Troubling Origins: Cyborg Politics in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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Abstract
This paper argues that *Salt Fish Girl* moves beyond questioning the concept of origins to suggesting that the concept itself - and the Enlightenment discourses that support racist, sexist, homophobic, and other marginalizing practices upon which the concept of origins is predicated - no longer makes sense, and that the novelist is arguing for locating connection through shared experiences.

Résumé
Cet article fait valoir que *Salt Fish Girl* va au-delà de questionner le concept des origines pour suggérer que le concept lui-même - et les discours de Lumière qui supportent le racisme, le sexisme, l'homophobie, et autres pratiques qui marginalisent, sur lesquelles le concept des origines est basé - n'a plus de sens, et que la romancière milite pour trouver des connexions par l'entremises d'expériences partagées.

> Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.
>
> Donna Haraway (2004)

Larissa Lai's 2002 novel, *Salt Fish Girl*, can be read in a number of contexts - as an Asian Canadian novel, a science fiction novel, a feminist novel, among others. As I - and I suspect other readers of this novel - have found, however, this book is difficult to pin down and read in a way that attends to the layered intersections of these kinds of texts. Indeed, in this paper I will read *Salt Fish Girl* as a text that troubles the notion of stable origins and defies easy categorization; it offers a political critique of the dominant Enlightenment discourses[1] that emphasize disembodied rationality, progress, and certainty to the detriment of alternative epistemologies. Written by a queer diasporic Canadian author of Chinese descent, *Salt Fish Girl* is a thrillingly unruly sci-fi dystopia about a Chinese creator/deity who lives multiple lives in vastly different times and spaces. It is concerned with labour issues, memory, and the nature of human-ness. It is also a love story about two women of colour who are repeatedly reborn and find each other, each time trying to stay together. Underlying all of the plot elements in this narrative, though, is a curious - and captivating - obsession with the question of origins. And while there are numerous ways to discuss origins in this book, my work will focus on origin stories, bodily integrity, and sordid genealogies.

Lai's interrogation of origins is a strategic move to address the issue of coalition politics, but in order to make that move, she needs to render the notion of origins - and, especially, the privilege that

accrues to authentic origins - incoherent. That is, if most political movements are built upon a sense of shared identity categories - many of which are linked to biologized categories (or shared origins) - then a disruption of the centrality of shared origins to political movements affords the possibility of considering shared experience as a basis for political action. As Lai has said, in *Salt Fish Girl* she is working through questions of origins (Lai 2004); as she phrases it, "[f]or the racialized subject of this moment there is no such thing as a pure language, pure culture or an ultimate point of origin" (Lai 2004). With this book, she says, "I was interested in undoing the patriarchal underpinnings of the founding myths of nation states" because of their historical and current systemic racisms and erasures of other narratives and goes further to say that "[i]t seemed to me that to write a founding myth about travel and dislocation could be a liberating thing because it denies racial purity and denies the primacy of the citizen tied to the land" (Lai 2004, 174, 173). Along similar lines, Dionne Brand, a diasporic Canadian author born in Trinidad, says in her 2001 book, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, "too much has been made of origins" (Brand 2001, 69).

Though *Salt Fish Girl* expresses a similar sentiment, its method of delivery differs substantially: rather than stating it as explicitly as Brand does, Lai creates a world in which the notion of authentic origins no longer makes sense. She problematizes the dominant conceptualization of origins by using characters who have multiple origins that are not hierarchically organized. That is, origins in *Salt Fish Girl* are indeterminate, multiple, turn in on themselves, or seem to regress infinitely - and they do so without explanation. The uncertainty that accompanies this lack of explanation is critical to the work of critiquing Enlightenment thought: if Enlightenment thought is built around prescribed boundaries and coherent and contained narratives, then Lai's open-endedness substantially disrupts these norms.

This concern with origins is not surprising if we consider *Salt Fish Girl* in the context of Asian Canadian literature. As Donald Goellnicht explains, when considering the development of Asian Canadian literature as a field of study in relation to other fields of minoritized literatures, Asian Canadian literature has no "'originary' event" that acted as a catalyst (or "'founding' moment") for the emergence of the field in the same way that many other racialized, nationalized, and ethnicized fields do, both in Canada and the US (Goellnicht 2000, 23). He goes on further to advocate a move towards coalition politics that is less concerned with specific nationalized and/or racialized boundaries. Instead, he looks at the possibilities for critique of power structures that affect people of colour, while remaining conscious and respectful of the differences between the experiences of groups of people, in addition to attending to the significance of the intersections of other identity categories that may make it difficult to "unite under a single sign such as 'Asian Canadian literature'" (2000, 19). Goellnicht's article does a lot of critical work for the establishment of this field, but it is this discussion of origins and coalitional possibilities that resonates in Lai's work.

Considering *Salt Fish Girl* in another context - that of dystopian feminist literature - helps to make sense of another layer of the narrative. Though other critics of this book suggest a more complicated understanding of the generic work it does (Birns 2008; Lai 2008; Lee 2004; Mansbridge 2004; Morris 2004), I find the description of M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas open enough to address many of the issues these scholars raise: in their 2009 book, *The Science Fiction Handbook*, they explain that "[i]f a utopia is an imaginary ideal society that dreams of a world in which the social, political, and economic problems of the real present have been solved...then a dystopia is an imagined world in which the dream has become a nightmare" (Booker and Thomas 2009, 65). And so while this genre speaks to the contemporary political climate, part of its legacy also relates explicitly to feminist politics, particularly as this genre can provide

an "imaginative space" in which to "examine alternatives to patriarchal structures" (2009, 87). Further to this discussion of gender, Booker and Thomas explain that feminist dystopias also take up questions of the nature of humanness, sexuality, and racialization. Indeed, in *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai imagines the outcome of late-capitalist neoliberal technocratic logic as it affects marginalized people as well as its impact on the control of both the environment and genetics and works to prevent it by demonstrating how the notion of origins upon which this logic relies is itself illogical.

As Paul Lai says in his reading of *Salt Fish Girl* as a critique of neoliberal structures, the origin stories that *Salt Fish Girl* takes up "offer a great deal of material for further discussion" (Lai 2008, 171). And numerous people take up Lai's engagement with origin stories in the contexts of globalization, racialization, monstrosity, embodiment, intertexuality, among other issues (Birns 2008; Harmer 2005; Lai 2008; Lee 2004; Mansbridge 2004; Morris 2004; Wong 2003/04). While there is some overlap among these articles, for my purposes the most important element that underpins all of these arguments is their readings of *Salt Fish Girl* as maintaining the importance of origins to some degree. That is, they read the novel as questioning fixed notions of origins, but seem to suggest that Lai is revising origins. Building on this previous scholarship, I suggest that in paying close attention to the origin stories, we can see that Lai's novel disrupts notions of origins upon which identity categories are contingent; a critical argument that *Salt Fish Girl* makes is that the notion of origins itself no longer makes sense, and if Enlightenment thinking is predicated upon a notion of knowable and discrete origins, then it no longer makes sense for people whose lives are negatively affected by these discourses to engage them. And so, while I recognize the importance of the work that Lai does with regard to specific identity categories, such as that of racialization, my argument focuses on the ways in which Enlightenment origin stories shape these identity categories - I aim to consider the work she is doing more broadly. In order to do that work, I focus on the origin stories that seem to resonate the most strongly in Enlightenment discourse: Judeo-Christian and classical mythology narratives.

I will position Lai's troubling of origins inside the discourse of posthumanist feminism because this theoretical framework raises questions about the nature of humanness in order to challenge the discourses of universal human values and linear histories of progress that pervade the Enlightenment-dominated western imaginary. I will then trace the complicated ways in which Lai troubles notions of pure origins through the characters of Nu Wa, Miranda, Evie, and Miranda and Evie's daughter, particularly as they arise in relation to the ubiquitous masculinist discourses of Christian and Greek mythologies. Although she overtly discusses the ways in which origins can be a site of political action in the text, Lai does not celebrate this approach; rather, she suggests that there is a danger in locating community exclusively in shared origins and goes on to destabilize the possibility of legitimate origins. Doing so allows her to advocate for the possibility of creating communities that address interlocking oppressions that resist the atomism that is privileged under dominant Enlightenment discourses, thereby maintaining the importance of storytelling in community building, but allowing for considerably more inclusivity.

Lai takes up the language that posthumanist feminists have used to deconstruct the Enlightenment discourses of universality and legitimacy in favour of the intersectional analysis. Two major posthumanist feminists, Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, discuss the ways in which the dominant notions of what constitutes humans are bound up in Enlightenment epistemologies that value unity, coherence, and disembodiment and that implicitly and explicitly privilege and naturalize white, middle class, heterosexual men - epistemologies that are rendered incoherent in Lai's novel. To think against this exclusive set of binarized self/other,

natural/unnatural parameters, Haraway in particular politicizes the figure of the cyborg, a being whose unity and "naturalness" is compromised: "Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism" (Haraway 2004, 34). Lai's novel engages cyborg politics in its rejection of what Haraway describes as a Western patriarchal logic that is predicated upon the domination of those constituted as others: women, people of colour, nature, workers, and animals (Haraway 2004, 35). I read Lai's novel as taking up a feminism advanced by Haraway that resists the "totalizing and imperialist" "dream of a common language" in order to embrace a "powerful infidel heteroglossia" that does not close meaning in the way that Enlightenment thinking attempts to, though, necessarily fails to accomplish (Haraway 2004, 31, 39). Indeed, with this rejection, Haraway's feminist project can leave the fraught understanding of the concept of "woman" behind - that is, the notion of shared biological origins - in order to embrace a politics based on affinity, which she defines as "related not by blood but by choice" (Haraway 2004, 14), or, in Lai's formulation, by shared experience, as opposed to shared origins. Haraway's advocacy of the troubled retelling of origin stories as a strategy to effect this change is significant for my reading of Lai's novel: in describing the function of "cyborg authors," Haraway claims that they "subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture" in order to resist the myths' colonizing tendencies (Haraway 2004, 33).

Like Haraway and Lai, N. Katherine Hayles is interested in the impact that technology has had on the ways in which we imagine humanness and embodiment. Hayles' particular interest is in the radical disembodiment Enlightenment epistemologies embrace - the notion that the body and mind are discrete entities (Hayles 1999). And so, when taken alongside Haraway's discussion of the dangers of Enlightenment phallogocentric logic, the key point is that they are both pointing out the deep flaws in drawing hard epistemological lines upon which Enlightenment epistemologies are predicated. Furthermore, it is important to note the ways in which Enlightenment humanist discourse dovetails with neoliberal discourse. Wendy Brown explains that neoliberalism involves "*extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*" (Brown 2003, para 6, emphasis original); under neoliberalism, that is, "all dimensions of human life [become] cast in terms of a market rationality" (Brown 2003, para 8). If we take this insight and compare it to the technocratic reduction of humanness to information that Hayles criticizes and the Enlightenment desire for fixed boundaries and singular codes that Haraway warns against, we can see the degree to which this market rationality encourages both individualism and the quantification of all elements of a life. And even if resisting these hard lines quantifiability also means that things become uncertain - that logic is no longer the social organizing principle - Haraway, Hayles, and Lai are willing to embrace this uncertainty if only because it necessitates constant reconsideration due to its instability. Lai embraces these epistemological uncertainties in her novel and points to the variable nature of building coalitions due to her characters' lack of shared origins and the precarious nature of building coalitions based on shared experiences that are not uniform - a project full of possibilities for building politicized relationships, though also a potentially dangerous one. And so these writers do not celebrate cyborg politics without caution; rather they embrace provisionally the possibilities that these epistemologies afford for coalition building.

Worthwhile to consider in relation to Lai's cyborg politics is Susan Stryker's elegant and powerful transfeminist observation that the impulse towards this radical disembodiment belies an anxiety about Enlightenment subjects' actual power. Though she is discussing transsexual embodiment, Stryker's critique of "authentic" origins and

humanity resonates strongly with the feminist politics of Lai, Haraway, and Hayles: likening the "monstrous" transsexual body to that of Frankenstein's monster, Stryker argues that "[t]he affront you humans take at being called a 'creature' results from the threat the term poses to your status as 'lords of creation,' beings elevated above mere material existence" (Stryker 1994, 240). Indeed, *Frankenstein* acts as a significant metaphor in discourses of embodiment, particularly in feminist criticism because it evokes the image of not-quite-humanness. This discourse has haunted both women and trans people, and continues to haunt the characters in Lai's novel, whose aberrant bodies have been imagined - and continue to be, though often in both implicit and explicit ways - explicitly as dangerous and/or monstrous. With this argument, Stryker exposes the anxieties that underlie the Enlightenment compulsion to locate bodies in relation to a concrete notion of an authentic origin that purports to confirm authentic humanness. Likewise, the unnatural, monstrous, racialized bodies in Lai's novel trouble the alleged authenticity and purity of human bodies as advanced by Enlightenment discourses.

Doing the work of a cyborg author, Lai troubles origin stories that support this sense of an authentic humanness. One strategy that she uses is to do a feminist re-telling of Christian and Chinese creation myths that she invokes and combines in unexpected and complex ways. The novel opens with the female Chinese god, Nu Wa, creating humans. Nu Wa, we are told, exists before the world, but we have no sense of where she comes from: aside from her unexplained presence, "[t]here was no order, nothing had a clear relationship to anything else" (Lai 2002, 1). Soon, in this undifferentiated place, water arrives, also without explanation, an event that begins the creation of the world. Although this process is not further narrativized, and that suggests the possibility of another agent of whom Nu Wa is not aware. Out of loneliness, Nu Wa creates humans in her own image - she has the torso of a woman and the tail of a snake - from mud on the river banks, giving them "stubby little tail[s]" so that they "wouldn't get too arrogant and think [themselves] better than [her]" (2002, 2). But when they fail to pay her the respect she thinks she deserves, she decides to split their tails. And when they take pleasure in the splitting and laugh at her tail, she throws them to the ground and into the water, intending to kill her "monstrous creations" (2002, 2-3). When Nu Wa finds that they have survived, though, she teaches them how to build shelters and, after they begin to age and fall ill, she gives their "instinctive activity" of "stroking each other between the legs" a "secondary function": she makes the "strong ones into women and the weak ones into men" so that they can procreate, which restores their health (2002, 4-5). And notably, she frames the procreative ability that she has given her creations in technological terms - not as natural, but as her "latest invention" (2002, 5). This section of the narrative is striking both because it disrupts the sense that creation is natural, along the lines that Stryker discusses, and because it compromises the sanctity of - or denaturalizes - the Christian creation myth.

Similarly, Nu Wa's body - that is, the divine body, which is generally thought to be inviolable - is denaturalized, and her status as originary being is questioned with the bifurcation of her tail and with her birth. Once the people begin to procreate, they get wrapped up in their lives and forget about Nu Wa, resulting in the return of her loneliness. She decides that she wants to become human, a desire that is exacerbated by her glimpse of a young man in a boat, apparently not one of the people she created (2002, 6-7). Indeed, although she describes herself as being alone before the world came together, Nu Wa visits a fish who has "eyes older than the world," indicating that the fish may predate the world that Nu Wa knows (2002, 8), and who lives in a lake that is "so deep it might have been bottomless" (2002, 7). This bottomless lake suggests that there may be an infinite number of originary beings, each predating the last and who may co-exist without realizing that they are not alone.

Furthermore, when Nu Wa's bifurcation is in progress, she desperately swims to the surface of the lake and sits on a rock, watching her legs form, and as she does so, she looks over and sees "another woman, also stroking her legs and marvelling at their newness" (2002, 9). Indeed, Nu Wa's status as sole creator is troubled on a number of levels, and, furthermore, is disrupted insofar as in this narrative the dominant discourse of the created worshipping the (male) creator is reversed: it is the creator who is envious of the created. This exalted creator status is further troubled with Nu Wa's subsequent rebirths. After leaving the lake, she crawls into a cistern of water in a village, at which point she resumes her previous shape and shrinks so much that a woman fails to see or feel Nu Wa as she swallows her. Nu Wa lodges herself in the woman's uterus and is born nine months later into the life in nineteenth-century China in which she falls in love with Salt Fish Girl, the daughter of her village's fish vendor. Lai does a feminist rewriting of the Christian and Chinese creators as an originary being whose desire to become human muddies the linear, progressive heterosexual-patriarchal nature of genealogies that drive dominant western origin myths.

To trouble Nu Wa's relationship to origins further, she is reborn again into the life of Miranda. When Nu Wa is reborn as Miranda in 2044 in the walled city of Serendipity, she is lodged this time in water next to a durian tree. And in this rebirth, a radical revisioning of the biblical Adam and Eve story, her conception story involves trans-speciation and is excessively pungent and sensual. Here Nu Wa makes herself into a worm and crawls into a durian bud, wrapping herself around the core of the bud, and eventually she "became the seed and the seed became [her]" (2002, 208 & 209). Miranda is conceived when her mother eats the durian, an illegal fruit from the Unregulated Zone, outside of Serendipity. To reframe the imagery that Lai invokes, Miranda is born from forbidden fruit. Miranda's relationship to forbidden fruit is markedly different than that of the biblical Eve's, though: Eve's experience - which is said to have incited women's reputation for leading men to their destruction, thereby justifying women's subjugation - involves Eve being tempted by the serpent to eat from the tree of knowledge. Subsequently, Eve tempts Adam to eat, which leads to their fall from Eden. In the novel, though, it is Miranda's mother's desire for the fruit that leads her husband to get it for her, as he points out (2002, 41), and Nu Wa is the serpent that is wrapped around a seed that implants itself in Miranda's mother's womb. Indeed, Miranda wonders to herself whether or not her conception can be read as immaculate because her mother was "a good eight years past menopause" (2002, 15), potentially making Miranda both the serpent and a Jesus figure. Lai exploits the double signification of the word "immaculate" to emphasize the juxtaposition of the biblical phrase with notions of cleanliness and to highlight the corporeality and sensuousness of Miranda's conception. Indeed, Miranda's parents conceive her with a passion that they hadn't felt since the illegitimate conception of their son decades before Miranda's conception while the smells of the durian's "pepper-pissy juices mixing with their somewhat more subtly scented [bodily] ones and the blood of the injuries [the durian] inflicted with its [spiky skin's] green teeth" waft around them (2002, 15). Instead of an immaculately conceived Jesus figure, this messy sex results in a baby whose "unpleasant cat pee odour oozed from [her] pores" (2002, 15). In this section of the narrative, Lai explicitly invokes and bends this Christian origin story while also juxtaposing it with, to revisit the language of posthumanism, hyper-embodiment and the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human.

In the novel, Lai troubles not only Miranda's conception story but also her status as human. Indeed, the reader finds out that Miranda is a reincarnation of Nu Wa when Miranda recognizes Evie's smell (2002, 150). Furthermore, throughout Miranda's childhood there are indications that she may not be fully human: most obvious is her strong smell,

which is associated with the Dreaming Disease, which is characterized by its sufferers' strong odours, memories of traumatic events, and impulse to drown themselves, though it is never fully explained, in addition to the two fistulas that she has beside her ears (2002, 163) and the scales that she sheds when she gets out of the bath (2002, 44-45). Miranda's relationship to motherhood is also complicated: Miranda/Nu Wa is both child and creator of her mother, but also identifies as a "motherless child" (2002, 207 & 227). As Evie drives them out of the city, for example, Miranda thinks to herself, "I am your grandmother, I wanted to tell her. I am the maker of your maker. Both of us, such putrid origins, climbing out of the mud and muck into darkness. But I did not want to unmake what I had made, imperfect and wicked as it was" (2002, 253). And finally, we hear that Miranda/Nu Wa has multiple selves. Ultimately, though, Miranda's origins remain uncertain. We do, however, know a few things: that she is a creator, Nu Wa; that despite being a deity, she is reborn twice in the novel without being aware of the rebirth until well into the next life; and that her body does not adhere to normative conventions of humanness. Furthermore, by giving both Miranda and her mother unexplained fistulas that the clones also have, Lai raises the possibility that authentic humanness may no longer exist, if it ever did, as Stryker suggests.

Evie's "sordid" origins, as Miranda phrases it (2002, 158), are clearer than Miranda's, though they remain similarly fractured and uncertain. As with Miranda, Evie's representation is mired in biblical imagery both because of her name and because of her "angel wing" scars (2002, 156 & 159). Simultaneously, though, this notion of "unnatural" origins is echoed in Evie's telling identification with Frankenstein that recalls Stryker's statements about the relationship of creature-hood and human-ness. This allusion is particularly striking since Evie is a clone who lacks a conventional origin story and because she confuses the creator with the created, as dominant culture tends to do, explaining that she, like Frankenstein, "crossed a glacier to throw [her pursuant] off the scent" (2002, 159), an act performed by the *creature*, not Frankenstein himself. Indeed, rather than trying to claim authentic humanness, Evie embraces monstrosity and demonstrates the slippage between the two orders of being against which the posthumanist writers have been arguing, and, furthermore, Evie is not only not pathologized, but is heroic.

This slippage is further evident in Evie's biological make up. Evie, who we find is the reincarnation of Salt Fish Girl when Miranda recognizes her smell (2002, 150), has been reincarnated as a clone: born Sonia 113, Evie is a non-human, 0.03% carp clone (2002, 158). As she phrases it, "'I'm not human....I'm a patented new fucking life form" who was created to enter the neo-slave trade of Pallas shoes[2] in order to keep their labour costs down (2002, 158). The nature of clones - or, in Haraway's language, cyborgs - is curious and unclear in the text: Miranda wonders about Evie's relationship with her older "sister": "To have access to oneself as an old woman. Was it like that for them? Did Sonia 14, having lived them, share Evie's foibles? Had she come to an understanding of them? Did she see Evie's life as an extension of her own, as a second shot at those things that had failed her the first time?" (2002, 228). And when describing her source material, Evie shares the story of the Chinese woman and the Japanese man who were interned during WWII and whose bodies were donated to science, but Evie says that "[f]or all I know one of my co-workers made it up" (2002, 160). It is clear, however, that Evie recognizes the political power of this origin story because, as she says, "Pallas tries to keep it quiet. A nice myth of origins after all would be a perfect focus for revolt" (2002, 160). In addition to having source material, we also hear that her mother is a carp (2002, 261) and that her father is Dr. Flowers (2002, 252) - indeed, Evie is born of multiple sources, not all of which are human. That is, Evie's origins consist of fish, humans, the history of the racist treatment of Asian Canadians, and the neoliberal attempts at mastery of the

environment, genetics, and bodies. But, importantly, Evie's messy origins mean that she can never fit comfortably into discrete categories, and it is Evie who renames herself, thereby rejecting the discourse that has been imposed upon her - literally, the name her father has given her - and rewrites her place in it. And by juxtaposing Miranda's authentic humanness with Evie's monstrosity, Lai demonstrates that the lines are not as firm as Enlightenment logic insists.

That said, we can also read Evie in the context of immaculate conception - born of her father, Dr. Flowers - which locates her in the masculinist discourse of the Greek myth of Pallas Athena's birth[3] out of Zeus's head. As Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon observe, this masculine, immaculate conception "allegorizes the three basic characteristics of the goddess Athena: her prowess, her wisdom, and the masculinity of her virgin nature sprung ultimately not from the female, but from the male" (Morford and Lenardon 2003, 157-58). Indeed, this birth and its progeny - out of "sterile paternal origins," as Joanna Mansbridge puts it (Mansbridge 2004, 125) - are bound up in the Enlightenment thinking that Haraway, Hayles, and Stryker critique; the progeny of this immaculate birth is destined for a stable life with one code, but unlike Athena, Evie is illegitimate because of her non-human status, and as Haraway predicts, "illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (Haraway 2004, 10). Indeed, with Dr. Flowers' role as the embodiment Enlightenment logic, Evie despises hers.

The last denaturalized origin I will address is the birth of Miranda and Evie's daughter. Like Evie's and Miranda's multi-sourced conceptions, the origins of Miranda's pregnancy seems to be unclear - after the first time they have sex, a scene in which both Miranda and Evie are described in terms of fish (Lai 2002, 161), Miranda wonders to herself whether or not that was the point at which the baby took root, thereby raising the possibility - one that is common in feminist dystopian literature (Booker and Thomas 2009, 88) - of her and Evie having a biological baby. We get a description too, though, of Miranda eating durian and of Nu Wa implanting another one of her selves in Miranda (Lai 2002, 225 & 227). That is, baby's conception seems to be related both to queer sex and Miranda's consumption of the fruit. Furthermore, it is speculated later that the fertility associated with the trees results from the government having "implant[ed] human genes into fruit as fertility therapy for women who could not conceive. And of course the pollen blew every which way and could not be contained" (2002, 258). Again, in this instance, the boundary between human and non-human is breached and cannot be controlled through institutional mechanisms. Furthermore, that Miranda and Evie's tails coil together when they get into the hot springs after escaping Flowers, at which point Miranda gives birth to their daughter with Evie's help, fits nicely into a utopia model (2002, 269) - one in which the strictures of Enlightenment epistemologies and values would not dominate; that is, as Mansbridge notes, a birth "that is not defined by a racist, heterosexist, paternal order" (Mansbridge 2004, 131).

This is the posthumanist feminist project that Lai has set herself - imagining the problems that Enlightenment thinking poses for queer, gendered, racialized, and other marginalized groups and trying to imagine alternative possibilities, connections, and epistemologies. The narrative she constructs is not an easy one to read - for as much as *Salt Fish Girl* is a novel, it rejects many novelistic conventions that are mired in the same Enlightenment structures of which she is critical, such as having a self-contained and coherent narrative, having a climactic story arc, and having characters whose behaviour is both consistent and logical - at least from their own perspective. None of these luxuries are afforded the reader of *Salt Fish Girl*, but therein lays the pleasure and brilliance of the text: by rejecting these conventions, Lai draws the reader's attention to their expectations of the medium, and thereby implicates the reader in the structures that she critiques.

Writing a critical essay on a text that

resists Enlightenment epistemologies, I realize, seems counter-intuitive and has proven challenging. In order to foreground some of the complexities of *Salt Fish Girl* with regard to feminist posthumanist theory, I have had to bracket several key elements that merit attention; as other critics who have written on this book have mentioned, it is fertile ground for further study. The issues that I have addressed, however, merit more attention too: theorists who work on posthumanism do so in order to rethink the boundary between humanness and non-humanness - they interrogate what it means to be human. Lai weighs in on this debate with *Salt Fish Girl*: this narrative acts as a metatextual interrogation of origin stories, questioning their power and the authenticity that stable origin stories are assumed to provide. Furthermore, Lai troubles the notion of natural origins by suggesting both that no one can be read as "naturally human" and that there is a danger in embracing this exclusive authenticity, arguing instead for an intersectional politics that is not based on (allegedly) discrete categories. Although, according to Miranda, "[t]his is a story about stink" (2002, 268), the book is really about community-building: while listening to Evie's story about her escape, Miranda describes Evie's situation in terms of freedom, but Evie counters by framing it in terms of community: she was now "[a]lone. It wasn't easy to leave, you know, when you are used to being surrounded all the time by your sisters" (2002, 159-60). Lai further raises Haraway's politics of affinity when she has Nu Wa think to herself upon her return to Salt Fish Girl, "[h]ow 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" (2002, 172). Indeed, Lai is advocating for a recognition of oppression through common experience, as opposed to through such allegedly coherent categories and shared origins as racialized or nationalized identities.

And so, even though she sees the power of origin stories, Lai rejects them as an exclusive basis for community-building. Lai illustrates the many ways in which the concepts that inform and enforce Enlightenment thinking can and must be troubled. Indeed, Lai exploits colonialist and patriarchal creation stories in order to "seiz[e] the tools to mark the world that marked [her and others] as other," as Haraway encourages (Haraway 2004, 33). As Lai says, "[w]hat is hopeful about Evie, and her sisters...is that they are fully products of the new global world order," but the crucial point, she continues, is that "Evie is no figure of purity. She is a murderer and a traitor. She is vindictive, brimming over with anger. But she survives. Evie's beauty lies in her ability to survive, adapt and reproduce in forms that mutate the present. She both doubles the past and diverges from it, in order to open to an embodied knowing hopeful future" (Lai 2004, 175). The crux of Lai's argument echoes Audre Lorde's assertion that "the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984). In order to challenge Enlightenment epistemologies, Lai suggests, one cannot use Enlightenment logic. Lai goes even further, though - not only does her text leap between time and space, leaving numerous questions unanswered, but she also ends the book by having Miranda think to herself, "[e]verything will be all right...until next time" (2002, 269). By 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.

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Endnotes

1. I say "dominant Enlightenment discourses" because, although Enlightenment discourses are surely as complicated as any other discourse, this paper refers to the hegemonic norms.
2. For a reading of this book in terms of its labour practices and globalization as they relate to national border crossing and the figure of the (im)migrant, see Wong.
3. The company's name, Pallas, also suggests the importance of Greek mythology, in that Athena's full name is Pallas Athena (Morford and Lenardon 2003, 163-64). Notable too is that Athena was associated with snakes and may have also been a fertility goddess (2003, 167). Finally, the reference of *Frankenstein*'s subtitle to Prometheus invites an extended reading of *Salt Fish Girl* in this context. Due to space limitations, I will not pursue that reading here, but see Lai's "Corrupted" for a discussion of mythology.

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