging the on-going performance of selfhood while simultaneously, to borrow phrasing from Sarah Ahmed, “reshap[ing] the very bodily form of the community, as a community that is yet to come” (180). In this way, Grocery Store productively engaged an additive logic that didn’t just expand the neoliberal container, but pushed against its narrowing agenda to nurture the seeds of different kinds of use—of space, of art, of time.

**Precarious Community in *Get a Real Job* **

Like smart mayors in desperate little towns all over the world, [our mayor] saw the value of pouring millions of taxpayers’ money into private, for-profit-business, and not just any business, but the business of the future: call centres! [...] [They] make millions!! And all they have to do is provide a few hundred jobs for a city full of desperate, hungry unemployed!! ISN’T CAPITALISM WONDERFUL?? (from *Get a Real Job*, quoted in Guard et al. 164).

Looking at the “wonders of capitalism” from the more specific vantage point of the precariously employed, the popular theatre performance of *Get a Real Job* came out of the efforts of the Omega Direct Response call-center in Sudbury, Ontario to unionize. The first rendition of *Get a Real Job* was performed in 2003 by Sudbury-based call-centre workers-turned-actors, known collectively as “Ring Around the World Players,” to an audience of 60 at an international conference on call-centre organizing. Audience members were made up of union organizers, academics, popular educators, and call-centre workers. The actor-workers, in the words of Julie Guard et al., “performed a scorching parody of the oppressive working conditions at their call center and pointed accusingly at the city council that had provided generous incentives to attract the call center to Sudbury, Ontario” (163). I am interested in
*Get a Real Job* as an artistic intervention into the effects of neoliberal labour practices, where call-centre workers performed their own particular subjugation within neoliberalism in a way that offered, to return to Jackson’s phrase, “a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imagining” (14). In other words, while tackling head-on some of the crises and contradictions wrought by neoliberalism, such as massive unemployment, precarious work conditions, the growing income gap, and the feminization of poverty, for example, the *Get a Real Job* project also offered possibilities for recapturing radical imaginings, for moving *toward* others through the process of gathering and telling stories.

**Necessity**

Laurie McGauley of Myths and Mirrors Community Arts, a grassroots non-profit arts organization based in Sudbury, facilitated the performance process. McGauley, the activist, community development worker, and popular theatre animator who founded Myths and Mirrors, comments that the organization had been denied charitable status three times for being considered “too political” (qtd in Harlap 124). Dempsey and Millan’s argument for the targeted, *necessary* work of art beyond the necessity posited by market framing (i.e. art is necessary for development!), is echoed in McGauley’s assertion that Myths and Mirrors was explicitly developed “to talk about the myths of ‘free-market’ capitalism and neo-conservatism” (Harlap 124). McGauley speaks to the challenges of working with the group of telemarketers to produce the play, the same challenges that made drawing attention to their experiences particularly urgent: “the low wages and the temporary lay-offs mean that they are never out of poverty, with all the stresses and personal chaos that that entails. It was difficult for people to commit to something when they didn’t know if they’d be working there in three
months” (in Guard et al. 168). Pointing to these and other difficulties in their expansive discussion of the play in “Art as Activism: Empowering Workers and Reviving Unions through Popular Theatre,” Julie Guard, D’Arcy Martin, Laurie McGauley, Mercedes Steedman, and Jorge Garcia-Orgales (the group of union organizers and academics who initiated the play-development process) note, “its collaborators successfully navigated the choppy water of a declining community economy, polarized union politics, conditional arts funding, and precarious employment” (166). The performance’s emergence from these “choppy waters” points to the very real barriers to voicing collective disavowals of the current economic system, particularly from those most affected by its violence and injustice. The performance process, however, also productively highlights some of the tensions and questions raised by socially engaged art efforts that enlist and recruit voices from “the margins” in a way that may complicate their broader social justice agendas.

Despite the openly political agenda of Myths and Mirrors, the Get a Real Job project also showed art to be extremely useful for a host of other purposes—building community, boosting confidence, getting better jobs—some of the very domesticating uses of art deemed suspect by those, such as Jelinek, who see community art as the “official art of neoliberal capitalism” (Leger). Indeed, Cheryl Whynott, one of the Omega worker-actors (who had become a student in Laurentian University’s Labour Studies program over the course of the project), wrote in the diary she used to document the process, “to be heard and understood…somehow validates [people’s] role in society and makes individuals feel as if they are not alone in their quest to live decent and comfortable lives” (qtd. in Guard et al. 172). Participants also noted that they “gained in confidence” and that they learned to be “proactive not reactive” (Whynott in Guard et al. 172) through their experiences.
collaboratively producing *Get a Real Job*. Given neoliberalism’s current hegemony as a cultural logic and its policing of dominant constructions of the social and subjectivity, there is clearly a tension here between the professed and unproblematized “social rehabilitative” dimension of the participants’ involvement in the project and the project’s systemic critique of neoliberal economic policies. However, rather than reading the one impulse (social integration) as necessarily invalidating the other (social critique), I examine them here as contrasting, uncoordinated movements that may nevertheless open us toward an understanding of the “social” that is not solely dictated by the domesticating leger of capitalism.

**Organizing Precarity**

*Get a Real Job* was designed most specifically to build solidarity and raise awareness about labour rights and unions in the precarious workplaces of call-centres, foregrounding capitalist exploitation while simultaneously moving toward others who were similarly living out capitalism’s continually deferred promise of job security. The symbolic auctioning of place that opened *The Spirit of Shivaree* is echoed in *Get a Real Job*’s opening: a call-center manager-turned-game-show-host invited audience members to compete for the top prize of a job (Guard et al. 164). Pointing to the empty promise of job security, “Ring Around the World Players” dedicated the play to “all of the workers of the ‘new economy’ who continue to struggle for bread and roses. In particular, to all the telemarketers who have been promised a real job, only to find abuse, insecurity, low wages and injustice. The struggle continues” (“Ring Around the World Players”). The play thus surfaced from the particularly challenging terrain of neoliberalism’s “new world order,” where the precariously employed exist in a tenuous relationship not only to systems of organized labour, but also perhaps to time.
Showing the dark side of neoliberalism’s purported triumph over history, Brett Nielson and Ned Rossiter draw on Milanese activist Alex Foti’s definition of precarity as the condition of “being unable to plan one’s time, being a worker on call where your life and time is determined by external forces.”

Supporting Foti’s definition, the thesis of Florian Schneider’s documentary *Organizing the Unorganizables* (2002) is that the central issue for the temporary worker is one of time (Nieelson and Rossiter). In the film, Raj Jayadev (of the Debug worker’s collective) recounts the sentiment expressed by a staff-writer for the Debug magazine: “My Mondays roll into my Tuesdays, and my Tuesdays roll into my Wednesdays without me knowing it. And I lose track of time and I lose hope with what tomorrow’s going to be” (qtd in Nieelson and Rossiter). Jayadev’s account is reminiscent of the mute pronouncement of David Armstrong Six’s rickety wooden signs at the AGO’s “Massive Uprising” party: “No Rest, No Time, No Hope.” Being temporally dislocated means, in this instance, not only being subject to capitalism’s capricious processes of deferral, but also being disconnected from the hope for a future that is any different from the sameness of the days rolling out, one after the other. In *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Richard Sennett notes, “A self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience is—to put a kindly face on the matter—an unusual sort of human being. Most people are not like this” (5). He goes on to argue that people “need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they’ve lived through. The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them” (5).

Working against the isolation and despondency engendered by neoliberalism’s new terms of living outlined by Sennett, the process of producing *Get a Real Job* drew extensively
on academic research, interviews, personal reflection, and group storytelling that engaged both the Omega workers-turned-actors as well as other call-centre workers and union officials who weren’t part of the actual performance itself. Guard et al. summarize the play development process, which unfolded at weekly gatherings held every Sunday in a community centre in Sudbury:

Over coffee and muffins, they would share their stories from their work week, the bosses, the quotas, and the gossip and offer each other advice, help, and support. They generated more material using popular education exercises, improvisation, body sculpting, and theatre games. Song writing was a favorite activity, and humor was the favorite form. From these elements the group came to collective decisions about what issues they would deal with and developed the themes they would address in the play.

(171)

Pushing against the dislocating feeling of precarious employment becomes all the more crucial given the very particular ways in which, to borrow language from Mohanty, “neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience” (“Transnational Feminist Crossings” 971).

Using precarity as a site to negotiate collectivity, however, remains both a compelling and challenging ground for critiquing neoliberalism. On the one hand, participating in efforts to name and thus forge solidarity between precariously employed workers, the Get a Real Job project became an opportunity for making visible the effects of precarity on the worker-actors involved in the performance. The project also, however, gestures toward some of the broader tensions in perceptions of precarity and flexibility as they relate, for example, to cultural labour and social engagement as well (which I discuss in more detail below). In stressing
some of the more general challenges related to organizing the “precariate,” Leger writes,

One immediate solution to post-Fordist economic precarization has therefore been to name it. Demonstrators at the 2004 MayDay Parades in Milan and Barcelona, for instance, referred to themselves as variously, the precariously employed, precariats, cognitive workers, cognitariat, autonomous activists, affectariat, etc.

Beyond the logistical challenges of organizing those defined by their lack of security within capitalism are challenges related to the very processes of “naming” a community (that I explored at the outset of this chapter), and the ways in which this naming can, in some cases, serve to polarize or disenfranchise those gathered together through the process. Nielson and Rossiter tease out what they articulate as the politically ambivalent position of precarity within capitalism, figuring it as both site of subjugation, but also, perhaps of empowerment (to return to Butler’s formulation). They point out that precarity “supplies the precondition for new forms of creative organisation that seek to accept and exploit the flexibility inherent in networked modes of sociality and production.” However, they go on to suggest that the emergence of the “positive” rendering of precarity (“flexibility”), figured in the passionate artist working for low-pay but on his / her own terms, may gloss-over the very different material experiences of those gathered together under the moniker of “precariate,” “an eclipse of those forms of bodily, coerced, and unpaid work primarily associated with migrants and women (and not with artists, computer workers, or new media labourers).”

While precarious call-centre employment was the visible target of the Get a Real Job project, the performance points toward further (less visible) layers and tensions surrounding the role of the arts and artistic labour within neoliberalism. In a way, Get a Real Job very literally conflated the flexible creative and the precariously employed call centre worker: the
call centre workers became artists / cultural workers through their involvement in the performance process, seemingly swapping their roles as exploited victims for new roles as enterprising, creative heroes. Their participation in what was a precarious performance process about precarity (with issues around access to performance and discussion space, conditional arts funding, lack of time etc.), however, shed light on their doubly compromised position as precarious artists.

In any of the discussion and documentation of the performance process, the participants’ roles as artists in making and performing the play do not seem to register as “labour,” exploited or otherwise. As McGauley comments, a catalyst for Myths and Mirrors’ “coming into being” was a result of “poor-bashing” and “government demonizing a part of the community. That part of the community needed to tell their own stories” (quoted in Harlap 124). The need to tell their own stories is framed as the motivating catalyst in a way that points to the praise of the autonomy, passion, and flexibility of artists, without attending to the pressures, economic insecurity, and vulnerability potentially marking their cultural labour as well. And, indeed, the process to produce Get a Real Job required a great deal of additional labour to “tell a story” that some of the workers had to be convinced to tell. McGauley acknowledged the workers’ initial reticence in getting involved, stating that for her and Whynott (the former Omega worker who co-facilitated the project) “leafleting was our only option. We had let the employer know about the project, but he was suspicious, and the Union couldn’t get us in [to the workplace]. So we’re standing outside in the freezing cold, catching the workers on their smoke breaks. Who are these crazy ladies?” (168).

This tension characterizes some of the issues troubling efforts to “make space” for disenfranchised voices in popular theatre projects and broader social justice efforts alike.
(examined in detail by, for example, Julie Salverson in “Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Testimony, and the Lie of the Literal”), where an allegiance to an unproblematized celebration of the transformative effects of the arts can mask some of the uneven and contradictory ways in which socially engaged art is produced, circulated, and performed. Salverson writes of the risks and responsibility in popular theatre practices that rely on the true stories of vulnerable subjects, stressing her “concern with what in Canada is an enthusiastic but perhaps not always carefully considered use of personal narratives in classrooms and community organizations” (181). Speaking from her own position as a community-based popular theatre practitioner, Salverson asserts, “As artists and educators, we must continually ask ourselves: in what context are risky stories being told? Within what frameworks did they originate? And what is the cost to the speaker?” (181-182). She suggests that thoughtless appeals for autobiography “may reproduce a form of cultural colonialism that is at the very least voyeuristic,” particularly when the choices surrounding the selection and presentation of specific voices or stories in popular theatre projects are made invisible, or when the voices of the facilitators or artists themselves remain unexamined (181-182). I highlight these tensions to underscore Bishop’s point that socially engaged art “is not a privileged political medium […] but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context” (“Participation and Spectacle” 45).

At the same time, the play development process worked itself into and through the contradictions characterizing neoliberalism by naming the contradictions themselves. The naming didn’t only serve, in this instance, to conjure into being a “precarious” community, but to show the process of becoming as a productive site for the critique of capitalism. Guard
et al. discuss the research that participants conducted “into government support for the call center industry,” going on to suggest that participants “thus grew more aware of the contradictions between official representations of call centers and their own and others’ experiences” (171). Whynott writes that at one point “Laurie [McGauley] brought us all these statistics that she pulled off the Human Resources Canada website on call centres. It tells us of all the wonderful benefits call centres have for the economy. What it doesn’t portray are the realities. That will be our job in the theatre piece” (in Guard et al. 171). In the monologue she performed about her experience, worker-actor Linda Dickerson illustrated some of these contradictions, stating

I remember being so excited […] about a new business that was coming to Sudbury […] The telemarketing company was intending on hiring hundreds of people; providing competitive wages, benefits, full time employment, education incentives, shift bonuses, state of the art equipment […] Well, all was not as rosy as anticipated. There were no benefits, no lockers, no education incentives, no secure employment […] We were aggressively pushed to perform. Many of my co-workers were soon fired. The work environment was incredibly stressful. (qtd in Guard et al. 172)

By juxtaposing the promise of secure jobs and benefits with the realities of the stress and abuse she experienced, Dickerson pointedly challenged the neoliberal success story, even as she acknowledged that recognizing the lie did not magically precipitate a way out: “I felt trapped, but what could I do? I couldn’t just quit and have nothing again” (172). The requirement to “perform” under duress in the workplace was an important target of the Get a Real Job critique, which included pressures such as “close management control, arbitrary
discipline, perpetual pressure to work faster, electronic surveillance, and managers’ frequent use of abusive language and threats to force workers’ compliance” (Guard et al. 167).

As I note above, however, the performance process itself was not “free” from being complicit in perpetuating some of neoliberalism’s most troubling contradictions—and Dickerson’s use of the language of being “pushed to perform” highlights its own emergence from the double-edge of performance that McKenzie outlines in Perform or Else. To circle back to my discussion at the outset, McKenzie suggests that an imperative to perform has become the defining normative feature of global capitalism (in a sense he re-frames theories of “creative destruction” and disorganized capital in terms of performativity). Following his logic, both the pressured work-place performance characterized by Dickerson’s comments above, and the flexible, resistant, “out of the box” performance suggested by the play itself could be read as necessary fuel for the capitalist fire. And yet, the multiple, over-lapping performances unfolding on stage of the precarious worker and artist, of the rehabilitated neoliberal self\(^\text{24}\) and the labour activist, gives form not only to the complex terms of subjectivity under neoliberalism, but also to a kind of collective agency and possibility that emerges in negotiation with those terms. To return to Butler’s words, here the “power exerted on a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (Psychic Life of Power 11).

On another level, then, the processes of naming and of telling, while critical for making visible a particular coordinate of experience, also served to anchor the tellers in time, in (hi)story, and in relation to each other, in the face of the temporal dislocation brought on by their experiences of job precarity. Commenting specifically on how relationships are the necessary starting point for a popular theatre project like Get a Real Job (which took over a
year to develop), McGauley states, “it takes time to establish relationships, and then for those relationships to shape the work […] the reality of possible failure forces us to be more creative” (in Guard et al. 170-171). The kind of creativity that McGauley invokes here, however, isn’t “creativity” neoliberal / entrepreneurial style, where “creative destruction” is deemed necessary to wrest the heroic individual and his / her vision from the systems, histories, and limits of other people. The job of the play was to tell the story of the subjugated call-centre workers, making their pointed, inconvenient stories visible, while positioning the worker-actors themselves as agents in the telling of a different story of subjectivity and possibility—i.e. one that positioned them in relation to each other and in opposition to the particular subjugating logic of neoliberalism. Salverson writes, “Risky stories in popular theatre must be able to be told in public spaces and understood as events situated within history, remembering that the artists who solicit and shape such stories need to listen not only for damage, but also for hope and resistance” (“Performing Emergency” 188). By speaking up and “naming” themselves while also advocating for change within the existing structures (appeals to unionize), the “Ring Around the World Players” made explicit some of the tensions plaguing the process at the same time that new possibilities for connection and change emerged.

The performance itself was a mixture of parody, research, musical theatre, and participatory game show, ultimately documenting the process of the workers’ successful efforts to unionize Omega the year before. At various points in the performance, “workers stepped out of character and delivered monologues describing their real experience at Omega before and after the union drive […] Monologues not only gave voice to the workers but linked their experiences to a wider analysis of low-wage, ‘new economy’ work at insecure
companies under tyrannical bosses” (Guard et al. 173). *Get a Real Job* moved between over-the-top parody, caricatures, other anti-realist techniques, and their own experiences to heighten the effectiveness of this critique, as well as to situate the “true” stories of the Omega workers in the context of broader hegemonic systems. Part of my reason, then, for using *Get a Real Job* is because in some ways it sits uneasily alongside the other pieces I’ve discussed here—all of the other novels, plays, and performances were written, scripted, designed, and performed by professional artists and writers, while *Get a Real Job* was developed and written by call-centre workers in collaboration with McGauley and her community art centre. I am interested in the tension between the “real” stories and the clear performance of these stories as an explicit strategy for engaging and challenging broader cultural narratives. That is, the performing, scripting, and stitching together of the worker-actors’ stories draws attention more broadly to the challenges and the ongoing work of performing and imagining ourselves into “sustaining life narrative[s]” (Sennett 5) especially as the terms of that “life” continue to shift and dissolve.²⁵

While *Get a Real Job* drew on the “real” stories of a group of call-centre workers, the attention to the broader systems that produced their stories and the use of over-the-top theatrical gestures distinguishes it from the kind of “reality” theatre (verbatim theatre, living newspaper, or immersive theatre, for example) that Harvie, among others, examines. Harvie writes of immersive theatre specifically that it “works to individualize everyone’s experience, socially isolating them, as well as in its practices of deeply seducing audiences into apparently rich worlds, only to abandon them at the show’s end” (53-54). Harvie’s analysis suggestively points to how, in some cases, immersive, participatory trends that work to make invisible the terms of their making in fact mirror neoliberal logics where individuals, atomized and
separated out, are granted the illusion of choice, self-expression, voice, of opportunities for excessive and endless tellings of the self—but in ways that may undermine claims to any kind of voice or value that exists beyond the space of economic rationality; this “new” kind of socially turned art makes the performances “like life” in ways that stand in marked contrast to the kinds of stories I’ve examined here so far, stories that explicitly invite questions of the performance of neoliberal selfhood while also denaturalizing and making visible the terms of their own making.

Yet, to push this one step further, I have been wanting to explore how, in different ways in the range of stories I’ve discussed throughout, attention to the constructedness of the social, to the complex terms of our relationships with systems of oppression, can lead to engagement with life rather than a panicked retreat from its messiness, gesturing to possibilities for connection that traverse the paths etched by dominant logics. In a similar vein, Salverson advocates for having the “courage to risk contact” in the stories we tell, reflecting on how in a class project she taught on storytelling, witnessing, and testimony, “the need to ask ourselves critical questions had taken on so much weight that we had lost the courage to risk contact. To my dismay, my class was reproducing a crippling carefulness I have inherited both in my work as a scholar and as an activist that paralyses the ability to truly engage” (“Taking Liberties” 251). Pushing against this kind of critical immobility, Get a Real Job offered specific strategies for resisting work-place injustice (both broad strategies around unionizing, and more specific strategies like having code songs or words to rally call-centre workers together when anyone was experiencing abuse from a boss or manager). In the context of Get a Real Job’s staging at a labour conference, this kind of clear, strategic rhetoric makes sense—the performance modeled the kind of pedagogical tone that other workshops
and discussions at the conference likely employed. Like the coupon passed to those visiting the Co-op Collective’s Grocery Store, the strategies outlined in the performance of Get a Real Job moved audience members, not perhaps to engage in a clear form of political or democratic decision-making, but to engage in a conversation about what standing up for (however contingent) a sense of community, or indeed, life means at this particular precarious moment, at this time when there is no time.

Get a Real Job and the broader discussions that occurred before, during, and after the production (through the interviews, story development process, diary documenting, research, conference conversations, and academic articles) point to tensions and to the multiple levels and layers where resistance and connection may happen: the performance itself materialized at a fraught point of intersection, where union discourse around change, personal work-place experience, and media rhetoric related to economic prosperity combined with leftist academic perspectives, popular theatre approaches, and labour activism. The process of producing the play also brought to light divisions and challenges within the union itself. The ultimate goal of unionizing was presented in ways that did not shy away from acknowledging complexities in the unionizing process. And while the resistance enacted stayed, in some ways, within the boundaries prescribed by the capitalist framework—the worker-actors were advocating for a safer, more just work environment, an adjustment to, rather than radical transformation of, the system—their efforts to expose call-centre injustices spilled out beyond the specifics of their work-place critiques, gesturing much more broadly toward the creatively destructive effects of neoliberalism. That is, despite the fact that the unionized Omega call centre ended up shutting down its operations in Sudbury, moving in pursuit of even cheaper labour off-shore, and despite the decline in union density and continued disproportionate exploitation of
women within call centres, the experiment at Omega stands out. By swimming against the neoliberal currents that keep the precariously employed and the working poor atomized, separated out, the collective voice emerging in the play offered a glimpse of something both damning and hopeful, even as the exact condition for that hopefulness (unionization) was figured as perhaps only a temporary, incomplete solution. It serves as a provocative example of a challenging, even compromised, artistic intervention where individuals stood alone together to condemn precarious labour conditions, negotiating through pressures they faced as working poor to confront the disciplining of their bodies within neoliberal logics, and celebrating their own acts of living through the process—making space for levity, connection, and voice inside critique.

While vastly different in context and form, both Grocery Store and Get a Real Job intervened directly in capitalist logics, showing local, contextualized experiences of disenfranchisement and abuse in relation to the broader neoliberal narratives within which these experiences were produced. Kirsty Robertson shows the limits of various political art and performance projects that take up social or environmental issues without actually engaging the movements they emerge from in any sustained way, suggesting, “art can serve a political purpose, but only if it shows a willingness to actually engage or to become part of the movement it might seek otherwise to illustrate” (483). Elsewhere, J. Keri Cronin and Robertson talk about Oliver Ressler’s concept of “embedded art” or “projects that take place as part of activist movements […] where the most ‘successful’ projects described by authors almost all include some sort of immersive, participatory, or performative component” (Imagining Resistance 10). While my discussion throughout implicitly problematizes Cronin and Robertson’s claims (indeed, I argue that all of the stories under discussion here are useful
in varying ways for their contributions to broader movements for social justice—regardless of whether they are concretely emerging “from the street” or not) the performance moments I discuss in this final chapter are most obviously inter-articulated with these struggles, stories that are purposefully directed at, and invested in, prying open the material implications of neoliberal logics on resistant/marginalized subjects. This makes them both most easily read as successful at engaging directly with broader struggles for social justice, but also, I would argue, most in danger of perpetuating notions of “community” and “social change” that serve to further the creative destructions of neoliberalism.

What I find most compelling about these examples, however, is that they both invite agency and participation while also showing the complex connections between the expression of that agency and hegemonic neoliberal logics. The sense and space of the social, invoked differently by Grocery Store and by Get a Real Job, is shown to be in inevitable and ongoing exchange with (not simply in opposition to) the framing narratives of neoliberalism, acknowledging the complicated terms and production of the performance of life itself. Speaking broadly about the possible offerings of socially engaged art in ways that resonate with my readings of Grocery Store and Get a Real Job, Jackson asserts, “By reminding us that living is form, these works remind us of the responsibility for creating and recreating the conditions of life. Form here is both socially urgent and a task for an aesthetic imaginary. Living does not just ‘happen,’ but is, in fact, actively produced” (“Living Takes Many Forms” 93). As such, there is much to learn from Grocery Store’s and Get a Real Job’s discerning vocabularies for reigniting radical imaginings in ways that are anchored in the material injustices currently produced by dominant ways of thinking but that are, ultimately, about
finding *in life*, in the words of Robin Kelley (scholar, activist, and radical utopian)

“the strength to love and to dream” (xi).
“We still have time”

This project has focused on the challenges posed to our radical imaginings by the current “hegemonic ideological coordinates” (Žižek 545), looking at a range of Canadian texts and performance moments that argue for the continued possibility of pushing through the dehistoricizing, decontextualizing, “end of history” of neoliberalism. Wendy Brown writes, “The collapse of a sense of historical movement in the present betokens the loss of future possibility […] A present experienced as eternal is a present experienced as Total, with no imagined elsewhere” (9). By re-instating historical movement and showing existing configurations of state and neoliberal ideologies in Canada as shifting, contradictory, and finite, the texts here imagine futures of possibility that nevertheless attend to the particularities of the present. As I have argued, the importance of re-populating History with different stories of who we are and might be is a move that seems increasingly necessary as we find ourselves in what Derksen describes as the “long neoliberal moment” of “annihilated time” (9). In this context, Verdecchia’s entreaty to reclaim time at the end of Fronteras remains crucial: “Ladies and gentleman, please reset your watches […] we still have time. We can go forward” (78). From the fall of the Berlin wall to the Arab Spring, and the Occupy and Idle No More protests, from neoliberalism’s alleged triumph over history in the 1990s to the mounting global economic crises today, many critics and activists are suggesting that we are, in fact, arriving at “the end of the end of history” (Roos). Indeed, neoliberalism appears to be stumbling and lurching from one crisis to the next in a way that suggests the (many) cracks in its logic are beginning to show to individuals beyond leftist academics and social justice organizers.
This project has traced counter-hegemonic movements geared at exposing these cracks, from questions provoked by Canadian national crises, ones of representation, identity, and belonging, and also of migration, immigration, and diasporic subjectivities, to a more sustained interrogation of the effects of the globalization of neoliberalism and its production of increasingly troubling waves of precarity, violence, disenfranchisement, and loss. Through this tracing of engagements that interrogate what it means to be human, what it means to be “home,” I have offered contrasting scales, genres, and temporalities for necessary storytelling, moving between national-scale fictionalized re-tellings of specific moments in Canada’s past (in Section One), North American / global-scale imaginings of a capitalist-infused and ostensibly borderless “end time” in a futuristic West Coast and a post-NAFTA Canada (in Section Two), and city-scale performances of “real” people’s experiences in the “now” (in Section Three). My discussion began with an examination of the production of “strangers” within Canada, foregrounding why and how the mechanism of stranger making has been integral to legitimizing and reinforcing the physical and conceptual boundaries of a whitened (male and heteronormative) “majority” version of Canada. Three Day Road, The Jade Peony, and Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God emerge as three texts in an extremely rich and varied terrain of imaginative interrogations of the project of nationhood in Canada. My examination of these imaginative reconstructions of Canada gave way to an exploration of the shifting topography of resistance within globalization, a force often read as “threatening” to the nation but which, as Salt Fish Girl and Fronteras Americanas show, is in fact intertwined with its project in deeply contradictory and ambivalent ways. My analysis in the final section probed the double-edge of necessity, on the one hand, to examine the “story” of neoliberalism and its allegiance to “use” and “necessity” in ways that have rhetorical and material
implications for broader projects of arts-based activism, community building, and social
justice, and, on the other, to investigate efforts that swim both in and against this utility tide to
open up space for sustained and critical conversations about reclaiming subjectivity and the
time of change from neoliberalism’s tyranny.

In a sense, what I have been grappling with here is less the particular intersection of
stories and social change, of art and activism (though that has been the ground of my analysis
throughout), than it has been an attempt to assert more broadly that our cultural imaginary is
and needs to be up to the task of actively dismantling and speaking beyond the neoliberal
colonization of our words and experiences. I have interrogated existing challenges to social
justice efforts, suggesting, ultimately, that telling stories in ways that both expose
contradictions in dominant logics while also allowing us to move toward others is critical for
not only imagining, but also inhabiting, moments and spaces that are more just. Telling here is
not about compulsive, endless saying for the sake of self-expression: it is about forging
connection between teller and listener, about asserting links between the telling and histories
of the forgotten, excluded, and disenfranchised, and about reigniting a sense of hope in the
face of the cultural currency of fear that leaves us “disoriented, frightened, and stumbling in
the dark” (Brown 10).

In his inspiring and unabashedly utopian book, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical
Imagination, Robin Kelley asks a crucial question, “What are today’s activists dreaming
about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?” (8). Why
these stories and what kind of world do they envision? These pages are full of disrupted
dreams, unsettling (hi)stories, of collective and individual expressions of anger, but they are
also laced with hope, with multiple, tentative, desperate yearnings for change. Like Niska in
*Three Day Road* who attempts to “scoop the fragments from the waters of [her] confusion and tr[ies] to piece them into a story [she] could understand” (198), or Poh-Poh in *The Jade Peony* who carefully constructs windchimes out of bits of garbage left in “the back alleys of Keefer and Pender Streets” (145), or Rainey in *Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* whose yearning to root and connect leads her to “grow” a tree inside her body (20), the texts here are underlined with a desire to connect, create, and imagine different futures despite pain, fear, war, violence, or isolation, despite multiple fracture lines on psyches and bodies. The stories here find the possibility for belonging that is often occluded by dominant logics in the process of telling stories itself: for Verdecchia in *Fronteras Americanas*, telling the border becomes home; for Evie and the Sonias in *Salt Fish Girl*, acts of telling in the face of their erasure from public life become profound acts of solidarity; for Niska and Xavier in *Three Day Road*, storytelling is the healing force that stitches them together in the face of death; and for the participants in *Get a Real Job* the performance of their stories is an act of solidarity, connecting them to “all of the workers of the ‘new economy’ who continue to struggle for bread and roses.”

So while the “hope” that emerges here is perhaps not one that sings from treetops, and while it is a hope that is never far from a deep and slow boiling anger, from profound and debilitating sadness, it is hope, nevertheless: hope that connection and voice are still possible despite sometimes overwhelming arguments to the contrary. Pointing to what he terms “the crisis of voice under neoliberalism,” Nick Couldry, in his recent book *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*, puts an urgent emphasis on the need to support processes that value voice, writing
I offer ‘voice’ here as a connecting term that interrupts neoliberalism’s view of economics and economic life, challenges neoliberalism’s claim that its view of politics as market functioning trumps all others, enables us to build an alternative view of politics that is at least partly oriented to valuing processes of voice, and included within that view of politics a recognition of people’s capacities for social cooperation based on voice. (2)

As such, the range of stories I’ve examined here are both against processes that deny voice and for finding new ways to move toward others, productively unravelling the binary that would hold, in Salverston’s words, “activist goals striving for social change” separate from “community building practices stressing celebration and affirmation” (“Introduction: Deep and Difficult Eyes” xii).

My work here has been to trace the contours of a world that is worth fighting for in the midst of what we stand against, even if that world may look quite different depending on where you’re standing. To circle back to Coleman, he draws on Paul Ricoeur to emphasize the importance for a discerning reader of moving between a hermeneutics of awe and a hermeneutics of suspicion, a move deftly encouraged by the stories collected here. Coleman explains, “For the hermeneutics of affirmation, the text is to be venerated, appreciated, and analyzed for its truth and beauty; for the hermeneutics of suspicion, the text is unaware of its own motivations or contents [...] and the reader needs to discover what it is that exists behind the text’s lack of self-awareness” (32). To celebrate or to resist. And while the balance in this thesis perhaps hangs more on the side of suspicion than awe, it is a suspicion aimed at forces that seem bent on trampling awe, on extinguishing the hope for a tomorrow that might skip out of the groove worn by today’s imagination deadening logics.
Coleman’s careful attention to the posture of reading, “a posture of expectancy, a posture of quiet, a posture that is fuelled by longing for connection” (127) illuminates a critical question: What happens to the ability for stories to expose racist histories, to examine the fiction of identity, to undermine the bifurcating power of fear, or to envision different futures, when we have lost the capacity to listen? To return to what Niska tells her nephew, Xavier, in Three Day Road, “The world is a different place in this century, Nephew. And we are a different people. My visions still come but no one listens any longer to what they tell us, what they warn us” (45). In fact, there is a notable absence in most of my discussion here of anyone else’s responses to the texts and performance moments I discuss, an absence perhaps all the more glaring for my desire to speak about the social implications of telling stories. But rather than reading this only as a lack / limit, I’d like to show it as a way forward.

What I am reading as critically hopeful in these texts and performance moments, then, is not just about how identity is theorized, or how home is re-written or re-imagined in the pieces themselves. It is about the something else that these stories gesture toward, the starting point for challenge and change clearly pointing out and at us, to the listeners of these tales. By showing both the contradictions, vulnerability, and historically contingent nature of oppressive ways of being and seeing, and our imbrication with these logics, the tellers of these tales enlist us as participants in both imagining and enacting a present-future that is more just. When Verdecchia turns to the audience at the end of Fronteras and asks “And you? […] Will you call off the border patrol?” (78); when Dempsey and Millan give a “coupon” for municipal action to their customers in Grocery Store; when the birth of Miranda’s baby at the end of Salt Fish Girl is punctuated with “Everything will be all right […], until next time” (269); or when Get a Real Job performers end their declaration of solidarity with “the
struggle continues,” we (readers, listeners, participants) are not let off the hook. As with Thomas King’s *Truth About Stories* where each chapter ends with King turning the stories over to the readers (“Take it. It’s yours”), the stories discussed here do not provide tidy closure so we can go on with our lives knowing that at least *someone* (or some *other*) is advocating for social justice. By seeing neoliberalism, and its particular liberal pluralist brand of nationalism in Canada, as a bounded and historically situated *story*, we are able to start from a place of acknowledging that any of our social justice efforts are complicit with dominant logics, but because, not in spite of this, we have a responsibility to challenge the injustices we play a part in producing. Turning the creatively destructive logic of neoliberalism on its head, Laetitia Sadier and Tim Gane of Stereolab suggest, “If there’s been a way to build it / There’ll be a way to destroy it / Things are not all that out of control.”

In the prelude to *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, Ajay Heble, Daniel Fischlin, and George Lipsitz look to the possibilities opened up by musical improvisation in ways that resonate with my invocation here of the potential role of storytelling for social justice efforts: “[Improvisation] teaches us to make ‘a way’ out of ‘no way’ by cultivating capacities to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope, and promise even in the most discouraging circumstances” (xii). Looking for the specific vocabularies and attitudes that might participate in making “a way” out of “no way,” I have been working to read and listen (to see connection in the midst of struggle, to hear possibility inside constraint) beyond reductive positivist narratives that measure “impact” and “success” in terms of a straight line from goals to fulfilled goals, from demands to concessions, to recognize windy paths, to note unexpected moments of disruption, to see critical hope
bending and pushing beyond the contours of the now. Speaking about the challenges and possibilities engendered by the Occupy Wall Street Movement, activist Ethan Miller writes,

if we want to effectively envision and create alternatives to the economy of Wall Street, we need to re-think the very concept of ‘the economy’ itself. We have inherited an economics that stifles our imaginations and dampens our collective sense of power and possibility. Only by telling new stories about what economies are (and might yet be) can we most effectively kindle the fires of our creative, transformative work to build new forms of livelihood.

Miller’s appeal to “telling new stories about what economies are (and might be)” alongside exposing fissures in the crumbling logic of neoliberalism is echoed in Ruth Howard’s discussion of community art’s expansive possibilities, about its ability to be both celebratory and critical, and about the relational dynamic of any effort to create and / or resist:

Perhaps sometimes this work is “gentler,” and that might be a good thing. Then again, sometimes simply dancing with your neighbours is a profound act of resistance, and making art with your family or your community is the difference between death and reaching for life. Sometimes parading down a street in festive attire is a leap towards people feeling more at home with each other. Sometimes “community” really means something worth creating. Sometimes it is fitting to protest, sometimes to build, sometimes to appreciate things in new ways, sometimes to celebrate and get to know people despite their apparent strangeness, and sometimes to take action against or for something—sometimes in form, sometimes in content. Perhaps community arts, at its best, is about making what you're for, in the face of what you're against. (8)
Howard’s comments highlight that whether a moment of performance, a story, a particular artistic intervention is a “success” depends largely on context, on the spirit in which these moments are conducted, the attitude, the hopeful, useful striving toward life (and not only against what constrains it) that signals change, a possible opening. In this way, I have been actively attempting to move the focus from measuring definite “effects” of resistance, to emphasizing the on-going, reiterative, and improvisational process of social change itself. This kind of movement away from privileging measurable effects is particularly crucial with neoliberal funding rationales requiring higher education and social justice efforts alike to “prove” utility in ways that increasingly narrow the field of what counts as change, of what (and how) stories matter. And this movement matters if we hope to re-engage time, re-populate history, to find “the strength to love and to dream” (Kelley xi) in ways that expose and exceed the narrowing, creatively destructive logic of neoliberal rationality.
Notes

1 I use “neoliberalism” or “neoliberal capital” throughout to describe the interconnected discourses of liberal democracy and global capitalism.

2 While there seems to be a proliferation of evidence that stories can and do “change the world,” the allegedly transformative role of storytelling is also being promoted in a range of discourses and practices that may have little, if anything, to do with the ongoing work to challenge, expose, and question the systemic forces that continue to perpetuate racism, sexism, economic insecurity, environmental destruction, violence, and despair on a global scale.

3 See, for example, Padmini Mongia’s introduction to Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader.

4 See Heble’s “Postcolonial Challenges” for a more expansive interrogation of these critiques.

5 At the same time, uses of “storytelling for social change” that emerged out of 1960s and 1970s identity-based social movements were often accompanied by a kind of radical presentism: a concern with challenging the conditions of the present to allow for a more equitable future. Freire suggests that the point of departure for revolutionary social movements “must always be with men and women in the ‘here and now,’ which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene” (85). Similarly, in the context of Canadian literature, Herb Wyile points to the 1960s focus on the “here and now” in storytelling with reference to Margaret Atwood: “Speaking of the lack of historical fiction during the flourishing of Canadian literature in the 1960s, Margaret Atwood recently observed that the writers of that generation ‘were instead taken up by the momentous discovery that we ourselves existed, in what was then the here and now, and we were busily exploring the implications of that’” (Speculative Fictions xi). This observation remains relevant for examining the neoliberal “here and now” (a project with which neoliberalism is itself quite preoccupied) and for opening up a space to re-tell history in ways that examine some of the claims upon which the “now” is stabilized.

6 In Reading Beyond the Book, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo talk about the popular upsurge in “shared reading” in the 1990s and 2000s with the advent of mass reading events such as CBC’s Canada Reads and Oprah’s Book Club.

7 While I primarily examine the signifier of race in my discussion here, the role of gender, class, and sexuality are also interconnected sites of stranger-making that are integral to how existing notions of Canadian nationhood and “home” have been constructed. Sharma writes that “In Canada it has been many centuries’ process of colonization that has prepared the groundwork for the contemporary organization of difference […] The domination of Man over women and all of nature; the violence done to Muslims, Jews, Queers, and other Others; the enclosure of common properties; the construction of ‘imagined’ nations and races; and the creation of Europe and the colonization of its Others: the relationships structured through
these practices have come to shape the everyday understanding of what it means to ‘be Canadian’ and therefore what it means to be not-Canadian [...] In short, it is through people’s relationship to the Canadian Self-identity of being White, heterosexual, and male that difference has been structured” (27).

8 Although I look at how identity, agency, and change are figured in these three narratives (an analysis that probes these texts for their theoretical or philosophical orientation toward change), each of the stories discussed here have also played a public role in broader conversations about Canadian culture formation and performance. These conversations—occasioned, for example, by Adventures’ production as a launch piece for Obsidian Theatre Company in Toronto, or by discussion and debate surrounding The Jade Peony’s and Three Day Road’s inclusion as contending novels in different years of CBC’s Canada Reads—offer opportunities for other situated considerations (beyond my own reading practice) of these stories’ engagement with broader Canadian nation-building or nation-challenging projects. The inaugural production of Adventures placed it at a key point of “change” for the Toronto (and national) theatre scene with the launch of Obsidian Theatre, a theatre that, as indicated on their website, is “passionately dedicated to the exploration, development, and production of the Black voice” (“Mission and Mandate”). Despite what I argue here, that these pieces draw attention to the constructedness of identity and of the limits of dominant renderings of Canadian nationhood, their critiques are always necessarily in dialogue with the spaces within which they are read and watched—i.e. within broader “popular” nation-building efforts such as Canada Reads, or with in the physical space of the new Obsidian Theatre.

I mention this to point to the limits of my own discussion and to acknowledge that regardless of how many challenging, disruptive stories are being told, it is perhaps, ultimately, the attitude of the listener alongside the systems and processes that structure our habits of reading and engagement that determine how and if we open up to a particular story. I try to grapple with some of these tensions more fully in my final section, but am flagging it as a dynamic worthy of more sustained attention than I am giving it here.

9 The media claim that the so-called “disease” actually leads people to commit suicide by drowning is called into question later on in the book when the highly unethical practices of Dr. Rudy Flowers show him attempting to “cure” Miranda of her “sickness” by locking her for weeks in a room with crashing and dripping water behind glass, until she is maddened by a desire to break through the glass and to escape through the water. Thus, the “real harm” that comes to be associated with the dreaming disease is more suggestively linked to, and shown to be the effect of the “cure” rather than the symptoms themselves.

10 The question of the marketing of “stories of difference” is interesting in the context of Lai’s novel which itself circulates as a commodity in an economy of literary texts. That is, beyond the question of how to go about “telling our own stories” is the question of if these stories get told at all. Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy’s book Writing in Our Time: Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003) examines the apparatuses (magazines, presses, readings, conferences, festivals etc.) through which “radical poetries” are able to emerge in the first place. Unlike When Fox is a Thousand, which was published in its first edition by Press Gang Publishers, a
left-wing printing co-operative that began in the 1970s in Vancouver and which declared bankruptcy in 2002, Salt Fish Girl was published by a Canadian branch of the more “mainstream” Thomas Allen Publishers. While “grassroots” presses like Press Gang Publishers, along with other now-defunct presses such as the Toronto based TSAR (Toronto South Asian Review), aligned themselves structurally and ideologically with broader struggles for social justice, Thomas Allen’s agenda is not explicitly counter-hegemonic. In this context, what are the implications for Lai’s text?

11 Lai exposes, as George Lipsitz puts it, “the inadequacy of national ‘imagined communities’ to monitor, regulate, and remedy the explosive contradictions of global structures of economic, political, and cultural power” (29).

12 See some of this public debate and discussion in Andrew Coyne, Martin Patirquin, and Marc James Leger.

13 While Florida has certainly made the “creative class” concept popular today, he is not the first to use this language / concept. In “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism Part II,” Martha Rosler offers a brief history of the concept of the “creative class,” pointing to the emergence of the terms “knowledge worker,” and “symbolic analysts” in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Peter Drucker and Robert Reich, respectively, as precursors to the “creative class” language. Later, the conservative and positive rendering of formerly Marxist terms such as “cultural industries” (from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in 1947) became “creative industries” and were linked to Australian and UK leaders in the early to late 1990s.

14 See also Alain Badiou, Slavoj Zizek, and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello.

15 See, for example, Herman Gray’s Cultural Moves for a more sustained examination.

16 This was recently made evident, for example, with Julie Salverson’s (ed) publication of two books for the Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English series, one entitled Popular Political Theatre and Performance, and the other, Community Engaged Theatre and Performance; with Alan Filewod’s expansive new book, Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada; with special issues on “community engaged” or activist performance in Canadian Theatre Review (July 2011, Artists and Communities, for example, edited by Salverson and Kim Renders) and in ongoing work by Alt Theatre; and with the edited collection by Kirsty Robertson and J. Keri Cronin on activist art and performance, Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada.

17 The kind of critique offered by Jelinek ends up only privileging artistic practices that are diffuse, rhizomatic, playfully postmodern, “small, spontaneous, nearly tactile actions” to borrow language from Gregory Sholette, “whose aggregate effect on the dominant system is real enough, even if it will never fall like the blow of a hammer, but fester within the system like a low-grade fever” (Dark Matter 147).
Sidonie Smith cautions, “For many witnesses, the embeddedness of stories of ethnic suffering in the discourses, institutions, and practices of the human rights regime provides the previously unheard and invisible a narrative framework, a context and occasion, an audience, and a subject position from which to makes claims. And yet, in order to circulate their stories within the global circuits of the human rights regime and bring crises of violence and suffering to a larger public, witnesses give their stories over to journalists, publishers, publicity agents, marketers, and rights activists whose framings of personal narratives participate in the commodification of suffering, the reification of the universalized subject position of innocent victim, and the displacement of historical complexity by the feel-good opportunities of empathetic identification” (134).

For example, Szeman suggests, “the expansion of discourses of creativity into the economy at large represents a loss in how we understand the politics of culture—a shift from a practice with a certain degree of autonomy […] to one without any” (18). Similarly, Yúdice argues, “Both in the university and in the cultural sector, the so-called culture wars have delegitimized the place of a presumably ‘disinterested’ culture in society” (“American Canvas” 24).

Werry joins a range of scholars and critics who are interested in performance in and of neoliberalism: in addition to Bourriaud, Harvie, Bishop, Jackson, and McKenzie who I draw on throughout, see also Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra’s edited collection Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations, Maurya Wickstrom’s Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism, or Adam Alston’s “Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency, and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre.”

Alan Filewod illustrates this kind of approach in speaking about the financial and political success of Ground Zero, an Edmonton-based popular theatre company. He points to Ground Zero’s practice of using a combination of grant-based and private funds, and of securing financing before proceeding with a project. As a result, “Ground Zero offers a productive model of how activist theatre workers can appropriate the entrepreneurial models of market capitalism—generating self-employment while enacting a radical politics of community and resistance” (Committing Theatre 282). Similarly, in her discussion of activist art-making in Peterborough through Food Not Bombs and People Putting Poverty on the Agenda, Nadine Changfoot suggests that the organizations use neoliberal discourses of self-sufficiency and independence as a way to intervene in funding logics, leverage resources from the neoliberal state while simultaneously executing a critique of its policies (131). Changfoot posits that it is the very fluidity of the categories of artist and social justice advocate in these instances that allows for a radical, sustained critique of neoliberal policies and actions: “The activist as artist, or artist-ivist, emerges as a political actor who can skillfully partner or move with neoliberal discourse while advancing social justice demands” (132).

McGauley provided an overview of the project in an interview for the Judith Marcuse Projects in Vancouver, B.C.: “Northern Ontario is invaded with call centres, as part of our latest new-world economic development strategies to bend over backwards to welcome businesses into town. Of course most of these workplaces offer non-union, low pay, high stress, insecure jobs. We partnered with our local Labour Council to develop a project with
call centre workers. I began the project with an ex-telemarketer who had been involved in the union drive of the only unionized call centre in town. Through her relationships and contacts, we gathered a core group of telemarketers. Together we did participatory research on the call centre industry, we interviewed telemarketers from other workplaces, and combining this material with the core group’s experiences, we wrote a play called ‘Get a Real Job’ about issues of working in call centres” (McGauley in Harlap 125).

Myths and Mirrors emerged out of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures community development program as a strategy for doing more politically engaged / radical work “without threatening the charitable status of Better Beginnings, Better Futures” (Harlap 125).

Interestingly, at the end of their article, Guard et al. figure the success of Get a Real Job in terms of personal transformation: “The collaboration that produced ‘Get a Real Job’ was a life-changing experience for the worker-actors who produced it, and the effects of their activity spread into their workplace and their community” (179). Their documentation of the personal transformation of the participants, while perhaps a limited neoliberal-inflected register for reading “change,” is important for validating the experiences of the call-centre workers and acknowledging the hopeful, connecting role of the temporary Get a Real Job collaboration, even as broader markers of its “success” as political action were perhaps less evident.

I explore the limits and potential for storytelling in popular theatre in further detail in Mündel, “Radical Storytelling: Performing Process in Canadian Popular Theatre.”
Works Cited


Dang, Steven, Elise Finnigan, and Katie Warfield. “Making the Case for Culture.”


----. “Culture as an Economic Engine.” *Making the Case for Culture*. Vancouver:


Fischlin, Daniel, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. *The Fierce Urgency of Now*: 226


Fuller, Dannielle and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. “A Reading Spectacle for the Nation: The CBC and ‘Canada Reads.’” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40.1: 5-36. Print.


Gomez, Mayte. “Healing the Border Wound: *Fronteras Americanas* and the Future of


----. “Metapropaganda: self-reading dystopian fiction: Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika*


Mondini-Ruiz, Franco. Morsels for the Masses: Populist Art at Popular Prices!


-----. “Speaking Pie to Power: Can We Resist the Historic Compromise of
Neoliberal Art?” *Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada.*


Stone-Mediatore, Shari. *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of*


243


