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Myths of Origin and Myths of the Future in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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“The present exists as a tension between the way things have always been and the way things ought to be. Myth . . . is all about this dialectic of past and future; it is a narrative whose beginning and ending always inform the middle”
(Laurence Coupe on Paul Ricoeur, *Myth* 97)

Contemporary views on myth are, in general, quite pejorative. Myths have the taint of the “primitive” or the religious, and are generally perceived at best as untrue, harmless stories or at worst as deterministic doctrines that bind us to older ways of thinking. Donna Haraway, in her now-famous essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” would seem to take the latter point of view, claiming that our myths of origin are the deterministic models from which cyborgs will help us to escape: “The cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense An origin story in the ‘Western,’ humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss, and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history” (Haraway “A Cyborg Manifesto” 292). This essay will use the preceding quotation as a starting point in order to interrogate Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, and then to use Lai's novel to interrogate Haraway's commentary on myth. *Salt Fish Girl* is, like most “contemporary science fiction [,] . . . full of cyborgs” (Haraway 291), but it is also full of myths, particularly origin myths. These origin myths are revised in Lai's novel, as well as being intersected with one another, so that they do not remain strictly “western.” Lai rewrites the Chinese myth of the creation of humans, intersecting it with Hans Christian Andersen's “The Little Mermaid”; in addition, she sprinkles the text with allusions to the Biblical book of Genesis. Thus, with *Salt Fish Girl*, Larissa Lai demonstrates that the desire to do away with the naturalization of certain problematic narratives does not necessitate doing away with the myths in which such narratives find their origin. Instead of envisioning cyborgs with no origin myths, Lai revises origin myths, intersects them, and finally participates in her own mythopoeia; all of these manoeuvres suggest that myths can offer possibilities rather than constraints. It is not the cyborgs in this text that

contain a potential to liberate, but it is the process of remythologization that constantly opens up possibilities.

Haraway writes that “a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (291). As hybrids of either machine or animal and humans, cyborgs appear in order to break down the integrity of human bodies, freeing the body from its control by official discourses. Haraway, along with other post-humanists, is arguing for “*pleasure* in confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (Haraway 292). *Salt Fish Girl* is full of cyborgs. Human-machine boundaries are transgressed by the “business” and “swimming” suits, which allow their wearer to experience a virtual reality physically as well as mentally. Female “Janitors” do the cleaning at Miranda’s school, but are not “women”: “The muscle and skin on 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” (Lai 76-7). Even Evie, who is 0.03% freshwater carp, is also part machine: “At the base of her spine was a series of numbers, which looked at a distance like they had been tattooed on, but if you looked more closely, the digits were raised ridges filled with some kind of powdered black metal” (Lai 156). As well as having these numbers underneath her skin, Evie bears a scar from an imbedded device that is used to keep track of her and the other clones.

The human-machine cyborgs in *Salt Fish Girl* are not beings of infinite possibility in the novel as they are for Haraway in her essay. Miranda’s father’s business suit causes him a great deal of physical pain, which eventually becomes more than Miranda can bear. The “Janitors” are obviously dehumanized, enslaved and seem to be under some kind of medical control: “‘Who did this to them?’ [Miranda asked Ian]. ‘They’re under observation,’ he said. ‘Must be having some kind of experimental therapy’” (Lai 77). Finally, Evie’s “Guardian Angel” is a way for those who have control of her to know everything she is doing at all times. All of these cybernetic transgressions of the boundary between the human and the machine are associated with humans trying to control other human bodies; these cyborgs are merely another way to oppress. Haraway does address this possibility, but still sees cyborgs as a source of hope: “Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling” (Haraway 295). In Lai’s novel, where human technology and interference into origins are present, oppression is also present: Miranda

herself says that “All these tidy attempts to control the mud and muck of origins upset me” (Lai 268).

Lai complicates Haraway's hope, showing that cyborg technology can allow for oppression as well as resistance, since the many cyborgs linking humans to animals or plants throughout Lai's text offer the possibility of resistance and renewal. These transgressions link the past to the present and offer possibilities of hope for the future; Nu Wa and her fish tail become linked to Miranda, who is growing scales, and Evie, who has carp DNA. All three are again linked by the durian fruit, which has helped to transgress human-plant boundaries, because of its effect on human reproduction. Speaking of her immaculate (durian) conception, Miranda narrates “that the third gender is more unusual and potent than most imagine” (Lai 15). It is unclear what this “third gender” refers to—it may refer to the fruit itself, it may refer to the children born of that fruit. In either case, human bodies become cyborg bodies, doing away with the binaries implicit in a two-gender system. *Salt Fish Girl* is a story about origins and about these organic transgressions: “This is story about a stink, after all, about how life grows out of the most fetid-smelling places” (Lai 268). In her focus on origin tales, Lai is, even with her apparent distaste for the technological, doing the work of a cyborg author: “In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture” (Haraway 311). Lai's retellings of origin stories are part of the subversive tendencies of *Salt Fish Girl*.

While Haraway's distaste for (at least) “western” myths of origin has much in common with the Enlightenment call for demythologization, in Coupe's scheme, she is really arguing for a *remythologization*. Demythologization and the “myth of mythlessness” is “the unexamined belief. . . that humanity has successfully transcended the need for mythical forms of thought” (Coupe 13). Myths need not be deterministic; according to Coupe, depending on their use and their interpretation, they can be liberating. In his critical overview of mythography, *Myth*, Laurence Coupe contrasts two ways of interpreting myths. The first, allegorical, sees myth as a static entity with one determinable meaning; a mythic narrative is only an illustration of the particular and final moral meaning contained within it. The other, which Coupe calls “radical typology,” sees myth as a place of permanent possibility: “Myths make other myths, and there is no reason why they should not continue to do so, the mythopoeic urge being infinite” (Coupe 108). One example of a mythographer who interprets myth in this radical way is Marina Warner. She writes that “every telling of a myth is part of that myth; there is no Ur-version, no authentic

prototype, no true account” (Warner 8). Both Haraway and Lai would seem to espouse this way of looking at myths, where myths will, in their rewriting, subvert dominant ideology: “If allegory presupposes an act of demythologization, radical typology proposes an act of remythologization” (Coupe 115). In this way, Lai participates in both mythography (interpreting and judging the old myths) and a mythopoeia (rewriting old myths and writing new ones). Throughout this novel, myth and history are as crucial to Lai’s vision as is the dystopic future, beginning with a retelling of a Chinese creation account.

Salt Fish Girl opens with a creation account narrated by a woman named Nu Wa; Miranda’s historical link or double, Nu Wa appears as one of the creators of the first people in a folktale. As in Chinese tradition, the world has not yet been formed and is in chaos: “In the beginning there was no order, nothing had a clear relationship to anything else” (Lai 1). Because of loneliness, Nu Wa begins to form people in her likeness—with a fish tail—out of mud. She only gives them legs (or bifurcates their tails) because she is angry at their insolence. In Chinese mythology, Nu Wa does form some people out of “yellow earth,” but many more she makes by “trail[ing] a rope in the mud. . . . Noblemen and rich men were created from the yellow earth, and poor and lowly people were made from the mud-covered rope” (Soymié 275). In most depictions of Nu Wa (or Nü Kua), she has a tail: “She is usually shown with a serpent’s or dragon’s tail, like that of a siren” (Soymié 285). Here is the clearest point of intersection between Nu Wa’s act of creation and the story of the little mermaid who gave up her tail to be human for the love of a prince. There are other connections between Lai’s version and Andersen’s fairy tale. Like the little mermaid, who sees the prince on a ship and falls in love with him, Nu Wa’s glimpse of a man in a boat pushes her to become human. She also goes to a sea woman with powers to accomplish this: “‘I saw a young man’s face,’ I told her, ‘I want to go up into the world as a human being’” (Lai 8). As for Andersen’s character, the price of this bifurcation would be constant and unending pain.

The subversion of the official, “western” creation account is accomplished by the intersection here of two very different and somewhat marginal stories; one is “eastern,” the other is only a fairy story. Having two such different stories interpenetrate has the effect of removing the universality of a singular creation account; as is demanded by Haraway, it removes the boundaries inherent in the official, original dream (Haraway 312). Removed from this version is the idea that woman is derivative, since all people are arbitrarily designed and Nu Wa only

makes “strong ones into women and the weak ones into men” as an afterthought (Lai 5). Furthermore sex for pleasure comes before any idea of reproduction. Compulsory heterosexuality and the idea that sex is only for procreation are undermined in this rewriting. Even Nu Wa’s goddess status is moveable; she is both a powerful creator goddess and a powerless mermaid with a crush. The opening chapter here questions the deterministic consequences of the Judeo-Christian creation account.

The radical typology of these myths is also accomplished by the revisions that Lai has made to them. Unlike Andersen’s mermaid, Nu Wa does not lose her voice, nor does she pursue the young man (who seems to actually be a woman); instead, Nu Wa becomes human first by becoming someone’s daughter. Moreover, in the official Chinese account Nu Wa is joined by her stronger brother and husband, Fu Xi, while in Lai’s account, Nu Wa works alone. By ridding the myth of its original married couple, Lai reiterates her challenge to compulsory heterosexuality. By maintaining some of the original parts of these stories and changing others, Lai is mythographer and myth-maker; she remythologizes *as* she demythologizes.

Remythologization of course demands an analysis of the implications of the changes she has made to origin stories. Her re-myths have their own deterministic possibilities. The unlikely conflation of an ancient Chinese (“eastern”) creation myth and a Christianized, Scandinavian (“western”) myth about a mermaid who becomes human has a universalizing effect, since myths so distant in time and space contain similar symbolism. That they both begin in the sea, especially granting that this is a creation account, further gives a sense of the universalization: they are both also connected to Darwinian theory. Since official scientific discourse in fact states that we were once more fishlike than we now are, the “myths” are imbued with a greater truth-value. This connection is emphasized by the predominance of fish (and fishlikeness) as a symbol and theme throughout the text.

There are also some problematic connotations here that connect women with the sea, a connection that Haraway sees as one of the essential problems with origin myths. To reiterate Haraway’s comment, “an origin story in the ‘Western,’ humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate” (Haraway 292). This phallic mother—indicated by Freud as the source of feelings of “oceanic oneness” (Freud 3-5)—is easily symbolized by Nu Wa, who exists before the creation of difference: “In the beginning there was no order, nothing had a clear relationship to

anything else” (Lai 1). Instead of being oppressive, though, because it requires the repudiation of that mother in order to form subjectivity, Lai’s narrators view this original oneness as a source of power and as a destination. In this reading, it is not only empowering to retell and subvert origin myths, as is required by Haraway, but it is valuable to find aspects in the “official” myths worth celebrating.

The connotations of a bifurcation might also be seen as problematic. The bifurcation of people’s tails is not present in the original myth. This painful separation harkens back to the same “western” myths of original oneness of which Haraway is so critical. These myths are connected both to the fall into sin and to the separation from the primal mother; both support the narrative of lost oneness/wholeness. The thrust of *Salt Fish Girl* is towards this oneness, where the legs will again become one tail. Thus, the rewritten, subverted myths would seem to support the same narratives as their originals. As well, bifurcation has connotations of the Chinese myth of the creation of the world, which has the once-chaotic nothingness separated into two—the yin (female) and the yang (male): “The cold Breath of concentrated Yin became water, the essence of watery Breath became the moon” (Birrell 32). Bifurcation then has associations with patriarchal designations of yin and yang; in this reading, Lai’s constant emphasis on women and sea becomes, perhaps, even more problematic. The consequence of these universalizations of dominant myths—Darwinian and Freudian, for example—is that Lai’s myths themselves retain the deterministic aspects of previous origin myths and even reinforce their potency. Remythologization and radical typology, while posing a challenge to dominant ideas, are not immune to reinscribing them. Perhaps what is liberating, then, is not the content of a particular re-myth, but the never ending possibility that this content is not fixed.

Given that *Salt Fish Girl* is a story about “the mud and muck of origins” (Lai 268), it is not surprising that the novel is peppered with allusions to the creation story in Genesis. Through the durian, Lai creates a forbidden fruit that has the power to affect real change. At first, Miranda’s parents seem to stand in for a new Adam and a new Eve. Her mother, Aimee, wishes to eat a durian fruit that she spies “near a beach in the Unregulated Zone,” and her husband surprises her with it; eating it causes Miranda’s seemingly immaculate conception (Lai 14). The durian smell is a nostalgic one for Aimee, who can remember these fruit from her childhood before the corporate takeover. The durian thus stands for a more innocent time. It ushers in an Edenic innocence as well: as Miranda’s durian smell fills their home, they let it grow in to

weediness, which seems to signify their great and innocent love for one another. This innocence is then disturbed when a neighbour asks them to clean up their lawn. Later in the novel, Nu Wa describes how she had crawled inside a durian fruit and remembers Aimee longing to eat it. The durian fruit is the instrument of reincarnation, since Aimee is both Nu Wa's mother and Miranda's—Nu Wa *is* Miranda (Lai 208-9).

Like the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis, the durian tree is forbidden. Unlike the tree in Genesis, however, eating the durian tree is a miraculous and liberating experience that leads to both new life and new kinds of life. The Sonias and Evie grow a durian tree in order to ensure their (unregulated) procreation. Temptation is far less exacting than it is in the Genesis myth. In that myth, while there is a serpent who tempts Eve to sin, who in turn tempts Adam, both Aimee and Miranda are mysteriously pulled towards the fruit: "I felt the tree pulling at me as though I were a small moon caught in the gravitational field of a heavy planet" (Lai 221). In Aimee's case, it is her husband who encourages her to eat it: "'Durian,' he said. 'Come, eat'" (Lai 14). So the Genesis myth is invoked but completely rewritten so that forbidden fruit does not usher in a Fall; instead, it brings with it a more natural, more innocent time in which Miranda's parents allow their home to become overgrown in their focus on a mutual love relationship. Upon first analysis, Lai's approach is in accordance with Haraway's, since she does not write about the Fall: "Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man" (Haraway 311). While Lai rewrites the Fall narrative as something less doctrinaire, *Salt Fish Girl*, as I have indicated, does rely on some myths of original wholeness, especially in its movement from the sea back to the sea. As in the Biblical account, the present is a fallen time between past and future wholeness.

As well as the durian tree, another central allusion to the Genesis account is Evie's name. Evie has escaped her captors and is the instrument of Miranda's quasi-expulsion from the corporate city. In the ending of the novel, Evie and Miranda find a hot spring where Miranda gives birth and their legs fuse together to become fish tails; they become part of a new myth of origins. While this scene seems to indicate finality since they have finally made their way back to their lost oneness with the sea, Miranda's final line indicates a more circular narrative: "Everything will be all right, I thought, until next time" (Lai 269). Much of *Salt Fish Girl* is focussed on the desire to get back to the sea, which is the same as the desire to return to ancient origins. The novel begins and ends in "ancient ocean" water (Lai 269). In fact, it would be

impossible to enumerate Lai's the oceanic imagery in this space, since it has such a constant place in the novel. In addition, people have become infected with a dreaming disease that causes them to remember painful collective memories. The dreaming disease is significant, as is Miranda's connection to her previous life in Nu Wa, since both indicate the importance of the past in this novel when it comes to visioning the future. Water is a place of relief for the sufferers of the dreaming disease, so much so that many of them drown themselves: "The only place she could find relief from this barrage of collective memory was in water" (Lai 85). Miranda, Aimee and Evie are all connected to their ancient origins as well by their fistulas, indications of their cyborg fusion with fish: "I developed a notion that the purpose of my fistulas was not just for cleaning the bone marrow, but that they served the function of memory, recalling a time when we were more closely related to fish, a time when the body glistened with scales and turned in the dark, muscled easily through water" (Lai 107-8). All of this indicates the circularity of the narrative of history; in this novel what we once were is also what we are going to become. All of the characters are on the verge of returning to their origins, and this return is empowering. Evie indicates that the clones need an origin myth to inspire them to escape Pallas's corporate control: "Pallas tries to keep it quiet. A nice myth of origins, after all, would be a perfect place for revolt" (Lai 160). So while Haraway sees "nice myth[s] of origins" as deterministic and therefore problematic, even these cyborg figures in Lai's text derive power from such myths.

If we are to read origin myths as deterministic, then *Salt Fish Girl* is deterministic. From the universalization of Darwinian theory to the desire for finality in the sea, *Salt Fish Girl* creates its own set of boundaries for those living in the wake of those myths. While her rewriting does away with compulsory heterosexuality, it reiterates, for example, the connection of women to the sea (as, perhaps, closer to nature). Perhaps it is not so easy to get away from origin myths and their determinism, even with the creation of a post-human cyborg. According to Haraway's understanding of myths as needing subversion, Lai's version fails because she reiterates the very narratives that are problematic in the originals. Even so, any of these critiques depend upon a view of myths as allegorical and deterministic, a view that I do not favour. If myths are read as radical typology, Lai's text is part of a constant move in literature to reexamine and reopen old myths, a process that keeps any version from being overly deterministic. Haraway's analysis is lacking, here, since cyborgs cannot provide the potentiality that myths do in Lai's text, whether dominant myths are being subverted or reinscribed.

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