

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“The new children of the earth”

Posthuman dystopia or a lesbian’s dream in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*

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Abstract

This article analyzes Larissa Lai’s novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) as a case of dystopian fiction marked by a concern with the dangers of the “Anthropocene” and the oppression of what lies beyond the scope of prescriptive definitions of humanity. Taking as point of departure Braidotti’s posthuman theory and her post-anthropocentric approach to embodied difference, I focus on the feminist and lesbian stance of Lai’s novel. For this purpose, I explore issues such as the characters’ *zoe*-centred, non-hierarchical fusion with nature, the link to the maternal through fish smell (traditionally associated with female genitalia, here reclaimed and embraced), together with the subversive potential of female bonding, and of alternative modes of motherhood and reproduction as opposed to heteropatriarchal utilitarian techno-scientific control.¹

KEYWORDS

dystopia, feminism, Larissa Lai, post-anthropocentrism, posthuman, *Salt Fish Girl*

1 | INTRODUCTION

Self-identified as a woman of color, a feminist, and a lesbian, American-born Canadian author of Chinese ascent Larissa Lai has published two novels, two poetry collections, and three chapbooks, apart from a considerable body

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of research as an academic and literary critic. Some of the journal articles Lai has published delve into the origin and significance of her own fiction, providing the reader with insight about her writing process and the cultural and contextual influences she acknowledges as source materials. Such is the case of "Future Asians: Migrant speculations, repressed history and cyborg hope," where she lists the events that were making news shortly before writing her novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and which find some form of reflection in its bifurcated plot:

[T]he cloning of Dolly the sheep, the arrival of three rusty ships from China on the West Coast of British Columbia carrying around 600 Chinese migrant labourers, Monsanto's suing of a farmer whose canola crop, probably through natural pollination, had picked up some of Monsanto's altered DNA, the patenting of slightly modified basmati rice by a large Texas corporation, the construction of Celebration, a fully planned ur-American town, by Disney. (Lai, 2004, 171-172)

Salt Fish Girl has been described as a spliced narrative mirroring the structure of a DNA sequence and thus "formally enact[ing] the novel's meditation on genetic modification" (Huang, 2016, 119): there are two parallel plots and narrative lines, with their own autodiegetic narrators, set in different continents and centuries, whose interconnections increase gradually until they merge in the final pages. The combination of both complicates any attempt to pin down the text in generic terms, as they combine myths of origins (Chinese as well as Judeo-Christian), fairy tale ingredients (Andersen's *Little Mermaid*), together with dystopian and speculative fiction motifs.² The autodiegetic narrator of the first narrative line is Nu Wa, the serpent-tailed goddess who created the first human beings from mud in the Yellow River Bank in the times prior to the Shang Dynasty, according to Chinese mythology. Feeling all alone and envying her newly created human beings mostly for the pleasure they get from sexual intercourse, she exchanges her divine powers for eternal life in human flesh and a new pair of legs that will be in constant pain at her former tail's point of bifurcation. After falling in love with the water reflection of a beautiful woman, in a passage that echoes and rewrites the myth of Narcissus, Nu Wa begins a process through which she will reincarnate as different women.³ In her first (re) incarnation in South China in the late nineteenth century, at the age of 18 she falls in love with a salt fish merchant's daughter, with whom she starts a relationship. Despite Nu Wa's paying for her own spinsterhood ceremony, the couple has to run away because of the merchant's opposition to his daughter's forbidden relationship. In Canton, South China, in the early 1900s, after killing a Caucasian potential rapist in self-defence, the Salt Fish Girl, as she is called by the narrator, is blackmailed into working in exploitative and unhealthy conditions in an assembly-line wind-up toy factory, while the narrator is bewitched by a foreign woman to follow her to a mysterious land (the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness) where she is also exploited and finally imprisoned for drug smuggling and illegal immigration. She does not age in the 50 years she spends in the eerie Island while the longed-for Salt Fish Girl becomes an old woman known by her neighbours as "the unnatural one" (Lai, 2002, 172). Upon Nu Wa's return home and the now old Salt Fish Girl's rejection and reproaches of abandonment, the protagonist-narrator goes back to her family home, where her brother forces her to marry the Salt Fish Girl's older brother to compensate for having caused his father's execution on charges of murder upon the girls' disappearance. With her husband's agreement, Nu Wa has sex with a young fisherman with the dutiful purpose of begetting an heir, but an adultery accusation leads to her capital punishment by drowning in the river. In the water she becomes a worm that, after a long period of detention inside a glass cage, enters a durian fruit that will be eaten in the mid-twenty-first century by 63-year-old Aimee Ching, who thereby falls pregnant "a good eight years past menopause" (p. 15) and gives birth to Miranda Ching, the autodiegetic narrator of the parallel, intertwined narrative line taking place in Serendipity and the Unregulated Zone, two fictional areas in the western coast of North America, between 2044 and 2062.

This new scenario can be described as a posthuman dystopian cli-fi setting in many respects. For a start, nation states have dissolved under the power of the Big Six, a group of corporations that control the Pacific Economic Union (PEU, which includes, at least, former China, Canada, and the United States). Besides, extreme pollution and climate change have brought about, among other consequences, an earthquake that submerged part of Vancouver in 2017, the growth of Asian tropical fruit trees (durian trees) in former Canada, and a disproportionate increase

in human infertility rates⁴ that scientists tried to counter by implanting human genes into fruit species as fertility therapy for women who could not conceive. Yet, nature eventually gets the upper hand as the windborne pollens cannot be contained by the capitalist-driven hetero-patriarchal scientific establishment, and natural cross-pollination gives place to a mutated species of durian fruit that makes women pregnant without the need for insemination. On the other hand, scientist Dr. Flowers is reported to have been creating thousands of Asian female clones, deprived of wits, willpower, and individual names (they are just a number in the Sonias or Miyakos series), as exploitable labour force in assembly-line factory compounds⁵ with no human rights on account of their not being fully human, as their genetic information includes 0.03 percent of carp and cat DNA respectively.⁶ One of the Sonia series of clones Dr. Flowers takes as his wife—Dr. Seto—and another as his daughter—Sonia 113, who rebels against the system of corporate oppression and renames herself as Evie Xin.⁷ Evie reveals to Miranda that the Sonia clones are made of genetic material from a Chinese woman and a Japanese man “interned in the Rockies during the Second World War” (Lai, 2002, 158) whose bodies were sold to science, combined with 0.03 percent of freshwater carp DNA. In Evie’s terms: “I’m a patented new fucking life form” (p. 158). She goes on to explain that laws governing human biomaterial were suspended around 2037, when the first livers and kidneys were created in laboratories, and when the Diverse Genome Project—“focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction” (p. 160)—was bought by Nextcorp. Fish-smelling Evie (the Salt Fish Girl’s twenty-first-century reincarnation) and durian-smelling Miranda fall in love and, by the end of the novel, Miranda—having realized that she is Nu Wa—gives birth to their own durian-conceived daughter in a muddy river, thereby bringing the story full circle by mirroring Nu Wa’s creation of humanity without male intervention.⁸

It is undeniable that Chinese culture, tradition, and identity play an essential role in *Salt Fish Girl*. Indeed, most criticism of the novel so far focuses on the conflicts of Asian-Canadian identity and on issues of illegal immigration, the institutional racism of Canada’s multi-ethnic society, and the labour exploitation of racialized women in global capitalism (Wong, 2003–2004; Mansbridge, 2004; Lai, 2008; Joo, 2014; Bahng, 2015). Yet, in the 15 years gone since the publication of the novel, critics seem to have overlooked, among other things, the telling detail that the title refers to the love object of the two female protagonist-narrators, in two different reincarnations: one enters industrial exploitation and the other escapes from it; one is lost, in order to be found again through the other a century later, bringing the story full circle. That the title of the novel is the name of Nu Wa’s love object—who will in turn reincarnate as Miranda’s lover, Evie Xin—lays a clear emphasis on women-identified women, on same-sex love, without turning it into an issue. Lesbianism is nowhere problematized in the novel. The female protagonist-narrators never question the nature of their feelings or their sexual identity, and neither does anyone else. Lesbian relations are entirely normalized, taken for granted in their naturalness: for instance, there is no “coming out crisis”—nearly ubiquitous in mainstream literary and cultural productions involving lesbian relationships. Perhaps it is this naturalization that has provoked the dismissal of the topic in critical analysis. Yet, it is precisely the so far disregarded feminist and lesbian weight of the novel that this article will explore in more depth through the lens of Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman theory and her post-anthropocentric approach to embodied difference. For this purpose, I shall also elaborate on other related issues, like the connection with the maternal through fish smell (traditionally associated to female genitalia, here reclaimed and embraced), together with the subversive potential of female bonding, and of alternative modes of motherhood and reproduction as opposed to hetero-patriarchal utilitarian techno-scientific control.

2 | POSTHUMAN POST-ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN *SALT FISH GIRL*

In 2000 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer coined the term “Anthropocene” to refer to a new geological era marked by the effects of human intervention on the environment to such an extent that those effects can be scientifically verified in the analysis of geological strata. As Sarah Dillon recounts, Crutzen and Stoermer locate the beginning of the Anthropocene era in the second half of the eighteenth century, at the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom and continental Europe, while the Anthropocene Working Group, founded in

2009 by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, locates the beginning of this epoch around 1945 due to the impact of “the development and testing of nuclear weapons” (Dillon, 2018, 7). Yet, as these data suggest, the awareness of living in the era of the Anthropocene starts in the very early twenty-first century—so much so that it has become a central theme in an important body of contemporary literature dealing with environmental concerns, the possibility of human extinction, and the future inhabitability of planet Earth. As Rosi Braidotti puts it, “the fact that our geological era is known as the ‘anthropocene’ stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by *anthropos* and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else” (Braidotti, 2013, 66).

Dillon establishes a fruitful connection with philosopher Eugene Thacker’s criticism on the anthropocentric perspective of philosophy and his belief that the human point of view must be displaced “in favour of a planetary one” (Dillon, 2018, 10) if humankind is to survive the Anthropocene era. This idea is closely related to Braidotti’s standpoint regarding the negative consequences of the Enlightenment centrality of Man as the measure of all things and the need to surpass the limits of both Humanism and anthropocentrism by doing away with the marginalization and exploitation of the naturalized others (i.e., of non-human life on the Earth or *zoe* as opposed to human life or *bios*). In her comprehensive study *The Posthuman*, Braidotti explores different angles of the current questioning of the nature and limits of “the human” both in academia and in other sectors of society. The growing concern with the validity of this category is, for Braidotti, an outcome of “the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns” (Braidotti, 2013, 1). The overarching policies and strictures of global capitalism together with its use and abuse of scientific and technological advances result in a gradual dehumanization of people and an ever-increasing control, manipulation, and commodification of all that lives. In Braidotti’s words, “the genetic code of living matter— ‘Life itself’ (Rose 2007)—is the main capital. Globalization means the commercialization of planet Earth in all its forms, through a series of inter-related modes of appropriation” (p. 7). Braidotti argues that contemporary capitalism is not only “bio-political” in that it tries to control all living matter but also a form of “bio-piracy” as it “exploits the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells” (p. 95) in the bio-genetic age of the Anthropocene. The positioning of women as exploitable objects is an indirect consequence of the neoclassical—that is to say, Humanist—model of humanity based on the Vitruvian Man as the model of perfection (p. 13). In Braidotti’s terms, “the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others [...] are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (p. 15). She acknowledges the theoretical impact of what she calls feminist anti-Humanism, or postmodern feminism, through its rejection of the Humanist ideal of “Man” and the emphasis laid on diversity and difference within categories like women, the native, or “the naturalized other (animals, the environment or earth)” (p. 27). Thus, starting from the legacy of feminist and poststructuralist anti-Humanism, Braidotti proposes “an affirmative posthuman position” (p. 38) that transcends the centrality of “Man” through the celebration of difference. For her, the reconsideration of the category “human” is an urgent issue triggered, among other factors, by the rapid changes taking place in the world in the last few decades in terms of environmental crises, the increasingly globalized economics, technological development, and “the global infotainment apparatus of the new multimedia environment” (p. 7). She pursues not only the de-centering of man, but also the de-centering of human beings—of *anthropoi*—in our relation with the rest of the world:

The posthuman dimension of post-anthropocentrism [...] deconstructs [...] species supremacy, but it also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature, anthropos and bios, as categorically distinct from the life of animals and non-humans, or zoe. What comes to the fore instead is a nature-culture continuum in the very embodied structure of the extended self [...]. Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself [...] stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. (pp. 60, 65)

Braidotti’s post-anthropocentric posthuman theory proves a fruitful framework for the analysis of Lai’s twenty-first-century dystopian world in *Salt Fish Girl*, with its “grey smog that hung perpetually over the land” (Lai, 2002, 152)

which few lungs can withstand, where the Pacific Economic Union is dominated by the absolute power of corporations and their media-controlled propaganda (p. 32), and enforced “corporate homogenization” (p. 225) whereby everyone who does not conform to the norm is banished to the fringes of society. In this regard, there are two clearly demarcated areas in the west coast Canadian location of this techno-fascist regime: the Unregulated Zone, whose inhabitants—bearing the stigma of difference—have no recognized rights, and cities like Serendipity where the law-abiding corporate citizens lead virtually enhanced, dull, suburban lives (p. 14). To add to the dystopian character of the futuristic plot, the novel provides hints at a previous armed conflict, as some streets in the Unregulated Zone are bombed-out (pp. 27, 37), the state of the buildings awakes “memories of genocide and smallpox, smart bombs and slow starvation” (p. 230), and the police forces use “a supertoxic chemical irritant”—“the latest in crowd-control technology” (p. 149)—to dissolve the clones’ and students’ riots. In the Unregulated Zone some American and Canadian dollars still circulate, but the legal currency is limited to Saturna, Soni, Monsanto and Nextcorp dollars (p. 81).

This dystopian environment is also marked by a rigid and intrusive surveillance system, as clones bear inside their bodies a tracking device cynically called “Guardian Angel” (Lai, 2002, 159) that Evie and other Sonias get rid of when they escape the grey compound factories where they are held as prisoner-labourers.⁹ It is the era of genetic engineering, when apples are big enough to feed four people and modified pollens in corporation laboratories have gone astray and mutated in the Unregulated Zone (p. 32), and also of wearable computing as people wear implants that have replaced the use of mobile phones (p. 41); indeed, “cyborg science class” (p. 61) is then part of the primary education curriculum. References abound to twentieth-century gadgets and values as long gone: “the embarrassing era of sleek technology when everyone believed in the goodness of the world” (p. 19). Now, taxes are collected in virtual reality (p. 27) and the houses of the wealthy, like Ian Chestnut’s family, are described as electronic jungles full of screens and flickering numbers on the walls, where orange juice has been replaced by a brilliant blue liquid that Ian’s prosthetic-eyed mother offers the children (p. 64).

Threats to both health and security are more than evident in that context. As Dr. Flowers admits regarding Miranda’s durian smell, considered part of the suicidal “dreaming disease” or “drowning disease,” there is “a new breed of autoimmune diseases, related to genetic and other industrial modifications to our food supply, that may prove quite devastating in the decades to come” (Lai, 2002, 69). In order to cure her, he proposes experimenting with her body for 15 years through drug use and surgery. He takes the first step by opening a wound in Miranda’s neck and inserting a cold metallic disc in it with the alleged purpose of measuring her brainwaves (p. 113). Furthermore, the school Janitors—dark-skinned women who speak a foreign language and who, like clones, do not hold the category of human—are considered the prime carriers of the Contagion.¹⁰ As a form of experimental therapy, their organs have been made visible by replacing the skin on their backs with a transparent silicone composite and rearranged “like stones in a formal garden, mimicking the asymmetrical aesthetics of nature, but with human intention” (p. 77). Apparently Miranda was born with the illness,¹¹ but Dr. Flowers and Dr. Seto theorize that

it might be the product of mass industrial genetic alteration practices—that the modifications of agricultural products in recent years had contaminated the soil, that the microbes that lived in the earth were mutating and infecting humans. That humans could get diseases once only possible in plants, or that indeed, the new disease was a strange hybrid, combining those that affected plants and those that affected animals.

Once, when Flowers wasn’t around, Seto suggested the disease had been intentionally manufactured, like the firefly disease created in 2010 [...] which made its sufferers glow in the dark. [...] “People are catching a bug that gives them the memory structures of other animals.” (pp. 102–103)

The novel’s pointing at genetic modification and other forms of manipulation of nature as causes for new illnesses is not a far-fetched science fiction motif, since the twentieth century had already witnessed cases like the mad

cow disease resulting from agricultural bio-technology—the feeding of herbivorous cattle with meat-based fodder (Braidotti, 2013, 7). This can be seen as part of what Braidotti denominates “the bio-genetic structure of contemporary capitalism,” which involves “the Human Genome project, stem cell research and bio-technological intervention upon animals, seeds, cells and plants,” profiting from “the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives” (p. 59). It is in this capitalist drive that genetic engineering is deployed to create a cheap factory workforce by the corporations in the PEU, and it is no coincidence that clone workers are exclusively female and non-white, in addition to bearing a minimal fraction of animal genes. Through this conflation of different types of otherness, Lai’s novel foreruns the interconnections denounced by Braidotti “among the greenhouse effect, the status of women, racism and xenophobia and frantic consumerism. We must not stop at any fragmented portions of these realities, but rather trace transversal interconnections among them” (p. 93).¹² Such interrelation stems from the consecration of the unmarked ideal of Man (white, heterosexual, and able-bodied) as the master of the “other and less-than,” his “manifest destiny” being “to dominate and control nature” (Hayles, 1999, 288) and those others connected to it: “the sexualized other (woman), the racialized other (the native) and the naturalized other (animals, the environment or earth)” (Braidotti, 2013, 27). Significantly enough, the view of smell and socially marked corporeality as pathological is the cause of the marginalization of exploited beings in *Salt Fish Girl*, hence revealing the techno-scientific, global-capitalist establishment’s rejection of difference from the mainstream, homogenized and obedient mass. This is but an extension of the centuries-long dualistic western philosophical tradition of privileging the intellect and the soul over the body, and their connection with the masculine/culture and the feminine/nature respectively (see Bordo, 2003). Not without reason, the cybernetic understanding of the posthuman being as mere disembodied information that transcends the flesh and can be downloaded into a non-human container is sharply criticized by posthuman theorist Katherine N. Hayles (1999). Instead, she calls for an integrative view of the posthuman as information that is necessarily embodied and the understanding of life as a nature-culture continuum.

The answer that Lai’s novel provides goes hand in hand with both Hayles’s claim and Braidotti’s proposal of “a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities” (Braidotti, 2013, 26). Braidotti advocates a posthuman subjectivity that is “rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere, according to the feminist ‘politics of location’” (p. 51). In this sense, it is remarkable that for Nu Wa to become human she must become embodied in an Asian woman’s shape (Joo, 2014, 51), and also embedded in specific space-time locations—from nineteenth-century South China to mid-twenty-first century former Canada. The embracing of embodiment thus stands as a rejection of the Humanist notion of Man as that which transcends the body—and its attached meanings of femaleness, non-whiteness, and nature—and of the higher value historically ascribed to intellect and the unmarked. In a revisionist rewriting of Christian religion, it is the primordial goddess of creation who is transfigured into a human being—a woman in this case—first directly, and afterwards through a series of immaculate conceptions.

Furthermore, in *Salt Fish Girl* “human and anthropomorphic others are relocated in a continuum with non-anthropomorphic, animal or ‘earth’ others” (Braidotti, 2013, 95), both metaphorically and literally, in a wide range of forms: not only are the clones partly fish and Miranda partly snake and genetically modified durian fruit, but also there are images of women becoming one with natural elements, like water when Nu Wa is drowning for being adulterous: “The river has become a part of you” (Lai, 2002, 184). In other words, racialized women in *Salt Fish Girl* are part of the *zoe*-centred egalitarianism that displaces the supremacy and exclusiveness of *anthropos* in the nature-culture continuum. Indeed, nature is presented as a restorative force able to reclaim quickly what has been stolen from it or destroyed by human action and roaring consumption, as Miranda says regarding the state of an overgrown highway: “It amazed me how quickly the earth can take over what humans have abandoned. The eager grass had shattered the highway into millions of shards. Dandelions and some small purple flowers I couldn’t identify dotted the road like bright kisses on an ancient wound” (p. 248). The beauty of the flowers and the healing, loving caress of nature—traditionally feminine traits—metaphorically prevail over the destructive effects of “culture” and—traditionally masculine—civilization.

3 | GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND EMBODIMENT IN SALT FISH GIRL

Feminist claims of various types are scattered throughout the two narrative lines of *Salt Fish Girl* from the very beginning when, at the moment of Nu Wa's creation of human beings, she decides to make women the stronger sex (Lai, 2002, 5). Later on, during her early 1900s reincarnation in South China, which extends until the mid-twentieth century, Nu Wa's five-year imprisonment in a women's jail is an excuse to point out that most inmates were condemned for maiming or killing their abusive husbands (p. 141) while denouncing the prison's overcrowding and the mistreatment and humiliations inflicted on the prisoners by the male guards.

The power of women's bonding and feeling of sorority to counter patriarchal violence is made evident by their outright rejection on the part of most male characters. A clear example is the satellite narrative event of the bus episode, where Evie and Miranda help a girl who was being harassed by two men on a bus. When the girl gets off the bus, the two molesters immediately do so as well and begin to follow her, but the bus starts running, preventing Evie and Miranda from getting off and protecting the girl. The bus driver contemptuously calls them "feminists" and accuses them of disturbing the harassers who, according to the driver, "were just being friendly" (Lai, 2002, 167).

Miranda's sections launch further feminist messages, like the criticism of the advertising industry playing with the illusions and self-worth of "bored suburban housewives [...] scared of growing old" (Lai, 2002, 202). Indeed, the advertisements' false promises that Pallas shoes could bring success and happiness to middle-aged, middle-class, suburban wives in their exhausting struggle to keep their bodies fit and young are explicitly connected with the ancient Chinese tradition of foot-binding, when capitalism and consumerism have supplanted the role of mothers in the maintenance of patriarchal oppression: "Crushed foot bones bandaged tight, their equation with grace—what a close call I've had. Narrow escape of only a hundred and fifty years. It occurred to me that it was women's hands that did the breaking. How could a mother do such a thing to her daughter?" (p. 227).

The mothers' endorsement of patriarchal tradition upon their daughters, though, is portrayed as active but reluctant, giving rise to contradictory feelings in the motherly agents of female oppression. Thus, when Nu Wa falls in love with the Salt Fish Girl she feels attracted by her smell of salt fish. As she explains, salt fish congee is the food with which Chinese mothers used to replace maternal milk for their children; it replaces the maternal milk's flavour. A longing for the Salt Fish Girl may therefore be considered as a longing for a reconnection with the maternal and the feminine in its earliest form of attachment—a distant echo of Nancy Chodorow's theory of girls' primal connection with their mothers as their instinctual, first love object and primordial source of desire (1978). However, the smell of salt fish also evokes the love and resentment that mothers felt towards their daughters, as they did not want to give too much of themselves, given the prospect of future abandonment on their daughters' part when the time came for them to get married (Lai, 2002, 48–49). Nu Wa considers it "a cruel trick of patriarchy" (p. 51) that her mother, dreading her daughter's abandonment, was the one that should propitiate it by arranging a marriage for her at the age of 15 with a man "blind in one eye, and ugly as sin" (p. 53) in order to provide her with a "respectable" life—"Note [she] didn't say happy" (p. 51). Nevertheless, Nu Wa decides to become a silk worker in order to pay for her spinsterhood ceremony, which was allowed in South China "if the family [was] agreeable and there [was] no protest from the local magistrate" (p. 53). Her mother becomes visibly furious while being "secretly pleased, in the mixed way only a married woman can be, seeing that her daughter has escaped what she could not" (p. 54). Nu Wa's active reaction to her marriage prospects is not a lesbian utopian fantasy but part of a historically documented reality. In her article "The sixth sensory organ" Lai explains the case of silk workers in South China who had the chance to become economically independent and could afford to buy "their way out of marriage and set up house together. They would buy concubines to replace them in their husbands' households. Others simply declared spinsterhood and underwent a hair-combing ceremony recognized as a viable alternative to marriage" (Lai, 1996, 204–205). Silk worker spinsters are the source of inspiration for the all-female community conformed by the Sonia clones who escape the factories and create a sisterhood-based family where they become independent from men and raise their own durian-conceived baby girls.

Female bonding plays an essential role in *Salt Fish Girl* and so does the decentralization of heterosexual marriage as the basis of society and life. The narrative counters the Judeo-Christian prescription of procreation as the main purpose of sex—the traditional claim on which the necessarily heterosexual nature of marriage is based—through Nu Wa's act of creation of the first human beings, when she designs procreation as a secondary function of sex, pleasure being the primordial one (Lai, 2002, 5). Lai's approach to lesbian sexuality surpasses the mere dismantling of stereotypes and conventions. It is part of her posthuman feminist agenda, whereby dislocations of identities are achieved, borrowing Braidotti's words, "via the perversion of standardized patterns of sexualized, racialized and naturalized interaction" (Braidotti, 2013, 99). It is of utmost importance that transgression is carried out in a transversal way: the lovers are not just Asian, lesbian, genetically modified women; they are also "naturals," partly animal and partly fruit and, what is more, sexual intercourse is represented through water and fish imagery in highly symbolic terms:

Her fingers moved over my skin, cool and tingly as ice water. I wanted to turn into water myself, fall into her the way rain falls into the ocean. I moved through the cool dark with her, flailing for oxygen in a fast underwater current, shivering slippery cool wet and tumbling through dark towards a blue point of light in the distance, teeth, lip, nipple, the steel taste of blood, gills gaping open and closed, open and closed, mouth, breath, cool water running suddenly piss hot against velvet inner thighs and the quick shudder silver flash of fish turning above the ice-blue surface of the lake. (Lai, 2002, 161–162)

As Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen point out, there has been "a long-standing reluctance to appeal to 'nature'" (Luciano & Chen, 2015, 188) on the part of queer authors because claims of naturalness have always been "waged against homosexual people, as well as women, people of colour and indigenous people" (Alaimo, 2010, 51). Yet, non-straight authors and critics have overcome this rejection of connecting their identities to nature due to the urgency of environmental concerns that has triggered the development of queer ecocriticism and its focus on the "complex system of interdependency" between humans and the natural world (Luciano & Chen, 2015, 188).

Similarly, when Miranda eats her first durian (thereby becoming unknowingly impregnated) her lovemaking with Evie is described in terms of food scents:

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 dong quai—all those things buried and forgotten in the years of corporate homogenization. Steam rose from us like water splashed on a hot pan of garlic greens. (Lai, 2002, 225)

The description goes beyond the essentialist connection of the feminine to nurturing through the provision of food to incorporate Asian ingredients and "foreign" smells, frequently used to discriminate against ethnic minorities on account of their difference. The incorporation of ethnically charged scents in the description of lesbian sex can be read as an inclusive claim for embodied-ness. Women's bodies, fluids, and non-normative smell are reclaimed in a way that recalls Monique Wittig's classic *The Lesbian Body*, where the narrator's lover is sometimes described in animal terms: "you rip off m/y skin with the claws of your paws [...] my she-wolf m/y arms around your neck m/y breasts m/y belly against your fur" (Wittig, 1975, 22). As Tara Lee puts it, "the durian and its putrid odour are the expression of a body clamouring to be acknowledged in a world that desperately wants to ignore its presence" (Lee, 2004, 104). She defines the characters' bodily smells as "a constant reminder of the failure of the corporations to control deviant bodies" since smell is not welcome "in the sanitized world of global capitalism" (p. 105).

The overwhelming insistence on odors in the novel can also be interpreted from another posthuman angle. As Paul Lai argues, "smell connects with change or in-betweenness because smells linger and their diffuse quality as airborne molecules disconnected from their sources endows them with confusion or lack of clarity about

categories and origins" (Lai, 2008, 176). Stephanie Oliver takes this idea a step further and suggests that the diffusion of odors "involves spontaneous encounters that enable entities to intermingle without combining" (Oliver, 2011, 89), subverting notions of inside and outside and the fixed boundaries of the well-delimited, autonomous Humanist and Enlightenment subject. Interestingly, for Paul Lai smell also opposes the narrative of modernity and Humanism since foul odors are connected to "the primitive and to those outside of civilization" in the context of modern societies, which "have undergone a process of deodorization" (Lai, 2008, 183); and so does Oliver, for whom "the West's construction of diffuse processes as potentially contaminating underscores Eurocentric anxieties about scents' ability to undermine notions of purity and boundaries" (Oliver, 2011, 89). She argues that during the European Enlightenment "anyone deemed odorous—including women, racialized groups, and the lower classes—was considered 'uncivilized'" (p. 89). Not coincidentally, Miranda's classmates call her names that link her smell to animals, like "Cat Box" or "Kitty Litter," and also indirectly to female genitalia, like "Pissy Pussy" (Lai, 2002, 21). She describes the smell on the day of her conception as "the reek of cat pee tinged with the smell of hot peppers [...] mingled with the smell of unwashed underwear" (p. 13). Lai herself expresses her view that smell is "such a powerful means by which the mainstream denigrates its others, particularly racialized and sexualized others. 'Foreign' foods are supposed to stink. So are women's sexual parts" (Lai, 2004, 172). So she inserts in her narrative two ways of relating to smell: "a hegemonic, oppressive one that wants to deny and obliterate and a progressive, liberatory one that wants to acknowledge and reclaim" (p. 172). Significantly enough, odor is reclaimed and relished by the main characters in the novel, unveiling their difference and their physical and sexual embodiment as the core of their identities and relationships. Rather than repulse, fish and durian smell attract the characters to one another and trigger glimpses of their affinity in previous lives, just as smells in the dreaming disease reconnect its sufferers with historical oppression and massacre. This act of embracing the natural and the repressed in a homogenized, deodorized society involves a further link to Hayles's and Braidotti's definitions of the posthuman, as the smell trope gives memory "a visceral, bodily sense" (p. 173) that posits human identity as information (memory) that is inescapably and undeniably embodied.

Not without reason Sharlee Reimer describes *Salt Fish Girl* as "a political critique of the dominant Enlightenment discourses that emphasize disembodied rationality, progress, and certainty to the detriment of alternative epistemologies" (Reimer, 2010, 4); for Aimee Bahng, it is "an interrogation of the Enlightenment notion of the individual subject and an inquiry into alternative renderings of embodiment and sensation" (Bahng, 2015, 676) while it examines "the way in which humanness is constructed as white, male, Western and heterosexual" (Morris, 2004, 93), that is, as bearing no trace of marked embodiment. Indeed, everyone who is considered as deviant by the heteropatriarchal system has their bodies constantly subjected to scientific monitoring and control; as Hyeyurn Chung puts it, "in the capitalist West of the future, aberrant/grotesque (read: female, non-white, marginal) bodies can be probed, corrected, manufactured, disassembled, and reassembled if normative (read: male, white, central) bodies deem it necessary" (Chung, 2009, 63). As an Asian, lesbian, female, piscine clone reincarnation of the Salt Fish Girl, Evie is the ultimate representation of the posthuman monster in Braidotti's terms; as Sonia Villegas-López remarks borrowing the philosopher's definition, she is "the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm" (Braidotti, 1994, 78, cited in Villegas-López, 2015, 31).¹³ With her carp genes and close connection to nature, and her past of work exploitation in the Pallas factory, this anthropomorphic posthuman being embodies what Braidotti describes as the transversal interconnections among "the status of women, racism and xenophobia and frantic consumerism" (Braidotti, 2013, 93). At the same time, she represents, together with Miranda, the post-anthropocentric—or anthro-decentric in Luciano and Chen's terms (Luciano & Chen, 2015, 190)—view of *zoe* as the non-hierarchical conjunction of human and earth "others," and the posthuman reconceptualization of the human as part of the nature-culture continuum advocated both by Braidotti and by Hayles.

Ironically, it is the product of hetero-patriarchal scientific creation, the wilful Sonias, that rebel against their laboratory creators and their will to control difference through its commodification. Significantly enough, the Sonias create their own community with the help of nature, which outsmarts scientific control through spontaneous cross-pollination resulting in the durian fruits' power to impregnate women without the need of sperm.

In Joanna Mansbridge's words, "the durian tree replaces the lab in the creation of a new generation of liberated clones" (Mansbridge, 2004, 129). The all-female extended family that the Sonia escapees create can be read as the kind of egalitarian society typical of a feminist utopia, while their ability to bear children free of the need of male genes can be seen as a lesbian dream of having children that are fully one's own—a terrain genetic engineering will never explore. In this sense, Paul Lai argues that, "representing the possibility of a reproductive futurity separate from heterosexual copulation (or even genetic material from men), the Sonias are outlaws who are hunted by the Pallas company for threatening social order" (Lai, 2008, 174). The threat to patriarchal order posed by the Sonias' free, egalitarian community and their ability to reproduce without male collaboration is so strong that the durian tree in their garden is cut down and burned in retaliation, and most Sonias in the sisterhood killed (Lai, 2002, 248). Yet, the Sonias' babies are still safe and the few survivors manage to save three large durians and a basket of radishes (p. 250), which they use for strengthening their foetuses. Dr. Flowers very tellingly legitimates the slaughter of the Sonias not only because, for him, "they were not human" (p. 255), but also because he considers them to be "degenerate": "'You don't know,' said the doctor, 'what monstrosities might have come of those births. Those trees have been interbreeding and mutating for at least three generations since the original work. The fertility those durians provided was neither natural nor controllable. It was too dangerous'" (p. 256). It is ironic that Dr. Flowers, the scientist who creates the carp-women clones for industrial profit, claims lack of naturalness as a source of danger—unless it is controlled, of course, by the corporate scientific establishment. At that moment of *anagnorisis* Miranda understands "the secret of the trees, the clever Sonias, the depth of their subversions. That they were building a free society of their own kind from the ground up" (p. 256). As she ponders: "we are the new children of the earth, of the earth's revenge" (p. 259) for all the damage inflicted by the excesses of the global capitalist humankind that has gone too far in its exploitative and discriminatory greed.

4 | CONCLUSION: WHERE FORM AND CONTENT CONVERGE

All the posthuman angles from which the novel can be read converge in its very ending. While swimming in a hot spring, Evie's legs become a scaly snake tail whose coil interlocks with Miranda's, and the latter gives birth in the water to a black-haired little baby girl "from an opening in [her] scaly new flesh" (Lai, 2002, 269). Significantly she adds what seems an utterly irrelevant detail: "The head had a wrinkled human face" (p. 269). This conclusion to the story brings together techno-science and myth in a new definition of the human: through this act of childbirth, Evie and Miranda seem to rewrite with a lesbian, all-female twist the Chinese myth of origins whereby creation emerged by the joint action of goddess Nu Wa and her brother god Fu Xi. The new baby with a human face is an Asian girl mothered by a partly-durian woman and a partly-carp, lab-created clone. This is a story of trans-speciation: Miranda is also Nu Wa because they share the same genetic material—Miranda was conceived because her mother ate the durian Nu Wa had entered in the shape of a worm. So, the reincarnation tale of mythical resonances fuses with the futuristic dystopian narrative of genetically modified cross-pollination in one and the same durian fruit, thereby making it impossible to ascribe Miranda's birth to any definite, clear origin. The idea that all the women who eat the durians are, in a sense, Nu Wa, the goddess of creation, can be interpreted as a celebration and revaluation of women's power to create new life—a transgression of the western Enlightenment view of motherhood as a handicap that locates women in the realm of nature as opposed to the superior male realm of culture.¹⁴

Furthermore, the ending is left open by the narrator's statement that "[e]verything will be all right [...] until the next time" (Lai, 2002, 269). According to Reimer, "[b]y leaving the narrative open—indeed, unfinished, and perhaps even impure, by normative Enlightenment standards—Lai enacts a final resistance to the fixity and closure that Enlightenment epistemologies demand" (Reimer, 2010, 12). Thus, we can say that form and content go hand in hand in Lai's dismantling of Humanist ideals of purity, linearity, and progress, of the normative, prescriptive definition of humanity in terms of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, and of the corollary connection of the human

with the disembodied intellect and soul—in cybernetics terms, with bare information. The discourses of Humanism are ultimately challenged through the privilege of the *zoe*-centered approach to life fundamental in the post-anthropocentric turn necessary to survive in the era of the Anthropocene, where both human and natural life are threatened by the excesses of technology and capitalism in its industrial and global stages.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The author would like to express her gratitude to the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2015-63506-P), the European Social Fund, and the Government of Aragón (ESF, H03_17R).
- ² The novel is described by Michelle N. Huang as “neoliberal economic dystopia” and “speculative realism” (Huang, 2016, 119–120); by Sharlee Reimer as “feminist dystopia” (Reimer, 2010, 6); by Hee-Jung Serenity Joo as “non-realist speculative fiction” (Joo, 2014, 46); and by Paul Lai as “a millennial novel for its concern with genetic technology, transgenic crops, human genome and cloning” (Lai, 2008, 168). I would classify *Salt Fish Girl* as a dystopia in so far as the futuristic portrait it provides is “pessimistic about technology, about the economy, about politics, and about the planet,” warning against threats such as “pollution and climate change, nuclear weapons and corporate monopolies, technological totalitarianism and the fragility of rights secured from the state” (Lepore, 2017, n.p.), while the magnified dangers are deeply rooted in present-day social maladies. For Jill Lepore, dystopian novels predominate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries because “economic growth has led to widening economic inequality and a looming environmental crisis. Democracy appears to be yielding to authoritarianism” (2017, n.p.). Lai’s novel also shares certain ingredients that, according to Margaret Atwood, are central in contemporary dystopias, such as “distribution of wealth; labor relations; power structure; the protection of the powerless, if any; relations between the sexes; population control; urban planning” (Atwood, 2005, 94) and it has an overall concern with socio-political organization (Wesseling, 1991, 96). It also fits in Atwood’s definition of speculative fiction—“things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (Atwood, 2011, 6)—as the futuristic bio-technological advances represented in the novel are already part of reality or a logical outcome of present day technology.
- ³ As Joo remarks, “each of Nu Wa’s chapters correlates to a specific phase of capitalist development,” from merchant capitalism when she falls in love with the Salt Fish Girl in a market, to industrial capitalism in early twentieth-century Canton where the exploitative working conditions of women in factories are described, on to transnational late capitalism symbolized by the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness (suggestively shortened to IMF) (Joo, 2014, 51)—and, I would add, to the apocalyptic post-national corporate globalization of the mid-twenty-first century.
- ⁴ *Salt Fish Girl* resonates with close echoes that suggest its paying homage—while postulating itself as a lesbian-feminist response—to Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It shares ingredients of cli-fi, its speculative and dystopian fiction character, the concern with infertility, and the patriarchal drive to dominate nature by disciplining the female through science and domination.
- ⁵ Replicating the all-female wind-up toy factory in nineteenth-century China where the Salt Fish Girl nearly became blind due to its slave-like working conditions (Lai, 2002, 121).
- ⁶ Paradoxically enough, making these not-fully-human beings is legal, but being one is not.
- ⁷ Xin being a homophone of “sin,” the allusion to the biblical figure of Eve in Evie’s choice for her new name is more than evident.
- ⁸ It is necessary to highlight here the fact that, in Chinese mythology, the original act of creation is made by the joint action of (or the incestuous relation between) Nu Wa and her male twin, Fu Xi. Yet, Lai obliterates the presence of the male figure to leave creation entirely in Nu Wa’s hands. Furthermore, when Miranda’s father tells her the story of Nu Wa and Fu Xi, she draws a picture of them as almost identical beings, with interlocked tails and androgynous faces: “I drew Fu Xi as a woman” (Lai, 2002, 187). Miranda also draws “Nu Wa staring into a pool at her own reflection” (p. 187), thereby intimating an unconscious remembrance of her primal incarnation.
- ⁹ Evie “scraped the central disc [of her Guardian Angel] out on a jagged bit of broken concrete wall, and pulled until the wiring came free” (Lai, 2002, 160), so her back is full of scars above the serial number below her spine.
- ¹⁰ Several critics have interpreted the symptoms of the illness as the repressed memories of all the peoples oppressed by colonialism and by ethnic assimilationist policies in host countries (Lai, 2004; Mansbridge, 2004; Lai, 2008; Oliver, 2011; Huang, 2016).
- ¹¹ She does not really feel she is ill until her father makes patent his concern with her smell. Miranda’s “disease” seems to be connected to sea-life, as her skin often grows scales (Lai, 2002, 213), a symptom that is initially diagnosed as psoriasis, and she has two fistulas above her ears, whereas her mother and Evie have one, which she sees as reminders of a prehistorical

past when human beings were closer to fish (pp. 107–108). This seems to be an autobiographical ingredient, as Lai herself affirms she has two fistulas quite similar to Miranda's (Lai, 1996, 199).

¹² The (vain) attempt at absolute mastery of nature through technology in the novel is the main reason why only female clones were manufactured, in order to prevent them from reproducing beyond scientific control (Joo, 2014, 54). Similarly, eating durians and any other fruit grown outside corporate control is strictly forbidden in *Serendipity*.

¹³ As Luciano and Chen argue, many cornerstone texts of queer theory, starting with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), have interrogated the meaning and status of "human" in its hierarchical relation to non-normative sexuality (Luciano & Chen, 2015, 186).

¹⁴ For an already classical theoretical account of this dichotomy see Ortner (1974).

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