What does it mean to be human?: Racing Monsters, Clones and Replicants

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"What Does It Mean To Be Human?: Racing Monsters, Clones and Replicants

Robyn Morris

How can it not know what it is? (Rick Deckard, Blade Runner)

When I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred. (Victor Frankenstein, Frankenstein)

In her first novel When Fox is a Thousand (1995), Calgary-based author Larissa Lai incorporated into her narrative selected scenes from the movie Blade Runner (Director's Cut 1992) to interrogate a contemporary filmic definition of humanness that is premised on racialised, sexualised and gendered hierarchies. Lai's intertextual engagement with Blade Runner articulates an awareness of the power of the Hollywood viewing apparatus to colour the look (white) and perpetuate dichotomies of racial difference. In the opening pages of Fox, however, the protagonist Artemis Wong watches and contemplates pivotal scenes from the movie in a way that suggests the novel's visionary renegotiation of power relations based on domination and subordination. The dialectic between Fox and Blade Runner is continued in Lai's second novel Salt Fish Girl (2002), which will be the primary focus of this paper. Characterised by intertextual layering, Salt Fish Girl interrogates the construction of identity through allusion to an older iconic sf western text, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Lai's fiction functions as a contestation and complication of the literary and filmic perpetuation of an ideology of a pure, originary and unmarked "humanness", a definition which has historically accorded the white, western, heterosexual male a universal and centred subject positioning.

Discerning, defining and designating difference as otherness is paramount to the way in which whiteness constructs and reconstructs itself as not raced, as not queer, as not coloured, and always as not other, within mainstream texts of science fiction such as Blade Runner and Frankenstein. It is important then, to ask, why Lai, who defines herself as a “person of colour”, a feminist and a lesbian, should draw on canonical texts of white and Eurocentric science fiction such as Blade Runner and Frankenstein. While one text emerges from early nineteenth-century imperial England and the other from the late twentieth-century imperial filmic apparatus that is Hollywood, both have spawned an entire industry of reviews and responses. Extensively written

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about, both texts, like Salt Fish Girl, also allude to various canonical works within their own narratives. It might be argued that such literary mirroring works towards ensuring the longevity of the original but this is not entirely what Lai’s fiction is about. Incorporating canonical texts into her writing allows Lai to interrogate the fixity of a discourse based on divisive boundaries.

Her evocation of canonical texts is interesting then because of their location within the genre of mainstream science fiction and more particularly so since, in the plethora of critical commentary which has been produced on both Frankenstein and Blade Runner, very few critics have read either in the context of race, racism or racialisation. Lai refers to Frankenstein in Salt Fish Girl and Blade Runner in When Fox is a Thousand precisely because they are a coded articulation, through their depiction of an “other” who created in the image of humans, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific racism. The interrogation of this historical “racing” of human difference in not only scientific thought but also in sf literature and film is an essential aspect of Lai’s politics of identity. The strategic inclusion, and reference, to canonical texts within Fox and Salt Fish Girl allows for a reading of Lai’s fiction as both a charting and critique of a racialised Enlightenment rhetoric that continues, in the post-modern age, to bind discussion of human variation to skin colour and “race”.

Both Fox and Salt Fish Girl are important texts in the emergent area of contemporary Asian Canadian writing because of their contestation of the visual designation of otherness by and at the level of skin. Lai, who is of Chinese ancestry, has commented that, “mainstream Canadian culture places people who look like me, on the outside”. Emphasising that her politics of identity also embraces the notion of looking back, Lai adds that, “there’s a lot of stuff you can see from there.” The intrinsic link between Lai’s fiction and Blade Runner and Frankenstein is a sustained interrogation of a colonialist discourse that perpetuates a fear of the visually raced other. While identity is positioned in Frankenstein and Blade Runner as culturally hierarchical and biologically fixed under the gaze of a white policing apparatus Lai’s novels work to reposition identity as a site of individual and social transformation.

At the textual level, Salt Fish Girl functions as both an interrogation and a redefinition of conceptual paradigms that contain difference to otherness and equate humanness with a singularised white, western, heterosexual male selfhood. While there is, as Richard Dyer observes, “no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human”, Lai’s complication of the term “human”, through the introduction of female clones labelled “the Sonia series” in Salt Fish Girl, is a strategic intervention in contemporary identity politics. Designed as a vast source of expendable factory labour by their genetic scientist father Dr Rudy Flowers, the Sonias are coded as “other” not
simply by their multitudinous similarity, their motherless birth, their slave status, or even their human/fish genes, but by their dark hair and eyes. Cloned predominantly from the DNA of Third World and Indigenous peoples of the past, the Sonias of the future wear, on their skin, the same physiognomy of difference that raced their forebears. As part of a quiet rebellion, the Sonias surreptitiously imprint, upon the soles of the shoes they produce for the Pallas Shoe Corporation, a haunting question that links Blade Runner and Frankenstein to Fox and Salt Fish Girl. In a rhetoric which is both poignant and political, the Sonias ask, “what does it mean to be human?” a question which Lai uses to trace and expose past and contemporary anxieties about difference.

One of the defining characteristics of the sf genre is this very preoccupation with both constructing and deconstructing difference. The reappearance of iconic sf figures such as Frankenstein’s creature or Blade Runner’s Replicants in Lai’s fiction, draws attention to stereotypical representations of difference while also emphasising the “artificiality, simulation and the constructed ‘otherness’ of identity”. Frankenstein’s creature, popularly referred to as a monster, is depicted in Hollywood movies as grotesque and deformed and is defined by his creator as a “filthy daemon”, a “fiend” and a “dreaded spectre”. Positioned as different and “other” to humanness by and through the visual, it is, significantly, the very “horror of [his] countenance”, his “unearthly ugliness [which] rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes”, which makes him an object to be feared by his white creator. Frankenstein’s creature internalises this imposition of otherness and cloaks what he feels is a hideousness of form, in seclusion and darkness. But his knowledge is such that he understands that the othering process is humankind’s “fatal prejudice”, a prejudice which, the creature notes with unintended irony, “clouds their eyes”. Neither this knowledge, nor the creature’s lapse into violence is enough to overturn a deeply entrenched ‘fatal prejudice’ that is premised on a fear of the inhuman other. Frankenstein’s creature is not you, but much like the cloned Sonias and the Replicants of Blade Runner, he could be read as being uncannily like you.

Frankenstein’s creature is, however, also Mary Shelley’s creature. Conceived during a nightmare, he is what Hélène Cixous, in her analysis of Freud’s reading of Hoffman’s “The Sandman” defines as the offspring cast off by the self through critical solicitation...the ghostly figure of non-fulfilment and repression, and not the double as counterpart or reflection but rather the doll [read monster] that is neither dead nor alive. Expelled, but why?

In her 1831 Introduction Shelley bids her “hideous progeny [to] go forth and prosper” while Victor Frankenstein laments that he “had turned loose in the world a depraved wretch... a being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror... my own spirit
let loose from the grave”.13 This notion of being cast out, of being made and unmade by a less than benevolent Maker is important to an understanding of the politics of identity being critiqued by Lai in Salt Fish Girl. Though referring to the figure of the cyborg, Donna Haraway’s observation that, “illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential”14 is useful to this reading of Lai’s literary interrogation of Euro/phallocentric and capitalist-based constructions of otherness. Victor Frankenstein is “father” to an unnamed creature, Dr Rudy Flowers is “father” to the Sonia series and the biomechanic Eldon Tyrell is “father” to the Replicants in Blade Runner. All fear the return of their creations, seeking to cocoon and isolate themselves against this offspring’s wrath of abandonment. It is hardly coincidental to Lai’s politics that the offspring all return, albeit confrontationally, to meet their paternal maker(s) and contest the production and marking of their body as unnaturally ‘other’ and their casting out by the society in which they seek to live.

Signaling that Salt Fish Girl intends to interrogate white paternalistic stories of creation and origins, Lai not only commences her narrative with those three hauntingly familiar opening words from Genesis, “In the beginning” (p.1) but relocates the biblical creation scene to that of the muddy banks of the Yellow River. It is here, in ancient China, that the half woman, half snake goddess, Nu Wa creates the first humans from yellow river mud. This is not a loving and benevolent creation. The birthing scene is one of carnage for Nu Wa is unhappy with the way her creatures talk back to, and ridicule, their maker. In anger, she tears her creations apart before falling asleep amongst what she describes as, and in an uncanny echo of Victor Frankenstein, “the wreckage of my monstrous creations” (p.3). Nu Wa, however, becomes lonely and desires to be like her creations. Forgoing her magnificent tail in exchange for human legs Nu Wa undergoes a very painful act of rebirth. Her story is linked to that of the Sonias in future when she chooses, as the vessel of her rebirth, the human form of the narrator Miranda. Miranda’s mother became pregnant with Nu Wa at the age of sixty-three after eating the forbidden fruit of the future, the genetically modified durian in which Nu Wa (in a minaturised snake form) was hiding.

Glimpses of Nu Wa’s long life are filtered through the experience of Miranda’s life in the present of 2062. The past presents itself to Miranda in the form of dreams although she largely ignores these historical vignettes. While the future world of Salt Fish Girl is characterised by a denial of the past, remnants and vestiges of human atrocities continually seep into the collective unconscious of its inhabitants. In a world where it is difficult to distinguish between the real and the not real15 it is important that Miranda should receive a warning from her mother about the need to “keep old games, old stories and traditional values alive” (p.65). Essentialist conceptions of “the real” in the future are continually being challenged.
through the language, stories and culture of the past; a notion which is underscored by Lai when Miranda begins stealing antique wind-up toys because of their “lifelikeness” (p.219). Lai exposes the technological as a paternal and profit-driven process; a process that, in this future city called Serendipity commodifies identity and complicates our past conceptions of humanness as realness.

Essential to Lai’s examination of the textual production of power-based inequalities is a critique of the way in which fixed binaries such as that of creator/created, human/not human, real/not real, works to assure whiteness of its dominance while subjugating and denying the “other’s” movement towards an autonomous identity. What constantly arises in Lai’s work is, as she terms it, “the spectre of the hybrid, and the notion of difference as not outside of power, but pressuring it along its borders, from within”.

Although the Sonias, Replicants and Frankenstein’s creature are defined by their dominant culture as less than human, Lai claims for these cultural hybrids a site of identity that is fluid and mobile. Writing against the border protectionist policy which characterises white fear of the mobile “other”, Lai’s fiction not only engages with the postcolonial, bi-polarist assumption that “the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontrollable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside outside,” but moves beyond its ideological confines. Contesting an acculturated split that invariably privileges the West over the East, same over other, Lai’s fiction consistently works not to suture the unnatural nature of this split. Instead, her novels emphasise the trope of splitting and doubling in order to critique its divisive underpinnings. It is then, with more than a little authorial irony, that Lai titles the opening chapter of Salt Fish Girl as “The Bifurcation”.

In Colonial Desire, Robert Young locates Western anxieties regarding hybridity as a feared “bifurcation”, a racial and cultural splitting that lessens the altogether pervasiveness and absolute power of whiteness. Young notes the term’s historical attachment to scientific and race-based colonialist discourse observing that this discourse circulates around anxiety over “decivilisation” resulting from racial mixing, “whereby a culture in its colonial operation becomes hybridized, alienated and potentially threatening to its European original through the production of polymorphously perverse people”. This “polymorphic perversity” is what Bhabha has, in an oft quoted phrase, defined as “the ambivalent world of the not quite/not white”. A definition such as this however continues to reify the centredness and normalcy of whiteness by implying that colour is other, less than and abnormal (to white). Lai’s conceptualisation of hybridity as pressuring the borders from within is liberatory in that it rejects any premise of a split in which a polymorphic difference is read as less than and other to white. While in Fox Lai depicts an Asian Canadian woman watching a mainstream film such as Blade Runner in order to emphasise the cultural embeddedness of the
split between East and West, human and non-human, whiteness and other, she takes this examination further in Salt Fish Girl. It is through the introduction of the cloned Sonias and their haunting question, “what does it mean to be human?” which allows for a reconceptualisation of the term hybridity as existing within, not outside the mythological white centre that a film such as Blade Runner and a text such as Frankenstein inscribes. In Salt Fish Girl Lai constructs a futuristic site of identity that rejects fixed boundaries, a site that is instead characterised by an ongoing process of negotiation and transformation. As Trinh Minh-ha writes, “violations of boundaries have always led to displacement, for the in-between zones are the shifting grounds on which the (doubly) exiled walk. Not you/like you.”20

Fallen Angels
The link between genetically engineered female factory workers, Replicants as beautiful works of art, and a gigantic, poorly stitched together creature could appear tenuous if it were not for the fact that all exhibit those “invisible” qualities of whiteness which, in the words of the Replicant’s maker, Eldon Tyrell, make them “more human than human”. In his examination of whiteness as an ideology of power and self-generating social privilege, Richard Dyer notes that it is “the soul and the mind [which] form part of what makes white people socially white.”21 The inherent power of whiteness resides in a paradox, despite its representation of itself as monolithic, that is, regardless of a problematic colour mix of brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, red, brown and blond hair and all the variations that these combinations offer, its discursive power rests on the construction and reproduction of itself as visibly invisible.22 This very invisibility means that in social discourse whiteness is taken for what Dyer describes as sameness or “the human ordinary”23 and neither the Sonias, the Replicants nor Frankenstein’s creature are “human ordinary”.

The identity paradox of the Sonias, Frankenstein’s creature and the Replicants is such that though they are created by humans, their near white, but not ordinary white, visage indicates a transgression of strict social boundaries designed to maintain hierarchical divisions. However, while the skin of the human hybrid bears the coloured mark of difference, the figure of human-like doubles such as the Sonias is feared because of its unrecognisability; they have been made in the image of whiteness. As Freud observes, this mirroring provokes a favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings especially “when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object [coloured, inhuman and other] becomes too much like an animate one [whiteness].”24 To protect itself at the centre and to allay its fear of the “other”, whiteness constructs labels of difference. The Replicants in Blade Runner are defined in the film’s Prologue as “virtually identical to a human” and the perceived threat of their
otherness is controlled through their slave status and their four-year lifespan. The Sonias of Salt Fish Girl are also positioned as servile to humanness and are controlled through a disc called a “Guardian Angel” that is wired into their backs at “birth”. Unlike the Sonias or the Replicants, Frankenstein’s creature has none of these technologically assisted controlling devices. Nevertheless, he is positioned as “different” by being delineated early in Shelley’s novel as “not quite” human. After surveying the creature fleeing upon the arctic ice, Captain Walton describes him as “a being which has the shape of a man... of gigantic stature... a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island”.

In contrast, Victor Frankenstein, who boards Walton’s stranded ship just after this sighting, is described as “a human being...a European”. Later in the narrative the creature’s skin is described as mummy-like, his hair as dark and his eyes as yellow and watery. According to Anne Mellor, one of the few critics who addresses the issue of race within Shelley’s text, the creature is “other”, precisely because he is “not white skinned, not blond haired, not blue eyed. He is not Caucasian. He is not of the same race as his maker.”

If “being” is equated with belonging and whiteness, then Frankenstein’s creature, Blade Runner’s Replicants and Flower’s Sonias, are outsiders or non-beings, their difference designated at the level of skin. Lai’s examination of the notion of “being” and “beginnings” shifts the focus of human origins from the West to the East. It is interesting, especially in light of Lai’s interrogation of a colourised and racialised imposition of otherness, that both the Replicant Roy Batty and Frankenstein’s creature locate their sense of otherness in the discourse of Western Christianity by defining themselves as “fallen angels”. These texts circulate around notions of whiteness rising, of being reborn. But, and as both Nu Wa’s act of creation and the cloning process in Salt Fish Girl suggests, this is both a flawed and false rebirth. When Roy Batty meets with Chew, his eye-maker, he (mis)quotes William Blake’s “America: A Prophesy” stating “Fiery the angels fell/Deep thunder roll’d around the shores/Burning with the fires of Ore”. In Blake’s original the angels do, of course, rise.

In an act of literary interweaving, Blake writes back to and illustrates scenes from Milton’s Paradise Lost, which is also a key text on which Frankenstein’s creature models his own vision of humanness. With Paradise Lost as his guiding text on the principles of humanity, the creature defines himself, while exiled in the perpetual whiteness of the Arctic aboard a ship momentarily stranded en route from the port of Archangel, as the dark, devilish and fallen other. Cast out by the whiteness which Victor Frankenstein personifies, the creature tells Captain Walton over the corpse of his Maker that he is a “fallen angel”. It is the second time he defines himself as such, the first, just before he begins the story of his life after his (mis)creation to his maker Frankenstein. In this instance the creature states,
"I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather a fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed."

The creature is symbolically shrouded, at the close of the novel, by the arctic, a bastion until recently and like space and the deep sea, of (white) male exploration and control. This is suggestive, perhaps, of both the racialist and gendered underpinnings of the novel but also of the paradox of whiteness; for its reproductive power, both figuratively and metaphorically, lies in what is inaccessible and invisible but also in the corporeality and technological reproductive capacities of the white male. The creature’s self-definition as a fallen angel, so closely linked to the story of biblical beginnings and appearing in a text proclaimed by Mary Shelley to incite terror and horror through the monstrous inhuman other, is significant to Lai’s appropriation of the original in her own hybridised-postmodern-science fiction-horror story. Ironically, it is not so much the revolting origins of the charnel house from which the creature emerges but the physical and psychological feeling of revolt that Victor Frankenstein experiences upon viewing his creation that determines the creature’s casting out from the centre of civilised society. The revulsion he feels upon the birth of his creature relates to a (mis)reproduction. It is not so much who, but what, is the object and underlying cause of this evocation of revulsion, terror and horror that Lai’s text seeks to address. In policing a border of homogeneity and perpetuating the fallacy of white maleness as normalcy, whiteness maintains its self-assumed position at the centre. So, fallen angels meet and (re)meet their makers and monsters and Replicants are cast as the dark and devilish other. And yet, it is through their acculturated otherness that Lai questions the very constructedness of origins, of the unnatural split between darkness falling and whiteness ascending.

Onto this already heavily laden palimpsest of iconic texts, Lai projects the figures of the cloned Sonia series, and their renegade leader, Evie. And what links does she have, if any, to that infamously cast-out woman in the Christian myth of origins, Eve? Evie is not Milton’s daughter; she has neither a devoted, dutiful nor a docile attitude towards her father. In an ironic twist in Salt Fish Girl, Nu Wa, in her futuristic form as Miranda, makes a return of sorts, with Evie, to Evie’s “father”, Dr Rudy Flowers. It is during a heated confrontation in which Flowers attempts to justify his role in destroying the renegade Sonias’ safe-haven that Miranda stabs him with the knife Evie was carrying. In a reversal of the Blade Runner and Frankenstein narratives, it is the maker (Nu Wa), who initiates the unmaking and unlike Eldon Tyrell or Victor Frankenstein, Rudy Flowers does not die. Although Nu Wa experiences first-hand the malevolence of her human creations she maintains her non-interventionist approach stating, “I am the maker of your maker. Both of us, such putrid origins, climbing out of the mud and muck into darkness. But I did not want to unmake what I had made, imperfect and wicked as it was”
As creator, Nu Wa assumes responsibility for her offspring. Understanding that the creation process is not seamless, that in its very randomness both perfection and mutations can occur, Nu Wa does not initiate acts of retribution; there are no floods, no pestilence, no four year life span, no abandonment and certainly no killing of the offspring on sacrificial crosses in this story of 'human' origins. Evie's narrative is a determined effort by Lai to situate the woman of colour's story outside of the discourse of both paternal and white Western origins. Evie does not regard herself as a fallen angel and Evie, unlike the Replicant Roy Batty or Frankenstein's creature, does not return to her father in search of a prelapsarian grace and harmony. Evie's narrative is a direct reaction to stories of paternal-driven deeds and origins. It is through Evie and the Sonias' quest for independence that Lai rejects the narrativising of women, and more particularly, women of Asian descent, as passive and silent under white, western, patriarchal scrutiny.

Lai’s novels instead emphasise the multidimensional aspect of vision and this is particularly prevalent in Fox which interrogates the way both race and gender are marked by and through scopic regimes of power. In one scene, the central protagonist Artemis Wong is taken by her friend Eden to a collector of oriental antique garments to whom she desires to sell an item of clothing. The collector, Mr Hawkesworth, is described, “[as taking] the garment in his long bony hands and scrutinising it with an almost pornographic gaze that made her shiver” (p.115). That Artemis should shiver when framed as other by the dominant white culture, of which Mr Hawkesworth is representative, is indicative of her status and awareness of her positioning as both sexual and racial prey. The narrative, however, functions to reconceptualise the act of looking as an interactive process, one which resists the positioning of Asian female selfhood as passive under scrutiny. It is within her fiction that Lai seeks to renegotiate the very structures that seek to frame an Asian Canadian woman such as Artemis as silent and passive; existing, much like the stereotypes of Madame Butterfly and Suzie Wong, only as objects of western and masculine desire.

Rejecting this framing of female, Asian Canadian subjectivity as passive under white, male scrutiny, is central to Lai’s politics of glancing back and through a dominant white culture. It is no coincidence that in Fox, Artemis watches and reacts against two scenes that show the Blade Runner Rick Deckard (played by Harrison Ford) exerting strength and power against women. The first is when he slams the Replicant Rachel up against a wall, “snarling”, as Lai describes it, and forcing her to say, “kiss me” (Fox, p.15). The second is when he shoots another Replicant, Zhora, in the back as she attempts to flee both his gun and his gaze. The final scene from the film that Artemis watches before falling asleep is the shooting of Zhora by Deckard. The inclusion of Zhora’s death in Fox is more than a passing comment on the representation of women as objects of voyeuristic pleasure. The positioning
of women within the film sets up a hierarchical dualism between male and female, but as Deckard’s lead in the “romantic” dialogue between himself and the Replicant Rachel suggests, always in need of patriarchal control. While Deckard may ultimately help Rachel to escape Zhora’s fate, she remains fixed as an “other” under the gaze of a pervasive policing mechanism. As we read Artemis watching this filmic sequence in the novel, it becomes increasingly apparent that she, like Rachel and like Zhora, has also been culturally positioned as one of the hunted.

In *Salt Fish Girl* Lai further explores this inscription of a passive and gendered otherness through vision but at the same time writes against the stereotypes of Madam Butterfly and Suzie Wong that continue to hover in the collective consciousness of the West. Salt Fish Girl works as a political satire precisely because its narrative deconstructs the myth that there is a danger in the “other” looking back; that returning the gaze can result in a Medusa-like freezing of Asian Canadian female subjectivity in the frame of white, western, male domination. Hélène Cixous has written that to alter embedded discourses premised on exclusion by race or gender “you have only to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.” Lai accords the Sonias a measure of power and autonomy through the control of their own reproductive capacities and their ability to live independently. Although the Sonias are constantly under surveillance through the “Guardian Angel”, they attempt to circumvent or escape their subservient gendered and racial subject positioning. This allows for a contestation of the embeddedness of the hierarchical dualism between East and West whereby the East is signified as passive and feminine, exotic and other but always in need of guidance and control. The Sonias reject any assumption of Western domination by ripping the “Guardian Angel” out of their backs. It is however, their chance discovery of the reproductive capacities of the durian seed (which has been genetically modified to help infertile women conceive), that allows the Sonias a sense of freedom and a chance of longevity that is denied to them on the factory production lines.

In exploiting the same technological process that exploits them, the Sonias are able to nurture new and free baby Sonias. These births offer a redemptive space for the Sonias in which to form a female community that is unavailable to Frankenstein’s creature or the Replicants of *Blade Runner*. It is also for this reason which Rudy Flowers helps the brown-shirted, black booted, Pallas Police to seek out and destroy the safe-haven of the renegade Sonias. As he tells Evie, “you don’t know what monstrosities might have come of those births” (p.256). Flowers uncannily echoes Victor Frankenstein (and there are several of these “echoes” in *Salt Fish Girl*), who destroys his female creation fearing that she and his male creature would propagate a “race of devils” upon the earth, making “the existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror”. There is a historical fear of the
“yellowing” of whiteness and both Frankenstein and Flowers are seeking to enact a white future through patriarchal control of human and non-human reproductive processes. The generic intertextuality which characterises Lai’s fiction acts as a literary interrogation of the continued patriarchal confluence of “monstrosity” with female reproduction, a conjoining that also attempts to mask white, patriarchal fear of difference. Indicating the importance of a feminist “politics of difference”, Salt Fish Girl begins with Nu Wa’s creation of humans from river mud in ancient China, and concludes with Nu Wa, in her human form as Miranda, giving birth to a baby girl through the bloody and painful act of womb birth. Directly linking reproduction to the maternal rather than the technological allows for a contestation of historically embedded textualisations of human origins as a natural, Western and paternal creation.

Paternal creation is premised on the desire to reproduce the “sacred image of the same, of the one true copy, mediated by the luminous technologies of compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist self-birthing”.34 However, when the copy assumes the privileges of “humans”, they are perceived as rebellious and in need of (brutal) control. The predetermined and stereotypical servility of the Sonias is a constructed bond between creator and creation and reflective of that between colonial master and indigenous or imported slave. The birth of free baby Sonias is a direct circumvention of the slave/master relationship but it results in a brutal massacre with the slain Sonias hastily buried in shallow graves. Mourning the loss of her sisters the eldest Sonia, Sonia 14, finds the grave and identifies, in a poignant inscription of subjectivity, each of the Sonias by their individual body markings. Despite the sameness of their origins, the cloned Sonias become, as the narrative progresses, more human and more individual than those who manufacture or hunt them down.

In the closing pages of Black Skin, White Masks Fanon argues that:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognised by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognised by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is on that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed.35

It follows that if the desire to reproduce copies is a confirmation of the superiority of humanness then in seeking a reflection or recognition of itself, whiteness, masquerading as humanness, constructs or defines otherness through powers of the cognitive. How ironic is it then, that the Replicants gaze back at humanness with prosthetic eyes, that Frankenstein’s creature gazes on his maker with watery, yellow eyes and that the Sonias’ dark eyes are the reproduction of an orientalist fear of the inscrutable “Asian other”? If there is a reflection of whiteness within the offspring’s eyes then it is one that
is both blurred and inherently flawed. Denying that it sees this flawed image of itself in the eyes of the other, the white maker seeks to destroy the offspring and in doing so, perpetuate the myth of human worthiness and ordinariness in his own terms. The reappearance of Frankenstein’s creature and Blade Runner’s Replicants within Lai’s fiction allows her to navigate across established generic and racIALIZED borders while complicating and critiquing the cultural embeddedness of divisive identity structures in which difference is designated at the level of skin.

Virtual Humanness

Otherness is designated through the defining eye of whiteness and it remains significant that Lai should return to a critique of the white gaze that she began in Fox, at the close of the Salt Fish Girl narrative. On the run from the Pallas Police after the stabbing incident with Rudy Flowers, Miranda and Evie hide in an aquarium which Evie, who is a mixture of human and point zero three percent freshwater carp, acknowledges is the home “mother” and the place, as she notes with understated irony, in which “many lives begin” (p.261). As she gazes at her mother and an assortment of other marine creatures, Evie comments that it is “hard not to believe in God...if you look at this, and if it makes you believe in God, then you also have to believe that it was all meant for human pleasure” (p.262). While Evie is suggesting that there is pleasure in looking there is also the implied association of looking with power. Lai immediately undermines this when Miranda reads a note on the octopus tank that declares, “octopus eyes and human eyes were very similar in their construction and functioning” (p.262). If non-human and human vision is hauntingly similar then the definition of humanness hinges on and circulates around the acquisition and protection of a race-based power. The figure of Evie, and her human/fish genes, exists in a liminal state, neither fully human nor non-human. This ambiguity surrounding her identity is one way that Lai complicates conceptions of humanness as whole, centred, complete; “the real thing”. Evie and her Sonia sisters serve a critical role in Salt Fish Girl, for it is through the figure/s of the clone/s that the potential for a sustained literary and theoretical examination of white maleness as a constructed humanness is justifiably exposed.

The intertextuality that characterises Lai’s fiction works as a criticism of a literary canon that has historically given primacy to, and privileged the stories and deeds of the white male. In consciously traversing the line between the reality of the past and the dystopian future and interspersing this with reference to Frankenstein in Salt Fish Girl and Blade Runner in Fox, Lai breaks what Fredric Jameson has defined as the “social contract” that exists between writer and reader. More importantly, Lai resists women’s, and more particularly, women of colour, lesbian and feminist women’s devalued position in the historical contract by repudiating any singular conception of
storytelling. Both Salt Fish Girl and Fox function to displace traditional conceptions of history and storytelling while also understanding that the act of transmitting is an elliptical process. Walter Benjamin has observed that storytelling is “the art of repeating stories”, but Lai’s novels have resonances beyond merely the repetition of ancient (white, male and western) words. Stories are as Trinh Minh-ha asserts, always evolving; “Pleasure in the copy. Pleasure in the reproduction. No repetition can ever be identical, but my story carries with it their stories, their histories, and our story repeats itself endlessly, despite our persistence in denying it.” The historically continuous narrative voice of Nu Wa and her observation of the experience of the renegade Sonias in Salt Fish Girl suggests that storytelling is a viable means through which versions of history other than that of whiteness may be transmitted to the future.

Both When Fox is a Thousand and Salt Fish Girl interrogate the process of racialisation by a dual examination of not only the way in which humanness is constructed as white, male, Western and heterosexual, but also how whiteness constructs and continually reconstructs itself as naturally not other within mainstream texts such as Blade Runner and Frankenstein. Lai’s fiction challenges essentialist conceptual paradigms steeped in a history of domination and control. Her novels draw attention to this historical practice while also offering ways for a new generation of writers of colour to resist and challenge the reproduction of not only racial, sexual and gendered, but also generic stereotypes. Salt Fish Girl links phrenologically based racial discourse of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century and projects their incumbent racialised hierarchies onto a future in which DNA replication reflects the same ideological polarisations of the past. But humanness, as the Sonias’ question exposes in Salt Fish Girl, is an arbitrary definition heavily laden with historically racist and gendered baggage. Lai questions both the constructedness and historical fixity of historically entrenched and culturally scripted differences between human and non-human, white and coloured, angel and monster, animate and inanimate, same and other. Her own body of fiction functions as an evolving and insightful examination of acculturated boundaries in which identity is determined by a hierarchical physiognomy of difference and is controlled by a white fear of (mis)reproduction.

Novels by Larissa Lai
When Fox is a Thousand (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1995).
Salt Fish Girl (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2002).

Notes
1. For a detailed analysis of the intertextuality of Lai’s When Fox is A Thousand and its references to Blade Runner see Robyn Morris “Making Eyes: Colouring the Look in Larissa Lai’s When Fox is a Thousand and Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner”, Australian Canadian Studies. 20:1 (2002), pp.75-98.

3. The critical reception to Blade Runner was particularly intense in the first decade after its original 1982 release. The initial response to the film was largely in the form of reviews. Michael Dempsey labelled Blade Runner, a “crippled but nonetheless magnificent edifice of a film” (p.39) while David Desser argues that the film’s allusion to Paradise Lost and Frankenstein, and the Replicants mimetic doubling of humans, allows Blade Runner to participate in the process of (humanity’s) self-recovery (“Blade Runner: Science Fiction and Transcendence”, Literature and Film Quarterly 13, 3 (1985), pp.172-78 at p.178). While many of these early reviews discuss the division between humanity (men) and machines not one extends the analysis to a discussion of the othering process in the context of race, gender or sexuality. Giuliana Bruno’s more insightful analysis of the film considers the relationship between history and identity, postmodernism and the dystopian Los Angeles of 2019 (“Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner”, October 41 (1987), pp.61-74, at p.62). Bruno’s focus is the postmodern city and the city envisioned in Blade Runner is one in which the Orient dominates; “the Los Angeles of Blade Runner is China(in)town” (p.66). The Replicants exist outside of the social (dis)order that characterises this city and difference is perceived as a “dangerous malfunction” (p.70). Bruno’s essay most significantly gestures towards a critique of the process of othering (and one that is taken up by Kaja Silverman, Richard Dyer, Scott Bukatman and Judith Kerman in more contemporary examinations of the film: see Silverman, “Back to the Future”, Camera Obscura 27 (1991), pp.109-32; Bukatman, Blade Runner (London: British Film Institute, 1997) and Kerman, “Technology and Politics in the Blade Runner Dystopia”, in Judith Kerman, ed., Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (Bowling Green: Bowling Green UP, 1991), pp.16-24. More significantly, it is this same process that Lai seeks to interrogate in When Fox is a Thousand. (For a more detailed analysis, see Robyn Morris, “Making Eyes”.)

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein also received an enviable reader reception, one that oscillated between veneration and censure. The novel continues to provoke studies and discussion though, as stated at the beginning of this paper, very few critics, like those of Blade Runner, have read through or past the racialised polemics that underscore the narrative. Early reviews of the text are an ambivalent mix of praise (Walter Scott, “Remarks on Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus; a Novel”, Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine 2 (1818), pp.613-20, repr. in Mary Shelley, Frankenstein The 1818 Edition, ed. D.L. Macdonald and K. Scherf (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2003), pp 300-06, at p.305; Percy Shelley, “On Frankenstein”, Athenaenm (10 Nov 1832), p.730, repr. in Shelley, Frankenstein The1818 Edition, pp.310-12, at p.312) and criticism (Croker 309). A more contemporary analysis suggests that the novel is a subversive critique of the family unit (Kate Ferguson Ellis, The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1989), p.185). Victor Frankenstein is an autonomous agent, he is skin white, his class and educated codes him as moral, as philanthropic. Interestingly, and as Percy Shelley so assiduously noted in his 1832 review of the novel, the creature, though described as an “abortion” (p.311) is born with an innate “affectionate and full of moral sensibility” (p.311), his whiteness, in this novel’s definition of the term, is skin deep. Interestingly, the creature turns
towards "misanthropy and revenge" not because of his lack of humanness, his non-white skin but because of the "circumstances of his existence" (p.311). The creature becomes other through his social construction.

4. Exceptions to this would include Anne K. Mellor ("Frankenstein, Racial Science and the Yellow Peril", Nineteenth-Century Contexts 23 (2001), pp.1-28) who construes the creature as a racial other in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth century theories on "race". H.L. Malchow (Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1996)) similarly locates Frankenstein in the context of race and racism. Malchow examines the way in which Shelley's text mirrors the racial stereotyping of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. This stereotyping, he argues, circulates around a suppressed fear of both the abolition of slavery in the West Indies and the potential swamping of white populations by the "nonwhite" (p.10) populations of Asian and Africa. Elizabeth Bohls ("Standards of Taste, Discourse of 'Race', and the Aesthetic Education of a Monster: Critique of Empire in Frankenstein", Eighteenth-Century Life 18 (November 1994), pp.23-36) also suggests that the creature is representative of a middle class British acceptance of empire building, perpetuated in this novel through the ideological and orientalist rhetoric of Henry Clerval (p.27) and angst over the notion of racial otherness prevalent, to the British at least, in the emerging colonies of India, Africa and the Pacific (p.25).


8. Shelley, Frankenstein, pp.73, 89 and 60.


10. Shelley, Frankenstein, p.95 (italics added).

11. Both at Shelley, Frankenstein, p.130.


15. For a history of the textual and visual representations of the creature, see H.L Malchow, Gothic Images of Race.


