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May 31, 2011

Life, Otherwise: Neoliberal Biopolitics and Resistance in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

In my view, the strangest part of Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* is not its opening, where a chatty but temperamental woman with the nether parts of a snake narrates her unceremonious creation of a disappointingly self-absorbed humankind. Nor is it any feature of either of the two narrative worlds that emerge subsequently—South China around the turn of the nineteenth century, with its triptych of rural village, industrial city, and semi-mythical mid-sea metropolis, or the Pacific Northwest in the mid-twenty-first-century, with its post-national spaces of corporate domination and its technological armature of cyborgs, clones, and virtual realities. Rather, what I find strangest about *Salt Fish Girl* are its final moments. After more than 250 pages in which restrictive systems, manipulative agents, and poor decisions precipitate the two protagonists—Nu Wa and Miranda—from one bad situation into another, the novel culminates abruptly, and seemingly perversely, on a note of unambiguous, if tentative, hope.

This is strange feature of the text, but not an arbitrary one. On my view, it is the final point of punctuation in Lai's subtle presentation of capital, power, and resistance in the latter of the two narratives, the one featuring Miranda and set several decades into the future. That narrative, therefore, rather than the half of the novel concerned with Nu Wa in China, makes up the focus of this essay. Within that narrative, Lai imagines a logical outcome for the globe, telescoped into the area in and around what is now Vancouver, if the current trajectory of neoliberalization were to proceed unobstructed. By 2044, a coterie of

globalized mega corporations known as the Big Six—among them Saturna, Nextcorp, Soni, and Monsanto—has risen to “absolute power” (14) within a transcontinental Pacific Economic Union (or PEU), and the Vancouver region has come to comprise a walled private city called Serendipity and a sprawling informal district known as the Unregulated Zone. Through the depiction of life in these two distinct but complementary spaces, the novel indicates that the type of power that predominates in neoliberal hegemony is *biopower*, understood in something very close to Foucault’s original sense of the term. From Serendipity to the Unregulated Zone, neoliberalism permits the conflation of life and capitalism, to the benefit of those who stand to gain from capital accumulation and to the detriment of the masses of the dispossessed. “Life,” then, constitutes the primary field of the political in the PEU. What makes *Salt Fish Girl* so striking (that is, strange) is that, instead of registering dismay at such an intensification of power, it represents the heightening of biopolitics as itself a source of potential for resistance, thus finding cause for optimism in a context where all alternatives seem to have been foreclosed.

Biopower, for Foucault, is the antithesis of sovereign power. The foundational right of the sovereign may be “the right of life and death” (“*Society*” 240), but the exercise of this right always entails an imbalance that favours death, since, though in its absolute authority the sovereign may kill its subjects, it has no comparable means by which to grant them life. In effect, therefore, sovereignty consists of the power to take life or let live. Biopower, in contrast, consists of the power to make live or let die. According to Foucault, this new technology emerged in the eighteenth century, dovetailing with the state’s established disciplinary techniques, which aimed to train the individual body into docility and productivity, and has since swelled greater in magnitude than the operational field of sovereignty. Biopower has “taken control of life in general—with the body as one pole and

the population as the other” (253). In tandem with discipline’s “anatomy-politics of the human body” (243), the “population” pole of biopower aims, through regularization, to “optimize a state of life” (246). Its mechanisms do not concern themselves with the individual but with the people *en masse*, addressing the aleatory factors in the group at a level of generality in order to improve and secure the life of the group overall.

Over the period of biopower’s ascendancy, sovereign power has diminished, but not entirely evaporated: as Foucault argues, in modern states the right of death continues paradoxically to persist alongside the imperative to maximize life. Killing, or letting die—understood to mean not just murder but also “the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (256)—becomes justified when it appears to serve life, when to expunge or discharge certain pestiferous elements would give a boost to vitality on a populational scale (Foucault calls this the *racism* of biopower). If between its disciplinary and regulatory poles, biopower encompasses and penetrates society thoroughly in the multiscalar sphere of human being that the term “life” defines, controlling in order to augment that sphere as productively and efficiently as possible, it nonetheless also operates deductively when necessary, by letting die.

Porting the concept of biopower from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where it resides in Foucault’s analysis, to the period of late capitalism is not a stretch. It is important, however, to keep in view along the way the neoliberal garb in which global capitalism has clothed itself since the 1980s. In their paper on “Biopower Today,” Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose argue that biopower in its Foucauldian sense maintains its analytical utility, provided that we are careful about our usage. Against various, often misleading recent deployments, such as in the work of Agamben and Hardt and Negri,

Rabinow and Rose propose that no plane of actuality is biopolitical unless it includes a minimum of three specific elements: “configurations of truth, power, and subjectivity” centred on a human population’s vital attributes (204), or in other words, a truth discourse about living beings, along with strategies of intervention and modes of subjectification in relation to that discourse and in the name of life (197). It is recognition of the third element—subjectification by power—that permits us to begin to conceive of how neoliberalism is an instance of biopower. It should therefore also inhibit us from seeing biopolitics, in the current political environment, as a straightforward source of potential counter-hegemonic energy.

Some otherwise valuable left efforts to foment change, however, have stumbled on this point. Matthew G. Hannah, for instance, working from the presumption that “how we construct biopower determines what we can do about it or with it” (3), opts to take up an “affirmative” strand from among the multitude of divergent constructions elaborated over the decades, a strand invested in seeing biopower as founded upon love and care. This, for Hannah, amounts to envisioning a programme of “*massive redistribution of the political, economic and environmental means for the self-determined fulfilment of life sideways across the globe*” for all humanity alive today (17, emphasis his). Gesturing toward a recuperated sense of nostalgia in the introduction and conclusion to the essay, Hannah seems to imply that this revolutionary biopolitical program might bear a certain resemblance to twentieth-century welfare statism, refurbished and universalized. While there are several penetrating insights in Hannah’s “still-fuzzy vision” (17), the problem with the narrative of restoring lost “biophilic” biopower as an organizing political schema in the world is that there *already is* a global biopolitical order, neoliberalism, which does not facilitate but stands in the way of the realization of any such large-scale socialist objectives. In fact, that order could well co-opt

Hannah's rhetoric of "the self-determined fulfillment of life" as a description of the principles of its own mode of subjectivization.

What capital cultivates in its neoliberal moment is a form of subjectivity that develops liberal autonomy in a new direction. For classical liberalism, the market is both a paradigm of and the means for the expression of human liberty: the market liberates agents to realize their natural capacities, but is itself nothing more than the sum of the economic interactions of those free agents. That is, in the very process of exchanging with one another, as they make decisions for purchase and sale on a rational private calculus of cost and benefit, individuals constitute a system that efficiently regulates itself, with benefit for all participants. The liberal state, then, deems it best to adopt *laissez-faire*, and leave the market to take care of itself. Foucault proposes that today's "new" liberalism departs from this view in two ways. First, it does not see the ideal market economy as springing up naturally out of free exchange, but rather as a product of an artificial structure of competition that must be formally introduced and maintained (*Birth* 131). Second, it aspires not to secure the integrity of the market from state interference, but to establish the competitive market as the model for the state itself (131), and correspondingly, for the government of all domains of human activity.

Put differently, this model operates as the norm of neoliberal biopolitics. Neoliberal doctrine posits that the optimal state of "life," at all levels from the body up to the population, will follow when privatization and marketization spread everywhere, and when the only regulation implemented is the regulation of competitive conditions for the various market spaces of society in which autonomous individuals will act in rational economic terms to achieve their private ends. Under these conditions, subjectivization effects a picture of human beings as specimens of the self-responsible *homo oeconomicus*—"an

entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (Foucault, *Birth* 226). Unfolding the logic of capitalism into every instance of deliberation and interaction, whether economic or social or political, neoliberalism creates a truth discourse that normalizes capitalism as quotidian common-sense. Capitalist rationality becomes conflated with “life,” and at the same time, the biopolitical exercise of the sovereign right of death targets anything that, in dying, can animate capitalism. As Jason Read contends, “neoliberalism can be considered a particular version of ‘capitalism without capitalism,’ a way of maintaining not only private property but the existing distribution of wealth in capitalism while simultaneously doing away with the antagonism and social insecurity of capitalism, in this case paradoxically by extending capitalism, at least its symbols, terms, and logic, to all of society” (32).

Neoliberalism wins consent by widely producing “freedom,” opening up apparently new spaces of autonomy and choice. But it does so in a way that “limits the sense of what is possible” (Read 36). It proliferates the freedom represented by self-interested market autonomy, which is conducive to corporate strategies of capital accumulation, but what it diminishes is the freedom of living otherwise, such as in ways, for instance, that give much greater precedence to solidarity, social responsibility, and inter-dependence.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, this is certainly the truth about the people of Serendipity, the Saturna-run city nestled somewhere in what was once Vancouver. With her characterization of Stewart, Miranda’s father, in his job as “tax collector” for a Serendipity bank, Lai presents neoliberal subjectivization as “responsibilizing” and alienating, but as nonetheless addictive. Stewart works from home in the evenings, a possibility allowed by his Business Suit, a technology that projects his mind in corporeal form into the world. When he puts on the Suit, covering himself from head to toe in its shiny synthetic black material, Stewart is able to

carry out his duties for Saturna while remaining physically in place in the family's basement. What he experiences psychologically while in the Suit, however, is not the real world but something known as Real World, a computer-mediated reality that transforms him into a soldier-hero and tax-collecting into "a marvellous adventure" (27), replete with violence that registers as actual pain in the flesh. Real World fails to supply practical knowledge about the PEU[]: it is "awash with a plethora of ideologically-interesting half-truths, in such abundance that only the most obsessed insomniacs could sort them, and even then, any action based on information gleaned was a gamble" (60). It alienates Stewart from both the people from whom he takes taxes and the Receivers-General to whom he remits them. It cloaks the truth of the work that he is doing, the sort of impact it has upon the public good (it never becomes clear what it means, precisely, to collect taxes for a bank). It takes a severe toll on his body. And the expected reward for a lifetime of such hazardous service is nothing more than a "meagre pension" upon which he cannot even afford to retire (95). Yet in spite of all this, there are "narrative mechanisms of the Game that [keep] workers like himself hooked" (95). The Business Suit offers Stewart the thrill of being "an entrepreneur of himself," of creatively seeking satisfaction through his work as a free, autonomous individual in a challenging and competitive environment. That this is enough for him signals the success of neoliberal "narrative mechanisms" in constituting their particular variety of subjectivity. The first time that Miranda views her father on a video monitor attached to his Suit's console, striding valiantly and purposefully through the Real World, she too cannot resist the appeal: "I thought that perhaps when I grew up, I'd like to be a tax collector too" (27). Saturna has no need for the coercive measures of sovereignty to maintain the consent of its citizens in Serendipity when the image of private agents acting in accordance with the rationality of self-interest styles thought as much as it does the marketplace of buying and selling. The

corporation profits from individuals' disaggregation, while workers like Stewart remain content even as they fail to reap their share of the benefits, due to the difficulty of seeing neoliberal "freedom" as itself ideologically problematic.

Beyond the symbol of the Business Suit, Lai uses Serendipity to show that the state of life optimized by neoliberal biopower necessitates social and political isolation. Focalized in the first person through Miranda, the narrative does not offer an overview of the structure or history of the city, but we can glean from scattered details that Serendipity is a self-enclosed, securitized unit. The corporation issues its own currency, maintains a private police force, offers private educational and medical services, and makes all of the latest high-tech goods available for consumption, allowing its "corporate citizens" (14) a comfortable life insulated from globalization's wider social and environmental consequences. Within the city's walls, little information is available about other corporate cities and the people who live in them. Nor is their much transparency about the Unregulated Zone, which both Running Dog TV and the *Saturna Telegram* characterize as a wild and dangerous place of alterity, thereby discouraging communication and identification beyond the city limits. Whatever greater knowledge *is* available to the citizens of Serendipity comes to them only through approved channels. As Miranda remarks, "it was, in fact, through new technologies that I learned anything at all about the world" (25)—technologies such as the Business Suit, its similarly distortive children's edition the Swimming Suit, and Miranda's electronic comic books, which mix interactive princess fairy tales with advertising. It thus becomes difficult for any Saturna citizen to "cognitively map" his or her place in the global capitalist system (Jameson 54), or to imagine that system in molar terms.¹ Miranda, who is born in Serendipity, is

¹ While I argue that *Salt Fish Girl* shows that isolation is among neoliberal capitalism's biopolitical strategies, Tara Lee somewhat contrarily argues through the novel that "fragmentation" is something that capitalism must work to mask. See Lee, "Mutant Bodies in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*."

unaware as a young adult of the bio-engineering implicit in the Saturna Gala that is “amply large enough to feed the four of us” (32). For her it is normal that all food should be “always vibrant bright and regular in shape and colour” (31), as the technological and economic processes that enable her family’s middle-class lifestyle in Serendipity, “where all the storefront windows gleamed with cleanliness, behind which beautiful things were displayed” (30), along with the ramifications of Saturna’s business outside of the city compound, are all tidily obscured from view. She gets a brief and perplexing glimpse of the labour upon which Serendipity depends when Ian Chestnut—a new student who, as the son of corporate spies, knows a thing or two more than Miranda—leads her down a secret passageway into the bowels of their school. In an underground corridor, peeking around the corner, she observes for the first time her school’s Janitors, women who have been turned into cyborgs:

The muscle and skin of their backs had been replaced with some kind of transparent silicone composite so that you could see their spines and behind them, their hearts pounding, their livers and kidneys swimming in oceans of blood and gristle. (77)

While Ian is able to reconcile this uncanny sight in terms of his new-age evangelicism, Miranda possesses no adequate framework for the Janitors. She is left feeling claustrophobic, with no desire to investigate further, and she immediately hurries back above ground to beat the 9:00am school bell. Whatever the merits of the consumerist “good life” that Saturna provides for its citizens, the corporation’s biopolitical strategies have as their ultimate goal not the well-being of humanity and the rest of the planet’s organisms, but an individualized manner of life and thought that will bolster global capitalist productivity.

What remains invisible from within the compound is the morbid side of biopower that characterizes the Unregulated Zone. Because it is not directly under the control of any

of the Big Six, the Zone appears at first glance to be refreshingly extrinsic to capitalist economy. For instance, after departing from Serendipity, the Chings, having come upon a derelict house *cum* grocery store, decide to move in and open it up again, stocking the shelves with “the remains of [their] old life” (81). Because the currencies of both the moribund nation-state and the corporations are unstable here, the Chings must conduct business by means of item-for-item bartering. But with all of the family members chipping in, they get the store humming along smoothly—“we made our profits in slight surpluses of goods” (82)—and manage to quickly achieve a rather pleasant existence. Miranda’s brother runs a used auto and bike parts shop from the garage attached to the back of their complex. Miranda attends a makeshift school three mornings a week in a nearby church basement. Her mother Aimee takes to organic gardening, transforming a small plot in their backyard into a site not only of verdure and beauty but also of community: “she had a very green thumb and a sweet, sociable disposition that invited others to help her, to give her rocks and plants and tips that made the garden thrive” (84). In short, as Miranda summarizes, “Somehow we maintained our sanity and equilibrium and found daily joy in little things” (84).

This communal idyll, however, (which in any case is short-lived) is quite starkly much more the exception than the rule in the Unregulated Zone. What was once Vancouver is now a polluted and decaying urban wasteland, full of crumbling, mostly empty buildings and the stench of “old petrol, sulphur, urine and rotten food” (37). The atmosphere is suffused by the despair of the “wasted lives” of the poor, those whom the global penetration of modernization’s processes of “commodification, commercialization and monetarization” (Bauman 6) has deprived of socioeconomic livelihood. Saturna has no place for them in its city, and their care would deplete profits with little hope of return on the investment. The corporate-state therefore leaves them to their own devices, which in many cases is

tantamount to leaving them to death. “People,” Miranda explains, “died in droves beneath the bridges and in the open-air rooms of half-collapsed buildings” (85). Those who survive do so with little dignity, like a girl who, “too poor to afford socks, wore plastic shopping bags over her feet” (39). It does not help that much of the natural environment has become dangerously contaminated as a result of the corporations’ irresponsible bio-technological tinkering. As Miranda’s father Stewart puts it, “If it grows wild in the Unregulated Zone then you have no idea what kinds of mutations have occurred” (32).

But even in their “wasting” state, the inhabitants of the Zone still contribute to the vitality of the global capitalist system. Importantly, as Craig Willse points out, “understanding death, the production of death and the management of death as economic activities suggests that *that which is ill or dying does not need to be eliminated to grant biopolitical life to a population*” (180, emphasis his). The numbers and the misery of the unemployed poor cannot but encourage the citizens of Serendipity to accede to the paltry conditions of life and work on offer there, as Stewart does: fear of losing the safety net (however meagre) of the private city, coupled with knowledge of the nearby pool of employable bodies, keeps workers tractable. Further, a more direct benefit accrues to enterprises when they enter the Unregulated Zone themselves and supplement their biopolitics with disciplinary tactics. For instance, Logo Moguls, an advertising firm, chooses to set itself up in the Zone because its executives are confident that the business will thereby be “cheaper to run, less beholden to the strict regulations of the walled cities and therefore freer to be more creative both with their [*sic*] products and their labour practices” (233). The Zone also plays host to a number of covert factories, similar to thousands of others spread all over the PEU, where purpose-made clones are effectively enslaved for their labour. There is thus a strong resemblance between the Zone and the “*weak state* in the ‘world economy’ which the center works

endlessly to exploit” (Retort 32, emphasis theirs), a region devoid of any substantive government or institutions of its own and vulnerable to the capital-serving incursions of multinationals, the Zone differing mainly in that it is conveniently located only a stone’s throw away from the metropole. As in Foucault’s formulation, the exercise of “killing” under biopower here functions not only to secure the population through the removal of something harmful, but also to make its life positively better. The morbid side of neoliberal biopower rids the corporate-state of the burden of providing for the biological and social reproduction of masses of people who lack the means to embody its entrepreneurial mode of living; at the same time, it draws on those “dying” people as a resource to better sustain the capitalist whole.

Thinking of Nazi Germany, Foucault termed this general operation “racist.” The biopolitical deployment of the sovereign function of death does not necessitate literal racialization, but in *Salt Fish Girl* race does become an important factor. Indeed, race is a factor even within Serendipity, which Lai portrays as tacitly exclusive in the manner of neoliberal Canadian multiculturalism, a frequent object of her critique.² For example, after Miranda’s birth, in the glow of a new-found love for one another, Stewart and his wife begin to neglect the yard that had previously been the object of their meticulous attention, and as a result it explodes into a “riotous exuberance of life” (18). In short order, “the next-door neighbour, Mr. Burke, a tall, burly man with a thick red mustache, meticulously trimmed, just like the lawn outside his house” (18) is at the Chings’ doorstep with stern reprimands for Stewart, who responds obsequiously. This brief vignette is a nod to recent racial politics in

² In “Corrupted Lineage,” for instance, Lai writes: “While the official Multiculturalism of the Trudeau era afforded a measure of the acknowledgement of difference, its parameters were rigidly controlled. Only those kinds of safe differences that could be perceived as commensurate with perceived “Canadian” traits or practices could enter sanctioned discourse. Richard Fung has referred to this as the “song and dance” of official Multiculturalism.” See also Lai, “Brand Canada.”

Vancouver, where the influx into white neighbourhoods on the city's affluent West side of wealthy Chinese transnationals with sometimes divergent domestic practices produced a great deal of anxiety about the loss of white privilege and social stability, often expressed through laments over declining "neighbourhood character."³ Similarly, in Serendipity, though the Chings reside there as full corporate citizens, it is clear that only select aspects of Asian culture are considered acceptable. Miranda's mother was, in her youth, a cabaret singer at a local club called the New Kubla Khan, where she would dress in cheongsam and perform Nancy Kwan covers and other ditties to popular acclaim. Aimee's success was possible because her performance conformed to a domesticated, orientalized image of Asian femininity. Her daughter, however, is born with a powerfully foul stench—the acrid "pepper-pissy" (15) stench of durian, a fruit native to Southeast Asia—that, for the rest of her life, will hang over her "like a cloud" (69). Miranda is ostracized at school, taunted by other children with names like Cat Box, Kitty Litter, and Pissy Pussy. Her stench stands in for the various strange smells that are often presumed to emanate from the homes and bodies of "ethnic" minority groups, and marks her as Asian in a way that Serendipity society cannot tolerate.

Increasingly anxious about Miranda's inability to fit in, Stewart places his hopes in traditional Chinese herbal medicine. Practitioners cannot be found in Serendipity, however—multiculturalist inclusivity is only willing to go so far. Liette Gilbert notes of neoliberal Canada that "in promoting cultural particularism, multiculturalism has involved the commodification of ethnic diversity (i.e., ethnic food, art, cultural productions) and the consolidation of ethnic entrepreneurialism at the local level" (11), in the process losing sight of the objective of integrating minorities and newcomers justly into the national polity. Thus

³ For a discussion of this conflict as part of the history of the neoliberalization of Vancouver, see Mitchell, *Crossing the Neoliberal Line* 163-212.

with wares—“roots and herbs in strange muted colours, browns and dark greens and greys” (31) used to make “foul-tasting remedies” (60)—that do not seem to lend themselves to commodification, and working principles that do not line up with those of Western scientific reason, the herbal practitioners are relegated, like everything else unnecessary or irksome to capitalist processes, to the Unregulated Zone. Although Stewart ventures out illegally to the Zone for consultations, bringing home one potential remedy after another all throughout Miranda’s childhood, in the end nothing is able to sever Miranda from her durian odour, and its inexplicable persistence contributes to the family’s peremptory dismissal by Saturna and expulsion into the Zone themselves. Neoliberalism, Lai indicates, no less than liberalism, sets strict bounds for what aspects of non-Western cultural experience may present themselves in the public realm, and what aspects ought to remain a private affair.

The explicitly racist biopower of the corporate state then emerges in the novel as a logical extension of the more or less benign prejudices that inhere in neoliberal Western societies, whatever those societies’ official commitments to multiculturalism. Apart from the Chings, almost all of the non-white characters that appear in the novel are dehumanized in one way or another, transformed into beings biologically alien to the population and hence unassimilable to biopower’s anthropocentric life-maximizing strategies. Miranda describes the Janitors on whom Ian and Miranda spy as “dark bodies in blue uniforms” speaking a language she doesn’t understand (75), and Ian refers to them as “illegal” (76). They are future versions of today’s disenfranchised “immigrant workers who, although physically within the borders of the nation, are nonetheless framed as the ‘other’ against which norms come to be constructed” (Wong 121). In this case, however, the “othering” takes an extreme form, involving the cyborgization of the women’s bodies, which precipitates them from the category of the human altogether. Ian, in response to Miranda’s query, “Who are

those women?” remarks, “Oh, them... they’re not women. They’re Janitors” (76). As Katharyne Mitchell argues, “the central ‘civil rights’ tenets of liberalism—individualism, individual choice, dignity, freedom, and rationality—are premised on a form of reason and of rational behavior which is culturally inscribed and can *never* be completely accessible to the outsider” (30, emphasis hers). It is all too easy for Ian to see these racialized bodies as being in contravention of a notion of legal personhood which, though highly contingent and culturally inscribed, he nonetheless takes as universally normative, and which, therefore, allows him to disidentify from them wholesale.

Lai drives home her critique of institutional racism with her delineation of the genealogy of the clones whom the corporations create for their secret factories. Each and every one of these clones has “brown eyes and black hair” (160), some taking their genetic structure from a Chinese-Japanese couple that was interned during the Second World War, others from the Diverse Genome Project, which “focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World. Aboriginal peoples, and people in danger of extinction” (160). With these allusions to an egregious example of wrongful incarceration and expropriation and to a grandiose scientific project with colonial undertones, Lai gives the clones a biological history rooted in the liberal Canadian state’s betrayal of its own professed democratic, egalitarian values. The corporate-state merely develops on the same theme, introducing a “caesura” in the biological continuum (Foucault, “*Society*” 255) to amplify these bodies’ unassimilability. The clones, it turns out, are all part animal. Those in the Sonia line are “point zero three percent *Cyprinus carpio*—freshwater carp” (158), while those in the Miyako line are a similar percentage cat, giving the corporations a loophole through whatever regulations governing the use of human biomaterial still hold force in the PEU. In contrast to the inhabitants of the Unregulated Zone, who are at least nominally citizens of the nation-state and always

potential citizens of the corporate state, the dark-skinned Janitors, Sonias, and Miyakos are, as human life, fully dead. Of course, when neoliberal biopower “kills” them in this way, the global capitalist system gains subjugated labour upon which to feed vampirically.

From Serendipity out into the Unregulated Zone, the power that sustains the hegemonic order in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-twenty-first century is a thick and voluminous biopolitical one. With great proficiency, this hyper-neoliberal mode of capital harnesses both “life” and “death,” broadly construed, for its self-propagation. The wealth that it generates, however, does not fall into the hands of any of the novel’s characters, or even trickle down to them, but presumably fills the coffers of the Big Six as well as the bank accounts of the unseen elite perched near the corporate pinnacles. *Salt Fish Girl* reminds us that as much as neoliberalization may appear in policy to be a design for kick-starting global capitalism into producing higher economic growth, in practice it has been a project to “re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey 19).

But if the corporate state’s biopolitics have achieved tremendous penetration in Lai’s dystopian world of mass dispossession, through to the molecular level of subjectivity, and if power in a Foucauldian sense has no absolute outside, this does not mean that the possibility of resistance becomes an impossibility, as Foucault’s own work demonstrates. Some commentators have interpreted Foucault to have ultimately discarded the positions he took in his earlier genealogies of power, and instead to have favoured the idea of a metaphysical subject with individual agency existing beyond or prior to power.⁴ To maintain that Foucault uncharacteristically embraced a sort of liberal humanism at the end of his career is to assume

⁴ For a recent monograph of Foucault commentary in this vein, see Paras, *Foucault 2.0*.

that, earlier on, he understood power in a way that left no room for ethical or political agency and that, finally, he had to depart from the power paradigm in order to make that room possible. Yet, as Ben Golder submits, Foucault never conceived of power in negative terms as absolutely repressive, constraining, or deterministic, but emphasized all along that power functions positively to produce subjects within grids of contestatory relations (367). And “to argue that subjects emerge in and through power relations is not to argue that they are the unwitting dupes of disciplinary logics which they are doomed never to comprehend or resist” (367). What shifted in Foucault’s work as his career progressed was only his perspective: he came to give greater attention to the capacities and actions of the self. As Golder notes, “crucially, the late Foucauldian subject’s capacity for action (including self-rearticulation) thus derives not from some primal pre-existent but rather from the very capacity-bequeathing discourses and institutions whose commands are variously repeated, obeyed, transgressed and appropriated” (368)—the subject, in brief, is an “unfinished process-effect” (369). Lai in the novel conceives of power and resistance in similar terms. She has said in an interview that while “[in *Salt Fish Girl*] I’m thinking a lot more in terms of systems and a lot less in terms of individual capability, individual power” (25), she nonetheless feels that “hope lies in the random—the idea that out of the worst situations, sometimes mutations occur in a liberatory direction” (25). It is this, quasi-Foucauldian understanding that accounts for the strangeness of the book’s hopeful quality.

For, the most potent challenges to the hegemony of the Big Six in *Salt Fish Girl* do not come from the obvious places. A group of escaped Sonias, led by one of their own (Evie, as she renames herself), attempts to mount a conventional kind of rebellion. Enlisting “raggedy looking students” (188) in their cause, they begin with low-tech leafleting and protests outside factory compounds, and then escalate with a plan to infiltrate and sabotage

shoe factories on a massive scale by substituting the standard sole-moulds with ones that would impress worker biographies, poems, polemics, and drawings upon the bottoms of shoes, which in turn would stamp those political texts as footprints onto the pavement for all to see. In concentrating their struggle onto the factory floor, however, the Sonias mistake the dispersed power of their world for the more localized power of a previous era. Security forces brutally suppress them on their day of action: virtually all that remains afterward is “newly turned dirt in a strip along the far edge [of an empty field] beside the forest” (250).

Similarly, Miranda fails to be the activist hero that Lai sets her up to be. Early in the novel, during the Chings’ Serendipity days, the young Miranda, increasingly upset by the pain her father suffers in the course of Tax-Collecting, takes it upon herself to save him. One night, after sneaking into the basement, she puts on the Business Suit herself and turns the usual narrative of Real World upside-down by returning money to the people and burning the Receivers General “to a black skeletal crisp” (79). Despite what this act (which is another likely reason for the family’s expulsion from the city) would seem to foreshadow, for the greater part of the narrative Miranda remains a stubbornly neoliberal subject. When Aimee dies, Miranda learns that her mother has willed her the rights to her old cabaret songs, which at her father’s request she promises never to sell but to “always keep... in the family” (93). Yet years later, not long after she has developed a relationship with Evie and learned some hard truths about the PEU, she quite abruptly signs away one of these songs to Logo Moguls to market the very shoe company, Pallas, that relies on clones like Evie for production, thus betraying her father and her new partner in a single move. From the sale Miranda receives not only cash but also a position at Logo Moguls, where she contributes further to Pallas’ advertising campaign. Not unlike her father in his Business Suit, at Logo Moguls Miranda has the freedom to capitalize on her personal creative assets, and this

economically rational endeavour outweighs all other concerns. “What the hell,” she muses, “I didn’t personally do anything to those factory women, did I?” (202). And when her pleased father suggests that she is finally on track to “make something of her life,” she grins “smugly” (233). This exchange occurs in the novel’s antepenultimate chapter, a few dozen pages from the close, and though in the narrative’s final episode Evie draws Miranda once again into the affairs of the clones, Miranda never experiences the epiphanic moment of transcendent political awareness and strengthened resolve, the birth of a reawakened desire to burn the rest of the Receivers General and their ilk, that we might hope for her.

The novel, then, does not place its hopes in any character’s autonomous agency against some putative unified enemy. Rather, in keeping with its presentation of diffuse biopower as late capitalist hegemony’s primary political modality, it posits life itself, in the form of the nature of human being, as the site of potential transformation. And in this regard it seems to develop upon the provocative thesis laid out by Sergei Prozorov in his article “The Unrequited Love of Power: Biopolitical Investment and the Refusal of Care.” Again largely in response to the work Agamben and of Hardt and Negri, where he observes a conflation of biopolitics and sovereignty, Prozorov carefully distinguishes the two types of power, opposing “*sovereign subjection* (the power of absolute exclusion, deprivation or negation)” to “*biopolitical investment* as the power of mobilising, fostering and, ultimately, creating life” (56, emphasis his). Although modern Western states, from German Nazism to Soviet Stalinism to global neoliberal capitalism, he argues, may embody the “demonic” contradiction of a synthesis of biopolitics and sovereignty,⁵ maintaining the conceptual distinction between them is nonetheless important for an oppositional perspective. It allows us to evade the misstep of challenging one from the terrain of the other (which is what the

⁵ It was Foucault who first gave this synthesis the “demonic” label. See Prozorov 57 n. 11.

Sonias do, and what Prozorov controversially claims is also the case in global human rights discourse), and to instead theorize resistance to a biopolitical system (albeit one that subsumes the sovereign right to kill) as something qualitatively different from the anti-sovereign forms of resistance with which we are familiar:

If resistance to sovereignty, which in all its versions is essentially a relationship of command, consists in *disobedience* and *revolt* either for the purposes of establishing a new form of sovereignty or refusing sovereignty as such in a variably conceived ideal of anarchism, resistance to biopower must entail the *refusal of care*, an attitude of indifference no longer to the threat of power, but to its loving embrace. (62, emphasis his)

In the modern context of “demonic synthesis,” the spread of such indifference would free up life from immanentist biopower but reaffirm sovereignty as the primary modality of power, making the much more readily graspable sovereign once more the foundation of the space of political contestation. In Prozorov’s analysis, this is precisely what occurred during the fall of the Soviet Union. Dissatisfied with the quality of the communist life fostered by the regime, individuals turned instead toward various alternate forms of life that, as they burgeoned into a full-scale “shadow society,” undermined the Soviet order’s biopolitical framework. With its authority displaced entirely onto its sovereign capacities, the Soviet government had only the right of death at its disposal, but inasmuch as it seemed reluctant to exercise this right in order to bring society back in line, it lost its legitimacy, became vulnerable to its opponents, and ultimately yielded to a new order. As for neoliberal capitalism, while Prozorov observes that it consists of “the simultaneous subjection of the target populations to the sovereignty of Western powers and the biopolitics of neoliberal governance, which paradoxically practices care through the disciplinary practices of the

formation of the self-reliant, enterprising subject” (73), he does not lay out what resistance to it in accordance with his theorization might entail. But to pursue the course of his logic, if neoliberal biopolitics consists of the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivity, that is, of extending care to individuals by giving them the (sense of) freedom to care for (or about) themselves, then resistance would entail enacting indifference to this disaggregating, privatizing, responsabilizing, entrepreneurializing care. It would entail declining to calculate actions based on self-interested economic rationality, and forgoing the market conditions neoliberalism works to establish. It would mean refusing to find an appeal in that kind of life, that kind of freedom. It would mean searching out not a replacement biopolitical order, but forms of life that are irredeemably “otherwise” and upon which neoliberal capitalism has no purchase.

Appropriately, in *Salt Fish Girl*, the one aspect of the Sonias’ attempt at subversion that achieves a measure of success is their appropriation of the by-products of corporate bioengineering. When Evie and the others were still enslaved in the factories, rumours reached them of wild fruit in the Unregulated Zone that, due to uncontrolled cross-pollination between certain genetically-modified varieties of tree crops, possessed the power to “make women pregnant without any need for insemination” (258). They initially escape in order to find the fruit, and once they do (it turns out to be durian), they put it to use, impregnating themselves by consuming its mutated flesh and supporting and strengthening the foetuses with specially cultivated cabbages and radishes. The new generation that emerges from their wombs quite literally constitutes an unprecedented life form, a multispecies hybrid of *homo sapiens*, *cyprinus carpio*, and *durio*—human, fish, and fruit. This is a risky venture, as Dr. Flowers, the master bio-engineer, notes in his reproach to Evie: “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... It was too dangerous” (256). The Sonias, however, are more than willing to accept biological danger, even as far as death, if it promises freedom from neoliberal biopower’s stranglehold over their mode of living. Against the corporations, who breed clones exclusively for labour, the Sonias reproduce simply for the exuberance of life as such, in the hopes of “building a free society of their own kind from the ground up” (256). Miranda too takes part in their project, albeit unwittingly at first, eating pieces of one the Sonias’ durians without realizing that pregnancy will follow.

To Miranda’s question, “Who helps you?” Evie responds, “We help ourselves” (224). In a deserted district of the Unregulated Zone, far outside of the purview of either corporate- or nation-state care, they manage—perilously—to sustain themselves on the contaminated land that for others is a source of constant fear, creating an organic, non-capitalist community emphasizing family and solidarity over autonomy and self-possession. Fittingly, rather than renaming themselves, they choose to remain “Sonias” in numerical sequence (even the one who doesn’t, Evie, *née* Sonia 113, finds her new name “weird” and “never quite comfortable” [223]), and give each of their daughters a single name as well: “Dora,” the gift. Their sameness, their common genes and common cause, trumps their individuality.

It is because the corporate state cannot countenance the clones’ resolute indifference to neoliberal capital’s biopolitical imperatives that, instead of deploying more modest techniques of discipline and punishment, it makes such exorbitant use of its sovereign power of death. But while the repression is successful (all that escapes the corporate police’s violence is Evie, one other elderly Sonia, five large durians, a basket of radishes, and five infant Doras), wayward biotechnology poses another, larger threat to neoliberal hegemony

that cannot be so easily resolved. A mysterious new condition is affecting greater and greater numbers in the PEU, one apparently caused by contact with soil contaminated by the “mass industrial genetic alteration practices” of modern agriculture (102). From the perspective of medicine, the symptoms of this “dreaming disease” or “drowning disease” include “foul odours of various sorts that follow the person around 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). Among those afflicted are “a 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 remember the lives of everyone who had ever died of tuberculosis,” and “a woman who reeked of radishes... [with] fabulous tales that involved the stealing of fruit and young women rescued from tall towers” (101-102). But, as these examples suggest, this peculiar conjunction of attributes is less comprehensible as a “disease” than as an alternate form of subjectivity—a “dreamer’s subjectivity.” It is as though all that which neoliberal subjectivization seeks to discredit and banish here makes a startling comeback. Failing not only to remain discrete from fiction and myth, but also to remain “resolved” in the past, history bursts forward to make a claim upon the present, and in the process troubles the narrative of modernity through which capitalism can present itself as the natural *telos* of human progress. Smell, which Paul Lai notes is “an especially intimate form of knowledge” (183) that appeals directly to feeling, enables sudden, intuitive recognitions of commonality and correspondence. And, over and against neoliberalism’s individualizing rhetoric, a yearning for continuity and oneness reasserts itself in the drive for total immersion in water. Thus, in the novel, serendipitous mutation in human being’s embodied subjectivity surfaces as an avenue toward resisting neoliberalism’s limiting production of “life.” Unsurprisingly, the corporate state refuses to acknowledge the

existence of the “disease” and forbids all research into its specifics: its biopolitics are not up to the task of disciplining the aberrance back into normality.

The novel concludes on a cautiously optimistic note on this account, and more particularly, because Miranda can count herself as one of the “dreamers.” Like the Doras, Miranda’s conception was durian-induced. Brought home illicitly from the Unregulated Zone by Stewart for Aimee’s pleasure, one of the fruits tumbled between the two as they themselves tumbled around on the floor, gifting a couple in their sixties with an unexpected new child. This partial parentage by modified durian, rather than any intercourse with contaminated soil, represents the source of Miranda’s symptoms, which include not only the durian stench, but also transhistorical memory of the lives of Nu Wa, the primordial half-woman, half-snake being who created humankind and eventually joined it herself. Miranda, in fact, is also Nu Wa’s latest incarnation, a form of Nu Wa having enclosed herself within the fateful durian that Stewart smuggled into Serendipity for his wife. By interleaving the narrative world of Miranda with that of Nu Wa, the novel suggests structural and thematic correspondences between the lives of these women, and hence formalizes the *Jetztzeit*-like temporality of a dreamer’s form of human being.⁶ Miranda’s egocentric actions, for instance, parallel Nu Wa’s actions when she was a rebellious girl in early industrial South China, just as Miranda’s erotic connection to Evie parallels Nu Wa’s erotic connection to the titular salt fish girl and Evie’s factory exploitation in the PEU parallels the salt fish girl’s factory exploitation a century and a half earlier in Canton. In short, the doubled narrative of *Salt Fish Girl* indicates that, in the dreamer’s alternative subjectivity, one is much less autonomous and “free” than beholden to the past, perennially and inexorably conscious of

⁶ For Walter Benjamin, *Jetztzeit* (“now-time”) refers to the short-circuiting of the past and the present that occurs when an historical “monad” flares up and becomes charged with the time of the now. See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

the *longue durée* of globalization and modernity. Thus the novel culminates in a tangle of lives and temporalities: submerged in a secluded hot spring at the end of a day of running from the authorities, Miranda and Evie's bodies take on characteristics of their ancient snake and fish forms, and, at the moment when they coil around each other, Miranda gives birth to a "black haired and bawling... little baby girl" (269). All this moves Miranda to reflect, "Everything will be alright... until next time" (269).

Objectively, not much has changed over the course of the narrative. Though one nearby corporate town, Painted Horse, has collapsed, and a section of Serendipity has fallen out of Saturna's control, on the whole the absolute power of the Big Six remains unshaken. And Miranda remains aware in this moment of holistic union of her self and Evie's, and of past, present, and future, that looming ahead is a "next time," another site of contestation in the necessarily ongoing struggle within power to establish better conditions for existence. Still, for her, their successful refusal of the neoliberal biopolitics of late capitalism, along with her newfound commitment to cultivating subversive forms of "life," constitute sufficient grounds for feeling hopeful. Even as capitalism subsumes more and more of our world, *Salt Fish Girl* proposes, it will never fail to enable openings for resistance. When opportunities for fashioning life otherwise present themselves, we can seize upon them and perhaps coordinate our efforts into a vital counter-hegemony—provided, however, that we can convince ourselves that forfeiting the freedom naturalized under neoliberalism is worth the risk.

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