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Ethnic Space and the Commodification of Urbanity in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*

**Introduction**

A woman ran down an abandoned road, past broken shop windows and the bombed-out frames of houses. On her feet she wore a pair of blue and silver running shoes that shone with a dazzling light. “Bloody Pallas,” I muttered. I pressed the fast-forward button and the woman scrambled at a fantastic pace down the bombed-out street, which, in spite of its dilapidated state, had a sort of romance about it. (35)

The voice in this quote is Miranda Ching, the narrator of the science-fiction novel *Salt Fish Girl*. Miranda is a young woman who lives in a North American company-owned town in the 2060s. The desire and repulsion the sneak- ers arouse in Miranda epitomize the paradoxical situation of a world order of globalized capitalist markets in which every desired product – here symbolized by the sneakers – is instantly available at the expense of the environment – symbolized by the bombed-out streets. *Salt Fish Girl*, written by the Asian Canadian writer Larissa Lai and published in 2002, depicts an urban North American future characterized by a hyper-capitalist system in which a few multinational companies have divided the USA and Canada up among themselves and separated the continent into walled-in compounds and so-called “Unregulated Zones,” familiar to science fiction audiences from the future scenarios of popular works like *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer*.¹ In Lai’s dystopia, citizens and employees have literally become the property of the companies they work for, which genetically engineer women of color as slave laborers. Building upon the work of cyberpunk dystopias who visually and rhetorically convey images of immigrants and members of minority groups in North America as “teeming masses” (Palumbo-Liu 326), Lai critiques capitalist aspects of globalization, such as free trade, free flow of capital, use of cheaper foreign labor markets and their effects on migrant workers. In *Salt Fish Girl*, the transcultural space takes the form of an urban capitalist dystopia in which ethnicity is commodified: Asian American wom-

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¹ For a detailed discussion of intertextual references between *Salt Fish Girl* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, see Robyn Morris’s article “What does it mean to be human? Racing Monsters, Clones, and Replicants.” In *Blade Runner*, the cityscape of Los Angeles is depicted as a run-down and polluted urban dystopia overcrowded with Asian and Hispanic immigrants. However, the film does not elaborate on this depiction as its main focus is on the conflict between humans and genetically engineered humans, called replicants.
are being cloned by multinational corporations and used as a labor force for the textile industry. Thus, the gender and ethnic background of the workers seems to be no coincidence but shows that when global capitalist market strategies are consistently applied, the prototype for cloned slave laborers may most likely be the immigrant woman of color, whose DNA is a readily available resource because she is not formally recognized and thus only “virtually” human. Rita Wong defines the status of the women workers in *Salt Fish Girl* – the genetically engineered women called “the Sonia series” – as “extra-legal,” as “those who may be undocumented or structurally unable to gain access to the nation’s front door” (111). Yet the virtuality and extra-legality of the cloned women in *Salt Fish Girl* refers not only to their unusual genesis in biochemical laboratories and their liminal legal status but to their ethnicity as well. Presumably cloned from the DNA of Asian American women interned during World War II, the ‘virtuality’ or ‘extra-legality’ of the Sonia series as depicted in the novel is rooted in political and social perceptions of ethnic women in North America and put into the context of a global hyper-capitalist world order.

By explicitly focusing on the cloned slave laborers, *Salt Fish Girl* presents a counterdiscourse to the global capitalist market system. The sneakers, described in the above quote as “bloody Pallas” sold by a multinational corporation called Nextcorp, play a crucial role in this counterdiscourse as they not only link producer and consumer but also serve the female workers who manufacture them as tools for a campaign against the corporation that clones and enslaves them. Secretly, the women instrumentalize the shoes as tools of a political subversion campaign by inscribing messages on the soles. In an ironic twist, the consumers/wearers of the sneakers involuntarily transgress and blur the boundaries between company-controlled compound and Unregulated Zone of urban decay – as well as between company-employed society and poor urban squatters – when they imprint political and poetic messages written by the enslaved factory workers on the muddy roads of the city. Consequently, in this paper, I will read the sneakers as both a metaphor of capitalist exploitation of the city’s inhabitants and their cultural histories and as a metaphor of the political subversion campaign of the cloned factory women. The seizing of the sneakers combined with the cloned women’s appropriation of genetically modified plants is an important strand in the critique the novel levels at the global capitalist system. Furthermore, the sneakers directly address us as readers and demonstrate how we as consumers are implicated in the cycle of globalized production and consumption based on the exploitation of those the novel identifies as the backbone of the production chain: Asian American women workers.

In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway argues that globalization, genetic science and information technology alter modes of production, consumption and employment. For my reading of *Salt Fish Girl* it is crucial to stress Haraway’s argument that technology is an important, yet not the defining factor of globalization: “a world capitalist organizational structure is
made possible by (not caused by) the new technologies” (166, my emphasis). In the context of *Salt Fish Girl*, technology serves as a tool for global capitalism as outlined in Haraway’s argument. Globalization in the form of an increasingly integrated global economy rests on a patriarchal system of white, male, capitalist domination as mapped by Haraway in her chart of “the informatics of domination” (161-2) as much as it depends on information technology and biotechnology as tools. Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” is based on her definition of the cyborg: “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149). Haraway identifies female workers in globalized manufacturing sectors as the prototypes of her cyborg trope. Consequently, she points out that the gender of the workers plays a crucial role for their positioning in global capitalism:

It is not simply that women in Third World countries are the preferred labor-force for the science-based multinationals in the export-processing sectors, particularly in electronics. The picture is more systematic and involves reproduction, sexuality, culture, consumption, and production. (166)

In a continuation of Haraway’s theory of the cyborg as a primarily gendered hybrid subject, Larissa Lai emphasizes the combination of gender and ethnicity as crucial factors for the identity negotiations of her cyborg women in a global capitalist world order. By re-fictionalizing the space of global market capitalism, Lai re-charts the “extra-legal” space which both the transnational hybrid and the cyborg inhabit in this system. Thus, this paper seeks to analyze the cyborg women of *Salt Fish Girl* through a continuation of Haraway’s “Third World” cyborg by stressing not only the gender but also the specific ethnicity of the cloned factory workers. In the second part of this paper, I will read the identity negotiation of the Sonia series as a key part of the counterdiscourse to the global market capitalism portrayed by the novel.

The aspect of hybridity that characterizes the cyborg is similarly discussed in postcolonial theory where it characterizes the immigrant and/or postcolonial subject. Whereas Homi K. Bhabha describes the post-colonial hybrid as being on an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (4), current debates in postcolonial theory depart from the idea of identities and spaces as “fixed.” In their introduction to *Reconstructing Hybridity*, Kuortti and Nyman reconsider transnational hybridity, locating it in a contemporary context as “imply[ing] a markedly unbalanced relationship […] as a site of transformation and change where fixed identities based on essentialisms are called into question” (2-3). This notion of hybridity as “problematiz[ing] naturalized boundaries” is used in what the editors call a “counterdiscursive manner” (11) and can be applied almost one-to-one to Lai’s cyborgs. Contemporary postcolonial hybrids as well as Lai’s cyborgs thus claim the “Un-regulated Zone” (Lai) of Bhabha’s “stairwell” and call into question his reference to “fixed identifications” such as top and bottom, human and virtual human, white and black, by rejecting them as normative points of reference.
In mainstream cyber-fiction, the cyborgs’ processes of identity negotiation can be compared to the identity quests of colonial hybrids. Similar to the colonial use of the term hybrid to refer to the so-called “illegitimate” and “impure” offspring of colonizer and colonized (Wisker 190-1), in mainstream science fiction the cyborg is also regarded as a threat to human purity, as *Blade Runner’s* conflict between humans and replicants exemplifies. In contrast to this, transnational migrants in recent postcolonial theory as well as the cyborgs in Lai’s story are individuals who resist identification in terms of the normative categories human/non-human. Underlining the point that not the colonial but the transnational hybrid finds her counterpart in Lai’s description of the ethnic cyborg, I would describe Lai’s cyborgs with a combination of the words of Kuortti/Nyman and Bhabha: the cyborgs in *Salt Fish Girl* are beings who “problematize naturalized boundaries” (Kuortti/Nyman 2-3) in search of a “cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4).

Having thus situated the cyborgs in *Salt Fish Girl* in a contemporary postcolonial context, in the following I will analyze *Salt Fish Girl* through a continuation of Haraway’s theory, where, as outlined above, not only the gender but also the ethnicity of the cyborgs needs to be emphasized. As Lai situates the cyborg characters within an “extra-legal” and Unregulated Zone, the presentation of this futuristic capitalist urban space will be examined in more detail as well.

**Urban Dystopia**

In line with urban feminist dystopias of the 1990s, such as Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It*, which depict a North American society dominated by multinational corporations where individual and cultural histories are suppressed by a corporate ethos of homogeneity and assimilation, Larissa Lai’s novel *Salt Fish Girl* also features a scenario where the state has turned over its autonomy to multinational corporations. In Lai’s urban dystopia, poverty, violence and ecological pollution have contaminated both society and nature, turning the North American suburb into a company-owned compound and its citizens into corporate property. Social homogeneity is achieved through the exclusion and repression of diverse cultural customs and histories; in the case of the Sonia series, the production of human labor itself is an objective for multinational corporations. In this bleak setting, the exploited and polluted soil of the Pacific coast becomes part of the narrative voice re-articulating the suppressed and assimilated cultural histories of employees and cloned factory workers alike when these memories resurface in the form of a disease that befalls the inhabitants.

One of the “diseased” is Miranda, the narrator of the novel. Miranda is a young woman who lives inside a company town ironically called Serendipity. The narrative reveals that Miranda is in fact an incarnation of the Chinese
creation goddess Nu Wa, a timeless being able to shift her shape and appearance, who travels through time and space. Nu Wa eventually arrives on the North American Pacific coast where she settles inside a durian, a strongly scented fruit that has been genetically modified to help women conceive. Miranda’s mother eats this piece of fruit, gets pregnant, and at age sixty-three gives birth to Miranda, whose body constantly emanates the “pepper and cat pee” odor associated with the durian fruit (15). The scent of the durian fruit is both a reference to Miranda’s supernatural conception as well as a reference to her non-conformist existence, which the company ethos regards as a remnant of a cultural diversity that has to be repressed. Yet it finds its ways inside the compound walls by leaking through its inhabitants. It is not made clear why the family is eventually expelled from work and home – whether the reason is their non-conformity or the fact that Miranda logs into her father’s online work place and returns the money that her father is supposed to collect as a tax collector for the Saturna corporation to the inhabitants. In any case, the Ching family has to leave the compound and move to the Unregulated Zone. Reminiscent of nineteenth and twentieth century Asian immigrants in North America, the family opens up a makeshift store where they sell fruits and vegetables. It is in the Unregulated Zone that Miranda befriends Evie, one of the genetically engineered women of the Sonia series, who escaped the factory where she had to manufacture the Pallas sneakers for the Nextcorp Corporation.

By juxtaposing a small and family-run store in the Unregulated Zone to the multinational corporations, Lai comments on the brand-name dominated cityscape that downgrades urban citizens to mere property and resource and prohibits a private life and individual cultural customs. However, Lai’s corner grocery store is not simply a new version of a romanticized space that repeats stereotypes of Asian businesses in North America as places where food, weapons and cheap gimmicks are sold. Lai resitutes this “typically” Asian American store by presenting it as a complex and ambiguous place, a space full of history, individual tragedy and family life that addresses the economic and political implications and situations of the inhabitants (Wong 117). Situating the family store within a global market, Rita Wong observes:

Embedded within the corporate hegemony of the PEU [Pacific Economic Union] are simultaneously forms of small economy that, although discursively colonized under the force of capital, nonetheless present material alternatives that have quietly co-existed in the shadows of the corporate wealth. (118)

Yet the store is not just a nostalgic longing for a presumably simpler past but a complex and conflicted space for the family, especially when Miranda’s mother dies in an accident in the store. Although haunted by cultural and personal history, the store is at the same time a place where the family can live – at least temporarily – without the threat of constant surveillance and the pressure of corporate homogeneity.
That this corporate homogeneity can make citizens dependent on the company and eventually unable to live without it becomes apparent when the global market situation abruptly changes:

After the stock market crisis and the further devaluation of the dollar, after the number of cars on the street diminished to a dull roar [...], the big corporations, Saturna and Nextcorp among them, laid off workers and cut pensions to the point that my father began to think that perhaps his dismissal had been a blessing in disguise. Workers flooded out of the corporate compounds and into the Unregulated Zone. Many people, my father’s ex-colleagues included, could not work out ways to make a living. The missions were full, and people died in droves beneath the bridges and in the open-air rooms of half collapsed buildings. (84-5)

It is at this point in the narrative that the mysterious disease called “dreaming” appears inside the compounds. Apart from the peculiar odors of the infected, the disease causes dreams with historical content. In the Unregulated Zone, Miranda meets several people infected with the mysterious illness, like the man “who smelled of milk and could remember all the famines that had ever been caused by war [...], a girl who smelled of stainless steel and could recite the lives of everyone who had ever died of tuberculosis” (101-2).

Through the dreaming disease, history finds its way back into the compounds, with the polluted soil as carrier and the infected as medium: “They theorized it might be the product of mass industrial genetic alteration practices,” Evie explains to Miranda (102). Stories, histories and cultural customs repressed by corporate homogeneity thus resurface in the form of smells, dreams and memories. As the disease is believed to be transmitted through the soil, for example by walking barefoot on the beach, the Pallas sneakers from the advertisement come into play as they are said to provide protection from it. However, it is also rumored that the shoes transmit the disease, in which case the sneakers again come to signify the omnipresence of global market control and a subsequent global homogeneity of customs and styles, which suppress regional and cultural practices. This global market control strategically deploys social, cultural and gender roles not only by using women as manufacturers of goods as emphasized by Haraway, but also by specifically targeting women as consumers:

Shoes worn by middle-class, middle-aged suburban women, scared of growing old, uninterested in the world they live in, except insofar as it can provide them with beautiful things to reward them for their long treacherous days in office towers pumped full of fake air, or at home, organizing groceries and menus, vacuuming, trying to make something they can call their own from what comes in cardboard boxes and plastic wrappers from the megastore strip mall. (Salt Fish Girl 226)

This quote comments on a cultural homogeneity that accompanies the distribution and consumption of products designed for a global market, like the Pallas sneakers. The peculiar yet natural or human-caused smells that are a symptom of the dreaming disease are another comment on this subjugation of diverse cultural practices, customs and characteristics. In a world where
Coca Cola and McDonald’s replace regional practices, cuisines and tastes, individuality and diversity are eventually lost. It becomes apparent that it is difficult if not impossible for the average consumer to escape this cycle of globalized production and consumption when Miranda is hired by a marketing agency to design advertisements for the dreaded sneakers. In the afterword to her novel *When Fox is a Thousand*, Lai articulates the intricate cycle of global production and consumption that we as customers are trapped in every day: “How [...] are we to imagine ourselves out of the suffering we become implicated with every time we fill our tanks, invest our money, eat a hamburger, or go to the mall?”, she asks (258).

Hence, in *Salt Fish Girl*, the Pallas sneakers symbolize producers and consumers alike as they signify the suppression of women as both “fashion victims” and victims of economic exploitation. Yet at the same time the sneakers show that individual agency can be reclaimed when the cloned women employ the sneakers as tools for their political subversion campaign. Thus, the borders between consumer and consumed, between exploiter and exploited, are blurred and complicated in the novel, reflecting the intricate workings of a globalized market. With the genetically engineered Sonia series cloned from the DNA of Asian American women, Lai not only portrays the interrelatedness of consumer and consumed but also draws attention to the role racial and gender categories play in this global market order. Lai projects a futuristic scenario that thinks through what Rita Wong terms “the logic of contemporary capitalist relations” (111), and connects this logic to what could be called the rationale of colonial relations by drawing attention to the ethnic background of the genetically engineered factory workers. Thus Lai’s racialized cloned women are a consistent continuation of the global capitalist world as mapped by earlier dystopias, such as *Blade Runner*: when human beings are turned into products for consumption on the global capitalist market, Lai’s story shows, the prototype for human simulacra is the “virtually” human immigrant woman of color as she is virtually without legal rights. Here, Haraway’s women workers become the prototypes for the cyborg women as the novel shows that gender as well as ethnicity defines the workers’ status of cyborgs. *Salt Fish Girl* places contemporary issues such as the genetic engineering research of the Human Genome Diversity Project, biotechnological advances by companies like Monsanto, and the tapping of labor markets in so-called Third World countries by textile companies like Nike into a fictional context. Applying these developments to a future scenario, her portrait of the cloned sweat shop workers is a consistent consequence of a globalization unrestricted by national and international policies protecting workers and consumers, as the following examples will show. Lai

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2 In Europe, the distribution of genetically modified corn and wheat seeds by Monsanto as well as laws issued by the European Union governing the planting of these seeds are currently receiving new public attention, as Jutta Hoffritz writes in *Die Zeit*. **
hence maps a critique of the contemporary capitalist logic onto a fictional futuristic urban space.

Through Evie, Miranda and the reader find out how companies like Saturna and Nextcorp operate and not only control national and international markets but also the environments, media and public life of their employees. We learn from Evie that Nextcorp clones human beings as slave laborers for their manufacturing of sneakers. Referencing debates on biotechnological and genetic engineering research contemporaneous to the novel’s publication, we read that “Nextcorp bought out the Diverse Genome Project [...] focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction” (160). It is thus no coincidence in the novel that the cloned workers in the sweat shops have “brown eyes and black hair, every single one” (160). In *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*, Donna Haraway explains the consequences the patenting of genetic information may have:

> Biotechnology in the service of corporate profit is a revolutionary force for remaking the inhabitants of planet Earth, from viruses and bacteria right up the now repudiated chain of being to Homo sapiens and beyond. Biological research globally is progressively practiced under the direct auspices of corporations, from the multinational pharmaceutical and agribusiness giants to venture-capital companies that fascinate the writers for the business section of daily newspapers. (245)

Drawing attention to the “social reality” (“A Cyborg Manifesto” 149) of their existence, to the fact that because of their “extra-legal” status they are the most economical resource in the globalized production cycle, the Sonias distribute foot-printed messages as part of their subversion campaign. These include their individual as well as collective histories, as in the following message which points out their exploitation as workers and the corporation’s enormous profit:

- materials: 10 units
- labour: 3 units
- retail price: 169 units
- profit: 156 units

> Do you care? (Salt Fish Girl 238)

Moreover, the cloned women reclaim their sexuality and reproduction abilities through the use of genetically modified fruits and vegetables. This strategy eventually encompasses all of the categories Haraway sees as being systematically controlled by multinational corporations: “reproduction, sexuality, culture, consumption and production” (“A Cyborg Manifesto” 166).

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3 See Haraway’s *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium* (244-53) for a further discussion of the Human Genome Project and the Human Genome Diversity Project.
Evie and her sisters acknowledge their “extra-legal” genesis in a laboratory, which was made possible because of the fact that society does not officially recognize the cloned women as human beings and therefore the laws governing human biomaterial do not apply to them (Salt Fish Girl 158). Rejecting normative social categories and reclaiming her extra-legal conception Evie proudly says, “My genes are one point zero three percent [...] freshwater carp. I’m a patented new fucking life form” (158). Evie thus defines herself as a subject living outside the categories of human/non-human, legal/extra legal. She and her sisters not only inhabit an uncharted territory – the house they squat in inside the Unregulated Zone – but also struggle with an uncharted identity. The narrative development invites us to relate Evie to the replicants in Blade Runner, especially when she points out that she was not designed for “wits or willpower, but [that she] was an early model. They couldn’t control for everything” (158-9). Evie ascribes her willpower and mental strength to the fish genes the genetic engineers used in order to circumvent laws protecting human biomaterial. Like the Nexus 6 models of Blade Runner she develops her own will, questioning and escaping her designated space as a slave worker for the corporation that engineered her. In the words of Wong, the novel thus “refram[es] the binary of ‘illegal’ and ‘legal’, [which] provides one way of rejecting the stigmatization of so-called ‘illegal,’ or extra-legal workers” in present day North America by letting the cloned women not only accept but rather embrace their hybrid identity (121-2).

The identity quest of the Sonias takes place on two levels: the immediate political campaign they plan against Nextcorp by distributing sneakers with imprinted messages and their long-term plan to create a new society by using genetically mutated vegetables and fruits like the durian to help them conceive children of their own. For their political subversion campaign – the distribution of pamphlets and the infiltration of corporate factories – the Sonias turn the sneakers they manufacture into activists’ tools that leave political and poetic messages on the muddy roads of the city: “What does it mean to be human,” or “How old is history?” (237). When posed by the cloned women, these questions are more than a reference to real-life slave labor like conditions in sweat shops that can be found in South East Asia as well as in California (R. Lee 191). When articulated by the cyborgs themselves, these questions force the reader to think through processes of production in a globalized market, production processes that are usually taken for granted by consumer society, which simply purchases goods that appear on store racks. “The shoemakers have no elves” (Salt Fish Girl 237). This poignant shoe-print points to the invisible human labor which actually sews the Pallas sneakers.

The factory as prison for the enslaved women becomes a space where they appropriate the tools they work with in order to communicate with each other and with the outside world. Even though the Sonias succeed in distrib-
uting the shoes with their political messages, the plan to “infiltrate all shoe factories” across compounds fails and the Sonias are killed (249). Because of their status as virtual citizens, they have no legal protection. Miranda describes the “extra-legal” status they are confined to: “Without a legal existence to begin with, they could not be reported missing” (249-5). Sonia 14, one of the early models able to hide together with the Sonias’ children from the company police, finds a freshly dug mass grave where the Sonias were buried. Subverting Nextcorp’s claim that the cloned women have no individual identity, Sonia 14 identifies her dead sisters separately: “She recognized Sonia 148 by her hand, still wearing a ring cut from a bit of copper pipe. She recognized Sonia 116 by the mole in her heel” (250). Reminiscent of the replicants, and “despite the sameness of their origins,” in Robyn Morris’ words the Sonias become “more human and individual than those who manufacture or hunt them down” (91). Yet the elements of urban dystopia are maintained by the novel as the Sonias are not permitted to lead their lives outside their masters’ profit margin and control in spaces they usurp for themselves, such as the abandoned house and garden they inhabit and cultivate. Their activist sabotage of the capitalist system with pamphlets and infiltration does not work, because the Sonias do not acknowledge the complexity of the global capitalist market system, as Tara Lee observes:

The tools of subversion which ultimately persist in a global capitalist system are the bodies of the Sonias’ babies and of Evie and Miranda, who escape the grip of the Pallas Police by retreating beyond the borders of Nextcorp. Tara Lee explains the importance of the survival of the cyborg bodies in Salt Fish Girl: “Paradoxically, capitalism implicates all bodies, and yet Lai suggests, effective resistance must be embodied” (104).

Although Evie’s and Miranda’s escape to the forest at the end of the novel suggests a retreat from the commodified urban space, the laboratories used for secret experiments in genetic engineering hidden in the forest show that in fact even the non-urban space is under corporate control. In Salt Fish Girl, there is no division between the commodified urban space and pristine nature. Both city and forest are part of the compartmentalization and commodification of space by the global capitalist system. Therefore, the flight of the two women to the forest is not a final withdrawal from the urban space and the patriarchal capitalist system but can only be a temporary retreat, as Miranda’s final statement shows: “Everything will be all right, I thought, until next time” (Salt Fish Girl 269). Although the activist campaign fails, the genet-
ically modified plants prove successful for the long-term plans of the cyborg women. Like the companies in the novel using information technology and bioengineering as devices to promote globalization, the women similarly make use of biotechnology. Although the Sonias are murdered, their identity quest and the subsequent creation of a new society presented in the novel as a counterdiscourse to the global capitalist system partially succeeds as the babies survive. The Sonias are able to subvert the master/slave situation after all by finding a way of creating their own offspring – not in laboratories but by using the genetically modified plants abandoned by the corporations and their scientists. In the novel’s showdown, Evie confronts her scientist “father” Dr. Flowers with the murder of her co-workers/“sisters,” and the extent of the Sonias’ long-term subversion through the re-claiming of their bodies and their success in charting their cyborg identity is revealed:

“Do you understand what those degenerate Sonias were doing at that house?”
“You gave the orders, didn’t you?” The knife appeared in her hand so quickly I could not be certain where it came from. But now the cool blade pressed, razor sharp, against the sagging flesh of his throat.
“I had no choice, Evie,” he rasped. “The tree...”
And in that moment I understood the secret of the trees, the clever Sonias and the depth of their subversion. That they were building a free society of their own kind from the ground up.

“The Sonias had been cultivating that tree, those cabbages and radishes for years. You had no right...”
“You don’t know,” said the doctor, “What monstrousities 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.”
“But what you did to make me, to make us, was not? I should cut your heart out and eat it.”
“I’m a scientist, Evie. Whereas those Sonias...not human.” (255-6)

Whereas Dr. Flowers insists on re-drawing the lines of male scientist and female property, of human and virtual human, the cyborg women transgress these borders between natural and artificial, organic and machine. With the Sonias’ plan to build a “free society of their own kind from ground up” (256) and with the children they were able to give birth to, Lai applies Haraway’s proclamation of the cyborg who, as Haraway says, “does not expect its father to save it through the restoration of the garden [of Eden], that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate” (“A Cyborg Manifesto” 151). Yet as the murder of the Sonias eventually shows, the free society of the cloned ethnic women still remains a dream moving up and down the assembly line (257-8), as only individuals manage to escape and create their own temporary safe spaces outside the territory of mainstream society.
Conclusion

“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,” Haraway writes (“A Cyborg Manifesto” 175). By putting advances in biotechnology and international immigration and labor policies into historical and contemporary contexts, Lai demonstrates how the cyborg workers’ gender and ethnicity are exploited by the capitalist system. Hence, ethnicity has to be reclaimed. For the reader as a consumer, Lai’s story pronounces the Catch-22 of a globalized market in which every desired product is instantly available at the cost of ecologically and socially irresponsible behavior. Telling the flip side of global capitalism, the stories of the cloned women not only critique but also present a counterdiscourse to global capitalism. As has been shown, the key aspect of this counterdiscourse is the women’s acceptance of their cyborg identities and of their cyborg bodies. During their identity quest the characters in Salt Fish Girl transgress the border between human and virtual human; like transnational hybrids of postcolonial theory, they chart the “in-between” space of the “stairwell” (Bhabha 4) as their own territory by reclaiming for their own objectives their bodies which are used as resource in the capitalist production cycle. By appropriating the biotechnology the corporate scientists use in order to produce cheap labor resources for the corporations, the cyborg women present a possibility of resistance to the system and support Haraway’s claim that the new technologies make possible rather than cause the global capitalist system the novel critiques.

The Sonia series chart the “Unregulated Zone” and “extra-legal” status of their existence by re-claiming and using their bodies not as product and property of the corporation but as individual entities within the system. They ensure their continued existence circumventing patriarchal control and capitalist profit:

I thought, we are the new children of the earth, of the earth’s revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future. (Salt Fish Girl 259)

Like the replicants in Blade Runner, the characters in Salt Fish Girl first struggle with the status of their ‘virtuality.’ Through these struggles, however, they learn to reclaim and turn the ‘Unregulated Zone’ of their ‘extra-legality’ into what Baccolini and Moylan call a “utopian impulse” in an otherwise dystopian surrounding (7). Returning to the context of the dystopia, the ‘utopian impulse’ in Salt Fish Girl is the state in which Miranda and Evie have captured the space of their ‘virtuality’ for their own advantage and have found a way to re-chart their cyborg identity. Because they have transgressed the borders mainstream society has erected around them when defining them
as virtual human beings, the baby Miranda gives birth to at the end of the novel, conceived through the consumption of a genetically altered durian fruit, suggests the birth of a new cyborg generation. As “new children of the earth,” this generation is born outside the dichotomies of human/non-human, legal/extra-legal, white/black, male/female, rich/poor. Its birth proves the successful subversion of the white patriarchal and corporate control exerted on its cyborg mothers. The baby heralds a new generation that no longer struggles with the border of legal and ‘extra-legal’ but redefines the space of ‘virtuality’ that mainstream North American society reserves for both transnational hybrids and cyborgs.


Morris, Robyn. “‘What does it mean to be human?’: Racing Monsters, Clones and Replicants.” *Foundation* 33.91 (2003): 81-96.

