

Social Reproduction and Ethics of Care: Reading Posthuman Survival in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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Abstract

Contemporary posthumanist thought systematically demonstrates that survival under bio-capitalism depend on the invisible labour of social reproduction and affective continuance and not on technological augmentation or autonomous self-sufficiency completely. Against this backdrop, Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) focuses on the gruelling, everyday material practices essential to sustain marginalised, non-enhanced bodies within the bio-capitalist establishments. The racialised, gendered, and disabled individuals perform the stigmatised, unrewarded labour required to endure posthuman survival. In doing so, this paper argues how posthumanism is an ongoing, mundane ethics of social reproduction and affective care that functions outside technological hybridity and transcendence. By tracing cloned labour, somatic ancestral memory, and multispecies intimacy the *Salt Fish Girl* illustrates the political resistance away from technological escape and towards relational interdependence. Drawing on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's 'ethics of care,' Nancy Fraser's 'social reproduction theory,' and Christina Sharpe's 'wake work,' this article exposes the structural dependence of corporate posthumanity on the very invisible labour devalued systematically.

Keywords: bio-capitalism, ethics of care, posthuman survival, social reproduction, wake work

Introduction

Posthuman survival, according to Pete Mandik, is a strategy to survive in extreme existential risks. It encompasses a machinery to cope with the "confronting exigencies such as massive asteroid impact or the eventual death of the sun as it depletes its hydrogen reserves" (149). Posthuman survival encourages beings to adaptation an environment that outsmart any unexpected cosmic cataclysm. Meanwhile, social reproduction theory judiciously delves deeper into 'how life-making practices' such as actions and attitudes "behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis" (Rey-Arujo 2). Social reproduction, thus, implies a systematic expansion of survival instincts 'intergenerationally' tackling the complete eradication of beings (living or fossilised). Similarly, the 'ethics of care' propounded by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa suggests an explicit thinking beyond human world. She, according to Sonja Jerak-Zuiderent, posits

that ‘the ethics’ in “an ethics of care cannot be about a realm of normative moral obligations but rather about thick, impure, involvement in a world where the question of how to care” (55) requires to be addressed. Besides, Larrisa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) emerges as a shared and relational process sustaining through social reproduction, ethics of care, and the transmission of historical memory across human, non-human, and technological mediated beings. The novel illustrates how posthuman survival can be visualised in a speculative world through ‘social reproduction’, ‘ethics of care’ and ‘wake work.’

The critical scholarship on *Salt Fish Girl* tends to foreground the spectacle of cyborg politics and technological alteration (Sharlee Reimer). While the novel has been widely theorised in terms of narrative symbiosis and creative evolution (Michelle N Huang), genetic hybridity (Qianyi Ma), feminist lesbian stance (Monica Calvo-Pascaul), and queering memory and reproduction (Christopher B Patterson), scholarly attention often takes transformation as a full semiotic performance or political status. This hyper-focus on the dramatic event of bodily modification creates a significant theoretical lacuna as it obscures the mundane, material labour required to sustain non-normative life after the disruptive moment of mutation or defect. This article moves the analytical focus away from ontological hybridity to relational maintenance and asks how posthuman existence is an ongoing, precarious project of survival. Through ‘social reproduction theory, and ‘care of ethics’, this article reconceives the non-human bodies in *Salt Fish Girl*, marked by odour, genetic encrypting and historical trauma, as active agents embedded in the embodied practices of care, ancestral persistence and collective endurance in the face of unprecedented calamities. In Lai’s narrative, the established “absolute power of the Big Six and our family’s fortunate installation at serendipity” (10) and bio-capitalist hegemony privatises reproduction and extracts surplus value renouncing material infrastructure necessitated to sustain vulnerable lives.

Lai opens the novel “in a way even the most shunned of you have never known loneliness (1). According to Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, *Salt Fish Girl* is “a book of origins. Nu Wa is a goddess that creates the heavens and the earth” (47), meanwhile Miranda appears an ambiguous character who is whether a reincarnation of Nu Wa or clone like Evie. Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* has been a touchstone text for Asian-Canadian speculative fiction, feminist posthumanism, and cyborg politics since its publication. It is essential to grasp the ontological disruptions outlined by the narrative, but it runs at the risk of under-theorising a central structural question as how does a body, once cloned, mutated, or racialised as subhuman, actually survive? Critical scholarship tends to emphasise transformation as an event or marker of identity over the understated, monotonous labour of physical and emotional maintenance. In Lai’s hyper-corporate, segregated Pacific Northwest, bio-capitalism exploits bodies, commodifies their biological making, and leaves their ongoing maintenance behind. In *Salt Fish Girl*, posthumanism is reframed through the material politics of ‘social reproduction,’ and ‘ethics of care.’ Lai shows that posthuman survival depends on relational labour by means of feeding, washing, remembering and holding of bodies already marked as disposable.

By synthesising Nancy Fraser's critique of 'social reproduction' under capitalism with Puig de la Bellacasa's framework of 'ethics of care', this theoretical intervention reveals that Lai's narrative focuses on the construction of an alternative, non-capitalist infrastructure of mutual endurance for an unknown future existence. In an interview with Sarah Leonard, when Frazer is asked about social reproduction, she answered:

Social reproduction is about the creation and maintenance of social bonds. One part of this has to do with the ties between the generations—so, birthing and raising children and caring for the elderly. Another part is about sustaining horizontal ties among friends, family, neighbourhoods, and community. This sort of activity is absolutely essential to society. Simultaneously affective and material, it supplies the “social glue” that underpins social cooperation. Without it, there would be no social organization—no economy, no polity, no culture. (Dissent)

Frazer argues that capitalism is based on a fundamental contradiction. On one hand, capitalism depends on a background realm of 'social reproduction,' the voluntarily affective, biological and domestic labour that produces and sustains human life. Yet it is always on the lookout for ways to destabilise and cannibalise the foundation. This crisis of social reproduction is literally expressed in genetic manufacturing in *Salt Fish Girl*: “These cloned people, all Asian or native in their features, form the ideal labor pool, because they are without family, without nation, and without history. They look identical to each other, and instead of names, they are given numbers” (Ty 97). The creation of the 'sonia' clones, genetically engineered workers infused with carp DNA to harvest durians, is the total commodification of life. Lia worries about the adaptability of a hypothetical future in which there are no aliens and everyone adopts a symbiotic relationship that makes the world habitable. In addition, bio-capitalism wants to fully internalise social reproduction by engineering a workforce designed for hyper-exploitation, bypassing the traditional familial structures required to raise and care for human labourers. Nu Wa asserts:

I know my mother isn't personally to blame, that she was just doing what all good mothers are supposed to do if they want their daughters to live respectable lives. Note I didn't say happy... It was a cruel trick of patriarchy to make her the agent of our separation. (Lai 51)

The *Salt Fish Girl* illustrates the privatisation of social reproduction through patriarchal and economic systems and how moms are forced to police their daughters into traditional marital and reproductive roles to survive financially. When Nu Wa chooses to become a spinster, she deliberately rejects the unpaid social reproduction expected of daughters-in-law in favour of a pooling of resources and labour in a self-funded sisterhood, “I'll be here with you when you grow old, rather than scrubbing undies for my mother-in-law?” (54). Evie, the 'sonia' clone, is the ultimate extension of social reproduction under posthuman capitalism as Evie states that “I'm a patented new ... life form” (158) reflecting how human bodies are produced, cloned, patented and used as pure labour units without human rights.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, the very processes of life-making, care and biological generation become radical sources of subversion and relational continuity, with social reproduction guiding posthuman survival. The corporate biopolitics of NextCorp attempts to privatise reproduction and emotional labour through the genetic engineering and commercialisation of cloned bodies such as the sony girls, in the dystopian enclaves of NextCorp. However, these reproductive capacities are reclaimed by posthuman subjects to create non-normative kinship structures, interspecies solidarity and mutual aid networks that exist entirely outside of corporate control. The novel expands social reproduction beyond the human-centred, nuclear family model through the melding of human, animal and mythic lineages such as Nu Wa's ancient transformations and the embodied, memory-bearing 'dreaming disease', making biological and ancestral memory a collective defence against historical erasure. Social reproduction is the engine of posthuman endurance, demonstrating that real survival depends on the organization of existence on the basis of relational responsibility, flexible interspecies care, and shared vulnerability rather than corporate self-sufficiency or technological superiority.

In the "Posthuman Ethics of Care in Fashion", Anneke Smelik explicates that an 'ethics of care' upraises interdependence, relationality, and the acceptance of degenerative or non-normative states such as abjection, hybridity, interspecies connection considering as an essential component to posthuman survival in the face of corporate oppression. An 'ethics of care' take into consideration:

not only the human but also the non-human world. In the case of fashion, the non-human is made up of the clothes we wear on our bodies. The non-human components encompass not only the plants themselves, but also the water that is spilled to produce the cotton for a T-shirt drying up the Aral-lake; or the level of polluted water poured into the rivers after dyeing jeans into their distinctive indigo blue; or the degrees of pollution inflicted upon the oceans and sea-routes by fleets of container ships that run on oil for the sole purpose of bringing the goods to other parts of the world. (3)

In this sense, 'ethics of care' encompasses every aspect of existence. It recounts the biological, economical and political aspects of a timeframe. In *Salt Fish Girl*, the humanist framework of individual autonomy falters in posthuman fantasies of interdependence. The characters replace the corporation's competition with relational maintenance, acknowledging the mutual vulnerability between species and across the boundaries of human and clone. Survival comes eventually from an ethic of mutual preservation among marginalised subjects living at the periphery. 'Ethics of care' redefines posthuman survival as an ongoing, relational practice of vulnerability, hybridity and historicised accountability. Posthuman care lives in the mutual entanglement of human, non-human, cloned, and mythic lives. This is counter to the humanist ideal of the autonomous, self-sufficient subject, a construct that corporations such as "Saturna and Nextcorp among, laid off workers" (Lai 84) to maximise labour and conceal exploitation.

Posthuman survival, fundamentally, is a collective act of ethical endurance, a refusal to exile compromised or marginalised lives, and an insistence that real continuity depends on

accommodating the ghostly debts, trans-species kinships, and embodied memories that bind beings through time. An instance from Lai's narrative explains posthuman survival when:

a girl who smelled of cooking oil, who remembered all the wars ever fought. She could recall and recount every death, every rape, every wound, every moment of suffering that had ever been inflicted by a member of her ancestral lineage. The only place she could find relief from his barrage of collective memory was in water. (Lai 85)

Lai explicitly criticises the inability of the poor to care for one another. Posthuman ethics will have to get over this edginess and form a coalition across shared marginality. She ponders that how "easily we abandon those who have suffered the same persecutions as we have. How quickly we grow impatient with their inability to transcend the conditions of our lives" (172). To survive, the posthuman must reject corporate ideals of genetic and bodily purity. The messy, hybrid, non-sanitised reality of cyborgs, clones and shape-shifters making new kinships.

In Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, 'ethics of care' serves as a posthuman paradigm for survival that systematically deconstructs the corporate reliance on the myth of the autonomous, self-contained liberal subject. Focusing on relational responsibility, interspecies solidarity, and horizontal mutual aid, the novel reconfigures ethics from economic productivity to a profound, embodied commitment to shared vulnerability. Moreover, in the figure of the mythic snake-creatrix Nu Wa and the bio-engineered 'sonia' clones with carp DNA, care is extended beyond human boundaries to trans-species kinship, turning genetic 'contamination' into a position of deep cross-species allegiance. When the corporate state finally throws away compromised bodies, those on the margins forge fugitive networks of mutual aid, demonstrating that posthuman survival is not a matter of technological optimisation or purity, but a stubborn refusal to abandon the vulnerable, the hybrid, and the ghostly debts of collective memory. Here, Puig de la Bellacasa's 'ethics of care' proves essential. The definition of the term 'care' "remains unsatisfying, for its abstract unspecificity, and for the moral undertones" (2) transcending the human. However, 'care' "works well enough as the certain terrain for the delicate task of broadening consideration of the lives involved in caring agencies, still mostly thought as something that human people do" (2). Care is not fuzzy or tangible feeling, but a messy, physical commitment to sustain 'neglected things.' For a posthuman survival, 'care' can be understood as a:

human trouble, but this does not make of care a human-only matter. Affirming the absurdity of disentangling human and non-human relations of care and the ethicalities involved requires decentring human agencies, as well as remaining close to the predicaments and inheritances of situated human doings. (2)

In response to bio-capitalism's privatisation of reproduction and pathologising of ancestral memory, Lai builds queer diasporic kinship networks. The main example of posthuman survival in the novel is the intimacy that develops between Miranda (the reborn creation goddess Nu Wa/Salt Fish Girl) and Evie (the carp-DNA Sonia clone). Their bodies share

fluids, scales and smells when they have sex and become romantically intimate. This commerce is an act of mutual maintenance. This relationship is an act of defiance against both the state's reproductive imperatives and the humanist fantasy of romantic individualism. Instead, their relation is created through what Christina Sharpe calls 'wake work', defined as "a new analytic and method of working with archives of slavery and its afterlives" (Nguyen 85) used to accumulate erasures, projections and fabulations. It is a difficult and deliberate work of watching over vulnerable lives, caring for the wounded, and fostering relational capacity in the wake of historical violence.

Consequently, due to the imminent ecological collapse, corporate overreach and the literal or existential threat of human extinction, Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* demonstrates that posthuman survival cannot be achieved through technological upgrade, genetic purity or humanist fantasies of individual transcendence. Instead, when humanity is on the edge of disaster, endurance depends entirely on a collective ethic of social reproduction and ethical care. By reframing posthumanism not as the spectacular 'cyborg event' but as the quiet, repetitive labour of sustaining vulnerable bodies, whether managing somatic illness, tending multispecies intimacy, or bearing the weight of inherited historical grief, the novel insists that our ultimate resilience lies in our relational interdependence. True posthuman survival is not an escape from our fragile, racialised, and exploited material forms; it is a deliberate, everyday commitment to mourn, nourish, and protect one another on the margins of power when the systems built to sustain us inevitably fail.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be remarked that Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* provides a significant counter-narrative to celebratory accounts of posthumanism that position technological enhancement as a path to individual transcendence. This novel shows that technological development under bio-capitalism opens up new pathways for its exploitation and does not liberate the body, in the form of cloned labour, pathologised memory, and multispecies intimacy. Lai's intervention is important in that it moves posthuman theory away from an obsession with hybrid ontology (what a body is) and toward an ethic of material dependency (what a body needs). Ultimately, the novel posits that posthuman survival is not an individual escape from our fragile forms, but a collective practice grounded in social reproduction and care. Migration, illness, reproductive labour and colonial memory are not marginal social concerns but the very conditions through which posthuman life becomes possible. In Lai's world, posthumanism is not about invulnerability or frictionlessness but about knowing that our damaged, racialised, and historical bodies are bound together in mutual interdependence. Survival is not a matter of technological upgrade, but of the daily, relational work of sustaining vulnerable lives on the periphery of corporate power that is a radical commitment to 'caring otherwise' in a world designed to make us disposable.

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