

## Hybridization as the Postcolonial Anti-Exotic in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* resists the containment strategies of Canadian multiculturalism by using hybridity both thematically and as a textual strategy. Thematically, the characters' hybridity in *SFG*, resulting from genetic cloning, immigration and cultural commodification, reveals the power structures of traditional China and a future North America, challenges the illusive stability of "home" and identity in both societies, and constructs a lesbian genealogy from the past to the future. Hybridity is also the text's strategy of contextualizing and de-exoticizing its lesbian genealogy. The constructed lesbian genealogy is hybridized not only with the characters' genetically mixed bodies and identities embodying multiple positions, but also through the text's plural beginnings, endings, lines of development as well as multiple intertexts. Besides pluralizing the meanings of "home," furthermore, the text hybridizes and contextualizes a variety of elements traditionally associated with the "Oriental": the mythic goddess Nu Wa, New Kubla Khan, the opium den, ethnic foods (durian and salt fish) and exotic ornaments. Such a hybrid genealogy is thus contextualized because all the time-spaces the characters experience take on multiple social meanings pertaining to the exploitation and exoticization of Asian diaspora in the age of multinational capitalism. *Salt Fish Girl*'s strategies of hybridization, then, are the "post-colonial anti-exotic" strategies that "re-politicize" the "exotic" elements to evade the Orientalist gaze supported by both capitalism and Canada's official multiculturalism, and to empower its characters in their multi-layered social networks. At the end, however, the text asks, with its two open endings, a difficult question of how differences can be recognized and what recognition means.

### Keywords

hybridity, Larissa Lai, *Salt Fish Girl*, the post-colonial anti-exotic

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## I. Official Multiculturalism vs. the “Postcolonial Anti-Exotic”

Since its inception in 1971, Canadian multiculturalism has long been an object of debate and contestation,<sup>2</sup> in response to which its focus has shifted from celebrating ethnic differences in the 70’s, managing diversity institutionally in the 80’s, to ensuring equal rights and civic participation since the 90’s (Fleras 11-17). Although its ideal of equity, especially in terms of equal access to social resources such as education, housing and work opportunities, is far from being realized, defenders of Canadian multiculturalism believe that in Canada “plural is possible” (Adam Gopnik in “Adam Gopnik vs. Malcolm Gladwell”), and that its society is “the most successful pluralist [one] on the face of our globe” (“Canada: ‘A model for the world’”). On the other hand, as Fleras points out, official multiculturalism is “essentially a society-building exercise that seeks to de-politicize differences through institutional accommodation” (20). In other words, there have been attempts at trying to contain or reduce cultural diversities, so that Canadian society can be “safe from diversity, safe for diversity” (21). For instance, a survey carried out by Innovative Research Group in 2005 shows that 70% of the Canadian respondents think that adapting to “the Canadian way of life” should be the priority for new immigrants (“Multicultural Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”). Another example is the violent reaction against UBC professor Sunera Thobani after her speech against US imperialism in October, 2001. At the time when there is “a re-whitening of Canadian identity and increased marginalization of its nonwhite minorities” (32), Thobani received harsh criticism and even personal attacks because, according to Arat-Koc, she spoke as a “modern subject” but not as an “ethnic minority” in an Orientalized position assigned to her (46).

The apparent “tolerance” shown toward cultural diversity in the multicultural Canada can be seen a strategy of containment, hiding the nation’s external boundaries and internal hierarchies, both of which become more discriminatory to visible minorities at times of crisis, change and conflicts of interests. In the field of literary production, such efforts at containment can be perceived in the selective acceptance of works by writers of visible minorities, usually categorized as “immigrant writings.” As Christine Kim points out, Larissa Lai’s first novel, *When*

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Fernando’s summary of the debate, which became more heated because of two books, in particular: Neil Bissoondath’s *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), and Richard Gwyn’s *Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (1995) 28-31. Huang also gives a detailed introduction to Canadian Multiculturalism, its history, myth, as well as the critiques and reconstructions it receives, 1-30.

*Fox is a Thousand*, has not received the same levels of critical and commercial success as Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, partly because the former—critiquing dominant representations of Asian Canadians within the nation and disrupting discourses of Canadian multiculturalism, as it does—is not as “easily exoticized” as the latter (154, 168). Kim thus argues that there is a need to design new strategies to read this body of literary works so as to re-shape market trends and reader expectations.

Lai herself, as a matter of fact, is not unaware of this need to carve out a space in and beyond contemporary Canadian literary canon. As can be seen from the many essays she has written, she positions herself against the containment strategies of official multiculturalism, whose binarist logic even the identity politics movement<sup>3</sup> with which she was involved failed to evade. She points out that the multiculturalism of the Trudeau era was quite limited in terms of who or what was accepted: “only those kinds of safe difference that could be perceived as commensurate with perceived ‘Canadian’ traits’ could enter sanctioned discourse” (“Corrupted Lineage” 43-44). In response, the identity politics movement refused to play by these multiculturalist rules, and focused on “constructing empowered identities” for visible minorities (“Forward” 16; “Future Asians” 168). However, one problem with the identity politics movement, among others, was that in asserting one’s difference from the mainstream one reinforces the Self-Other binarism (“Political Animals” 149; “Corrupted Lineage” 44). For instance, the minority writers of that generation tried to break through the barriers of silence and articulate the repressed history to the full. With all their critical intent, the histories articulated had to be subject to the selection logic of the publishing business and those “favored” ones fed into the exoticist imagination of the reading public and their assumptions about a terrible Other/past or a liberated Self/present.<sup>4</sup> In writing her novels, therefore, Lai herself is quite wary of being trapped in this “racialized space” of literary production and reception, which can be both empowering and pigeonholing.

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<sup>3</sup> The identity politics movement was marked by a series of important events from late 1980s to early 1990s: the international film and video conference/symposium *In Visible Colours* (1989), the film and video conference/workshop *About Face, About Frame* (1992), the 1993 conference *It's a Cultural Thing* and the very controversial national writers' conference in 1994, *Writing Thru Race* (See Gagnon).

<sup>4</sup> Lai points out, for instance, there is in Canadian publishing industry a preference for narratives of “past injustice . . . or brutal histories of ‘over there’” (“Corrupted Lineage” 42). The examples she gives of the preferred ones are *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Jade Peony*.

The dilemma Lai describes can be related to what Huggan calls “the postcolonial exotic” in the global and Canadian markets. Huggan uses the term “the postcolonial exotic” to mark the intersection of two regimes of values: postcolonialism, with its anti-colonial efforts, and postcoloniality, or the socio-economic conditions of today’s postcolonial world and its global market (28). The intersection happens because inevitably any postcolonial texts have to enter the market and be subject to its logic of selection, marketing, and, possibly, its exoticism: that is, positing visible minorities as cultural strangers, or using the “rhetoric of fetishized otherness and sympathetic identification” to mask the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse [of self-empowering] could not function” (Huggan 13). Some postcolonial cultural texts such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica*, according to Huggan, use exoticism strategically or specularize marginality to critique Orientalism only to partake of it inadvertently: these texts flaunt mythic, romantic-nostalgic or erotic images of exoticism “deridingly” at their readers/spectators to the effect of “[trapping] the unwary reader into complicity with the Orientalisms of which the novel[s] so hauntingly [relate]” (77, 153).

While I disagree with Huggan’s generalization about the “West,” his conflation of a book’s market values and its meanings, and his quick readings of some of the postcolonial texts mentioned above<sup>5</sup>, he does point to the fine lines between commodification/consumption and Orientalist gaze on one side, and transcultural understanding on the other, in an era when postcolonialism and postcoloniality are overlapping and everything is commodified. Besides the examples Huggan and Lai give of those in the favor of the publishing business and reading public with the mythic, erotic or historical, Goellnicht and Kim also point out that South Asian Canadian novels by Mistry, Selvadurai and Mootoo are popular partly because they describe racism happening in distant places but not in Canada (Kim 163). Although I don’t think that a postcolonial text’s popularity bespeaks its complicity with the capitalist logic of consumption and reification, the whole process of distribution, marketing and canon formation *can* lead to reification and objectification of the “others.” In such a multi-mediated network of communication and circulation, how does a postcolonial writer/reader construct the marginalized without fixing them as objects of gaze? How does a text construct a

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, he argues that *Exotica* “oscillates between the alternative poles of surreptitious social control and profoundly anti-social concealment,” ignoring the structure of community and sympathy established among the film’s marginalized characters, which is neither anti-social nor a form of concealment (151).

“contact zone” (Susan Friedman 90) which supports multi-directional cultural translations and interactions but not simplification of the others—either as “the strange” or “the familiar”—for “self”-empowerment and entertainment?

Although a text’s meaning is produced out of some complicated processes of encoding and de-coding, Lai’s work does attempt to avoid “[empowering] the media machine to replicate the same trope” or fix the diasporic identities (“Corrupted Lineage” 44). According to Lai, to avoid the either-or trap of racialization, she has tried in her work to “[construct] a consciously artificial history” (“Political Animals” 149). In her “artificial” history the “always already coded” elements of diasporic Chinese culture should, I believe, be seen as being hybridized and (inter-)textualized so that their histories are more spatialized and networked, than linear and teleological. More specifically, if some postcolonial writers’ strategic use of exoticism and marginality can be co-opted because, for readers, they remain “exotic”—strangely familiar and alluring objects of fetishization and decontextualization—Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, I want to argue, adopts two strategies to avoid fixing its characters’ identities and re-inscribing them into the logic of exoticization: first using a revisionary and hybridizing mode of narrating a creation myth to develop a non-linear lesbian genealogy, and then a hybridizing treatment of images and spaces to form a network of social issues related to Chinese diaspora, past and present.

Many critics have noted in Lai’s novels the border-crossing and hybridizing impulses on the levels of subjectivity and genre, as well as their resonances with today’s world. Both Fu and Morris analyze the heterogeneity and transformations of the characters in *When Fox is a Thousand* (hereafter cited as *Fox*). Fu points out that *Fox* “(trans)forms, (trans)poses, and (trans)genders her subjects and offers an array of cross-cultural, -racial, -sexual, -gender identifications,” which “straddle different spheres and disrupt the sense of reality and complacency of those worlds” (157, 163). Morris analyzes how *Fox* uses both hybrid characters and “generic interweaving” (71, 72) to defy categorization and question the predominantly white male gaze and control as represented by *Blade Runner*. In their analyses of *Salt Fish Girl* (hereafter cited as *SFG*), Cuder-Domínguez analyzes its creative revision of speculative fiction to enable multiple constructions of Asian women’s subjectivity, while both Wong and Mansbridge see the hybrid characters as “the abject,” and their spaces and histories as the “unheimlich,” that subvert the homely space of Canada. For Cuder-Domínguez, *SFG* envisions a “hopeful” future on the characters’ personal level (127), whereas Wong and Mansbridge see the novel more as a critique of contemporary Canada, its exploitation of Chinese garment workers

(Wong), or the notion of Canada as “a homely nation” (Mansbridge 121). Tara Lee, besides analyzing the text’s critique of the complicity between science and capitalism, uses the trope of cyborg on the hybrid identities and sees in them the political possibility of creating new forms by “*reading and re-reading the mixed origin* which is in their makeup” (214; emphasis added).

To add to these critics’ analyses of the hybrid characters and genres in Lai’s novels, I will discuss hybridity as a process of hybridizing networking in *SFG*. For me, *SFG* constructs a lesbian genealogy by not only revising and hybridizing traditional creation myths, but also pluralizing and “spatializing” its plotlines so that its “origin” and “memory” are mutually constructive. Also, *SFG*’s hybridization involves connecting the “Chinese/Asian Canadian” spaces and signs in its textual network so that they present both the problems and utopian possibilities of lesbian and diasporic hybrid identities while evading the fetishizing Orientalist gaze supported by both capitalism and Canada’s official multiculturalism. In what follows, I will first explain my usage of the concept of hybridity in relation to the debates around it, and then delineate the textualized lesbian genealogy constructed in *SFG*, which is further hybridized by its use of “Chinese” signs and spaces.

## II. Hybridity in Debate

Since its emergence in the nineteenth century, hybridity, or the forcing to grow together of two distinct beings or cultural matters<sup>6</sup>, has been interestingly problematic as an analytic tool. Usually categorized into linguistic-cultural and genetic-racial hybridity, hybridity has been an issue for debate, as the concept is

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<sup>6</sup> Defined biologically, hybridity means “disruption and forcing together of any living things” (Young 26). Defined culturally, it means “the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles or identities, cross-cultural contact” (Kraidy 5). The anthropologist Brian Stross provides a comprehensive definition of the term which includes its original meaning and later extensions: “In Latin the *hibrida* was the offspring of a (female) domestic sow and a (male) wild boar. The semantic range of the word hybrid has expanded in more recent times to include the offspring of a mating by any two unlike animals or plants. The *cultural* hybrid is a metaphorical broadening of this *biological* definition. It can be a person who represents the blending of traits from diverse cultures or traditions, or even more broadly it can be a culture, or element of culture, derived from unlike sources; that is, something heterogeneous in origin or composition” (254 emphasis added). Definition of hybridity has been modified and extended differently in different fields. For instance, Young points out that hybridization can begin with “forcing of a single entity into two or more parts,” as in the operation of hybrid shares on the stock market (26). The “mixing” in hybridity can be further differentiated into “fusion of differences” on the one hand, mixture of something already syncretic on the other, with different degrees of remaining distinctness in between (Susan Friedman 85).

associated biologically with miscegenation, cross-fertilization and hybrid vigor in genetics, horticulture and biotechnology, and, culturally, with contamination, mimicry and cultural diversity in anthropology, colonial and postcolonial discourses. The term “hybridity” is heavily loaded also because, besides being used differently in the fields ranging from biotechnology to fashion, from music, literature to the stock market and car industry, it is engaged in cultural discourses on individual and collective levels as something radical and transgressive, or as a matter of routine and everyday practices. Hybridization, likewise, involves co-optation and assimilation by the dominant cultures, inversion and subversion of the liminal, gradual creolization of languages, multiple border-crossing of the diasporic, mimicry, bricolage, parody and (re-)mixing-and-mediating of artistic styles, and, last but not the least, selection, modification and mixture of genes, foods, codes and styles to produce commodities and construct identities on daily basis.<sup>7</sup>

Though dissociated more from its negative implications such as impurity and fragmentation now than before, hybridity is still a target of criticism for two interrelated reasons: (1) that, as a conceptual tool, it is too ambiguous to be theoretically rigorous and (2) that, on the empirical level, it lacks “revolutionary potential” (van der Veer 104). The use of hybridity can be ambiguous because, as a descriptive catchall term, it “fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity” (Stam 60). For the dissenters, the so-called “hybridity talk” is thus seen as “an ‘elite’ preoccupation” (Mukherjee 21) which “looks everywhere than the street” (Jonathan Friedman 75), where hybridity can be experienced painfully and without a choice by those in the lower rungs of the social ladder (the case of melamine-tainted milk powder erupting in the Fall of 2008 is a case in point). Politically, confirmation of cultural diversity can lead to tokenism, vertical mosaic, or, in post-apartheid South Africa, it can “come dangerously close to reproducing the ideology of ‘separate development’ (Mathieson and Atwell qtd. in Brah and Coombes 2). In popular culture, moreover, cultural hybridity can be a selling point: as mixtures of exotic flavors in restaurant menus and fashion styles, or those of

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<sup>7</sup> There have been several succinct overviews of the development of hybridity discourses. I am especially indebted to Robert Young for his connecting cultural hybridity to its racial and biological counterparts, and for his tracing its history to the nineteenth-century debates in genetics and horticulture; to Susan Friedman, for her mapping of hybridity theory in terms of the types of cultural mixing, its function, spatial and temporal orientation, as well as the power relations involved; to Kapchan and Strong, for their connecting the concept to the related concepts of syncretism, bricolage and creolization; to Laura Moss, for suggesting a way to move beyond the two poles of hybridity discourses—contamination and celebration: seeing racial hybridity as an increasingly ordinary state, and, further, to Marwan Kraidy, for providing examples of hybridization in journalism, mass production and reception in global cultural exchanges.

ethnic “colors” in ads, interior decoration and spectacular shows for visual consumption. For Hutnyk, therefore, hybridity is a political void, because “this political project seems too often to have given way to an analysis of textual construction”; because “hybridity and difference sell; the market remains intact” (122).

Despite and probably because of their ambivalence and complexity, the cultural phenomena of hybridity should continue to be understood and investigated by us today in this globalizing world; it is a matter of how to develop strategies of presenting and reading hybridity. Undeniably, hybridization, to borrow Kraidy’s term, is a “cultural logic of globalization”(148) that is happening on daily basis to almost all the aspects of our lives—to such an extent that no food is not genetically modified<sup>8</sup>, no nation can be self-contained, and nobody can be 100 percent naturally and purely “human.” In this global world of interconnectedness, it is a crucial way of “self”-positioning to try to perceive and locate, negotiate and at times contest the multiple hybridizing forces in, on and around us, as well as to articulate their differences and interconnections.

The cultural relevancy of hybridity alone, however, does not justify its usage as an analytical tool. Conceptually, in my view, hybridity stimulates analysis of the powers involved in and between the “mixtures” of various types, and thus helps map their power relations. Instead of dismissing the literary or cultural hybrid works as less disruptive or non-revolutionary (e.g. Hutnyk and van der Veer), the studies of cultural hybridity should move beyond polarizing domination and transgression/resistance, to examine the power structures involved in and around each instance of hybridization.<sup>9</sup> Like Kraidy, I see hybridity as a discursive formation, in which text and context are mutually constitutive, if not inseparable.<sup>10</sup> From a discursive perspective, both the hybrid “text” and its “context” are dynamic, multi-layered, and with manifold interactions among its disciplinary, historical and empirical levels, just as the driving forces of hybridity—be they genetic

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<sup>8</sup> Just as cultural critics argue that cultures have always been hybrid, according to Susan McCouch, genetic modification has been done all the time in the history of plant breeding: “every crop we eat today is genetically modified. Every one. . . . So don’t ask me what is natural and what is not.” (Didur 101).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kraidy 149. Kraidy’s approach is consistent with Susan Friedman’s third approach to hybridity; that is, after the “oppressional” model (hybridity imposed or erased) and “transgressional” model (hybridity as counter-hegemony), there is a “locational” approach—a locational “thick descriptions” of historically and geographically specific situations.

<sup>10</sup> Kraidy treats hybridity as a discursive formation, and in analyzing hybridity in intercultural communication he takes a contrapuntal approach: “each type [of hybridity] consonant with other types in some aspects and dissonant with other types in other regards, and yet all converging on the notion of hybridity” (14).

modification, traveling cultures, capital flows or global migration—collapse identities, dissolve borders, and reterritorialize various political zones and discursive fields while maintaining their fluidity. It is the concept of hybridity that pushes us to examine the resonances and interactions of the levels involved in each instance of hybridization.

As a literary critic positioned in Taiwan and thus having less access to the materialist conditions of the production and circulation of *SFG*, I choose to examine not the structure of its production and circulation, but the multiple hybridizing forces *within* the text—which, for me, both presents and works against the attempts at exoticization or containment of Canadian multiculturalism. From this analytic stance, I will examine how meanings get produced on and among different textual levels, and ask text-specific questions about what social levels and power relations get articulated, what meanings get produced (as the result of oppression, co-optation or subversion) and in order to serve which function—entertainment, indifferent daily routine, bodily harms, or, in the words of Homi Bhabha, “translation that keeps open the questions . . . of home, identity and belonging” (“Halfway House” 3).

In analyzing *SFG*, therefore, I will appropriate the notion of hybridity as a conceptual tool to help me link the various textual levels and historical moments in *SFG* of hybridization as either power control, or resistance or both. As a post-national science fiction which juxtaposes and connects the historic south China and a future north America set in 2044 to 2062, the text has, as its frame of reference, some contemporary instances of capitalist hegemony and two kinds of hybridity: that of genetic modification and immigrants.<sup>11</sup> *SFG*, therefore, thematizes hybridity as an object of systemic control on some of the following levels: migration, global marketing, human creation, cloning and computer simulation, to reveal the extensiveness of their power and to challenge the illusive stability of “home” and identity. In the meantime, hybridization is also the text’s strategy of the postcolonial anti-exotic. To counter mass media’s stereotyped or fetishized images of Asian/Chinese Canadian diaspora, the text hybridizes some time-spaces of home, work and entertainment to “stage” the interrelations between racial and gender exploitation in different centuries; secondly, it presents the characters who, inhabiting or migrating to these time-spaces, embody and negotiate the meanings of hybridity through their bodies and images, as well as in their family,

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<sup>11</sup> What Lai apparently had in mind when writing the novel are: first, the corporate control, manipulation and simulation of animal, plant, and administrative district (i.e. Dolly the cloned sheep, Monsanto’s control of wheat gene, a Texan company’s patenting of slightly modified basmati rice and Disney’s construction of a small town Celebration), and second, the news of the Chinese “boat people” who arrived on the British Columbia coast (“Future Asians” 171-72).

work and love relations. In writing the stories of the past and the future into the “unheimlich” present, Lai, however, does not give a realistic or utopian account of the history of oppression and resistance; rather, she writes into this history the “corrupted body-double” of Nu Wa and Salt Fish Girl, Miranda and Evie, who go through uncanny time-spaces which are “really the present. . . . contemporary corruptions of texts that have been and texts that are yet to be” (“Corrupted Lineage” 48). Lai’s “corruption” or revision of Chinese cultural texts, as I will show later, is what I call the “postcolonial anti-exotic” strategies of hybridization, which pluralize or transform some types and stereotypes of the “Chinese” in North America in order to subvert the original hierarchy of purity and impurity, blur the line between normality and abnormality, and pluralize the meanings of the targets of exoticization—Oriental goddess and girls, cabaret club, opium den, strange bodies, “odd habits and foul smells” (48)—and place them in some hybrid spaces of negotiation.

### III. Lesbian Genealogy Hybridized

*SFG* challenges almost everything that constitutes a stable sense of identity: from a stable home and community, a unified human origin and linear history, to our bodily and behavioral senses of integrity. Both Nu Wa and Miranda Ching are displaced from “home” several times, while the families or communities they form get broken either by the authorities or because of their own betrayals. Such a sense of displacement and precarious belonging is inevitable in the “homespace” Lai carves out for diasporic Chinese lesbian women. For one thing, the “homespace,” as mentioned above, is located in the liminal or the “unheimlich” spaces of the nation (or post-national society). Also, this “homespace” does not have as support the linear trajectory of nationalist history; instead, composed of stories from the gaps of history, it has to be “loose, chaotic and contradictory,” bespeaking the disjunctions and discontinuities of [Chinese diaspora’s] histories (Lai, “Political” 149; Morris, “Sites of articulation” 23). Despite, and also because of, their contradictions and disjunctions, these spaces allow for Chinese diasporic characters’ and the text’s negotiations of multiple textual and intertextual meanings in terms of birth, home, work and representation. In this section I will discuss how “birth,” or origin, and memory get hybridized both genetically and textually to carve out a homespace for lesbian coalition without fixed identities.

The “birth” or originary moment—of a person or a nation—is traditionally seen as *the* moment that defines the unifying essence of a personal or national

identity. In *SFG*, however, there are not only multiple origins, presented “as a reiterative process of splitting, doubling, and remembering” (Mansbridge 125), but also gaps and recurrences, divergences and convergences *in* each of the three stories of birth (Nu Wa’s making of humans, Miranda’s birth, and her giving birth to a baby girl with Evie at the end), radically revising the traditional concepts of birth as the originary moment signifying God’s or biological parents’ love. Nu Wa’s story of human creation, first of all, has in it multiple starts and stops, and implies even more. Nu Wa could have aborted her “creation,” had the creatures not survived her anger. Also, her work finds repetitions and echoes in and beyond the text. The first repetition, on the second page, is that of the opening line, “In the beginning there was just me”—a line that obviously echoes Genesis but is here desanctified by its associations with what Nu Wa describes as the stink of “the river and a rotten-egg smell” (2). The “history” of creation is then repeated in Nu Wa’s mind, when, to find a way to fight humans’ aging, she retreats to her cave and “dream[s] of” humans’ origins and “remember[s] all the details of their creation (5). Finally, more repetitions are suggested when Nu Wa, happy with her creation, reveals that this is her “latest project” (6).

The creation story of Nu Wa’s keeps being hybridized as the text invokes one intertext after another. First of all, the text allows a feminist comparison between Nu Wa as a creator and her male counterparts. Unlike Frankenstein, she helps her creatures when she can, although she also finds her creations “monstrous” and the creatures’ wallowing in the mud a bit disgusting (3-5). Unlike Confucius, whom Nu Wa refers to as her successor, Nu Wa does not worry about moral restraints when it comes to sexual pleasure; she sees procreation as a function “secondary” to sexual pleasure (5). Also unlike Confucius (and the Christian God), Nu Wa makes women stronger than men.

The lesbian connotations of Nu Wa’s story start to emerge as we find her “human” and in a state of longing for a companion. Instead of being the selfless goddess setting up the heterosexual marriage system in the traditional Chinese legend, Nu Wa creates humans out of loneliness, slits their tails when being angered by their laughing at her tail, creates more humans in a desperate attempt to find one with “a little respect” (3), and, once her creatures know how to kiss and copulate, envies them and wants to experience their “joys and sorrows” (6). This desire for recognition is even more pronounced by her speaking to “you”—meaning first the reader and then her creatures—asking for our/their understanding and seeking communication.

This theme of desire and recognition takes on a lesbian dimension in the text's subsequent revision of Hans Christian Andersen's story, "The Little Mermaid," through a sequence of face gazing and recognition. Compared with crossing the line between the human and the sea world, Nu Wa's migration seems easier, as she swims through the river leading to a pool, another river, and then to a cold green lake, all fluid spaces without fixed boundaries. At the cold green lake, however, a line is drawn with the glassy surface of the water between the self under the water, and the other one above it. With this mirror-like lake surface, the text shifts the mermaid's yearning for an unknowing prince in Andersen's story to a mutual gaze between a self and its other: while the face above is surprised to see beneath its reflection another face, Nu Wa recognizes a lonely and private face (7). More divergence from the mermaid fairy tale happens after the bifurcation of Nu Wa's tail into human feet, as she turns to notice on a nearby rock a woman with a face like the gazing male face and with translucent feet like hers, seeming to suggest that another fish-human (or heterosexual-homosexual?) transformation has occurred as a result of a similar longing.

Developing less through plot than through intertextual ramifications, the human creation of Nu Wa, followed by the "transmigration," or rebirth, of her and another woman, seemingly begins a lesbian genealogy which then develops through the motif of yearning for and recognition of physical affinity and love, and culminates in remembering previous lives and engendering a new one. This genealogy is far from being a singular-linear or progressive one, since the double plotlines of the two lesbian couples interrupt each other to make "history" develop "spatially"—back and forth in time through repetitions and textual revisions (As I will discuss in the next section, the two plotlines, filled with interruptions by betrayals and obstacles, get hybridized through images and in spaces to take on more diasporic and class implications). Even the motif of recognition suggests recognition/remembering across time, allowing the backward movement of remembering to happen simultaneously as the genealogy develops onward to a possible future.

Recognition, first of all, is that of both physical affinity and of multiple "mothers" for a reconstruction of hybrid lesbian selves. Both Nu Wa and Miranda recognize their lovers through their smell: Nu Wa falls for the Salt Fish Girl because of the latter's stinky fishy odor she has, while Miranda recognizes Evie the moment she smells a whiff of "familiar fragrance, briny and sweet": "It's you," she says (105). Another biological resemblance becomes apparent after their first sexual intercourse, when Miranda finds out that Evie, like her mother and herself, has a

fistula behind her ear. In the meantime, Miranda “[remembers] another longer, leaner shape” (163)—that of Nu Wa, thus forming a connection between the two daughters and the two “mothers.”

Does this connection through physical affinity, then, suggest a kind of biological determination? I don’t think so. Apart from the cultural connotations of (fishy) smell and cloning, which I will get to in the next section, suffice it to say here that the act of recognition means empowerment through coalition and historical reconstruction, rather than biological determinism. For one thing, when Nu Wa recognizes Salt Fish Girl, and when Miranda recognizes Evie, they empower both the women of lower classes, and, through such affiliation, themselves. Nu Wa’s empowerment of the other women also starts with recognition: she “recognizes” both of the women she impregnates—the first one as an old-time worshipper of hers, and the second one, “[her] mother” (208). When Nu Wa calls Aimee her mother, the two plotlines (of Nu Wa and Miranda) converge and a lesbian genealogy is both confirmed and revealed to be a “constructed” one. This genealogy is an artificial construction because, immediately after Nu Wa has said, “I became the seed and the seed became me. Whatever grows from it will be mine” (209), we see Miranda in the next chapter overwhelmed by her memories, which seems to suggest that it is Miranda who remembers/reconstructs such a foremother. Although what Miranda dreams/remembers is never specified, it could very well be the story of Nu Wa, since both of them are obviously searching for their “mothers” and “daughters,” one looking forward and the other backward. Miranda’s happens in her mind when she and Evie head on to the final creation scene: “I’m your grandmother . . . I am the maker of your maker,” denying the paternal authority of Dr. Flower but also re-confirming a lesbian genealogy which is both recurrent and self-engendering (253). In this constructed lesbian genealogy—one which is confirmed in Miranda and Nu Wa’s mutual recognition/identification through Aimee and Evie—therefore, the line of development is both forward-moving and circular.

The constructedness of this lesbian genealogy, together with its multiple possibilities, is further suggested in the sequence of drawings Miranda produces after her first sexual intercourse with Evie. Filled with her love for Evie, Miranda confirms through her drawings the line of matriarchal lineage between her mother, the little mermaid and Nu Wa. Her drawings, moreover, involve some bolder revisions of traditional patriarchal stories: she offers a lesbian re-vision of human “origins” by having Fu Xi, Nu Wa’s brother, androgynous and “almost identical” with Nu Wa; she creates a more obviously lesbian plot out of “The Little Mermaid”

by having the woman the little mermaid meets on the shore embrace her. Finally, metafictional references are made in the drawings where Nu Wa's creation becomes a literary one (the humans' becoming words), and biological reproduction or cloning (Nu Wa's birthing brought down to the level of cell multiplication).

The final scene of birthing can be seen as a realization, after all the betrayals and disruptions, of one of Miranda's revisions of the Nu Wa story (that of the Nu Wa-Fu Xi drawing). It is also a "hybrid" ending in more than one way. First of all, it revises another creation myth, that of scientists' creation of cyborg and clone, by having Miranda and Evie's journey parallel that of the cyborg Roy's in *Blade Runner*. Before they reach the birthing place, Miranda and Evie visit the different sites of the cloning industry, from Dr. Flower's building to the aquarium (where one of Evie's "mothers," the carp, and the other fish are kept), to the shacks for the production of male human clones resembling Dr. Flowers, and, finally, to the snail cabin for keeping DNA and fertilizing eggs. Evie visits her father, Dr. Flower, to seek revenge, in a way that recalls the cyborg Roy's, and by extension, the other monsters', clones' and cyborgs' search for and/or rebellion against their scientist "fathers" in novels and films ranging from *Frankenstein* and *Artificial Intelligence*, to *Island*. Roy's and Evie's journeys include a visit to the father (Tyrell and Dr. Flower respectively) in their buildings, which loom large above the surrounding sprawling buildings (*SFG* 253); a visit to a Chinese man (named Chew and Chang), who turns out respectively to have been involved in the production of the cyborgs' eyeballs and genes. However, the similarities end here; while Roy goes through a sequence of brutal killings which still cannot stop his own demise, Evie only injures her father and goes to Chang for "maternal" nourishment. What is more, she stops Miranda from killing the male clones, before the two of them witness the "mud and muck" of human origins in the snail cabin, thus making the two women's journey to the "origins" altogether different from that of Roy, with its structure of killings, heroic rescue (of Deckard) and death.

Besides revising sci-fi fiction's story of male scientists' creation, the birthing at the end seems to return to and rewrite the two other birthing moments of the novel. Unlike the cold green lake Nu Wa was in when seeing and yearning for the gazing face above, here Miranda and Evie jump into a bubbling hot spring; reversing the process of Nu Wa's transformation, here both of them have their scale back on their skin, their feet fused, and then their tails entangled with each other like Fu Xi and Nu Wa. Unlike the immaculate conception of Miranda's mother, Miranda and Evie's coupling results in the birth of a black-hair girl, a hybrid born

out of two hybrids: Evie, with her sources traced to a Chinese woman, a Japanese man and a carp, and Miranda, a mixture of the Nu Wa seed and her Chinese parents.

Unlike the genetic complexities of Miranda and Evie's daughter, Miranda's birth marks a period of emotional complexity in her family history and undermines its father-son patriarchal lineage. If the dominant image of the first and the last birth moments is water, in Miranda's description of her birth, it is the mirror and photographic/video images that mark the beginning (a week before her conception) and the end (at age four) of the short-lived romance happening to her parents, and thus suggesting the cultural conditioning of this family. Miranda's search for her origins in the photographer-father's loving gaze is misdirected, as it leads her only to find an empty lens. When viewing the video the mother watches, Miranda, again, hopes to see the camera focus on her father. The camera, instead, focuses on "a very handsome dark-haired man" whose eyes are full of Aimee. This video thus points to the family's secret past which confuses its patrilineage. From the arguments between the parents, we get to know that this man jilted Aimee and later became a famous doctor in *Painted Horse*. Could this person be Dr. Flower? Although the text does not confirm such a coincidence, Miranda's brother, Aaron, does suspect Dr. Flower to be his father (97), which, again, undermines the legitimacy of the nominal father.

#### IV. Hybridized Images and Spaces

*SFG* is far from being just a lesbian utopia fiction; once we consider the hybrid images and spaces associated with the characters, the already disrupted and hybridized line of lesbian genealogy takes on more meanings on the levels of diaspora and multinational capitalism. The images of durian and salt fish, water and memory, and mirror and video connect the characters to one another and to their societies, which, together with their hybrid spaces of birth, home, work and representation, form a network of interconnectedness to reveal to the issues of race and gender exploitation, industrial and techno-corporate capitalism the characters are involved in.

The first group of images, the traditionally exotic foods of durian and salt fish, get placed together with the other non-cultural images to form a network of meanings and develop different implications. Durian and salt fish, on the one hand, are transformed in the text from exotic and stinky foods to something supporting the lesbian genealogy: respectively as fertility seed and a sign for recognition. On the other hand, they also take on different meanings related to the characters' ideologies

and material existence. While durian and fish, as discussed above, connect the four female characters, they also serve to separate Nu Wa and Miranda from their biological mothers. Durian is the fruit that causes the five-year romance between Aimee and her husband, Stewart, but that cannot change their different ideological positions regarding the fruit: it is an evil fruit for Stewart, but for Aimee, it is seductive because the smell of “something forbidden smuggled on board” (13) reminds her of her childhood experience. Durian, moreover, serves to separate Miranda from Aimee through the latter’s accidental death, which, in my view, reveals less the workings of fate than the harsh materialist conditions they live under in the grocery store.

Another way to interpret the materialist conditioning of food is that although it serves to break the links between the daughters and their patriarchal families, it also helps forge another one among women-identified women. According to Nu Wa, in South China’s villages, salt fish is a common cheap food used to wean baby girls, just as sesame pudding is used by her mother to sweeten up the matchmaker. In other words, food is provided not so much for nourishment, as for some practical purposes of distancing the girls from other people and marrying them off. Nu Wa adds to this typical destiny of daughter’s being “married out” (like spilt water) a psychological dimension: the weaning happens so early because psychologically the mothers have to be prepared, so that later they will be the “agent[s]” of their separation (51). Nu Wa’s story, however, is revised so that it is not just a typical story with a fixed marriage plot. Not only does Nu Wa see through the mother’s attempts at separation and declare spinsterhood to forestall them, she turns actively to love salt fish and Salt Fish Girl—and the stink which “[makes her] want to live more than ever” (56).

Besides invoking multiple intertext, one of the text’s hybridizing and anti-exotic strategies, then, is to mix new elements into the images traditionally connected to the characters, the plots and the spaces they are in—so that the hybridized images, plots and spaces can resist stereotyping or fixing while retaining their historical and materialist implications. As these cultural images are also associated with images which are culturally non-specific and thus not easy targets of exoticization—for instance, the second image group, water and memory, the text further expands on their implications both along the lines of feminist genealogy and social implication. For instance, durian smell and fish/sea memory are the symptoms of Miranda’s dreaming disease, a “disease” revealing the hybrid and unruly reality of the highly rationalized world of Big Six regime. In this way, Miranda’s durian smell and intensive water/fish memories connect her

diachronically through the sea to Nu Wa and her past lives, and synchronically, to those contemporaries with dreaming (or drowning) disease, which thus provides a broader social context for her problem. Diachronically, water is the means of Nu Wa's migration and impregnation-reincarnation which finally reaches and empowers Miranda, who, on the other side, remembers. Parallel to Nu Wa's drowning in the water and being caged by it, Miranda is captured in a water closet, which induces in her more intensive memories than she can bear. Synchronically, the dreaming disease that Miranda contracts serves to reflect contemporary social problems of the Big Six. For one thing, it is an epidemic spreading from Painted Horse to Serendipity and Unregulated Zone, suggesting that the areas' boundaries are porous at best and that Saturna's attempts at repressing the news is futile. Secondly, there are many collateral signs of the walled city's collapse – for instance, workers being laid off, people dying under the bridges, the wall being blasted away and New Kubla Khan being riddled with bullet holes (85-6, 191). The studies of the “disease,” moreover, point to Big Six's excessive technological manipulation of human, plant and animal lives as the suspected causes of this disease: that the disease can be transmitted from genetically altered plants, or animals, or that the disease may be intentionally manufactured (102). Moreover, as an inverted mirror, some of its “symptoms” seem to be the “return” of either the repressed or of those discriminated against. For instance, these patients' scaly skin, suicidal tendencies and nightmares with historical content—about the wars, diseases and fantasies—seem to be psychosomatic responses to the excessive repressiveness of this highly rationalized society. In this highly rationalized world, everything is supposed to be normal, stainless (read: memory-less) and odor-free. Besides traumatic histories and “abnormal” physical conditions, the strange and exotic are also repressed and excluded; for instance, Miranda's durian smell, which is “stinky” and forbidden to those (Westerners and Serendipity citizens) for whom the fruit is Asian and exotic. Also forbidden, however, is acquiring the odors of some “natural” materials and “freshly” made foods (for instance, the odors of oranges, tobacco, cabbage, silk, cotton, coffee, milk, freshly baked bread, and of “dust and rain and mud” (70), which become as problematic as those of blood and carnage, machine oil and rotten eggs.

The hybrid spaces of the characters' workplaces and home address capitalist consumption of the Oriental more directly. The first hybrid space I will discuss here is the factory district in Canton (today's Guangzhou), where Nu Wa and Salt Fish Girl arrive after their escape from their villages. It is in this border space that these two begin to go their separate ways: the Salt Fish Girl stays marginalized in the

system, first working in a factory and later becoming a white-hair woman rejected by society, while Nu Wa continues to cross such boundaries as the legal ones in pickpocketing and smuggling, as well as the geographical ones in observing the factories from outside, in going to the Land of Mist and Forgetfulness, and then back from it as one with a foreign tongue. This journey through one surreal hybrid space after another has the effect of reproducing certain vignettes of the traveling of Asian Canadian people and goods, in which the factory is one of the major nodes. Beauregard very shrewdly points out that having a “Malaysian” girl in the factory area is a piece of anachronism, which I would use to support my argument that the whole description of the factory district, like that of the Land of Mist and Forgetfulness (with its allegorical names and Nu Wa’s use of credit cards in early twentieth century), is surreal *but* relevant to today’s global markets. The relevancy is suggested, first of all, in the text’s making a link between the “here” of Miranda (the toy stores in North American) and the “there” of Nu Wa (the factories in Canton) by letting the same type of wind-up toys appear in both places. A link can also be perceived between “then” and “now” if we relate the young and old female factory laborers in Canton to today’s sweatshops in the same area.<sup>12</sup> While the results of cheap labor today can be the products of the international corporations such as Disney and Nike, the products produced then—rattan products including bird cages, and paper products such as opera masks, luscious flowers and exotic animals (118)—are those easily feeding into Orientalism (218). Lai’s anti-exotic strategy in this case is to implicate Nu Wa as a viewer who is first detached and then involved. Looking at the factory workers through one window after another, Nu Wa does not notice the workers’ bleary eyes or wasted bodies, so she finds the work a good one for them, and herself disengaged with “a strange sense of bodilessness . . . to the point where [she disappears] into the act of watching” (118). Her “romanticization” of Oriental factories—or beautification of the object of her gaze in detachment—evaporates the moment Nu Wa recognizes Salt Fish Girl among the workers and gets shocked by the panic on her face. In this brief textual moment, Nu Wa’s non-engaging romanticization of factory work is incurred by the distance and the speed in which she looks at the workers—a problem TV viewers like us could very likely have when watching the news in the comfort of our living rooms.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Ching Kwan Lee, “China has become the world’s new ‘global factory,’ with the southern province of Guangdong (including Hong Kong) as its powerhouse. Millions of women workers are toiling in sweat shops and modern factories, churning out Mickey Mouse toys, Barbie dolls, Nike sports shoes, Apple jeans, watches, radios, televisions, and computers for worldwide consumption” (1).

Besides pluralizing the meanings of the signs which are traditionally susceptible to exoticization such as durian and salt fish, *SFG* places Oriental ornaments like masks, paper flowers and animals back to where they are produced to reveal the sweat and hardship involved. With the third set of images, mirror and video, surface another major target of Orientalism: Chinese-North-American women in two spaces of self-display, at home and at New Kubla Khan. Miranda's self-denial is expressed in her reluctance to see herself in the mirror after her mother's death, while Aimee Ling is quite pre-occupied with her mirror image. This mirror image, however, reveals more of Aimee's social conditioning than it does her self, as is exemplified in the video that she plays on a computer in front of her vanity mirror when in retreat from the temporary romance with Stewart. Aimee's glorious moment is definitely a thing of the past, twice removed from her time of viewing it because of its double framing: the temporal frames marked by the old machine—"a scratchy CD-ROM . . . on an equally decaying laptop"—used for playing it, and the ideological framing of the Running Dog TV company, whose position is revealed in the announcer's saying that Unregulated Zone is "very very dangerous" (19, 20). The second kind of framing is the construction of Aimee Ling through her career as a cabaret girl, her costume ("shimmery sequinned red cheongsam" 19) and the song she sings (Nancy Kwan's "Fan Tan Fanny" from *Flower Drum Songs*). There is, actually, a third frame in the video: that of the gazing man's irises, which show "two tiny reflections" of Aimee (20).

Does the video capture and eternalize a glorious moment? Does the male gaze speak love? Or do both of them actually capture and confine Aimee? The video as a text produces two contradictory female images because of its intertextual reference to the song from *Flower Drum Songs*: one, constructed by the lyrics, is an independent Fanny, who leaves one man for another ("Fan Tan Fanny was leaving her man . . . Fan Tan Fanny has found a new guy") and the other, the image of the highly feminized, sexy and mirror-loving Linda Low most marked by the song "I Enjoy Being a Girl."<sup>13</sup> To add the other two songs attributed to Aimee in the text: "A Song for Clara Cruise" (24, 91) and "Dim Sum Daydreams" (197), the cultural

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<sup>13</sup> That the musical film *Flower Drum Song* helps consolidate the stereotype of Oriental girl as naïve, pliable and sexually available has been noted by many scholarly works. To name just a few: Lisa Lowe argues that the image of Linda Low in front of the mirror in the song "I Enjoy Being a Girl" "both relies on and reproduces a common belief: that Asian women embody the hyper feminine" (37); Blank notes how many Asian American women feel that they are perceived as "pliable and sexually available," because of the stereotypes of Oriental women presented in the films such as *Sayonara*, *Teachouse of the August Moon*, *The World of Suzie Wong*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *The Deer Hunter* (43).

significance of Aimee Ling's performances as a popular cabaret singer is even more ambiguous. On the one hand, "Dim Sum Daydreams" seems to present fantasies deriving from another Oriental sign, dim sum; on the other, "A Song for Clara Cruise" revises Anderson's fairy tale "Red Shoes," shifts the focus from the girl's final salvation to the fetishized red shoes closer: "Shoes danced the bones till they were dust . . . The pretty shoes of Clara Cruise/Dance *empty not so far away*" (92; emphasis added)<sup>14</sup>. On the personal level, then, Aimee Ling seems to be caught in the midst of these contradictory cultural meanings: she seems to be able to critique the power of shoes as commodity fetish but then leads a life of self-pity borne of a fading glory, and of mourning for the now-absent male gaze (her society's and, more specifically, her first lover's).

Far from being a private space for the family members, Miranda's home is one penetrated by capitalist and statist powers, producing plural spaces with contradictory cultural meanings to compromise its residents' positions. Besides the mother's vanity, two other spots at home reveal similar social complications in the characters' use of electronic devices: the father's basement workplace, where a video monitor and a Business Suit are used for him to enter a virtual reality for tax collection, and the house's back step, where Miranda reads her electronic books, *Forbidden Tales*, and likes especially to design ways for the snow princess to escape. The father at work follows the scripted plotline of being a rescuer first and then being beaten up by policemen, while Miranda is the one to choose different plotlines in her story book, and reverse the father's at work. As Wong points out, both this middle-class household and the grocery store in the Unregulated Zone are "sites of crisis, or heterotopias, that reveal how contested and contradictory domestic spaces can be" (112). And I would add that the contradictions compromise the characters without fixing them. While both parents have their moments of deviation from Serendipity (i.e. one for the love of durian and the other for Chinese herbs) and loyalty to it (i.e. one for its medical system, and the other, its food system), it is Miranda that finally breaks through the corporate capitalist control.

With Aimee's video the reader is taken to another hybrid space, New Kubla Khan, an obviously commodified and exoticized space in which both the mother and the daughter fall prey to different kinds of mainstream constructions of (Chinese-North American) women. In Miranda's time, however, the spectacles are a lot more mixed than what is presented in Aimee's video. Besides Miranda's singing her mother's song in her cheongsam, there are a magic show (of a woman's bodily

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<sup>14</sup> In the original story by Andersen, Karen ascends to heaven after her heart breaks with peace and joy. Then nobody asks after the red shoes.

fragmentation), a sentimental piano performance (by Chinese child prodigy), and an erotic bubble-bath tub singing (by a cyborg Sonia). Physical fragmentation and bubble bath are typical tricks used in spectacularization of women's bodies in magic, films and ads. Textually, however, these entertaining spectacles are connected to some brutal scenes of bodily fragmentation and exploitation—the juggling of organs on the one hand, and Sonias' laboring in the factories—thus exposing their common reality of instrumentalization of female bodies. But why do the performances include the child prodigy's piano piece and Miranda's singing Aimee's song? As I see it, the one follows the logic of "decontextualization" in exoticism, while the other paves the way for Miranda's deeper involvement in commodity fetishization. While the idea of the child prodigy in "Two Kinds" in *Joy Luck Club* serves to satisfy the Chinese-American parents' American dream of assimilation and social climbing, the child prodigy's performance in New Kubla Khan is just one of the repetitive shows, bringing "uncontrollable" tears in some audience while making Ian feel bored.

Miranda's trip from New Kubla Khan to the advertising firm, like Nu Wa's from the factory district to the Land of Mist and Forgetfulness, is one of increasing involvement in the capitalist network. In the space for exotic display that New Kubla Khan is, Miranda's performance can only be deceptively self-satisfying: she feels in her singing the presence of her long-lost mother, without knowing that "Aimee Ling" is evoked only to be betrayed by her. The real purpose of this invitation is to get her to sell, against the promise she made to her family, the rights of using mother's song in an advertisement. Her sellout seems to be coerced since, on the one hand, not being a Serendipity citizen, she cannot sue Withers against his use of the song without permission, and, on the other, Dr. Flowers is there chasing her. However, the self-justification she makes after being captured by Dr. Flowers, as well as her ensuing work in advertising, reveals more of her ideological complicity with consumerism: she denies the connection between promotion (advertisement) and factory exploitation ("I didn't personally do anything to those factory workers, did I?"), and she comforts herself by thinking that the shoes will bring glamour to the bored suburban housewives and aging women, and that, to counter the mother's critique of the shoes' glamour, "this time the immortal shoes will make their wearers *truly* immortal" (202-3; emphasis added). Granted her need of a decent job for herself and her family, Miranda produces advertisements with ideologies which run against her emerging revolutionary thinking, deny women's autonomy (using the idea of female passivity to sell the perfume Trembling) and even the value of memory (promoting the Pellas shoes as having "memory-proof" soles).

Thus presented in *SFG*'s hybridizing logic, the factories, New Kubla Khan and the advertising business are connected. The factories and New Kubla Khan, as a matter of fact, are two nodes in the two production lines of "commodities," one in the form of goods and the other, images. Thanks to the advertisements which use Aimee's fetishized images, her song, and Miranda's slogans, moreover, the shoes get fetishized in commodity circulation to gain more exchange values—at the expense of the workers producing the goods and the people being fixed by the images. In the text, for instance, the Janitors and most of the Sonias are dehumanized and used as mere tools. The Ching family's problems, on the other side, are as much to do with Aimee's self-pity as to do with her position as the desirable but dispensable other, which first fixed her in front of the vanity mirror, and then, when used in the shoe advertisement, gets her husband fixed in a position of mourning.

New Kubla Khan can be connected with another exotic space which marks the climax and turning point in Nu Wa's migration: the bar with an opium den in it. Nu Wa's migration story is a surreal condensation of the probable life experience of an illegal immigrant in the liminal spaces of a host country in the twentieth century and today, ranging from taking up a low-paid menial job of the hotel maid variety, profiting from telemarketing fraud and gambling rackets, to being involved unknowingly in drug smuggling.<sup>15</sup> While Edwina, a foreign woman with healthy and "almost translucent" skin (123), embodies the beautiful illusion of hope offered by the host nation, Nu Wa's dilemma of remaining unemployed after her self-education in statistics bespeaks the reality of the host nation's rejection of immigrants. The most curious aspect of her experience, for me, is her visit to the exotic and hybrid space of *the bar*, inside which there are a cage dancer, a wall covered with garden fresco, and, in the center of this wall, a piece of thin black gauze covering the opening to an opium den.

Why does the text invoke the history of opium, a dark page in the histories of Chinese and Chinese diaspora, a past many of us Chinese diaspora, Lai included, see "in glimpses and glimmers that are, of necessity, so frightening or disgusting that we run from them and embrace their opposites" ("Future Asians" 173)? Instead of denying this dark history, Lai re-inscribes it in the text strategically to produce

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<sup>15</sup> Telemarketing fraud is a contemporary problem occurring both in Canada and in Taiwan. Also, to compare Nu Wa's experience with the typical jobs Chinese female immigrants have in the period from 1860 to 1947—"merchants' spouses, domestic slaves (*mooi-tsai*), serving girls (*kei-toi-nui*), and prostitutes" (Woon 85)—we can be sure that Nu Wa's experience spans a longer period of the twentieth century up until the present.

plural meanings. Far from being the center of “Chinese” evil and squalor, this opium den is reconfigured in three ways. First of all, the whole space is not marked as “Chinese”: neither the exotic birdcage dancer, the painted garden, nor the man inside has an ethnic or Chinese mark. Secondly, it is not a space marked by passivity or evil: the birdcage dancer, instead of just being a mere object of gaze, returns his “intent gaze” to guide Nu Wa to the opium place. Finally, we see in the center of this opium den not some Chinamen, but Edwina, the symbol of American dream and the prime cause of Nu Wa’s degrading experience of exploitation and crime in the capitalist machine. As a stigma in the history of Chinese diaspora, this opium den can be placed in the crux of the international traffic of Asian immigrants, laborers, and the “exotic” goods and images they produce. In this broadened context, then, what Nu Wa tries to kill is more than Edwina and her “assured sense of . . . superiority” (146). Seen both in its textual and socio-historical context, the effort can only be futile. Textually, with Edwina’s map Nu Wa can only go back to the Chinese society to which she no longer belongs in terms of language, age and gender, but in which she is equally coerced into the traditional plot of “marriage and children vs. adultery and death.” In the text’s “historical” perspective, then, the lesbian genealogy is also a history of female exploitation, occurring in the hybrid spaces of Canton factories, North American bar in the past, and the shoe factories and New Kubla Khan in Miranda’s time and suggesting that both labor exploitation of and exotic display of the Other simply recur in history.

## **V. Hybridization as an On-Going Process**

Amidst the globalizing forces of multinational capitalism, our life world is simultaneously expanding and contracting, bringing the issues and “faces” of otherness to our daily life. Both in the multicultural society of Canada and in Taiwan, the others—be they laborers, immigrants, ethnic minorities, or those different from “us” in terms of religion, political stance, sexual orientation, customs, and biological composition—constantly challenge our sense of “self” and boundaries, while the mixing of different cultures happen daily and everywhere. Exoticizing the others and their cultures in different forms of commodities seems to be an easy way out: while we, in consumption, thought we comprehended these aestheticized and fetishized differences, we are blind to the fact that the issues of boundaries are matters of daily negotiation, and that there are always faces of the Other beyond our comprehension and challenging our cognitive and emotional capacities.

Against such logic of self-satisfying consumption of the others, *SFG*'s "post-colonial anti-exotic" strategies "re-politicize" the "exotic" elements by textualizing and hybridizing them. The unfamiliar, or de-familiarized, elements in the text, ranging from the mythic goddess Nu Wa, the Oriental spaces of New Kubla Khan and the bar in the Land of Mist and Forgetfulness, to ethnic foods such as durian and salt fish and exotic ornaments such as mask, exotic paper animals, are neither romanticized-fetishized nor decontextualized; instead, they are all multi-contextualized so that their meanings get pluralized. Instead of weaving a consistent system of imagery as modernist novelists do, Lai allows the images to diverge and multiply in meanings, the plotlines to bifurcate and converge repetitively, just as various words and details take on multiple intertextual resonances. These strategies of hybridization, of course, do not undermine the text's lesbian cause; instead, it constructs a lesbian genealogy and sets it in the context of interacting social levels of business, technology and family relations. The text traces these power relations back and forth in history, in order to locate thoughts and "seeds" of resistance across time and suggest future possibilities.

To relate the title of the opening chapter, Bifurcation, to the text as a whole, the word refers not only to the splitting of the human tail, but also to the dual plot of Nu Wa-Salt Fish Girl and Miranda-Evie, the failure and separation of the first pair compensated for and consummated by the child-bearing of the second. However, bifurcation does not happen just once in these major plotlines; the constructed lesbian genealogy is filled with intertexts and repetitions, while in both plotlines there are divergences caused by the characters' differences from and betrayals of each other. Miranda's ambivalence is shown in her worries about her job and her fears of Evie, who is "alien and dirty," with "strange origins" and "odd sisters" (151, 228). No wonder that with the birth of their baby, Miranda thinks that "[e]verything will be all right . . . until next time" (269), implicitly acknowledging the gap between the two of them, and the immensity of the system's control.

Bifurcation in *SFG* is actually an on-going process of hybridization, which can be manipulated and contained within the capitalist (multicultural) system of control—or an act of openness to and communication with differences. Besides a possible negative future, there is another negative ending in the text: Sonias' failed sabotage, with many of them killed, their home base destroyed, and only a few survivors running off to a place they knew. The union of Miranda and Evie across the lines of class and "humanity" is no easy matter, just as Miranda does not "yet" recognize the Sonia group as her "family" (249). In a way, the text wants to ask us: what will happen "next time," and what will happen to the survivors of the Sonia

group? Will there be conflicts within and between the two groups, or will the two potentials be realized in a larger resistant group that allows further diversification? By leaving these questions unanswered, the text does not so much trouble the already porous borders of multicultural Canada, as pose the most difficult question to us readers: what does “recognition” mean and how should we “recognize” the others—as lovers, family, or as subjects which are equal but different—in the interconnected and penetrating capitalist systems of communication, which are also systems of commodification through fragmentation, exploitation and exoticization?

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### **About the Author**

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