

Genetically Modified Selves: Posthuman Embodiment and Diasporic Dehumanization in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of posthumanist theory and postcolonial diaspora studies through a close reading of Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), a speculative novel that braids a Chinese creation myth with a near-future narrative of genetic engineering, corporate biopower, and reincarnation. Mainstream posthumanist criticism has largely theorized the boundary between the human and the non-human through Euro-American reference points, treating "the human" as a stable category that new technologies destabilize from without. This paper argues instead that the category of the human has never been stable or universal: it has always been racially exclusive, and diasporic subjects have historically occupied the position of the non-human or the not-quite-human within colonial and racial capitalist orders. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter's critique of "Man" as an overrepresented genre of the human, Alexander Weheliye's concept of racializing assemblages, and Rosi Braidotti's theorization of posthuman subjectivity, this paper reads Lai's genetically modified, durian-scented, and serially reincarnated protagonists as figures who expose the racial logic underlying the human/non-human divide rather than simply illustrating a generic science-fictional anxiety about biotechnology. It further situates the novel's corporate dystopia within Achille Mbembe's necropolitics to show how biotechnological capital extends historical patterns of colonial dehumanization into a speculative future organized around cloned, disposable, feminized labor. The paper concludes that *Salt Fish Girl* does not merely borrow science-fictional tropes to describe diasporic experience; it uses the genetically modified, mythically doubled body to construct an alternative, non-hierarchical model of subjectivity that neither posthumanist nor postcolonial theory can fully articulate on its own, and that becomes visible only when the two frameworks are read together.

Keywords: *posthumanism; postcolonial theory; diaspora; Larissa Lai; Salt Fish Girl; Sylvia Wynter; Alexander Weheliye; racialization; biotechnology; necropolitics*

The starting point for this paper's theoretical framework is Sylvia Wynter's argument that "the human" is not a neutral biological category but a historically produced "genre" that has been overrepresented by a specific figure she calls Man. In her influential essay on unsettling the coloniality of being, Wynter traces how European humanism, in the process of displacing a purely theological definition of the human, produced a new secular definition, "Man1," organized around rationality and later, in its second iteration, "Man2," organized around

biological evolution and economic productivity (Wynter 260-266). Crucially, Wynter argues that this Man was never simply "the human" in a universal sense; it was a specific, Western, bourgeois, and racially white figure that was then projected outward as if it were humanity as such, with all other populations, especially the colonized and the enslaved, measured against it and found lacking, and therefore classified as its "human Other" (Wynter 266). This is the theoretical move that most posthumanist criticism, in its haste to move beyond "the human," tends to skip over: before we can meaningfully ask what comes after the human, we have to ask which human, and whose humanity was ever secure enough to be transcended.

Alexander Weheliye extends and sharpens Wynter's critique in his book *Habeas Viscus*, where he argues that mainstream biopolitical and posthumanist theory, even in its most sophisticated forms, such as the work of Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, has largely failed to reckon with race as a constitutive, rather than incidental, category of the human/non-human distinction. Weheliye proposes the concept of "racializing assemblages" to describe the ongoing sociopolitical process by which humanity is "hierarchically arranged" into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans, a process in which race functions not as one identity category among others but as the very apparatus that produces and polices the boundary of the human (Weheliye 4). For Weheliye, Black studies and other traditions of thought produced by those historically classified as non-human, from slave narratives to contemporary Afrodiasporic literature, have long theorized the fractures and violences of the human category from a position that mainstream posthumanism, with its comparatively comfortable relationship to "the human" it wishes to move beyond, rarely occupies. This paper extends Weheliye's insight, developed primarily in relation to Black diasporic and African American contexts, to the Asian diasporic context of Lai's novel, while remaining attentive to the different historical trajectories of anti-Black and anti-Asian racialization; the point is not to flatten these histories into a single undifferentiated non-humanity, but to show that Wynter's and Weheliye's general theoretical apparatus, which insists that humanity has always been racially stratified, illuminates something that a purely technology-focused posthumanism cannot.

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* supplies the third leg of this framework, though in a more qualified way. Braidotti's account of posthuman subjectivity as relational, embodied, and embedded in networks of non-human others is genuinely useful for describing the kind of hybrid, boundary-crossing subjectivity that Lai's characters embody. Braidotti's concept of "nomadic subjectivity," a subjectivity constituted through movement, multiplicity, and the refusal of fixed identity, resonates with the diasporic condition even though Braidotti does not develop this connection at length herself. Yet, as noted above, Braidotti's framework requires supplementation by Wynter and Weheliye, because on its own it risks describing the dissolution of the human subject as a shared, generalizable, and even celebratory condition of contemporary life without adequately distinguishing between those for whom that dissolution is a liberatory choice and those for whom non-humanity was a historically imposed condition of subjugation. Reading Braidotti's nomadic posthuman subject alongside Wynter's genealogy of Man and Weheliye's racializing assemblages therefore allows this paper to hold together two things that are often kept separate: the genuinely new ethical and ontological possibilities that posthumanist theory identifies, and the older, unfinished colonial history of racial dehumanization that those possibilities risk obscuring if read in isolation. Finally, Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, the exercise of sovereign power through the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die, or whose life is rendered systematically disposable, will be introduced in the

paper's third analytical section to account for the specifically economic and biotechnological form that dehumanization takes within Lai's corporate dystopia (Mbembe 11-14).

The most immediately striking feature of *Salt Fish Girl* is its insistence on smell, specifically the smell of durian, as a marker that clings to Miranda Ching's body from birth and cannot be washed away, deodorized, or disciplined out of her. Miranda's durian odor functions in the novel as a visible, or rather olfactory, sign of an impurity that the surrounding society reads as monstrous, embarrassing, and finally symptomatic of an underlying genetic or biological disorder. This detail, seemingly minor, is in fact doing a great deal of theoretical work. The durian, a fruit widely associated with Southeast Asian and Chinese diasporic foodways and notorious in the Western culinary imagination for its overpowering smell, becomes in Lai's hands a condensation point for a much older set of racialized tropes about Asian bodies as excessive, foreign, and biologically "other." Miranda's condition is treated, within the novel's world, not as a cultural association but as a medical pathology, a "Dreaming Disease" that doctors attempt to diagnose and correct. In this move, the novel literalizes a pattern that critical race scholars have long identified: the tendency of dominant culture to translate racial and cultural difference into the language of biological deviance, so that what is in fact a socially produced marker of otherness comes to be treated as an inherent, bodily defect requiring correction or containment. Wynter's argument that the West's secular, biocentric definition of Man² recast previously theological categories of Otherness in the vocabulary of biology and evolution is directly relevant here: Miranda's durian smell is a biologized recoding of what is, at root, a diasporic and racialized cultural difference (Wynter 264-266).

This pattern intensifies in the novel's treatment of the Sonias, the genetically engineered, cloned women who staff the Pallas Corporation's shoe factories. The Sonias are produced, not born, through a proprietary genetic process; they are physically identical to one another, subject to corporate ownership of their bodies and reproductive capacities, and assigned to the most menial and repetitive forms of factory labor. In this figure, Lai draws together two historically overlapping tropes: the science-fictional trope of the clone as a being whose personhood is perpetually in question, and the much older colonial and industrial trope of racialized and feminized labor as fungible, interchangeable, and endlessly reproducible. The Sonias are not read by the novel's corporate order as individuals with interior lives but as standardized units of productive capacity, an echo of the historical logic by which colonized and immigrant laborers, including generations of Chinese laborers recruited to North America under exploitative contract-labor and exclusionary immigration regimes, were valued primarily for their labor output and denied recognition as full legal or social persons. Weheliye's racializing assemblages framework clarifies what is happening here: the Sonias occupy the position of what Weheliye calls the "not-quite-human," a category that is neither fully outside the human community, since they are needed for its economic functioning, nor fully inside it, since they are denied the legal and social recognition that would grant them personhood (Weheliye 3-4). The genetic modification that produces the Sonias is thus best read not as a neutral technological premise but as a speculative intensification of an existing racial-capitalist logic, one in which biotechnology provides new, more efficient means for accomplishing what colonial labor regimes had long already accomplished by other means.

It is significant, too, that the novel routes its critique of dehumanization specifically through female and feminized bodies. The durian smell, the cloned Sonias, and the novel's broader interest in unconventional forms of reproduction, including Nu Wa's mythic shape-shifting and

Miranda's own eventual, ambiguous connection to Sonia and to reproductive technologies that bypass heterosexual conception, all suggest that Lai is interested in the way that gender and reproduction have historically served as key sites through which racial categories are policed and reproduced. This is consistent with a substantial body of feminist postcolonial scholarship on the regulation of colonized and diasporic women's reproductive capacity, and it means that any posthumanist reading of the novel that ignores gender will necessarily be incomplete.

If the novel's genetically modified bodies allegorize the racial logic of the human/non-human divide, its structural use of reincarnation offers a formal strategy for representing diasporic experience that resists the individualist, linear temporality typically assumed by the liberal humanist subject. The mythic strand of the novel, narrated by Nu Wa, presents a subject who does not simply live and die once but is reborn across multiple bodies and multiple historical moments, carrying fragments of memory, desire, and embodied knowledge across lifetimes that official history does not record or sanction. This reincarnation plot allows Lai to connect nineteenth-century China to twenty-first-century Pacific Northwest not through a conventional genealogical family tree, the kind of linear descent narrative that underwrites much immigrant fiction, but through a more fluid, non-linear structure in which the past persists inside the present body as something closer to sensation, dream, and smell than as documented fact.

This narrative choice resonates strongly with Braidotti's account of the posthuman subject as constituted relationally and non-linearly, assembled out of multiple, sometimes contradictory, temporal and material inheritances rather than unfolding as a single continuous biography (Braidotti 89-91). But it also does specifically diasporic work that Braidotti's framework, developed with little direct reference to migration or colonial history, does not fully anticipate. For diasporic communities whose histories have frequently been fragmented by displacement, exclusionary archives, and the loss or suppression of records, from the destruction of immigration documents to the systematic exclusion of Chinese migrants from official U.S. and Canadian historical narratives during the era of exclusionary immigration law, linear, evidence-based historiography is often precisely the mode least capable of recovering what was lost. Reincarnation, as a narrative device, offers Lai an alternative epistemology of the past, one in which the body itself, rather than the documentary archive, becomes the site where historical memory survives, however partially and however transformed. Read this way, the novel's blurring of the boundary between one life and the next is not simply a fantastical plot device but a formal argument about how diasporic subjects might access a history that colonial and national archives were never designed to preserve.

This also bears directly on the question of posthuman subjectivity. If the liberal humanist subject is defined, in part, by bounded individuality, a single continuous consciousness proceeding from birth to death, then Nu Wa's and Miranda's porous, transmigrating selfhood constitutes a direct formal challenge to that model. Yet, again following Weheliye's caution against reading such formal challenges purely as ontological experiments, this dissolution of bounded selfhood in *Salt Fish Girl* is never presented as a free or celebratory choice in the way that some posthumanist theory imagines hybridity and multiplicity as emancipatory in themselves. It is, instead, closely bound up with loss, involuntary displacement, and the historical violence that produced the diasporic condition to begin with. The novel is careful to hold both possibilities in tension: reincarnation, doubling, and bodily hybridity are sources of vulnerability and exploitation, most obviously in the mass-produced Sonias, and, at the same time, potential resources for a different

kind of kinship and solidarity that the novel's ending gestures toward, without fully resolving the tension between the two.

The Pallas Corporation, which controls the genetic technology behind the Sonias and dominates the novel's near-future Pacific Northwest economy, offers a case study in what Mbembe calls necropolitics: the exercise of sovereign power not primarily through the disciplining of life, in Foucault's classic account of biopower, but through the capacity to determine which populations are exposed to death, disposability, and what Mbembe terms the "death-world," a form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of living that confer upon them "the status of living dead" (Mbembe 40). The Sonias' factory labor, performed under conditions of engineered obsolescence and interchangeability, and the novel's broader depiction of a bifurcated society in which corporate elites live in gated, environmentally protected enclaves while workers and the poor are exposed to pollution, disease, and precarity, dramatizes precisely this necropolitical logic. Importantly, Mbembe's own analysis explicitly traces necropolitics to the plantation and the colony as its historical laboratories, meaning that Lai's speculative corporate future is not inventing a new form of power but extending forms of power that were first developed and tested on colonized and enslaved populations (Mbembe 21-23). The novel's biotechnological future, in other words, functions as what postcolonial science fiction scholars have described as an "extrapolation" of colonial history rather than a break from it: the same logics of disposability that organized plantation labor and colonial extraction are shown persisting, in intensified and automated form, into a genetically engineered future.

This necropolitical reading also helps explain why the novel resists offering a straightforwardly redemptive or liberal-humanist resolution, such as a legal recognition of the Sonias' personhood or their successful assimilation into full human status. Such a resolution would implicitly accept the very premise that Wynter and Weheliye ask us to interrogate, namely that "the human" is a stable, desirable category simply awaiting expansion to include more members. Instead, the novel's ending gestures toward something more disruptive: forms of solidarity, memory, and embodied connection between Miranda and Sonia that operate outside the corporation's legal and biological categories altogether, refusing rather than requesting admission into the existing human/non-human hierarchy.

What, then, does *Salt Fish Girl* ultimately propose in place of the human/non-human hierarchy it so thoroughly dismantles? The novel does not offer a fully worked-out political program, and this paper does not claim that it does. But it does gesture, particularly in the relationship between Miranda and Sonia and in the persistence of Nu Wa's mythic consciousness across bodies, toward an ethics of relationality that owes something to both of this paper's theoretical traditions without being reducible to either. From Braidotti's posthumanism, the novel takes the idea that identity is relational, embodied, and constituted through connection to non-human and more-than-human others, rather than through bounded individual autonomy. From Wynter and Weheliye's postcolonial critique, it takes the insistence that any such relational ethics must reckon honestly with the historical violence that produced certain bodies as non-human or not-quite-human in the first place, rather than aestheticizing hybridity as an innocent or purely liberatory condition. The result is a vision of kinship built not on the recovery of a lost, prelapsarian wholeness, and not on assimilation into existing categories of the human, but on a shared, embodied history of dispossession that becomes, however tentatively, a ground for solidarity across difference.

This is precisely the kind of insight that becomes visible only when posthumanist and postcolonial diaspora frameworks are read together. A purely posthumanist reading of the novel risks treating the Sonias' hybridity as simply another instance of the boundary-dissolving condition that Braidotti and others associate with contemporary technoscience, missing the specifically racial and colonial genealogy of their exploitation. A purely postcolonial reading, meanwhile, risks treating the novel's genetic engineering plot as mere allegorical costume for a story that could equally have been told in a realist register, missing what is distinctive about the novel's insistence on actual bodily hybridity, reincarnation, and cross-species kinship as its chosen vehicle for that story. Only by holding both frameworks together, as this paper has attempted to do, can we see that *Salt Fish Girl* uses the science-fictional apparatus of genetic engineering not merely to dramatize diasporic experience through metaphor, but to make a substantive theoretical claim: that the human was always a racially stratified category, that biotechnology's capacity to blur the human/non-human boundary does not inaugurate this stratification but rather makes its historical operation newly visible, and that whatever comes after the human will have to reckon with who was never fully inside it to begin with.

This paper has argued that Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* offers a distinctive contribution to posthumanist theory precisely because it approaches the human/non-human boundary from a postcolonial and diasporic position that mainstream posthumanist criticism has largely left unexamined. By reading the novel's durian-scented protagonist, its mass-produced clone laborers, and its structure of mythic reincarnation through Sylvia Wynter's genealogy of Man, Alexander Weheliye's concept of racializing assemblages, Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic posthuman subjectivity, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, this paper has shown that the novel's speculative biotechnological future does not depart from colonial and racial history but rather extends and automates it, while simultaneously imagining forms of embodied kinship that might exceed the categories that history has bequeathed. The broader implication for literary studies is that posthumanism and postcolonial diaspora studies, too often pursued as separate critical conversations, have a great deal to offer one another: postcolonial theory supplies posthumanism with the historical and racial genealogy it frequently lacks, while posthumanist theory supplies postcolonial and diaspora studies with a vocabulary for embodied, non-linear, and non-individualist forms of subjectivity that realist critical paradigms can struggle to accommodate. Future research might extend this framework to other diasporic speculative fiction, including the work of Nnedi Okorafor, N. K. Jemisin, and Ted Chiang, to test whether the pattern identified here in Lai's novel, the use of biotechnological non-humanity to expose the racial genealogy of the human, recurs across different diasporic traditions and, if so, what variations in that pattern might reveal about the distinct histories of racialization each tradition addresses.

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