Descent of the Human: Racialized Animality, Queer Intimacy, and Evolutionary Theory in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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Posthumanist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti have critiqued the way that "the human" has been philosophically employed to delimit the domain of intelligible existence. Braidotti explains that "the classical ideal of 'Man'" has traditionally taken the form of an Enlightenment figure both male and white (13). She further posits that "The human is a normative convention" that has proven to be "highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination" (26). Indeed, as Sharlee Reimer notes in her essay on Larissa Lai's 2002 novel *Salt Fish Girl*, "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" (6). Robyn Morris's reading of the novel similarly observes that *humanness* "is an arbitrary definition heavily laden with historically racist and gendered baggage" (93). Morris's essay thus re-poses the question asked by Lai in *Salt Fish Girl*: "*What does it mean to be human?*" (237). Morris does not so much answer this question as suggest its strategic complexity: "Lai's complication of the term 'human,' through the introduction of female clones labelled 'the Sonia series' . . . , is a strategic intervention in contemporary identity politics" (82). As she further suggests, the Sonia clones, human-fish-cyborg hybrids, "complicat[e] conceptions of humanness as whole, centered, [and] complete" by calling into question "both the constructedness and historical fixity of historically entrenched and culturally scripted differences between human and non-human, white and coloured, angel and monster, animate and inanimate, same and other" (92-93). Both Reimer's and Morris's readings of *Salt Fish Girl* interrogate "the human" as conceptualized by Enlightenment discourses and offer broader conceptualizations of what it means to be human in

its stead. In this essay, I extend their analyses by asking, what does it mean to be a human-animal?

The racialized body has not simply been excluded from categories of humanness. It has also been historically figured through an explicit animalization in literary and popular representations, for example in nineteenth-century American advertisements that depicted black bodies as simian and Asian bodies as rat-like (Chen). In response, *Salt Fish Girl* takes up the figure of the racialized, animalized body both to enter into the history of this representational violence and to reclaim Asian diasporic subjectivity. The novel's disorienting plot wavers between two time periods — the nineteenth century and a dystopian capitalistic future (2044-62 CE) — interweaving the story of the Chinese goddess Nu Wa in the first timeline with that of Miranda Ching, a girl of Asian descent who lives in the Pacific Northwest, in the second. Nu Wa's body dynamically morphs, taking on snake, fish, and human hybrid forms. Miranda, we are informed, has a condition known as the "memory disease," which marks her body with vestigial fish-like characteristics, an animalized symptomology reminiscent of Nu Wa such that the narrative implies that Miranda is likely her descendent or reincarnation. Nu Wa's and Miranda's lovers in each timeline (the titular "Salt Fish Girl" and a Sonia clone named Evie Xin, respectively) are likewise linked together across time by their shared fishy embodiments.

Although Reimer usefully observes that "theorists who work on posthumanism do so in order to rethink the boundary between humanness and non-humanness" (12), in this essay I investigate whether we might also recuperate the animalized racial body, as it appears in *Salt Fish Girl*, to formulate new ways of thinking about racial identity. In other words, I invite us to contemplate different ways of viewing bodily difference by attending to the novel's representation of the human animal as a human-animal — the human as continuously immersed in a never complete animal evolution.

My analysis of Lai's novel invokes evolutionary theory to discuss race in terms of what Mel Y. Chen calls "queer animality." Chen defines "animality" as "the 'stuff' of animal nature that sometimes sticks to animals" and considers how animality "sometimes bleeds back onto textures of humanness" in queer and racialized forms (89). The term "queer," of course, has complicated origins, having been used adjectivally and nominally in the past as a slur to identify members of the LGBTQ+ community. Following the scholarship of Judith Butler, Lisa

Duggan, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others, Chen animates the term "queer" "less as a name that designates an identity or group than as an analytic and method" (57). As analytic and method, "queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative," what Chen describes as sites of "improper affiliation" (104). We could say that *Salt Fish Girl* is queer in the identitarian sense because it portrays lesbian sexuality. But, following Chen, just as importantly it enacts a queer set of relations. Indeed, Lai's novel queerly reassembles racialized communities, histories, and bodies through its representations of "improper affiliations," both within human-animal bodies and across human-animal intimacies. As Donald Goellnicht posits, Asian American literature demonstrates "the necessity of recuperating the past for survival in the present and growth in the future," performing "the act of re-membering, of putting fragments back together, of reclaiming the body (of flesh, history, and memory) . . . as essential for survival" (352). *Salt Fish Girl*, I argue, performs this act of recuperation via the tactic of an embodied queer "re-membering."

In what follows, I read the vestigial animal traits in *Salt Fish Girl* as an analogy of the "stuff" of race that seemingly sticks to human bodies. I begin by considering the entanglement between race and animality as it emerges through Miranda's memory disease and Nu Wa's hybrid body. I then explore "queer animality" in relation to queer reproduction and intimacy. Finally, I turn to evolutionary theory as it pertains to and interrupts humanist discourses of progress. Like the term "queer," evolutionary theory has problematic origins tied to colonialist and imperialist strategies of subjugation.[1] Recognizing evolution's historical implication in eugenics, my reading reclaims this fraught discourse by considering how the repetition of vestigial animal characteristics that appear on bodies of characters in the novel melancholically points backward yet simultaneously opens up new ways of thinking about race through evolutionary possibility. Ultimately, I argue that the interrelation between human and animal in *Salt Fish Girl* offers a queer theory of identity and relationality that is both transformative and attentive to histories of racialization.

"Fishiness"

Much of the existing critical literature on *Salt Fish Girl*, including that by Paul Lai, Stephanie Oliver, and Malissa Phung, decentres visual

markers of race, focusing instead on the novel's deployment of other senses, namely taste and smell. In doing so, their respective writings work against "the politics of representation, regimes of racialization, the power of the gaze, and the dynamics of visibility and invisibility that are key to processes of social marginalization" (Oliver 85). Phung, for example, argues that Miranda and Artemis Wong (the protagonist of Larissa Lai's 1995 novel *When Fox Is a Thousand*) "represent compelling figures for theorising diaspora in the way that they upend biological assumptions of racial and cultural authenticity" (1). The turn to the novel's emphasis on the non-visual provides an invaluable critique of the "defining eye of whiteness" and the "white gaze" that produce the ostensible legibility of racial otherness (Morris 92). However, I contend that, along with other senses, we must also make sense of the novel's engagement with the visuality of race because, despite contemporary critical work that demonstrates race as a social and political construction, we continue nevertheless to navigate visual economies of racialization in which individuals are profiled and othered based on phenotypical traits such as skin colour, hair texture, facial bone structure, and so on.[2] I thus attend to the visualization of race in *Salt Fish Girl*, through the evolutionary figure of the animal, not to represent race as some kind of biological reality but to draw attention to the everyday realities of race and racism as visually marked, embodied experiences. As Paul Lai also posits, "The figure of the fish . . . illuminat[es] the transformations central to the novel's mythological future and suggest[s] a fishiness, or questionableness, to any self-evident narratives of progress" (169). Focusing on the "fishiness" of the Asian body, we can see how the novel uses human-animal hybridity and human-animal sexuality both to animate Asianness and queerly to reconstruct racialized Asian bodies.

Before attending to the fishiness of Miranda's body in *Salt Fish Girl*, let us examine the memory disease, which permeates her dystopian world and breeds anxiety about nature. The so-called disease, defined as "a bug that gives [people] the memory structures of other animals" (103), produces symptoms that include "foul odours of various sorts that follow the person without actually emanating from the body, psoriasis, sleep apnea, terrible dreams usually with historical content, and a compulsive drive to commit suicide by drowning" (100). The incurable disease is supposedly transmitted by direct contact with the ground "through the soles of the feet" (243-44). Miranda narrates that

> [my thoughts] drifted to the kids with plastic bags inside their shoes, and the eyes of those who wandered barefoot, their eyes swimming with grief and history. I thought about the footprints on the sidewalk and the graffiti on the side of the concrete building that demonstrated how to seal one's feet inside plastic bags without the danger of infiltration from the ground, the danger of attack from the land itself, fighting back. (244)

The disease seemingly infiltrates the physical landscape of Miranda's home in the Unregulated Zone on the outskirts of the fictitious city of Serendipity, a space that corresponds to present-day Vancouver, as Rita Wong suggests. The disease demonstrates the body's permeability to external elements. Stacy Alaimo uses the term "trans-corporeality" to describe this physical entanglement between a body and the environment that a body inhabits. As Alaimo argues, "trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, . . . makes it difficult to pose nature as mere background . . . for the exploits of the human since 'nature' is always as close as one's own skin — perhaps even closer" (2). In Lai's novel, trans-corporeality allows the disease to migrate from the environment into the body, thus causing physiological transformations of the brain and skin of those afflicted. The Unregulated Zone's disenfranchised subjects attempt to protect themselves from "the danger of infiltration" by shielding their feet with plastic bags. The economically privileged opt to buy expensive shoes, produced and advertised by the fictional shoe company Pallas, at Miranda's suggestion, "as protection against the dreaming disease. Memory-proof soles" (244). Pallas mobilizes people's fears about the supposed "danger" of the ground for capitalistic gain. In this way, human technological advancement is set in opposition to the primitiveness of nature. The company's marketing strategy thus invokes the language of protection in order to instantiate modernity as the best defence against the threat of the natural world.

Through its animalized symptomology, the memory disease links Miranda to the primitiveness of nature. Her psoriasis-like symptoms manifest on her skin as fish scales that she attempts to scrub away, and her body smells like durian, a pungent fruit grown in Southeast Asia. In the novel, durian is said to smell "like the reek of cat pee tinged with the smell of hot peppers" and is repeatedly characterized as "reptilian" (13). Paul Lai observes that the novel's descriptions of durian as "smooth, bloodless organs that lay inside their leather-hard

shells" and "'greenish-gold bodies covered in spikes, distinctly lizard-like' . . . suggest a cold-blooded quality, a startling animal characteristic that disrupts animal-plant boundaries and connotes reptilian alienness, evolutionary primitiveness, and deception" (178-79). In *Salt Fish Girl*, the pathology not only causes Miranda to smell and look fishy but also induces flashbacks, presumably triggered by those physiological changes that leave the diseased with the "memory structures of other animals — fish maybe, or elephants" (103). These "memory structures," characterized as forms of genetic memory, and the disease's animalization of the body together suggest a symbolic return to an evolutionary past. This return to an animal past further coincides with a return to, or an atavistic reincarnation of, a racialized diasporic past.

Both the disease and Miranda's status as "the only Asian child in her class" already physically mark Miranda as other within her community (23). Her disease-induced memory fragments accentuate this otherness by recalling her from her present life in the Pacific Northwest back to her Asian origins, to her previous life as the Chinese goddess Nu Wu, whose shapeshifting body sometimes possesses a fish-like tail. The infected land becomes the material agent that connects Miranda to both her animal past and her diasporic roots. "Land" thus holds a double meaning, referring both to the literal land on which she walks and to the abstracted homeland to which she belongs. Put another way, through the memories that the disease produces, the land orients Miranda to the land of her ancestors. In this way, the disease seems to infect and mark her with a hybrid national identity as much as with a hybrid human-animal body. The characterization of Pallas shoes as having "memory-proof soles" (244) not only opposes technology to nature but also sets Western modernity in opposition to Miranda's Asian otherness. Through its simultaneously racializing and animalizing effects, the memory disease animates two different origin stories: the familial genealogy of race and the evolutionary genealogy of the animal.

Hybrid Creations

As much of the critical work on *Salt Fish Girl* indicates, the novel generically troubles origin stories and linear genealogies. Joanna Mansbridge, for example, explains that the generic hybridity of Lai's "writing reworks the predominant origin myth of the West in order to resist the dominant ideals of personal and national identity formation that rely on a para-

digm of exclusion and abjection to maintain the borders of both self and nation" (121). The legend of the goddess Nu Wa that opens the novel blends Chinese, Judeo-Christian, and Ancient Greek creation accounts. Like the myth that she narrates, the body of the lonely goddess is similarly hybrid, described as simultaneously human and fish-like:

> Of course I have lips, a woman's lips, a woman's mouth already muttering secrets under my breath. Look, I have a woman's eyes, woman's rope of smooth black hair extending past my waist. A woman's torso. Your gaze slides over breasts and belly. The softest skin, warm and quivering. And below? Forget modesty. Here comes the tail, a thick cord of muscle undulating, silver slippery in the early morning light. Lean closer and you see the scales, translucent, glinting pinks and greens and oily cobalt blues. (1-2)

Through the interpellation of "your gaze," Nu Wa invites the reader to participate in the unabashed wonder of her body. Directing the gazing eye to "forget modesty," she entices the reader into bestial sexual desire by emphasizing the "undulating" sensuality of her lower animal half. Her language exposes the narcissistic ease with which she relishes her own body, a comfort troubled by the implementation of a constraining social world. When she creates the first people, she narrates, "I stroked and smoothed [the mud] . . . until it began to look a little like me. I gave it a thick, smiling mouth. I gave it a stubby little tail so it wouldn't get too arrogant and think itself better than me." Although Nu Wa attempts to curtail hubris by making the mud being's tail less magnificent than her own, when it comes to life, it "smirk[s]" and mocks her tail nonetheless (3). The angered goddess splits the creation's tail in two, inadvertently creating legs. She reattempts to make a being like her, only to reproduce more human forms. The creations' subsequent feelings of superiority produce an affective schism between the animal origin and the human descendant.

Consequently, Nu Wa compares her own animalistic body with the human creation, and she begins feeling discomfort with her difference: "The first emotion I recognized in myself was envy. I longed to walk amongst them, experience the passion I had invented without having ever felt it" (6). In a scene that Paul Lai calls a "re-visioning of both the myth of Narcissus and the Little Mermaid fairy tale" (170), Nu Wa falls prey in *Salt Fish Girl* to a fairy-tale desire to lose her tail, "to go up into the world as a human being" (8). From her underwater position,

she sees a human figure in a boat, producing the sense of a spatial hierarchy with the human above and the animal below. Nu Wa finds "an enormous green fish with scales as big as [her] hands and eyes older than the world" who helps her to become human by bifurcating her tail into legs, replicating her own creation attempts. As Nu Wa transforms, her "bright scales flaked off one by one to reveal vulnerable flesh beneath" (9). Her creation account and transformation story demonstrate the continuity of the human with the animal, emphasizing how the wholeness of the human body is literally composed of the deconstructed animal. The novel then complicates her desire for humanness through the consequences of that desire. The ancient mystic fish warns Nu Wa that the process of becoming human will be agonizing and that she "will never again be without pain" (8). The pain that persists in her legs after the bifurcation indeed becomes a material remainder and reminder of the fish tail that she no longer has. This embodied melancholic response to the transformation figures the body as capable of expressing the psyche's historical trauma, a phenomenon referred to in psychology as somatization, the "experience and communication of psychological distress in the form of physical symptoms" (Lipowski 1359). In this way, the novel resists positively portraying evolution into humanness as progress; rather, Nu Wa's pain signifies the inability of the body to escape traumatic histories of discrimination, figured forth in her creation tale as the origins of racism.

Queer Migrations

The opposition between an animal past and a human future as forecast by Nu Wa's tale remains an important tension in the representation of race and ethnic origins throughout the novel. Nu Wa, reborn as a mortal in the nineteenth century, "[falls] in love with . . . the daughter of a dry goods merchant who specialized primarily in salt fish" (48). Nu Wa and Salt Fish Girl run away from their home in South China to engage in their romance apart from their families' and community's "stigma against queer desire" (Patterson and Troeung 79). The lovers are separated when a "foreign woman" named Edwina leads Nu Wa away to the "City of Hope" in the "Island of Mist and Forgetfulness" (*Salt* 123). The eastern and western gates of the city, respectively, bear "the ideological promises of 'Progress' and 'Democracy'" (Mansbridge 127). Miranda notes that "On either side of the arch . . . was a geometrically

stylized, low-relief image of a woman holding a large sheaf of grain, not rice, but wheat perhaps" (*Salt* 125). Reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, these female figures welcome Nu Wa with the promise of progress, thus figuring the West as a site of advancement. Rita Wong, Joanna Mansbridge, Christopher Patterson, and Y-Dang Troeung, among other scholars, note the diasporic symbolism of Nu Wa's journey: "Nu Wa enters the liminal space of migration. Reflecting Chinese immigration to Canada, Nu Wa enters the island only to forget her language and lose her freedom" (Mansbridge 127). Nu Wa's observation that the figures hold "not rice, but wheat," implies that the city's promise of progress comes through the rejection of a racialized past; in other words, the cost of progress is assimilation (Phung; Wong). In the city, Edwina gives Nu Wa a drink to "loosen [her] tongue," to sever her from her native Cantonese (*Salt* 126). Nu Wa describes the acquisition and loss of language as a somatic experience: "I felt a new language enter me. With each sip of the drink, I lost grasp of the old one. It was a tall glass. My bladder swelled. I went to the bathroom to pee. As the hot liquid rushed out from between my legs, I felt my old language gushing away from me, liquid, yellow and irretrievable. I did not feel sad. I felt light, and terribly giddy" (126). The metaphor of language leaving her body as a yellow liquid emphasizes the experience of ethnic and racial identities as embodied knowledges, somatically gained and lost here through the bodily processes of drinking and urinating.

Her integration into Western culture splits Nu Wa not only from her animal past but also from her lover, Salt Fish Girl. In this figuration, progress entails refuting both animal and ethnic origins. Nu Wa does not mourn her losses, at first, but feels "light" and "giddy." She dissociates from her past life through the written promise of a better future. Hope, though, proves to be a cruel affect. Patterson and Troeung posit that Lai's novel "reveals the hypocrisy of such liberal discourse" enshrined in those Western promises of progress and democracy (79). Abandoned by Edwina, Nu Wa tries to integrate into the new social world, only to be reminded of her repressed origins by a hotel owner who offers her work as a "toilet scrubber and a bedsheet changer," in a "conflation of exploitable labour and ethnicity" (Mansbridge 127), and by authorities who imprison her on the alleged grounds of "drug smuggling" and "the intention to immigrate illegally" (*Salt* 141).

Nu Wa is thus confronted with the inescapability of both her racialized and her animalized embodiment. Melancholically longing for the

past that she left behind, she dreams about reuniting with Salt Fish Girl. In her dream, the two consume "a fish the size of a human being" (143). However, to her repulsion, she discovers that "It tasted like my own tongue. Its human taste shocked and horrified me. The realization that I had swallowed some before noting the taste made me sick to my stomach" (144). Nu Wa sees a fish, yet its "human taste" transgresses her expectations of what it ought to taste like. She sees herself as human, but the taste of her "own tongue" triggers a shock of recognition. Larissa Lai explains that, while writing the novel, she wanted to explore "the things we repress in order to enter mainstream culture" ("Future" 172). As we see with Nu Wa, the repressed returns despite her attempts to be human and to assimilate. Tasting herself in the fish, she ultimately finds herself unable to escape the racialized experience of animality.

Of course, as I have suggested, the depiction of the racialized body as an animalized body is not Lai's invention. Chen explores the historical imbrication of animality in the representation of disenfranchised subjects. Analyzing the queer and racialized felinity of filmic representations of Sax Rohmer's character Fu Manchu, specifically as he is rendered in the movie *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) and the TV series *The Adventures of Fu Manchu* (1956), Chen notes that "Fu Manchu's queer gendering poses an embodied threat; the filmic representation of this body, it could be argued, suggests the perceived toxicity of a racially gendered body that simply won't behave" (121). Chen then recuperates the ostensible toxicity of Fu Manchu's difference by interpreting animality as an act of resistance: "I wonder whether he might be thought of as claiming animality, rightfully claiming animality, the animality that we all have and that some of us hide, as a part of his righteous defiance of Western orders of rule and knowledge" (121). For Chen, all bodies contain traces of animality, and they see subversive possibility in embracing it as something racialized and inherently queer. I join them in this wondering to explore the subversive possibilities opened up by the queer animality in *Salt Fish Girl*.

Queer Reproductions

Miranda is queerly produced and queerly reproduces. Her menopausal mother immaculately conceives her after consuming durian fruit harvested from the Unregulated Zone. *Salt Fish Girl* ambiguously fails to clarify whether Miranda is conceived by this consumption, because the

durian has been genetically modified by Dr. Flowers to induce fertility, or whether the conception results from Nu Wa's having implanted her "genetic essence" into the fruit (Bahng 680). The precise mechanics of reproduction aside, the novel suggests that Miranda, like her mother, becomes pregnant by eating durian. In the moment that she ostensibly conceives, Miranda describes the fruit as an animal-like organism:

> The yellow pieces glistened like fresh organ meat. . . . I had always thought there was something cannibalistic about eating [durian], and so I never had. But this time an overwhelming sense of wonder compelled me. I scooped the creamy yellow flesh into my mouth, felt its taste and odour merge with my own. It gave me a very peculiar sensation, as though I'd bitten my own tongue. And yet it was delicious. (223-24)

"[Y]ellow flesh," evocative of a euphemism for Asianness, racially infuses the durian. Miranda expresses bodily identification with the "fresh organ meat," thinking that eating it is somehow "cannibalistic," a suggestion that perhaps connotes notions of primitive savagery. To her, the "yellow flesh" tastes like her own yellow flesh, leaving her with the "very peculiar sensation" that she has "bitten [her] own tongue." The language, of course, mirrors Nu Wa's dream of eating the human-sized fish that likewise tastes like her own tongue. For Miranda, the durian becomes animal-like not only through its "reptilian" qualities but also because the fruit tastes like her own animalistic body. The seemingly autoerotic and "cannibalistic" act of consuming the fruit can thus be read as a form of trans-species reproduction, the queer interaction between the body of the durian and the body of Miranda resulting in the production of a new body.

Like Miranda, the "Sonia" clones also engage in queer reproduction. Larissa Lai describes the Sonias as hybrid entities, "[m]anufactured from the DNA of a Chinese-Canadian woman interned with her Japanese-Canadian husband during the Second World War, combined with the DNA of freshwater carp in order to get around human cloning laws" ("Future" 175). Evie, in particular, "is no figure of purity." She describes herself as "point zero three per cent fresh *Cyprinus carpio* — freshwater carp. I'm a patented new fucking life form" (*Salt* 158). The same fishy spots that make Miranda not quite human are likewise used to dehumanize the Sonias, allowing Flowers to enslave them in his capitalistic production of Pallas shoes. The artificial insertion of the

animal into the racialized body transforms the Asian body into a kind of liminal entity, neither human nor animal. The "unnaturalness" of Evie's origin becomes a source of anxiety for Miranda, even though she similarly possesses fish-like qualities. This anxiety about the unnatural implicitly reflects fears about purity, both of the human body generally and of racial purity specifically. The hybrid human-animal body carries the threat of racial miscegenation, eliciting the fear of a body that cannot be codified by normative structures of identity. The overdetermination of the human-animal hybrid performs the subversive disruption that Chen sees in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "the body without organs":

> The body without organs is that body that actively refuses its own subjectivity by engaging the dis-ordering of its "organs." In the body without organs, no given organ has merely one functionality, and the organism itself cannot be represented as an ordered system. Instead, the body without organs makes impossible *any* coercive systematicity by affirming an infinite functionality and interrelation of the "parts" within, "parts" that can only be individuated by one of an infinite number of permutations of a body into "parts." (Chen 151-52)

Deleuze and Guattari's concept gestures toward the interdependence of all organs within a single body. The distinction between one organ ("part") and the next becomes muddied in the body in which all of the organs function in "interrelation." Likewise, the delineation between what is distinctly human and what is distinctly animal blurs in the body that is both. The fishiness of her genes transforms Evie into a new life form that exceeds humanness, despite her human-like form. Nu Wa's bifurcated tail and shape-shifting form similarly express this categorical blurriness. Are her legs a split tail? Is her tail fused legs? By oscillating between human and animal, the liminality of the human-animal body resists being contained by a system of recognition that equates a body's value with its humanness. As Tara Lee argues, however, we must remember that the fragmentation of the body has sometimes been employed by neoliberal capitalism: "The corporate manipulation of the body entails a disassembly, but more importantly, a reassembly . . . that is a conglomeration of parts gathered from multiple sources" (99). Lee further posits that, "While capitalism wants to sanitize away the fragmentation it has perpetrated, Lai's durian politics insists, like [Donna]

Haraway's cyborg politics, 'on noise and pollution' . . . to demonstrate that the disruptive body cannot be eliminated so effortlessly" (105). The human-animal body is capable of dissent through its evolutionary descent. In other words, it dissents through the ruptures of animality that refuse the ostensible cohesiveness of the fully evolved human subject.

Chen theorizes that "animals . . . stand in for the intermediary zone between human and nonhuman," provoking the "debate about the appropriateness of humane and inhumane treatment" (95). Miranda feels dis-ease with the concept of intermediary liminality when her father offers her a homeopathic remedy for the memory disease: "Once I had to drink a soup made from embryonic chickens still sleeping in their eggs and coated in mucusy egg white. I don't know why I should find such things unpleasant. I eat eggs and I eat chicken. Why should I be horrified by the liminal state between the two?" (*Salt* 59). Why indeed? Of course, the father's remedy recalls traditional Chinese medicine, and embryonic bird eggs are often consumed in parts of Asia as a delicacy called *balut*. Miranda's discomfort with the remedy might then be understood as "immigrant shame," to borrow Phung's term. Although Miranda herself is not an immigrant, she experiences "an embodied and affective connection to past losses and historical traumas not quite [hers] but [hers] regardless" (Phung 2). Beyond immigrant shame, however, Miranda focuses her horror on the "liminal state" of such "things." The liminality of the embryonic chicken perhaps elicits her anxieties about her own unruly body.

The desire to fit things into concrete categories enables racist practices through its othering effect, as we see in the treatment of the Sonias, who can be cloned because they are "not human" (*Salt* 158). On closer inspection, though, no body is fully human when construed as an evolutionary product. Evie emphasizes the coloniality of categorization when she and Miranda visit the aquarium where Evie's genetic carp mother resides. The display of an encased octopus causes Evie to critique the anthropocentrism that makes such a scene possible. She says to Miranda, "if you look at this, and it makes you believe in God, then you also have to believe that it was all meant for human pleasure. Which makes it perfectly all right to shut these beautiful things up in tanks and bottles. The logic is built right into the architecture" (262). For Evie, the belief in theistic design allows one to colonize nature because it posits the human as a special creation. In turn, it seems to be natural to compartmentalize nature, to segregate *us* from *them* with artificial

boundaries like the glass display that separates Evie from the aquatic other. Recognizing that our differences are artificially "built right into the architecture" of our social structures calls into question the logics of discriminatory practices. The refusal to classify things — perhaps even the inherent impossibility of classifying things — probes at the ethics of our relationships with other beings in the world.

Despite her anxiety about the unnatural, Miranda finds herself hooked by Evie's fishiness, and the two become lovers. The language of their sexual encounters is undeniably animalistic: "I moved through the cool dark with her, my body a single silver muscle slipping against hers, 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" (*Salt* 161). In the afterglow of sex, the two share an unusual, intimate moment when Miranda discovers that Evie, like her, has fistulas beside her ears. Like the origins of many things in the novel, those of the fistulas remain unclear, though Flowers suggests that they are symptoms of the memory disease, and Miranda believes that she has inherited hers from her mother.

Of course, these pre-auricular fistulas can be read in evolutionary terms as gill-like vestigial traits from a fishy origin, a diasporic carryover beginning with the goddess Nu Wa. This bodily remnant seemingly has no purpose and is unadaptively prone to infection. However, familiarity with her own fishy anatomy allows Miranda to anticipate the physical needs of Evie, creating moments of queer intimacy between them. Miranda lances Evie's swollen fistula, orgasmically releasing a "thin stream of pus reeking of fish and ocean water" and causing Miranda to feel "something shift inside [her] that remembered another longer, leaner shape" (*Salt* 163). The queer affection between Miranda and Evie involves the simultaneity of sameness and difference in their recognition of their shared otherness. The intimacy between them is queer not only because they share female anatomies but also because they share fish-like anatomies. They derive pleasure in the translation of pain into ecstasy through their mutual condition of animality, so the site of infection, an ostensible defect, becomes a point of encounter with the other. The lovers participate in the pleasure of "re-membering": they regather the pieces (members) of their animalized bodies, they bring together members of a community, and they re-member across time,

coming together in the present having been the lovers Nu Wa and Salt Fish Girl in the past.

Evolutionary Dissent and Other Problems

Because Evie is a clone, it seems that she should be indistinguishable from the other Sonias. Miranda can nonetheless always identify her among the others. This familiarity results, in part, from Evie's characteristic salt fish scent and the queer intimacy developed between the two characters, but we might also consider it in explicitly evolutionary terms. Michelle N. Huang and Hee-Jung Serenity Joo attend to the novel's evolutionary and racial themes to discuss its formal position within the Asian North American literary genre and Asian North American history at large. I extend their analyses by focusing on the evolutionary animality of the racialized body. Elizabeth Grosz frames Darwin's theory of evolution as "the *genesis of the new* from the play of repetition and difference within the old, the generation — of history, movement, and the dynamism of evolutionary change — from the impetus and mobility of existing species" (29). As organic creations, the Sonias are permeable to the same evolutionary forces that shape all organisms, so — despite their status as clones — uniformity is not really possible. Evolutionary dynamism emerges from the reproductive technologies of the Sonias. They cultivate a genetically engineered durian tree that produces fertility fruit in order to conceive their own children. Flowers indicates to Evie, his daughter we learn, why he later has this tree destroyed: "You don't know . . . 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" (*Salt* 256). Flowers figures the unruliness of nature as monstrous because it is uncontrollable, thus interrupting his project of producing uniform clones. Despite his attempts at reproductive and genetic mastery, new organisms nevertheless evolve via evolutionary "interbreeding and mutating," demonstrating the impossibility of controlling the randomness at work in nature.

Evolution's unruly capacity to drive change helps us to think about the animality of race as something potentially transformative. Although I have tried to make clear the connection between Asianness and fishiness, the ways that they work together are sometimes a little untidy. However, this untidiness gestures toward the categorical instability that

I have been emphasizing: race and the body are subject to continuous reshaping because they are porously enmeshed in dynamic interactions with the outside world. Reflecting on Darwinian theory, Alaimo proposes that this evolutionary dynamism offers a transcorporeal ethics of existing with others: "Demonstrating that the structure of the human body is comparable to that of animals and that animal behavior is comparable to that of the human, Darwin forges a scientific and philosophical 'posthumanism' in which there are no solid demarcations between human and animal and in which the human is coextensive with the emergent natural/cultural world" (151). Returning to the unclassifiable nature of "the body without organs," human-animal assemblages unsettle the ontological fixedness of things by muddying the "demarcations between human and animal." What does it mean to be a particular species, or race for that matter, when we exist in a continuum of evolution? Although the fantasy of race is produced through the logics of colonialism and capitalism, it is nevertheless felt as a deeply embodied experience: the materiality of the body is the stuff that seems to confirm the illusion of racial difference. Likewise, Miranda's vestigial fish traits symbolize the repetition and stickiness of racialized histories and embodiments; however, just as evolution is dynamic, so too is the animalized body. The return to the animal recognizes the affective attachments, pains, and enjoyments that can emerge from shared experiences of racialization; at the same time, the human-animal body's inherent evolutionary instability resists reifying race as an essentialist and immutable condition of identity.

By seeing the generative nature of evolution, we find the possibility of disturbing historically reified conceptions of race and gender. As Grosz posits,

> Evolution is neither free and unconstrained, nor determined and predictable in advance. It is neither commensurate with the temporality of physics and the mathematical sciences, nor is it unlimited in potential and completely free to develop in any direction. Rather, it implies a notion of overdetermination, indetermination, and a systemic openness that precludes precise determination. This is the temporality of retrospection, of reconstruction, but a reconstruction whose aim is never the faithful reproduction of the past so much as the forging of a place for the future as the new. (45)

Evolutionary "overdetermination," "indetermination," and preclusion of "precise determination" make possible the transformation that occurs in the closing scene of Lai's novel. Miranda and Evie step into a hot spring, mirroring the drowning impulse of the memory disease but rewriting it as a moment of regenerative pleasure. Their legs evolve into fish tails, and they engage in a semi-coital act, "her tail through mine . . . coils interlocked," which induces Miranda's labour: "I howled with the pain of womb spasming deeply, and then a dark head emerged six inches below my navel, from an opening in my scaly new flesh. The head had a wrinkled human face. Evie reached under water, guided the thing out, black-haired and bawling, a little baby girl" (269). The offspring has a human face, is racialized as Asian, and is gendered as female, but it remains unclear precisely what Miranda has birthed. She characterizes her offspring non-specifically as "the thing." The baby is racially marked, yet in its non-specificity it has the evolutionary capacity to become something new. Although the baby might be interpreted as a potential site of futurity, Miranda refuses to see it as the promise of a better future, concluding the birth and the novel by asserting that "Everything will be all right . . . until next time" (269). The baby is neither a trajectory toward progress nor the arrival of humanness; rather, it is a sign of survival and queer intimacy in the present.

Other analyses of Lai's novel have invoked the figure of the cyborg, the monstrous, and the posthuman as a turn against "the nostalgia of essentialism" (Lee 108) or "a possible direction for a global feminism free from the valourization [sic] of a common point of origin" (Mansbridge 132). My evolutionary reflection on animality generally concurs with such readings insofar as I argue that the racialized body, as a human-animal body, holds the potential for evolutionary transformation. However, as Grosz argues about evolution, the racialized body is neither "unlimited in potential" nor "completely free to develop in any direction" (45). Thus, we cannot embrace reproduction as the solution to racism. The figure of the cyborg risks the fetishistic promise of a hybrid, postracial future.[3] Commenting on nineteenth-century and twentieth-century mixed-race relations in the United States, Tavia Nyong'o cautions about the limitations of postracial projects: "efforts to ridicule the fictiveness of race — by showing it to be contingent rather than essential, constructed rather than a biological given — tend to run up against the obscene remainder of racial terror and enjoyment that seems always to survive race's theoretical demolishing" (173). He pos-

its further that "Hybridity has been repeatedly enlisted in envisioning utopian and dystopian scenarios"; however, the "persistent projection of hybridity into a temporal and spatial elsewhere is itself a mechanism for resisting an awareness of the actual and ongoing mongrel past" (175). Put another way, hybridity is a problematic site of futurity; its historical undercurrent carries "[f]ears of racial degeneracy" and anti-miscegenation laws that structured America's "mongrel past" (17). During the twentieth century, the principle of hypodescent, also called the "one-drop rule," was legislated by many states as a way of regulating racial difference (171). According to that principle, a mixed-race child with one white parent and one coloured parent inherits the coloured parent's race. In this way, racialized blood appears as a kind of residue that stains the body. Although Nyong'o refers to African American subjectivity and Lai writes about Asian subjectivity in the geographical space of Vancouver, I think that his critique is of use here. He argues that "The impossibly burdened figure of the biracial child cannot conceivably do the work of utopia that we repeatedly impose upon her" (174-75). The cyborg runs up against the same problem. It cannot move beyond race because its condition of hybridity is produced by the terms that it attempts to disavow. In other words, the cyborg becomes viewable as "hybrid" only because it is racially and sexually marked. Is it nonetheless possible to embrace the residues of otherness that mark our bodies? For Chen, the body's transcorporeality enables new forms of relationality. Using the example of toxicity, they posit that

> I would be foolish to imagine that toxicity stands in for "utopia" given the explosion of resentful, despairing, painful, screamingly negative affects that surround toxicity. Nevertheless, I am reluctant to deny the queer productivity of toxins and toxicity, a productivity that extends beyond an enumerable set of addictive or pleasure-inducing substances, or to neglect (or, indeed, ask after) the pleasures, the loves, the rehabilitations, the affections, the assets that toxic conditions induce. (211)

With and beyond conceptions of race and identity, the marks that linger on our bodies engender queer attachments. The memory disease, the fistulas, the residues of animality — these staining forms of otherness threaten the integrity of the fictional pure human of humanism and its ideology of bodily sovereignty. Yet these same toxic agents become the links that connect bodies with the environment, with history, and

with each other. Neither the mixed-race child nor the human-animal child guarantees the possibility of escaping racism. The child is not the promise of progress, and perhaps progress should not be desired. But the queer intimacy that produces the child is the possibility of something different. Human-animal bodies and human-animal intimacies suture together pleasure in the past with the potentiality of a different future. In other words, to "re-member" means simultaneously to remember the past and to re-member the future, to reassemble queerly our identities and to find pleasure in our "improper affiliations" (Chen 104).

Animality offers an articulation of otherness that emphasizes the interconnectedness of bodies. By mapping the relationship between Asianness and fishiness in *Salt Fish Girl*, I do not mean to imply a one-to-one correlation between particular racial categories and particular animal species, because doing so would posit the racialized body as a stable category. Rather, what makes animality such an interesting site of inquiry is its insistence on the simultaneity of the past with the present and, consequently, its hope for the future. Human-animal bodies and human-animal intimacies highlight both the pain and the pleasure of embodied histories. At the same time, evolutionary dynamism reveals animalistic difference as a queer locus for the potential renegotiation of identity. In other words, our bodies and our social bonds remain inherently mutable, subject to continuous renewal. In Lai's novel, viewing the human subject as an assemblage of both human and animal offers the transformative possibility of seeing the body unbridled by the spontaneous rhythms and drives of evolution. If we forget about narratives of human progress and embrace our animal bodies, then what other queer affections might we discover?

Author's Note

I would like to thank the anonymous readers for offering generous comments and suggestions, which helped me immensely to improve this essay. I am also deeply grateful to Tania Aguila-Way, Dana Seitler, and Isabelle Zhu for their thoughtful advice and feedback across the various iterations of this piece.

Notes

[1] Chen observes that "Pseudo-Darwinian evolutionary discourses" have been "tied to colonialist strategy and pedagogy that superimposed phylogenetic maps onto synchronic human racial typologies, yielding simplistic promulgating equations of 'primitive' peoples with prehuman stages of evolution" (101-02).

[2] There is extensive scholarship on the persistent visuality of race. See, for example, Cheng; Compton; Eng and Han; and Seshadri-Crooks.

[3] Patterson and Troeung argue that "'post-racial' sensibilities have become ubiquitous" in Asian diasporic speculative fiction and that *Salt Fish Girl* and Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* offer a critique of neoliberal multiculturalism by highlighting how racialized subjects "become appropriated and reconstructed for the purpose of maintaining a multi-racial upper class" (75).

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