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## Re-visioning Representations of Difference in Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*<sup>†</sup>

Robyn Morris

*A friend of mine asked me  
if I always thought of myself  
as a coloured person.  
Is white a colour and do you  
think of yourself as white? I asked.  
Or do you just think of yourself as  
normal? (Hiromi Goto, The Body Politic)*

*I've seen things you people wouldn't believe.  
(Roy Batty, Blade Runner)*

In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, vision is positioned as a bipartisan process, one which oscillates between discursive empowerment and disempowerment. *Blade Runner* is Orwellian in its preoccupation with strategies of surveillance, and an imperialistic policing of the gaze dominates both the narrative and visual frame. In *Blade Runner* what you see is *not* what you get, and manipulation of the cognitive process by those (humans) in a position of power determines otherness. In a notable scene from the film, the Replicant Roy Batty meets with Chew, his eye-maker, and tells him, "If only you could see what I've seen with *your* eyes." "Your eyes," as Batty infers, could be the prosthetic devices designed and constructed by Chew, devices that deny Batty ownership of his gaze. However, Batty's comment also implies possession, and the question of "whose eyes" have the power to see, hovers, much like the unblinking eye in the film's opening sequence. It is precisely this predominance of the visual within *Blade Runner*, and the incorporation of the "meeting" between Batty and Chew into Larissa Lai's first novel, *When Fox Is a Thousand* (hereafter *Fox*), that links two seemingly disparate texts.

While *Blade Runner* constructs difference through the organizing principles of surveillance, Lai's description of *Fox*'s central character, Artemis Wong, watching and contemplating pivotal scenes from *Blade Runner*, signals that her text is vision(w)ary in its renegotiation of normative notions of dichotomous relationships based on domination and subordination. Lai's novel is premised on a sustained interrogation of the way in which race, gender and sexuality are marked by, and through, scopogenic regimes of power. Through an intricate interweaving of three dis-

<sup>†</sup>A version of this essay was published as "Making Eyes: Colouring the Look in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*," *Australian Canadian Studies* 20:1 (2002): 75-98.

tinct and historically “othered” narrative voices, Lai redefines both vision and storytelling as multidimensional processes. The act of “looking” and the act of “telling,” function to conceal, just as they reveal, truths about the world(s) in which the various characters of *Fox* live. Lai’s incisive incorporation of several principal scenes from *Blade Runner* is integral to her interrogation of a hegemonic white gaze that seeks to simultaneously possess, and dispossess, a specifically Chinese Canadian self.

In reading *Fox* through *Blade Runner*, I will explore the notion of a tripartisan “look,” suggesting that *Fox* is at once a glance back, a glance through and a glance at the debate on racialization that questions the presumptiveness of a world that colours the look in every hue but white.<sup>1</sup> Characterized by generic hybridity, *Fox* intertwines historically marginalized voices that oscillate between the mythological Fox, the ninth-century Chinese Poetess Yu Hsuan-Chi and an unnamed narrator who lives in contemporary Vancouver. This plurality of voices allows Lai, a regular commuter between Calgary and Vancouver, to re/view normative and acculturated polarities that have historically separated East and West, object and subject, human and non-human, white and non-white. The Fox, who will achieve immortality when she turns one thousand, is a dominating and pervasive narrative voice, and her mythological story is appropriated by Lai from Pu Songling’s sixteenth century recording of supernatural tales, originally published as *Strange Tales of Liaozhai* (Lai 151). The Fox assumes the role of the novel’s tour guide. She leads the reader through rural and feudal China where the Poetess is executed for the supposed murder of her maid/lover and across the ocean to contemporary student life in Canada. Though at times nostalgic, the Fox’s return journey has a pedagogical basis, and she draws on her lengthy and comprehensive experiences in order to teach the present the importance of repairing the rapidly fraying link with its own past. The Fox’s motives, however, are not altogether altruistic, for the Fox is a trickster, and she enjoys, above all else, observing the effects of her orchestrated mischief in the human world.

The Fox’s representational strength is twofold in that it allows Lai to assume a feminist stance while simultaneously questioning the politics of racial and sexual stereotyping. With the power to animate the bodies of dead women, the Fox assumes a human form in order to enact her hauntings, repeatedly returning to, and using, the body of the ninth-century Poetess. It is in this form that the Fox chooses to haunt Artemis, a Chinese-born, university student who lives with her adopted Caucasian parents in Vancouver. Artemis links the three separate strands of the narrative, and it is the Fox who offers her a passageway through memory that

<sup>1</sup>I am here drawing on Richard Dyer’s delineation of the three senses of white. According to Dyer white is understood as a category of colour or hue, as a category of skin colour and as a carrier of symbolic connotations (45-46).

will eventually lead to a reconnection with a cultural past that Artemis has spent most of her childhood denying. The Fox also contrives a meeting between Artemis and another student, Diane Wong, and this propels Artemis towards a tempestuous relationship with Diane but one which allows Artemis to fully acknowledge her lesbianism. This melding of ancient spirits and ancient bodies with contemporary student life emphasizes not only the historical continuity of the female story, but also the importance of the past in the formation of a bicultural identity in a specifically mono-Canadian present.

Roy Miki argues that “Asian Canadian and other minority writers, speaking out of the finitude of their subjectivities, have to be vigilant not simply to mime the given narrative, genre and filmic forms through which dominant values are aestheticized” (117). Referring to Joy Kogawa’s much lauded *Obasan*, Miki observes that formal literary disruptions, such as the blurring of genres, have become key strategies of resistance to white hegemony (117). Lai’s direct engagement with issues of race, sexuality and gender allows her novel to write out of, and against, the poetical politics of representation that is, perhaps, the legacy of *Obasan*. Given the intellectuality and quality of Lai’s prose, her superb storytelling devices and the fact the novel was shortlisted for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award, critical response to *Fox* has been negligible. The novel looks beyond what Miki defines as the “coercive gaze of homogenizing discourses” (123), for its politics indicate Lai’s understanding that the storytelling circle is never closed; the listener is also the interpreter. The lack of critical response to her novel is another indication that Lai has put the politics of representation before Virginia Woolf’s adage to “choose your patron wisely” (65). Lai’s cast of hybrid characters, a Fox who transforms herself into human form, an ancient poetess with a predilection for androgyny, and an array of young students who could be white or Chinese Canadian, heterosexual or homosexual, defy labelling while also adding to the complexity of the novel’s structure. *Fox*’s generic hybridity, when coupled with the inherent hybridity of each of the central characters, suggests that Lai is writing from a space outside of the canon in which *Obasan* has now been accepted and incarcerated.

*Fox*’s narrative voice is at once ancient and contemporary; it is, most significantly, Chinese-Canadian, female and lesbian. The liberal interpretation of traditional Chinese fox stories and the migratory narrative voice enables Lai to separate both herself and her story from Euro/phallocentric discourse. In an interview with Ashok Mathur, Lai states that her fiction writing is focused on the attempt to

create a sort of historical launch pad for hybrid flowers like myself. I have been trying to foster the germination of a culture of women, identified women of Chinese descent living in the West ... it is my way of trying to escape the reactivity of identity politics by claiming a mythic, fictive sort of originality, my way of saying, but people like me ... have been here all along, and we are more than the sum of the identities that this statistics crazy society wants to pin on me (quoted verbatim 2).

Lai's comment indicates the twofold political structure of her novel by firstly questioning established notions of the way in which history is constructed and received in the West. This statement moves beyond any indication of an authorial desire to rewrite the Historical story. It signals, instead, an interrogation of the containment and silencing of women, whose stories have been shaped by a hybrid rather than monocultural ancestry, within a singularized master narrative. But, the historical story, as Trinh Minh-ha asserts, "never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences ... A gift built on multiplicity" (*Woman* 2). Difference is paramount in the (re)telling, and Lai's generic interweaving allows for a multiplicity of subject positionings from which to speak and see. Lai propels Artemis on a collision course with her past in order to question not only the negation of the female story in history, but also the representation of Canadian women of Asian ancestry as silent, passive or framed by a privileged white, Western and heterosexual male gaze.

And yet, as Minh-ha notes, "no matter how plural and diverse the voices featured, one always has to point back to the apparatus and the site from which the voices are brought out and constructed" (*Framer* 169). Artemis watches and meditates upon what has become, in the two decades since its original release, a Hollywood cult film. The film is linked to a conveyor belt of essays, reviews and internet discussions that hover precariously between criticism and fandom.<sup>2</sup> Lai's intertextual engagement with the film *Blade Runner* articulates an awareness of the power of the paternal viewing apparatus to colour the look white and perpetuate gendered and racialized dichotomies. In this sense Lai defines the gaze as an external imposition, constructed and perpetuated by a cultural system predicated on white supremacy, in which, referring to the dialectic that began this paper, white is hierarchically positioned as the only "non" colour. In "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," Cornel West describes the historical desire by the perceived "other" or "non-white" to seek approval of "white normative gazes" (32). West's concept of a plurality of gazes is useful in identifying a potential site of resistance to a cultural

<sup>2</sup>The critical reception of *Blade Runner* was intense in the first decade after its 1982 release. The initial response to the film was largely in the form of reviews. Michael Dempsey labelled it a "crippled but nonetheless magnificent edifice of a film" (39), critiquing the excessiveness of Harrison Ford's voice-over narration, while Robin Wood observes that the film's contrived "meeting of Raymond Chandler and William Blake is not entirely unproblematic" (183). Dempsey's review illustrates a general understanding of the film as a meditation on definitions of humanity. J.P. Telotte argues, without any reference to Freud, that the film is preoccupied with notions of "doubling." The Replicant's ability to be "more human than human" is defined by Telotte as a key design fault and one which requires strict policing and control. David Desser, referring to Telotte's article, argues that the film's allusion to *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein*, and the Replicant's mimetic doubling of humans, allows *Blade Runner* to participate in the process of (humanity's) self recovery (178). To do this, the double must be banished in order for humanity to reassert its transcendental superiority. The film's Gothic underpin-

process that positions the look as singular and colours it as white. While it is important to trace the history of the colonizing power of the white gaze, the notion of a monolithic, white, heterosexual male gaze warrants repudiation. As Donna Haraway observes, “the topography of subjectivity is multidimensional; [and] so therefore is vision” (193).

The generic intertextuality of *Fox* enables Lai to question and alter the discourse from which the myth of a monochromatic look is originated and perpetuated. In this, I suggest, Lai heeds the challenge issued by Cornel West that in order to articulate a new cultural politics of difference, writers, acting as cultural critics,<sup>3</sup> must “think about representational practices in terms of history, culture and society” (20). As a product of the Hollywood filmic apparatus, *Blade Runner* privileges a specific way of seeing, and vision functions within the film as both a dominant motif and a motif of domination. Vision, as Scott Bukatman writes, “both makes and unmakes the self in the film, creating a dynamic between a centred and autonomous subjectivity (eye/I) and the self as a manufactured, commodified object (Eye Works)” (7). Indeed, the apocalyptic panorama of a burning cityscape that is reflected from the hovering and disembodied eye in the second frame of the film foregrounds not only the notion of surveillance but also an associative and hierarchical power structure. As a “technology of power” (Foucault, 156), surveillance has long been utilized by the colonizer to maintain inequitable power relations between “the free” white and the coloured/colonized other.

Striking similarities exist between the disembodied eye of René Magritte’s “The False Mirror” (1935) and the unblinking, hovering eye in *Blade Runner*. The film’s eye is similarly blue, similarly disembodied, and similarly severed from its human source despite the implicit coding that the surveyor is (hu)man. The very notion of the falsity of representation and reflection is indicative of a historical preoccupation with ascertaining differences between the simulacra and the real. Both Magritte’s painting and Scott’s filmic image work to suggest that there is no such thing as passive or natural vision. While it is difficult to imagine the surveillance of either eye being interrupted by a blink, it is implied that neither eye is representative of an unblinkered vision. Commenting on “The False Mirror,” Arthur Kroker observes that

*Magritte’s “eye” is transparent, mediational and silent. The silence which surrounds the eye is almost strategic in its significance. There are no human presences in the painting. Everything works within and under the suffocating gaze of the mirrored eye. Magritte’s universe is one of terror ... There is no frontal oppression; no sovereign authority of a father-figure whose function is the incantation of*

nings, as observed by Robin Wood, problematize the fear of the unknown other and is suggestive of the measures humanity must put in place in order to control this uncannily alien other. While all 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 (62). As Bruno observes, both relationships are in an acute stage of decay. 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” (66). The Replicants exist outside of the social (dis)order that characterizes this city and difference is perceived as a “dangerous malfunction” (70). This definition of difference perpetuates hierarchical binaries in which anything outside of a white normalcy requires control or elimination. It is Bruno’s essay which most significantly gestures towards a critique of the process of othering (and one which is taken up by Silverman, Dyer, Bukatman and Kerman in more contemporary examinations of the film). More significantly, it is this same process that Lai seeks to interrogate in *When Fox Is a Thousand*.

<sup>3</sup>Lai helped organize the Writing Thru Race Conference, July 1994, and is part of the Women of Colour Collective in Vancouver. Politically committed to exploring the mechanics of anti-racism in her writing Lai states that she is particularly interested “in questions of strategy—how people of colour and First Nations people empower ourselves and one another given the colonial and neo-colonial contexts we are all forced to live with” (Mathur 1998).

the eternal “no.” Instead, the terrorism of the world as a pure sign-system works at the symbolic level: a ceaseless and internal envelopment of its “subjects” in a symbolics of domination” (83).

The difference between seeing and being seen is based on inequitable power relations, and a “symbolics of domination” is perpetuated through both an external and internal surveillance of the self. Kaja Silverman’s authoritative analysis of *Blade Runner* has become a key reference for further interrogation of the film. Silverman interprets the floating eye as an oscillating spectatorial position that elides the division between human and Replicant. Defining the eye as an “organ [that] represents precisely the site at which difference is ostensibly discernible within the world of *Blade Runner*” (111), Silverman remains ambivalent as to whether this eye belongs to the Replicants, Leon or Roy Batty, or their would-be exterminator, Rick Deckard. Such an interpretation overlooks the representational power and normativeness of a blue-eyed vision which, I suggest, belongs to the penultimate eye-maker and postmodern mechanic, Eldon Tyrell. Illustrative of Western, patriarchal domination, both Magritte’s eye and Tyrell’s eye in *Blade Runner* signifies a voyeuristic white gaze that seeks dispossession of, just as it seeks to control, the object under scrutiny.

In “The Eye of Power,” Foucault equates vision with power using, as an example, Bentham’s model of the Panopticon, an architectural model in which institutionalized subjects can be observed within their cells from a single and centrally placed observation tower (148). Based on a reversal of the dungeon theory in which darkness is central to controlling the individual, panoptic vision derives its knowledge of the individual through a manipulation of light and surveillance from above. Control and power are maintained when the subject of its surveillance internalizes the look and begins to police and categorize their own behaviour. Placed in a position of, to appropriate Laura Mulvey’s terminology, “to-be-looked-at-ness,” the institutionalized individual eventually internalizes this constant exposure and becomes, in Foucault’s words, his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (155). Operating against any claim to an emergent evolution, the culturally and historically entrenched triad of knowledge, power and light operates to deny any development of autonomous subjectivity, particularly a subjectivity that seeks to claim difference outside of a white, western and masculinized norm.

Lai’s strategic and revisionary appropriation of *Blade Runner* works to disaggregate the visual and textual representations of race, gender

and sexuality that have historically acted to construct and affix labels according to externalized perceptions of difference. More than a hint of authorial irony suffuses a scene from *Fox* in which Artemis describes to her friend Diane their perceived bodily differences: “You’re tall, I’m short. You have freckles. I don’t. Your face is long, mine is kind of round” (63). The name Diane is, in Roman mythology, identified with that of Artemis who, in Greek mythology, is the virgin huntress. But on the written page these women, it seems, are not at all alike. And yet, to the person behind the counter of a fast-food outlet, there is no recognition of difference. Calling to Artemis he says, “Your sister’s fries are ready,” and though Artemis replies, “She’s not my sister,” she is nevertheless told by the assistant that “She looks like you” (65). Naming the other is an insidious process in which the label is affixed through verbal and non-verbal means and Artemis is looked at and racialized as “other” precisely through a visual politics of difference. There is an implied power in the equating of sameness with otherness, and Lai is vitriolic in her critique of an assumption of power that allows whiteness the majesty of, to paraphrase Barthes, looking without seeing (111).

The dominant white and western linguistic economy that anchors labels to the various characters in *Fox* maintains otherness not only through the act of looking but also through a sustained and insidious process of mispronunciation and manipulation of language. Artemis recalls her teachers complaining of “not having much practice with foreign names” (10). In equating foreignness with otherness, a shop assistant questions Diane’s use of a credit card, not because the card registers as stolen (which it is), but because the name on the card is Anglicized and she is told that, “Anderson is an unusual name for an Asian woman” (37). The term “Asian woman” implies that Diane is a national rather than historical subject, that she is Asian, not Canadian, and, to this shop assistant at least, Asian and Canadian are mutually exclusive terms. While Artemis describes her name as a “keepsake” (10) in the sense that this name and a trunk full of Chinese jackets and quilts is her only inheritance from her birth mother, the process of naming difference has an historical resonance tinged with fear and oppression. Lai uses specific scenes from *Blade Runner* to critique the naming process in which otherness is designated as a disempowered and foreign or alien category. In *Fox*, Artemis is identified with the renegade Replicants as the hunted other. To be Replicant, a woman, a fox, an Asian-Canadian or a lesbian is to be other. To be other is to be non-human. To be human is to be white, western, male and heterosexual. As the Chinese father of a gay son in *Fox* laments, “It’s hard enough being Chinese. Why does he



want to make it worse? Especially in something he has a choice over” (45).

Lai problematizes this very notion of choice, for if naming implies choice, then the corollary of choice, is power. “Others,” she signals, have no “choice” in their naming. Erasing boundaries that would demarcate or mark out a centre is essential to Lai’s politics of representation, and the call for the recognition of a transient and permeable sexualized and racialized hybridity pervades the narrative. Though Artemis is defined as Eastern and as Other by her racialized body, her upbringing is predominantly Westernized Canadian. In Part Three of the novel, significantly titled, “Degrees of Recognition,” Artemis attends a party hosted by her photographer friend Eden. She is introduced to a blond woman who inquires whether Artemis can “speak English” (153). But Artemis, who had just inhaled the joint the woman had offered, has lungs full of smoke and is unable to answer. After looking at and marking Artemis’ body as different, the woman assumes she is addressing a non-English speaking subject, and she turns to her friend commenting, “I don’t think she understood me” (153). Artemis is classified as non-Western and therefore as a non-English speaking “other” by her racialized body. Lai identifies the conspiratorial role of the white woman’s gaze in perpetuating this social construction of otherness. And yet, Artemis is not immune to being “othered” even within her own home. With a father who is an Asian Studies professor and a mother who is Curator for the Vancouver Museum of Ancient Cultures, Artemis has become the personification of her adopted parent’s occupations. Their combined desire to study the orient and fetishize the past is embodied in the objectification of their “exotic” daughter and it is Diane who asks Artemis, “Do you catch them looking at you funny?”(31).

In order to deflect the “funny look,” Artemis desires to assimilate into whiteness predominantly through a denial of her cultural past. By cloaking herself in the trappings of whiteness, Artemis renders her cultural self invisible and, in doing so, seeks to protect herself from what is a potentially dispossessing white gaze. As a child, Artemis describes how “thankful she had been for the whitewashed walls and rose-pink carpets. The Suzuki-method violin lessons and the wardrobe of pretty clothes” that her father insisted she should have (21). Later, when her mother began to take her to Chinese grocery stores, always when her father was away on business, Artemis would look quietly, but with distaste, at what she believes is foreign or “creepy” (21) food. The father’s denial of her cultural past and her mother’s fetishization of it, results in a schizophrenic subject positioning for Artemis. She exists, like the Replicants in *Blade Runner*, in the difficult place of the “other.” It is a place

that Homi Bhabha describes as “the ambivalent world of the not quite/not white” (92).

It is ironic then that the renegade Replicants in *Blade Runner*, who physically resemble their human designers, are described as “skin jobs.” Difference, in their world, is determined by exteriority. *Blade Runner’s* Prologue foregrounds a definition of difference that can be read as a diagnostic of the film’s racialized perspective. The Prologue constructs totalizing divisions by defining Replicants as “virtually identical to a human,” yet classifying them according to a hierarchy of (human) needs. Clearly positioned as servile and as slaves, Replicants are either interplanetary cannon-fodder or, as we are later told at police headquarters, they are manufactured, unpaid military prostitutes. Ownership and control is explicitly linked to a strict policing and maintenance of the boundary between human and non-human. Any violation of this space is ratified by law and suspected Replicants on earth are labelled as “trespassing.” Declared “illegal,” their detection carries the penalty of death. The inclusion in the Prologue of the term “illegal,” with all its historical and racist baggage, is itself a significant marker of the identity politics of the film. There is a historically entrenched and racist connection between “illegal” and “alien” in a Western/American post-World War II culture. It is a connection reactivated by fear of a “Yellow Peril” takeover of America following a resurgence in the Japanese economy in the early 1980s (Bukatman 74). In what is a very American film, the logos of Budweiser, Pan Am and Coca Cola flash continually in the attempt to interpellate us into a dream based on the pretext that in American/universal commodification one finds one’s true identity. The American reality is, however, a fear of the raced other. The all-American hero, Harrison Ford, who plays Rick Deckard, is not only doing his filmic job in expiring Replicants, but is also ideologically serving his country (and this has an ominous resonance given the contemporary political climate) by effacing difference and therefore eliminating any perceived threat from the “illegal alien” other.

One of several embodiments of perceived alien otherness within *Blade Runner* is the recurring shot of a billboard Geisha. In *Fox Artemis* is described as reacting with clenched fists when confronted with this image (15). Perceived by the West as the personification of Eastern exoticism, the Geisha is significant to the novel’s interrogation of the racialization of the other’s body. In her essay “Political Animals and the Body of History,” Lai comments on the looming spectres of Pocahontas, Suzy Wong and Madame Butterfly (153), and these ghosts of servility loom large in the perpetuation of the myth of Western dominance over

the East within *Blade Runner*. The figure of Madame Butterfly serves not only as the rationalization of American attitudes toward Japan: in all her various guises she also represents the necessary sacrifice of all people of colour to assure Western domination (Marchetti 79). This immediately sets up a hierarchical dualism between East and West whereby the East is signified as passive and female, exotic and other, but always in need of guidance and control. It is hardly a coincidence that *gei* is “art” in Japanese and that Artemis, sometimes called Art, should react so adversely when confronted with the image of the Geisha. Artemis can see herself reflected in this celluloid and stereotypical representation. That Lai is conscious of this Westernized inscription of exoticism onto historical players is evident not only through her parodies, but through her subtle and associative critique of the dangerous historical resonances such stereotyping has for women of Asian descent living in the West. When Diane mentions to a man she meets in a bar that her mother was an opera singer, he immediately comments that “She must have made a charming Madame Butterfly” (35). There is nothing “charming,” however, about a subject position that is codified as subordinate because of gender or race.

That the renegade Replicants, Roy, Leon, Zhora and Pris, are also aware of a similar inscription of otherness, is evident when they attempt to flee the white gaze of surveillance by mixing with the teeming masses at street level. The difference between seeing and being seen is based on inequitable power relations, and the city streets have become the domain of the homeless “other.” Though the genetic engineer J.F. Sebastian tells us that there is “plenty” of room “for everyone” in the derelict buildings that dwarf the streets, space has literally become a premium in the world of 2019; it is the new and necessary frontier. The old space, Earth, has served its purpose and the colonizer is moving on, leaving what appears to be an overcrowded penal colony inhabited by the “other.” “Others,” it seems, are not J.F. Sebastian’s “everyone,” and street visibility becomes a mark of difference, a difference that clearly designates “others” as objects of surveillance. The cultural reproduction of whiteness, however, is premised on racial purity, and one of the central fears of the colonizer in *Blade Runner* is based on the difficulty of distinguishing external differences between humans and Replicants. While Artemis is visibly marked as “other” by her dominant white culture, the Replicants’ bodies are indistinguishable from that of their white maker. The renegade Replicants are all skin white, and it is precisely to critique the designation of difference through skin colour that Lai introduces them, and Rick Deckard, into her text. The Replicants have been made,

not in the image of the punks, Asians, Jews, and Hari Krishnas who wander at street level, but in the image of their white maker. The racialized polemics of the film, though carefully coded, have a heritage in divisiveness, and the wandering street hordes of Los Angeles 2019 are indeed Fanon's "wretched of the earth." In a hierarchical system of classification, they are not, like Deckard, "ordinary" white.

Judith Kerman goes so far as to suggest that Ridley Scott purposely created a class and ethnic hierarchy within his small group of Replicants (1991:22). Kerman argues that *Blade Runner's* genetic designers "chose ethnic types which suit their (and our) prejudices about who make the best garbage men" (22). In this hierarchy, Leon Kowalski, with his indecisiveness, bulging eyes and weak chin, is, according to Kerman, intentionally cast by Scott to be physically subordinate to the genius, Aryan whiteness and altogether prettiness of Roy Batty (23). While Kerman is more concerned with the moral implications of making machines look and act like humans, Kaja Silverman's more discerning analysis of the film clearly identifies the Replicant/human dichotomy as a politically motivated and racially based construction (115). Silverman notes that within *Blade Runner* the categories of Replicants, whiteness and race are "ideological fabrications" (111), fictive constructs that not only set up a definition of otherness but work to maintain difference through a denial of subjectivity (130). Silverman convincingly reads *Blade Runner* as a film which problematizes the notion of the "natural." Arguing that humanness is a fictive construct, Silverman suggests that the Replicant's ability to be "more human than human" (to quote their maker Tyrell) reorders any notion of difference set up in the film's Prologue (110). Most significantly, it is Roy Batty, despite his "hyperbolic whiteness" (115), who is cast in a role historically occupied in Hollywood film by black African American actors. It is Batty's show of whiteness which prompts us to reconsider his servile positioning as slave so clearly defined in the Prologue. Slavery, as Silverman observes, remains an acculturated category that "still manages, in an attenuated way, to rhyme with negritude" (115). *Blade Runner* is an accessible product of the Hollywood filmic apparatus, and its popular appeal perhaps masks its racialized polemics. While Silverman further argues that the film "interrogates what passes above all else for "race" within our contemporary cultural scene, with its history of slavery and revolt" (emphasis added 115), I would suggest that the film works instead to further entrench the division between "master" and "slave," whiteness and other.

Enforcing and perpetuating racial subjugation based on definitions of otherness can be read, as bell hooks, commenting on black slavery in

America, writes, as “an effective strategy of white supremacist terror” (“Representations” 30). Arguing that the control of the black gaze by whites was integral to the dehumanizing process of slavery, hooks states that “black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see” (30). In this sense the slave, as object, is without vision, not through any natural rendering of blindness but through the perpetuation of a racist code of conduct designed to maintain a colourized/racialized hierarchy. If black engages in the act of looking then punishment from white is swift and fierce. The inciting and perpetuation of this terror functions to allay the fear of white becoming visible, and though white is the historical subject, white power is conversely mythologized as the hovering (again, like the eye in *Blade Runner*), yet invisible, spectre of terror.

Lai critiques the inherent paradox of an ideology that positions colour as subordinate yet also as something to be feared by white. While at a shooting range with her friend Ming, Artemis notes that her target “had a human shape, a white outline tracing the ancient form, the shape of terror and vulnerability” (188). The “ancient form,” a shape made vulnerable and subordinate through the inciting of terror, is also the shape of black encircled by white. It is the coloured other. As hooks observes; “without the capacity to inspire terror, whiteness no longer signifies the right to dominate. It truly becomes a benevolent absence” (40). The “ancient form,” in this sense, is able to recover a measure of its ancient subjectivity and look beyond the threatening circle of whiteness. It is a process which, in the words of John Berger, requires us “To look: / at everything which overflows the outline, the contour, the category, / the name of what it is” (219).

Identifying, maintaining and surveying the division between the naturally white and non-white, alien, “other” is central to the racialized polemics that underwrite the colonial project. “Power [as Trinh Minh-ha comments] has always arrogated the right to mark its others, while going about unmarked itself” (“Acoustic” 8). And yet, as Minh-ha asserts, there is a shift occurring in the politics of representation, particularly the politics of difference. Suggesting that the “other” no longer stands outside, or is peripheral to the centre: “The named ‘other’ is never to be found merely over there and outside oneself, for it is always over here, between Us, within Our discourse, that the “other becomes a nameable reality” (1). The other already functions within the centre, and so the designation of difference, through race, sexuality or gender, is a reproduction of what Minh-ha writes as “the confine-and-conquer pattern of

domination dear to the classic imperial quest" (7).

One way that Minh-ha suggests to escape "othering" is through a refusal to be named or to be labelled (6). It is a process that the various characters in *Fox* find difficult to enact. While this signals an authorial awareness of the difficulty in resisting the naming process, it also identifies the need to reposition this practice as a site of interrogation. When Artemis is modelling Oriental regalia for her photographer friend Eden she is told, once she is fully outfitted, "You almost look like the real thing" (78). But the novel functions to dismantle these far from benign conceptions of "the real thing." To be the "real thing" in *Blade Runner* is to be human; to be the real thing in *Fox* is an epitaph decreed by "the white thing" and embodied by Eden whose very name connotes a prelapsarian whiteness, lightness and goodness. Lai's politicized satire has a blade-like edge. In drawing into her text a film which is preoccupied with defining difference between human and non-human, authentic and inauthentic, organic and synthetic, Lai suggests that there is, indeed, no "real thing" outside of the consumer mass marketing and manufacturing process. The novel reconceptualizes dominant assumptions of an authentic and singularized selfhood in its interrogation of the commodification and cultural fabrication of identity. If Coca Cola is positioned as the only "real thing" in *Blade Runner*, then what, we should ask ourselves, is human?<sup>4</sup> Within the film, whiteness, and its associative concepts of humanness and naturalness, becomes a dangerous referent for the validation of cultural homogeneity.

Rick Deckard, the *Blade Runner* played by Harrison Ford, is central to Lai's rewriting and questioning of the cultural construction of identity. Richard Dyer suggests that one of the dominant fears operating in *Blade Runner* is the "death of whiteness" (217) and that Deckard's representational strength is his ruggedly Western, non-Oriental looks and his reluctant heroism which make him "ordinary" white rather than super-hero or Aryan white (215). With the release of the Director's Cut in 1992, the question as to whether Deckard is a human or a Replicant is said to have generated more dialogue on the internet than whether God actually exists (Bukatman 80). If Deckard is not "the real thing," if his Replicant status is confirmed, then the "death of whiteness" is a real possibility. When "tainted" by the "not quite/not white" label, Deckard's "pure" white potency is severely diminished. Lai urges us to look behind Deckard's "ordinary" white exterior and examine his pathological make-up. This is central to her politics of glancing back and through a dominant white culture, a culture that defines difference predominantly through exteriority. Artemis watches and reacts against two scenes

<sup>4</sup>The dialectic between *Fox* and *Blade Runner* is continued in Lai's most recent novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). Characterized by intertextual layering, *Salt Fish Girl* interrogates the construction of identity through allusion to an older iconic sf Western text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Both *Fox* and *Salt Fish Girl* contest the literary and filmic perpetuation of an ideology of a pure, originary and unmarked humanness that accords the white, Western heterosexual male a universal and centred subject positioning. For further discussion see Morris (2004).

which show Deckard 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” (15). The second is when he shoots another Replicant, Zhora, in the back as she attempts to flee both his gun and his gaze.

In the process of hunting Zhora, Deckard almost gets himself killed in her dressing room because he has become the “peeping Tom” he purports he is looking for. Zhora, originally designed as a military combat model, finds work as an exotic dancer, exposing herself to the eyes of the spectator in order to camouflage the otherness of her Replicant status. It is interesting that Deckard gains entry to Zhora’s change-room on the pretext of looking for holes in the wall; drilled, he tells Zhora, “to watch a lady undress.” While pleasure may be gained from looking, power is maintained from remaining unseen. Deckard tells Zhora that “You’d be surprised what a guy would go through to get a glimpse of a beautiful body.” Needless to say, Zhora is not surprised and uses his voyeurism to physically fell and momentarily out-run him. 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, exotic and other, but, as Deckard’s lead in the “romantic” dialogue between himself and the Replicant Rachel suggests, always in need of guidance and 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 apparatus. As we read Artemis watching this filmic sequence in the novel, it becomes increasingly apparent that she, like Rachel and like Zhora, is also culturally positioned as one of the hunted.

Towards the close of the novel, Artemis dreams that her eyes have been plucked from their sockets by birds of prey, rendering her world momentarily black. In this same dream her vision is returned with the aid of prosthetic eyes “so perfect she almost believed she had her own eyes back” (183). Like Roy Batty’s vision, Artemis’ newly manufactured eyes, despite their technological perfection, are designed to mirror their maker’s vision. Lai clearly aligns Artemis with the renegade Replicants in order to emphasize not only the very constructedness of vision, but also the notion that it is the (human) eye that first designates what is normative vision. Donna Haraway likewise distinguishes between natural and technological vision suggesting that:

*the eyes made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing; that is, ways of life. (190)*

Haraway's division between prosthetic and organic, active and passive, emphasizes the very constructedness of the act of looking. The hovering eye of *Blade Runner* represents a "specific way of seeing," that is, the gaze of the white, western, male colonizer, personified within the film by Eldon Tyrell. Tyrell's visionary biomechanics, his creation of Replicants who are "more human than human," elevates him to the position of creator *par excellence*, more god-like than God. And, like God, Tyrell is, as Batty tells us, "a hard man to see." Batty's cognitive puns, not to mention Tyrell's thick bifocal glasses, again indicate that there is more than one way of observing the world.

Explicitly questioning the use of vision as a controlling device of identity, Batty makes a confrontational return to his maker Tyrell and literally disempowers him by gouging out his eyes. This violent blinding is described in *Fox* (16), and after watching this scene, Artemis buries her head in Eden's shoulder. Her vision is literally blocked by the paternal whiteness that Eden represents. Batty's curiosity about his origins, his preoccupation with vision and his return to, and violent murder of his maker, can, perhaps, be contextualized through Freud's reading of E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sandman" in "The Uncanny." In "The Uncanny," Freud equates the fear of losing one's eyes with the fear of (symbolic) castration. Vision, both within Freud's abridged reading and Hoffman's original version, is a dominant motif. Through an embedded narrative, Hoffman's story problematizes the inherent truth value of optic devices, both prosthetic and organic. The inability of Hoffman's "hero" Nathanael to distinguish between animate and inanimate, human and non-human has many similar parallels to Scott's *Blade Runner*. Nathanael, like Deckard, can never be totally sure that what he is looking at is "the real thing." It is hardly coincidental to this reading that both Nathanael and the *Blade Runner* Rick Deckard should fall in love with beautiful, life-like dolls. And yet, the Replicant to whom Olympia (Nathanael's "doll") most resembles is Pris, played within the film by Daryl Hannah. In an analysis on *Blade Runner*, Giuliana Bruno notes that there is a sustained fascination with notions of doubling throughout filmic history, and that Hoffman's tale is a significant fictional contribution to any interrogation of simulacra (68). Olympia, Bruno observes, "is such a perfect 'skin job' that she is mistaken for a real girl" (68).



In Hoffman's version, Olympia is described by Nathanael as having eyes that "seemed fixed ... without vision ... as if she were sleeping with her eyes open" (104). Her social demeanour is defined as "strangely stiff and soulless" (117), and Nathanael's friend Siegmund laments, "if her eyes were not so completely devoid of life—the power of vision, she might be considered beautiful ... she seems ... to be *playing the part of a human being*" (117 emphasis added). In a significant scene from *Blade Runner*, Pris hides from Deckard amongst the life-like dolls that the genetic engineer J. F. Sebastian has created. With her eyes wide open, Pris too "plays" at being human, at looking, without appearing to see. Aided by a flashlight, Deckard searches her eyes for signs of life (perhaps a blink or a narrowing of the pupil), but, detecting no such signs, he continues his search and Pris is granted a momentary extension of "life." Humanness is, in *Blade Runner*, Fox and "The Sandman," part of an elaborate masquerade that is constantly being redefined by the notion of "re-visioning" or "making eyes." If humanness is the pinnacle, then eyesight, as Roy Batty's return, first to Chew and then Tyrell indicates, is its *modus operandi*.

While Artemis watches Roy Batty's murder of Tyrell, there is no mirroring of this symbolic release of self within her own life. Unlike Batty, Artemis appears trapped by the fixity of the paternal frame of whiteness and is unable to look back; her head remains buried in Eden's shoulder. In the early stages of the novel, Artemis is snared by Eden's gaze, and she notes that "his eyes caught hers like a surveillance light. She struggled visibly to break free of the gaze" (79). Like the Replicants, Artemis grows increasingly wary of this spectre of surveillance, particularly "the feeling that she was being watched but never seeing by whom or from where" (103). At the close of the novel, the Fox, finally revealing herself in human form to Artemis, and significantly echoing the words of the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood," states, "What big eyes you have" (207). In her study on myths and fairytales, Marina Warner writes that the moral purpose of these tales is to define boundaries (xvi). Lai's purpose is to expose these perimeters. Reality blurs with the world of fairytale and the supernatural and the Fox's transformation, or border crossing, is the embodiment of Lai's critique of acculturated boundaries. The Fox indicates to Artemis, who at this stage has fully acknowledged her lesbianism, her very capacity to glance back and challenge the historical denial of an autonomous Chinese Canadian/lesbian subjectivity. Questioning the fixity of the frame involves not only the recognition of the cultural blanching process comparable to the act of looking, but also the associa-

tive human act of interpretation in what is a highly technological and theorized process.

*Fox* is, in part, a novel about vision, but vision is not, as Lai suggests, singular, fixed, heterosexual or white. The relationship between white and other, human and Replicant, subject and object hinges on and is also perpetuated by an imbalance of power. That *Blade Runner* should reappear in a novel premised on questioning the very constructedness of such a system of classification, signals a lengthy interrogation of vision as a tool of domination. The act of reappropriating an enunciative position that has historically precluded the voice and the gaze of the other is essential to Lai's strategic resistance to hegemonic notions of a paternal white gaze. *Fox* questions a gaze that seeks to map the terrain as human and as white, a gaze that distorts and (mis)translates the coloured reality of the marginalized subject's life. In altering the discourse from which the myth of the look is originated and perpetuated, *Fox* offers an empowered look that is both polymorphic and correlative. It is the lack of such visionary space in *Blade Runner* that ensured its inclusion in Lai's politicized fox tale.

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