

"THE EARTH'S REVENGE": NATURE, DIASPORA, AND TRANSFEMINISM IN LARISSA LAI'S *SALT FISH GIRL*

NICHOLAS BIRNS

Abstract

The Chinese Canadian writer Larissa Lai's futuristic novel *Salt Fish Girl* imagines a mythic femininity that persists even amid its attempted suppression by transnational globalisation. Lai uses myth as a redemptive layer of experience, but does not do so in a modernist way that would elevate absolutes. She uses myth in a critical way that accepts the epigenous as equally a part of the texture as the original. In this way, Lai's novel is relevant to discourses of transfeminism, and can liberate transfeminism from just being a term that literally denotes transsexual identity politics, to a broader spectrum of discourse in which the experience of transgendered people can inform feminism generally. Applying a transfeminist analysis to the novel also elucidates how Lai makes connections between Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian experience that bridge longstanding differences in a common stand against transnational exploitation.

'Transfeminism' is a word that has gained a great deal of currency among women's and queer communities. Yet the concept of transfeminism has not found much of a home in literary criticism or theoretical discourse concerning literary texts. In perhaps the most lucid definition of transfeminism, Emi Koyama (2006) asserts that transfeminism is "a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation as intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond". Yet, even after Koyama's lucid definition, there seems a fundamental uncertainty about whether

transfeminism is specifically a feminism for transgendered women, a feminism that seeks to include the experience and discourses of transgendered women as a fully enfranchised part of the feminist spectrum (see Heyes 2003), or a feminism that defines the 'trans-' prefix in a maximally heterogeneous way, focusing on transnationalism and transgendered articulations of identity in understanding the cultural formations at play in the identity of women in the twenty-first century. This article analyses the Canadian postcolonial feminist Larissa Lai's 2002 novel *Salt Fish Girl* as a text which articulates this third, most extended definition of 'transfeminism'. *Salt Fish Girl*, authored by someone born female, offers a model by which the identities of transgendered people can be understood in their full breadth and in a way that can help actively frame a transfeminist discourse in which transgendered people are foregrounded but are not the sole participant or focus.

Larissa Lai is a writer in many ways at the vanguard of several social and literary movements. But she does not espouse a gratuitous or shrill futurism, and traditions, of various sorts, are as important to her as being on the cutting edge. Lai has said that she seeks to show that contemporary ethnic and sexual pluralism is not simply a recent novelty, that she seeks to make them mythic and archetypal, link them to "the mud and muck of origins" (2002: 268). In her first novel, *When Fox Is A Thousand*, Lai uses a motif of a long-lived fox to explore continuity and discontinuity in women's lives over various eras. Lai delights in the specificity, the foxiness, the foxy embodiment, of the fox metaphor, so that the book has a beast-

fable component, even as it canvasses issues of gender and identity. Lai has commented that the fox is a "creature of darkness and death and also germination and sexuality. The fox has the power to travel both beneath the surface of the earth and above it" (Mathur 2006).

For most postmodernists, myth is something 'bad' in its aspirations to a kind of permanent, metaphorical truth. The myth-fiction dichotomy is virtually illustrative of the entire paradigm-shift from modernism to postmodernism. Modernism, as Marc Manganaro (1992) has pointed out, uses mythic tropes to anchor anthropological generalities such as those found in James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and as a metaphor for imaginative activity as seen in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Though much of the discourse on women in mythic modernism was authored by men and predictably conformed to images of the 'eternal feminine', modernist-era women such as M. Esther Harding, in *Woman's Mysteries*, also saw women's identity as mythic in a primal, biological way, stressing instinct in a manner which postmodernity inevitably saw as reductive. Postmodernity, as evidenced as early as Frank Kermode's 1967 book *Sense of an Ending*, swerved away from myth to concentrate on fiction, and later, post-structurally inflected categories of discourse and textuality that were *a priori* constructed.¹ Lai's critical reframing of fertility motifs from ancient Chinese myth supplies the genuinely global dimension that had in general been missing even from those modernist accounts of myth that stressed the 'universal' or 'archetypal' and mentioned Asian spirituality. Lai shows how third-wave feminism and transfeminism can absorb what might formerly be seen as

'essentialist' discourses without losing their critical edge.

But Lai, while insulating her own myths from modernist absolutism of the Frazerian variety, all the while enjoys myths and the sense of myths and the sense of "the wet sleep of the unformed world" (2002: 1) they can provide. So a substrate of permanence is laid under contemporary cultural concerns. Lai not only, rather obviously, offers no return to prelapsarian purity. She demonstrates that hybridities can be radically different from each other, and that even, and especially, the hybrid can have a clear moral valence, for good or ill. Hybridity and diaspora, for Lai, are not just an urban carnival of floating transnational signifiers as they tend to be in the work of scholars such as Saskia Sassen, whose work illuminates the inequalities of globalisation, only to quell any discontent about these inequalities through reassurances about mobility and dynamism, while she is only able, in Jess Wendover's words, to "offer little assistance in trying to cope with the problems she identifies in global cities" (2000: 120). Lai, on the other hand, insists that how people live their lives within globalisation, and especially the concrete circumstances of their gender and their emotional and sexual relations, actually matters.

It is important to see Lai as a Canadian writer, who has lived in various regions of Canada, is published by Canadian presses, and has a much larger canonical presence in Canadian criticism than she has yet achieved worldwide. We tend to see the attention played to global anglophone postcolonial writing in the 1990s and after as liberating these texts from a confined national space. But, in doing this, it is possible to underestimate two factors. As Frank Davey, in *Post-National Arguments* has

pointed out, Canada is not a nation in the nineteenth-century sense, drawn together by racial and ethnic homogeneity or, as in the case of the United States, a perceived ideological creed. Canada's somewhat accidental heterogeneity, made into a cardinal principal by governmentally sponsored multicultural policy in the 1970s, as well as the irreducible French presence in the Canadian body politic, means that Canadian national space may be as or more heterogeneous than a global sphere dominated by metropolitan centres in the US and Europe that tend to cast an imperial aura even over diastolic and hybrid experience. Secondly, the idea of seeing all literature in English as first and foremost literature in English, and only then subdividing it into particular national literatures, seems subversive of established boundaries. But it may only be a way of ensuring that the hegemony of the old national literature, rebaptised as a global consensus, remains paramount. Matthew Arnold foreshadowed this when he said "...I see advertised *The Primer of American Literature*. Imagine the face of Philip or Alexander at hearing of a *Primer of Macedonian literature*! Are we to have a *Primer of Canadian Literature* too, and a *Primer of Australian?*" (1977: 165). What appears to be a kind of panoramic, ecumenical breadth is in many ways a device for making sure minor literatures stay minor. Seeing Lai as a Canadian as well as a diastolic writer evades this potential pitfall.

Lai has spent much time in Canada engaging in various kinds of community activism in Canadian political space. This is particularly and paradoxically salient, as her novels, though certainly having political reverberation, do not seem to have an obviously political agenda. The originality of Lai's stance can be seen in this excerpt from

comments she made in an interview with Ashok Mathur in 1998:

I love the power and the romance of confrontational politics because there is a purity in that refusal to back down, that refusal to take shit, or to compromise. But in another way, I found increasingly that to engage politically in that manner also confirmed and validated precisely those liberal racist politics we meant to dismantle, by always placing ourselves in opposition to them. In other words, to claim the opposite was to affirm and validate as original and meaningful precisely those insipid ways of seeing and behaving that I found most offensive.

Similarly, in an interview with Robyn Morris in 2005, Lai says of anti-racist discourses of previous generations:

One of the inadvertent side-effects of these discourses, I think was to crystallise whiteness and to address it much more than I like to do. They also tended to crystallise positions of marginality more than I am happy to right now. I want to emphasise, though, that I think those writings and those discussions were of tremendous importance at the moments when they took place. I just don't think it's healthy or helpful to stay there (25).

Larissa Lai was born on September 13, 1967 in La Jolla, California. Her father is Tyrone Lai, a still-active scholar who taught for many years at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her mother, Yuen-Ting Tsui, is also a writer and intellectual. Because of where her father taught, Lai spent her childhood in Saint John's, not a stereotypical place for a Chinese-Canadian writer to grow up. Lai has stated that the Newfoundland setting for her childhood contributed an awareness of Biblical themes because of the strongly evangelical and Calvinist religiosity of the province. But the

base for her highly fantastic and allegorical settings tend to be China or Western Canada. It is in this latter part of the world that Lai has spent the balance of her adult career.

After graduating from the University of British Columbia, Lai worked at different times in Calgary, Ottawa, and Vancouver for many years as an activist, researcher, writer, organiser and editor. Lai also has studied abroad, receiving a Master of Arts degree from the prestigious creative writing program at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. Lai, though, has taken an interesting approach to carving out her career. She is not conspicuous on the prize circuit, has not received huge financial advances for her fiction, and has, so far, (whether by circumstances or design) published with small firms, not transnational conglomerates. Nonetheless Lai's work has achieved a wide audience and her name is increasingly known in the very different constituencies of Asian diaspora studies and of fantasy/science-fiction. Lai's writing is challenging, invigorating, and, in a profound sense, hopeful.

For a writer still early in her career, Lai's work has garnered an unusual amount of academic attention. Much of this is concentrated in a special spring 2005 issue of the Canadian journal *West Coast Line*, where a group of younger scholars examine her work. Lai is a writer who intrigues current younger generations of critics because of her mixture of imagination and political critique, and her ability to deploy Generation X irreverence alongside discourses of gender and ethnicity.

Salt Fish Girl is set on two different historical levels: a mythic China of the early twentieth century and a near-future 'Serendipity'

which is a projection of British Columbia in the mid to late twenty-first century. As Lai knows, the word comes from 'Serendib', used by Westerners to refer to Sri Lanka. Thus this glitzy-futuristic pseudo-utopia originally has an Asian referent. In combining ethnic historiography with science fiction, Lai challenges givens of both genres. She thus canvasses a new model for Asian-Canadian fiction. In the critical reception of ethnic or subaltern fiction in English, there is the danger of generic nostalgia for the mainstream novel being metonymic for an atavistic nostalgia for the 'homeland' which can all too readily complement ethnocentricity among the 'mainstream' in the new country. The key symbol of *Salt Fish Girl* is the durian. The durian is a foul-smelling, multi-coloured, tactile, almost obnoxiously earthy tropical fruit, "spiky" and "leather-hard" (14). But nonetheless, the durian epitomises fertility and the survival of nature amid Serendipity's attempt to use human bodies as so many spare parts. "The earth's revenge" (259) withstands the threat of technocratic manipulation.

The presence of the durian, though, is not just an inventive lark. It is a felt consequence of global warming. The presence of the tropical fruit in British Columbia shows how "the world has warmed up since we were young" (209). Yet the parallels between Nu Wa, the Chinese creation-spirit – "in the beginning there was just me" – in China, and Miranda of the Serendipity world acknowledges separation as much as continuity. Miranda is not just an archetypal reincarnation of Nu Wa, but someone with her own highly developed family situation. Her relationship with her own mother, a legendary singer, is particularly rich. So archetype does not prevail over immediate social context in the novel, and ecofeminist rhetoric nonetheless remains embedded in

particular social situations. The novel has a realistic level as well as a more abstract or symbolic one.

Lai makes a risky move, intertextually speaking, in giving her heroine the name Miranda, but she pulls off this gamble. Miranda. The name of Prospero's daughter in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, calls up the prominence of that play, especially the Ariel-Caliban dichotomy, in post-colonial discussion. But 'Miranda' also evokes the miraculous, recuperative quality of the ending of *Salt Fish Girl*, as the birth of Miranda's baby girl has, like Shakespeare's late plays, a restorative element – but restorative, not nostalgic. Although Serendipity – the "Unregulated Zone" – has revealed itself as a failed free-market utopia, Miranda's is a new beginning, not a reversion to the womb of the old country, a reversion about which Ien Ang and other theorists have warned. Crucially, and unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, though, Lai's Miranda does not need the institutions of heterosexual marriage to reproduce herself. Nor does she have to re-enter a more 'advanced' world and integrate herself into a pre-existing power structure that had already, in both *The Tempest* and Lai's text, exhibited negative traits.

Lai's acknowledgment of postmodern multiplicity actually makes her able to proffer a vision of wholeness and healing. This resembles what Tseen-Ling Khoo, in her pioneering comparative analysis of Asian-Canadian and Asian-Australian writing, *Banana Bending* (2003), calls the "stylistic experimentation and subversive textual playfulness" of Lai's first novel, *When Fox Is A Thousand*.² This ludic discourse is continued in *Salt Fish Girl*. But whereas the first novel had a central protagonist, Artemis Wong, who maintained the single, if multiply

incarnate, focus of the hard-boiled quest-narratives Lai was parodying even as she excavated their patriarchal authority from within, *Salt Fish Girl* has two heroines, in different incarnations Nu Wa and Miranda, Evie and the Salt Fish Girl. But the more recent novel is comfortable enough in its multiplicity to evoke underlying unities. The ending of *Salt Fish Girl*, clearly influenced by cyberpunk writers such as William Gibson, tells a story of new birth from old manipulation and artificiality. Whereas, as Robyn Morris suggests, *When Fox Is A Thousand* parodies Gibson's self-reliant, if jaded, protagonist, *Salt Fish Girl*, to simplify, takes the 'message' of cultural recombination of Gibson without the 'medium' of the stalwart male hero. Recombination delights in impurity, and values the consequent as more than a poor substitute for the antecedent. An exact analogy to *Salt Fish Girl* itself, its own textuality, would be too formulaic. A mixture of science fiction and folkloric storytelling strategies cannot be paralleled with genetic engineering. But the general point of cultural affirmation making its way through diasporic mixture is highly relevant to understanding Lai's novel.

Also crucial to the novel is how its depiction of sexuality extends beyond physical sex to feelings of touch and taste. As Paul Magee has noted, food is a key trope of postcolonial fiction. Food's connections to cultural difference, survival, and what Lai calls "the hybridity and impurity of the body" (Lai interview, 2005: 174) can make it either elemental or ornamental. Lai's use of food gravitates decidedly towards the former pole. The scent of the durian is not something pleasingly exotic, but something which makes Miranda smell like "cat urine" (69) or "pepper" (69). The odour renders Miranda ostracised by her schoolmates and

compels her parents to seek medical remedies for it. When she develops fish scales, the situation becomes even more difficult:

My parents were so anxious about my odour, I didn't dare tell them about the scales, which didn't appear at the bottom of the tub with much frequency anyway. For all the years of my childhood, not a month went by without a secret trip to some doctor's office or herbalist's shop in the Unregulated Zone (59).

Miranda articulates this openly towards the end: "A stinking toilet as the end of the story? Why not? This is a story about stink, a story about rot, about how life grows out of the most fetid-smelling places" (268). In order to communicate the full force of the olfactory she is willing to bring the stench along with the Proustian whiff. Part of this has to do with the original story of Nu Wa, the primeval sea-nymph with a tail. After creating mankind as a series of imperfect experiments, Nu Wa, decides, in effect, to become one of her own creations, splitting her own tail to become a woman. The woman that Nu Wa becomes is the woman who, after being reborn, eventually becomes Miranda, though Lai deliberately delays this identification until near the end of the novel: "Yes, I thought, an ancient ocean bubbling up through the rocks, salty and full of minerals. I scrambled desperately towards it, shed my clothes and slipped in. No shame as the coils unravelled" (269).

Nu Wa is the natural woman in the novel, the one who will eventually fall in love with the artificial creation, Evie. Yet Nu Wa can serve as much an exemplar for transfeminism as can her counterpart. Our tails, figuratively speaking, are all split; we are all both maker and made. Transgendered subjects exemplify this dual identity, of the body as creative agent and

container, with particular force. Emi Koyama (2006) describes the usual definition of transgendered subjects as "individuals who identify, present, and live more or less as women despite their birth assignment to the contrary". The transgendered woman, for instance, often feels the male body identity she was assigned at birth as something abstract and vacant, something in which she does not feel defined. A body that does not express the gender that she defines herself as manifesting can, according to Karen Gurney, make the transgendered woman "appear to be as trapped in a body at odds with our reality" (2005: 210), as immured in a fettering, immobile transcendence as is the pre-embodiment Nu Wa. The creation spirit's struggle to become vulnerable and human, her struggle to find a perishable, embodied form in which she can feel situated, has tremendous resonance for the transgendered subject's wish for "sexual congruence" (221).

In other words, a transgendered subject is striving for an embodied materiality, a vulnerability, an imperfection that can point to what Joanna Mansbridge (2005: 124), speaking of the durian smell as an index of physicality in Lai's novel, calls "an unhomey, yet hopeful, future". Deploying a 'remade' identity and appearance can, for a transgendered subject, be akin not just to representational redefinition but to embodiment itself, to occupying a material context, for which, paradoxically, their assigned identity has not provided any sufficient accommodation.

It is generally the experience of transgendered subjects who have affirmed their new identity that this identity seems no less 'real' for being epigenous, performative (in a Butlerian sense) and, at least in literal,

bodily terms, constructed or adopted. Transgendered subjects affirm their materiality as both 'natural' and constructed, whether culturally or, sometimes, in a narrower, physical sense, in terms of surgery or other body modification. Analogously, Nu Wa and the durian-associated Miranda are identified with the earth, and with a kind of earthly fertility. But, very importantly, they are not just 'mass' or 'matter'. Nu Wa is the creator, the demiurge or, for that matter, the urge itself. Similarly, Miranda is a conscious fabricator as much as an instinctual welter of energy. (The surface/depth dyads here recall another Canadian novel about femininity, water, and consciousness – Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*). The creativity associated with Miranda is signalled in the fact that her birth mother, Clara Cruise, is also a creative artist – a singer. It is the women to whom Nu Wa and Miranda are sexually drawn that represent the idea of the 'created' as opposed to the 'creator'. The incarnated Nu Wa, at the age of fifteen, falls in love with the Salt Fish Girl, whose briny odor at once signifies a perceptual purity and a physical loss of innocence. Similarly, Miranda, a century and a half later in Serendipity, finds her soul mate in Evie, a young woman who is in fact one of many genetically engineered 'Sonias', substitute worker-drone humans whose biological makeup is based on carp cells. (An alternate line of replacement workers, Miyakos, have their biological makeup based on cat cells). Evie, not Miranda, is the new Salt Fish Girl. As the name indicates, she is a primal creation, a new Eve. One of the most arresting passages in the book is the scene where Evie tells Miranda "I'm not human" (158) and that her genes are "point zero three percent *cyprinus carpio* – freshwater carp. I am a new life form" (158). We are meant to see this new life form as a

horrific outrage in its perpetration. Yet, because it comes from what Lai, in an interview, calls "the violent and violated outside" (2005:175), it is able to be appropriated as a new possibility, when the new identity is embraced by the person involved. Evie is a product, but only on a surface level, of cartel-based bioengineering. Evie's gene-manipulating makers think they have made her, but in Miranda she finds her genuine 'creator', perhaps paralleling the way Eve in the Bible is created out of Adam but by God. But this sense of primeval restitution is not total. Lai clearly wants to inject a 'cyborgian' sense, as the term 'cyborg' is used by Donna Haraway (1995) and other feminist theorists, of a deliberately unnatural element which serves to place under critical scrutiny the aspirations of patriarchy to an ascribed 'natural' status. There is, for Lai, no lapsing back into the nostalgic, no attempt to use the Nu Wa legend as the basis for a cathartic but fetishised vision of what the nineteenth-century German anthropologist J. J. Bachofen called *Mutterrecht*. The lesbian relationship in this book is not utopian, not beyond time or conflict. It is not a fetishised, paradisiacal imaginary, but an ongoing dialogue filled with agency and contest. The "woman-identified women" (Lai, in Mathur 2006) of the text do not simply set up a new matriarchy that reproduces the non-heterogeneous qualities of the patriarchy. The dialogue between the natural status of one woman and the 'created' status of the other indicates that the romantic relationships between women in the book always have an element of the conflict, the mixture, inherent in the relation between what creates and what is created, a relation any writer knows very intimately.

Miranda's first meaningful friendship, when she is still struggling to understand her

family's situation and the conditions into which she had been born, is with a boy her own age:

When I was twelve, a new boy came to our school. His name was Ian Chestnut. I remember him walking into cyborg science class, and the rustle of whispers that travelled across the classroom. He was small, slender, and very fair. I wondered how he'd register with the popular kids. Whether he would be one of theirs because he was so exquisitely lovely, or whether they'd decide he was too effeminate and therefore to be shunned (61).

Although Miranda's friendship with Ian does not lead to a sexual relationship, it is nonetheless indicative of how the lesbian sexuality of the primary character can accommodate affective, companionate relationships with men. Though the dominant atmosphere of the novel can be termed a gynocentric transfeminism, masculinity is not excluded, and masculinity is also allowed to be plural and polymorphous, as seen not only in the references to Ian's perceived effeminacy but to his surname. Chestnut, and the links it gives him with the natural world whose recombinant endurance is celebrated again and again in the book. (As we will see in the case of Rudolph Flowers, natural names are not always benign indicators, but in Ian's case they seem to be). Lai posits a gynocentricity which admits discourses of masculinity and is not essentialist. If transfeminism is to successfully bridge lesbian feminism, transsexual identity politics, and a vision of feminism that accommodates women wishing to have relationships with men without the heteronormative baggage of patriarchally prescribed relations. Transfeminist lesbianism, even as it seems to emphasise the queer inflections of transgendered identity, is

vulnerable to charges such as Janice Raymond's, in her 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*, that transgendered women are what Raymond terms "autogynephilic" men who wish to have their cake and eat it. According to Raymond's controversial argument, which is sharply rejected by the majority of transgender theorists, transgendered women are men bodily clothing themselves in women's bodies as a cynosure to the male heteronormative gaze yet arming themselves with the righteousness of feminist rhetoric, all the while privileging, in a Lacanian sense, the symbolic phallus even as they eliminate the physical phallus from actual relations between women. This kind of residual privilege of the dispensing with privilege, the way that, as it were, a transgendered woman who has renounced her former male privilege is just enjoying the after effects of her renounced privilege, is something which transfeminism has to take seriously as a possible trap. Lai's two woman protagonists, one 'naturally born', the other 'constructed', display both an empathetic vulnerability and a determination to persevere with respect to all the possible depredations that surround them. Their identities do not somehow reside in a state of aftermath, a lingering residue at the ghostly wake of white privilege.

Transfeminism also recognises that all gendered subjects, not just transgendered subjects, have their identities constructed—and can also construct identities. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Miranda, the 'born' woman, is also linked to creativity through her birth mother Clara Cruise. Clara Cruise is a cabaret singer who dies prematurely as a result of an accident with a rambunctious durian box for which Miranda blames herself. Clara Cruise's torch-song career ended before Miranda was born. So the daughter is

always a step distant from it ("All of my mother's beautiful torch songs, remnants of a long ago glory I never fully understood", 90). This adds an air of mystery and inscrutability to the songs, which become a reserve fought over between Clara's heirs and the expropriating world of advertising.³ At a point of desperation, Miranda sells the rights to her mother's songs in order for money she urgently needs in order to escape to the Unregulated Zone. But Miranda's father perceives this as an act of betrayal. Miranda ends up sharing this mood of regret ("How could I have sold my mother's songs to that shark?", 202) and perceives that, though necessary to extrapolate herself, her gesture had participated in her society's endemic ethic of exploitative instrumentality. The sale of Clara's songs multiplies, for Miranda's father, the betrayal and abandonment he felt after his wife's death. It taunts him with his beloved Clara's most treasured and distinctive creations now being used as slogans on universally seen advertising, abetted by his own daughter even in her effort to help save herself and, by inference, others. One of the faults of the futuristic society depicted by Lai is its cavalier treatment of human and natural biology. Almost equal is its disregard, as seen in the fate of Clara's songs, for the integrity of individual creation, individual passion.

Lai employs a futuristic scenario that is broadly familiar to much of her audience acquainted with genre conventions, taking advantage of what Rosi Braidotti has described as the capacity of science fiction to depict "unrepresentable sexualities of the most hybrid kind" (2002: 195). The world of the Miranda level of the book is a standard near-futuristic one, described by Tara Lee as being at "the apocalyptic end of late capitalism" (2005: 94). This scenario is seen,

for instance, in a book as mainstream as John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), which pictures a decentred North America in the wake of a nuclear exchange with China. (Lai has shown great interest in revising male-science fiction topoi, as instanced in the poems she has written on Rachel, the android from Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, and 'Maria', the robot from Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*.) In this genre-futuristic scenario adopted by Lai, state power has nearly collapsed and the afterlife of the postmodern West is ruled by a set of self-interested corporate cartels. Lai, though, adds some of her own touches to her depiction of this relatively familiar backdrop. The Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, to which Evie and Miranda at one point escape, seems to be based on the computer game *MYST*. Lai is not beyond this sort of pop-culture borrowing, side by side with allusions to archaic, pre-Confucian Chinese myth. This myth, represented by Nu Wa, is not a paradisiacal utopia, but holds menace and fear in its bounds. Nor is nature *ipso facto* redemptive. The villainous genetic engineer doctor, who "rearranges the organs of the afflicted" (76) to create "the new language of God" is named Rudolph Flowers. The name is, of course, ironic. But Lai's choice of nomenclature also shows that invocations of flower power do not, as the 'back-to-nature' rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s assumed, automatically connote individual or collective enfranchisement. In this respect, Colleen Mack-Canty has cogently stated that "Ecofeminism has developed, and continues to focus on developing, a body of complex theory in its attempts to explain and act upon the interconnected subjugations of women, other humans, and nonhuman nature" (Mack-Canty 2004: 175). Ecofeminism is not a discourse of mere sentimental self-pity. Yet often ecofeminist

rhetoric is so idealistic and all enveloping that it can make little concrete impact on the actual environment, political or ecological. Lai's perspective is an intensely 'green' and ecofeminist one. It favours ecodiversity over macro-engineering by human conglomerates. But Lai's genuine interest in actual diversity means that this critique of technology is a decidedly postmodern one. It never becomes atavistic or actively seeks a pre-industrial sanctuary as Romanticism did, or mourned its inaccessibility as Modernism did. Miranda, for instance, states early on that "It was, in fact, through new technologies that I learned anything about the world" (25).

Lai presents hybridity and diaspora in this stirring passage near the end of the book:

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

The grave, almost aphoristic tone of this passage (which is part of Miranda's thought-process) hails the revenge of the earth against those who have tried to control it for their own ends. But it does not reject the epigenous by-products of this expediency merely for proceeding from a 'contaminated' source. The by-products are accepted as part of the world even after their unnatural source, the rapacious macro-recombination that has produced all the drone-like, hypothetically subservient Sonias and Miyakos. Nu Wa's love for the Salt Fish Girl, and its reincarnation in Miranda and Evie, is the keystone of this acceptance of the epigenous by-product. Lai

acknowledges hybridity to 'retroject' it from this passage's science fiction setting back to the terms of our own age. Lai does not celebrate circumstances merely for being hybrid and diasporic, two conditions that have often led publicists of globalisation to avoid scrutinising hybridity and diaspora in moral terms. Eliza Noh (2003: 143) has urged that a transnational feminism "be grounded through tracking histories of cultural difference and rupture. Without a critical eye honed from collective cultural experiences of material conditions, the commitment to a different practice of feminism cannot seem to move beyond a superficial level of emotional investment". The hybrid relationships in Lai's novel achieve just the deeper level of emotional investment Noh tacitly urges. They on a reciprocal, mutual acceptance, not simply a flashy celebration of postmodern detritus as seen in *Wired* magazine or in the multinational corporation's attempt to brand themselves as providers of an affirmative global synthesis, a kind of more effective United Nations with its idealism soldered down to earth by the profit motive.

Lai's critique has its hybridity ramified by the way she writes between several genres. But *Salt Fish Girl* is most immediately recognisable as futuristic fantasy. It is significant that Lai appeared at the International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts in Florida in March 2005. There is always a temptation, because of the firm place identity politics and ethnic-studies programs have in contemporary universities, to foreground the ethnic aspect of a book such as this over the fantastic aspect, as fantasy, whatever its great success in popular media, is still not fully accommodated within literary academia. To forestall this potentially monolithic construction of her book in ethnic terms,

Lai's own genuine interest in her mythic-futuristic tableau for its own sake, not just as a trope reducible to ethnicity, should be acknowledged. Nonetheless, there are aspects of the book that make it of more immediate social relevance. The Sonias and Miyakos, for instance, are clearly designed as indicators of the low-wage jobs occupied disproportionately by people of colour in the postmodern, global economy. They are constructed avatars of the hegemony of transnational capitalism. Yet by the end of the book they are freed, and, rather than seen as inferior to biologically born humans, are seen as entities in their own right. The experience of white, middle-class transgendered women is immeasurably more privileged than that of working-class Asian women. Lai's quasi-allegory of the condition of working-class Asian women in the global marketplace emphasises how the constructed and interpellated nature of their assigned identity does not prevent them from achieving a sense of self that is not contingent on an external agency behind their making. This has its equivalent in the transgendered subject's sense of their own appearance and body as most 'prosthetic' when born, most 'organic' when refashioned. In this way, transfeminism is allied with cyborgian feminism, is indeed part of the same general stream, in seeing mechanisation as liable to exploitation, but not inherently evil or misguided. Rosi Braidotti describes this kinship when she calls attention to the way machines are "prosthetic and transgender" (2002: 233) and when she associates transgender experience with the "mixing" characteristic of the human interface with the machine.

Though white transgendered women, for all the prejudices against them as manifested by continual "ridicule" and "rejection" (Gurney 2005: 210) and denial of

fundamental civil rights, have many more options in Western society than transgendered women of colour, both categories of transgendered women also can be compared to working-class Asian women in the subservient role they are expected to play as interpellated in the white heteropatriarchy. The male fetish of the transgendered woman is analogous to the white male fetish of the Asian woman. Both sets of women are expected by the patriarchy to reaffirm traditional female subservience that has been jettisoned by overtly assertive white feminist women. As seen most bluntly in David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, European expectations of the 'perfect Asian women' are mirrored by the male fantasy of the subservient, docile transgendered woman, anxious to assume the traditional female roles her biological female sisters have spurned in favour of equality.

Indeed, the white male stereotype of the Asian woman is also, somewhat ironically, mirrored by the second-wave feminist stereotype of the lesbian transgendered woman, who, it is said, is desperate to become the objectification of 'woman' she once desired in her jettisoned male identity. Amber Kinser has commented that third-wave feminists "are particularly at risk for adopting problematic approaches to feminist living" (2004: 146). Kinser means that third-wave feminism can be used as a code word for rejecting feminism entirely, or hollowing out its main arguments. Likewise, transfeminists categorically distinguish themselves from reaffirming stereotypes that would lapse into the renewed gender conformity that Kinser labels "postfeminist". Lai has said that "agency does make a difference, that it leaves a signature, that authorship does matter, but authorship not just in the sense of who you are in terms of

race, class, gender, and sexuality, but also in terms of intention, in terms of agenda, in terms of consciousness and vision" (in Mathur 2006). This sort of specific vision that people claiming certain identities can articulate for themselves finds a palpable embodiment in *Salt Fish Girl*.

This article has emphasised issues of gender in Lai's work. Yet ethnicity should not be forgotten. Indeed, it is the hybridity between Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian identity, as seen in Evie's prototype, Ai, a Chinese woman who marries a male Japanese internee, that is the most potent and constitutive of all the novel's hybridities, Lai's historicizing of her own future world, the way she embeds its constitutive premises in the discursive experience available to her at the time of the novel's composition. Evie's 'source', the model for her constructed shape, was a Chinese woman named Ai, "who married a Japanese man and was interned in the Rockies during the Second World War. She died of cancer right after the war ended. He died of grief" (160). That even this futuristic fantasy written by a Chinese Canadian woman touches on the internment experience so central to Japanese Canadian women writers such as Joy Kogawa, in *Obasan* (1981) and Kerri Sakamoto, in *The Electrical Field* (1998) is most salient. Internment remains a historical anchor or persistent scar, even with a writer with few 'literal' connections with the historical episode and whose science-fiction genre interests would seem to pull her away from attention to this episode. This is especially notable given the historic tensions between the Chinese and Japanese communities in British Columbia, especially during the Second World War when the Chinese-Canadian community, outraged by the Japanese invasion of China in 1937

and after and the atrocities conducted there such as the Rape of Nanking (which specifically involved violence against women), was generally sympathetic to the internment of their Japanese-Canadian counterparts. The renegotiation of future constructed biological and gender identities in Lai's novel has its counterpart in the renegotiation of old ethnic animosities among Japanese and Chinese Canadians. This renegotiation does not just pertain to ethnic coalition building but to elaborate a set of dissident, heterogeneous possibilities that yet can make potentially common cause against a normative, phallogocentric regime. This is not, though, a simple coalition, but what the Chinese feminist Li Xiaojiang describes as "an analysis of the simultaneity of loss and gain for all ideologies and paradigms in order to 'multidimensionalize' them, that is, to include multiple and contradictory perspectives" (2002: 117).

Larissa Lai is still early in her career. But her work is already notable for its mingling of genres and savvy cultural awareness and an undoubted mythic reach, that mark it as making a distinct contribution to Canadian writing. "Canadian writing" may be a better catch-all than "world writing in English" as too often the category of the Anglophone can be a retrograde concept.⁴ This is seen in the conservative idea, popularised by James Bennett, of 'the Anglosphere' as the core of 'the West', and the neo-liberal glee that the amount of English speakers in India enables cheap labour costs for multinationals. Kevin Phillips makes this point in a more moderate and detached way when he says of English, "If it became a language of convenience, that was because it was first and foremost a language of victory" (1999: 601). Eliza Noh makes this point more generally with respect

to postmodernity when she says that "significant aspects of transnational processes arise from imperial relations of power, which continue to delineate...racialized geographies" (2003: 133). On the other hand, the nation, often castigated for being premised on patriarchal norms, may actually be the more critical and heuristic category here.⁵ *Salt Fish Girl* is notable in the way it offers a model for transfeminist identity that is not burdened by race or class privilege nor channelled through a restrictively individual prism. Nor is the novel limited by an excessively narrow construction of either feminism or sexuality, and an overly celebratory view of global capitalism. Lai enables us to see transfeminism as a set of interlocking discourses in which individuals can, in Koyama's phrase, "stand for each other". In *Salt Fish Girl*, the earth's revenge proffers multiple by-products to counter the repressive rhetoric of monolithic globalisation.

Author Note

Nicholas Birns teaches at Eugene Lang College of the New School in New York. His teaching specialties are literary theory, the modern novel, and postcolonial studies. He received his BA from Columbia College in 1988 and his PhD from New York University in 1992. His book *Understanding Anthony Powell* was published by the University of South Carolina Press in 2004. He is editor of *Antipodes: A North American Journal of Australian Literature* and has published in *Arizona Quarterly*, *The Hollins Critic*, and *Ariel*. He is currently co-editing (with with Rebecca McNeer of Ohio University *Companion to Twentieth Century Australian Literature*, to be published by Camden House in 2007.

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Davey) although the contributors to the *West Coast Line* special issue have a less idealistic vision of Canadian multiculturalism.

Notes

¹ Even a tome as massive as Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*, which sees myth as a kind of massive ontological fiction and was, in style, more in line with postmodernism than previous studies on myth such as those of Ernst Cassirer, Theodor Gaster, and even G. S. Kirk, failed to make a dent in the postmodern anti-myth consensus.

² In fact, as Morris (2005: 71) paradoxically notes, critical attention to Lai's work has been "negligible" other than the special issue, Khoo's work being an exception.

³ Interestingly, the songs, and the entire figure of Clara Cruise, seem somewhat of an 'exception' to the mythic traits exemplified by the other characters; they are secondary, not primary. Torch songs are not mythic, they are oral performances only possible in print culture; with established conventions of courtship and of designated performance spaces for the songs to be performed, as well as conventions of what a 'torch song' is in genre. Even though Clara's torch songs are not 'mythic', they are still a strand of the matrix of Miranda's inherited traditions.

⁴ The presence of an interview with the Québécoise lesbian feminist writer Nicole Brossard in the *West Coast Line* issue dedicated to Lai instances how the Francophone element in Canadian literature can serve as a brake upon monoglot Anglophone euphoria.

⁵ This may be especially true of a nation such as Canada which, at least as defined by elements of the left-liberal intellectual tradition among its Anglophone inhabitants, seeks to be deliberately heterogeneous and anti-essentialist in its sense of itself and its articulation of 'nationality' (see