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”Looking through the twin lens of race
and gender: a new politics of surveillance
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Robyn Morris
University of Wollongong

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**“Looking Through the Twin Lens of Race and Gender:
A New Politics of Surveillance in Asian Australian
and Asian Canadian Women’s Writing”**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Robyn Morris, BA *Griffith*, BA Hons *Melb*

Faculty of Arts
English Literatures Program

2008

THESIS CERTIFICATION

CERTIFICATION

I, Robyn Lee Morris, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts, English Literatures Program, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Robyn Morris

10th July, 2008.

Abstract:

“Looking Through the Twin Lens” examines how an emergent body of fiction by contemporary Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers engages in revisionist tactics, complicating the hierarchical nature of the politics of looking. Recent feminist theories explore the link between the male gaze, images of the female body in mass media representations and the tradition of the high art nude, but they have neglected to contextualise other forms of embodiment such as race. This study extends the theory of a gendered gaze into the area of race. Texts by Australian-based writers Simone Lazaroo, Lillian Ng and Hsu-Ming Teo and Canadian-based Hiromi Goto, Larissa Lai and Evelyn Lau, have been selected for their intercession and intervention with established ways of seeing, gazing and looking. These texts are connected not only by each writer’s Asian ancestry and their female authorship, but also by their scopic thematics and by their literary entry into contemporary individual and national identity politics. While contemporary feminist theory has prompted a re-reading of well-known texts of the West through the lens of gender, the recurring reference to well-recognised filmic or literary narratives in many of these writer’s works, allows for an interrogative return to the original through the twin lens of gender and race. In this sense, contesting the dominance of white hegemony involves both a return of the gaze and a return to issues of misrepresentation that are central to a past and contemporary cultural politics of difference.

Contents

List of Illustrations	ii
List of Abbreviations	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Preface	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Politics of the Racialised and Gendered Gaze	9
Chapter 2: “being as white as they could possibly be”: Observing Race in Simone Lazaroo’s <i>The World Waiting to be Made</i>	35
Chapter 3: Reading Photographically: Vision and Difference in <i>The Australian Fiancé</i>	53
Chapter 4: Glancing Back at Constructions of Australian National Identity in Hsu-Ming Teo’s <i>Behind the Moon</i>	76
Chapter 5: “a pleasure to behold”: Consumption, Choice and Commodification in Writing by Lillian Ng and Evelyn Lau	101
Chapter 6: Changing the Ending: Hiromi Goto’s Translations of Self.....	124
Chapter 7: Making Eyes: Colouring the Look in Larissa Lai’s <i>When Fox is a Thousand</i> and Ridley Scott’s <i>Blade Runner</i>	142
Chapter 8: ‘What does it mean to be Human?’ Racing Replicants, Monsters and Clones in Larissa Lai’s <i>Salt Fish Girl</i> and Mary Shelley’s <i>Frankenstein</i> ...	166
Chapter 9: Desiring Dolls: Celluloid Displays of Gender and Race.....	191
Conclusion: Writing against a Racialised and Gendered Space	214
Works Cited	222
Appendix 1: Interview: Hiromi Goto.....	234
Appendix 2: Interview: Larissa Lai	241

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1.	Call for Selective Immigration Policies, <i>B.C Saturday Sunset</i> . Aug, 1907.....	25
Fig. 2.	“Wake! Australia, Wake.” <i>The Boomerang</i> . 11 Feb, 1888.....	26
Fig. 3.	The bonds of mateship: Archy and Frank in Egypt. .	88
Fig. 4.	Beholden: Nancy Kwan in <i>The World of Suzie Wong</i>	104
Fig. 5.	Mannequin Factory.	108
Fig. 6.	Cover: <i>Swallowing Clouds</i>	111
Fig. 7.	Back Cover: <i>Choose Me</i>	112
Fig. 8.	Cover: <i>Fresh Girls</i>	113
Fig. 9.	Cover: <i>When Fox is a Thousand</i>	114
Fig. 10.	Travel Advertisement: “A Cheap Fling in Asia.”	116
Fig. 11.	“The False Mirror.”	149
Fig. 12.	“The Flaming Eye”: <i>Blade Runner</i>	150
Fig. 13.	The Replicant Rachel.	196
Fig. 14.	“Black Children with White Doll.”	201
Fig. 15.	The Replicant Pris.	207

List of Abbreviations

<i>AF</i>	Lazaroo, <i>The Australian Fiancé</i>
<i>BM</i>	Teo, <i>Behind the Moon</i>
<i>BP</i>	Goto, "The Body Politic"
<i>C</i>	Goto, <i>Chorus of Mushrooms</i>
<i>CM</i>	Lau, <i>Choose Me</i>
<i>F</i>	Lai, <i>When Fox is a Thousand</i>
<i>FG</i>	Lau, <i>Fresh Girls</i>
<i>K</i>	Goto, <i>The Kappa Child</i>
<i>LHP</i>	Ingalls Wilder, <i>Little House on the Prairie</i>
<i>LV</i>	Teo, <i>Love and Vertigo</i>
<i>R</i>	Lai, "Rachel"
<i>SC</i>	Ng, <i>Swallowing Clouds</i>
<i>SFG</i>	Lai, <i>Salt Fish Girl</i>
<i>SS</i>	Ng, <i>Silver Sister</i>
<i>TW</i>	Lazaroo, <i>The Travel Writer</i>
<i>WW</i>	Lazaroo, <i>The World Waiting to be Made</i>

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As with any journey, you meet many, varied and helpful people as you chart your way. I am indebted to those who saw potential in this project and did not lose faith despite its long gestation. I would like to acknowledge the academic generosity of Tseen Khoo, whose pioneering comparative studies in Asian Australian and Asian Canadian literature has set a benchmark for future scholars in this emerging research area. I would also like to thank Roy Miki from Simon Fraser University for supporting my ICCS scholarship application and for giving me the go ahead to tackle this project.

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To my family, especially my sister Tracey and sister-in-law Trina, and parents, to my friends: all of the Hbs, to Karen, Rochelle & "the Gails"— a simple thanks perhaps seems inadequate, but they know their value in supporting my research and travel.

***It is with love and appreciation
that I dedicate this thesis to
DJ, Jordy, Eleri & the H.***

Preface

Preface

My interest in Asian Canadian studies was set in motion when I played “taxi” or tour guide to a group of Asian Canadian writers visiting the University of Wollongong as part of a collaboration between the then, newly-opened Centre for Canadian-Australian Studies on campus and ACSANZ, the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand. As I got to know these writers, as I listened to their discussions in my car and to their readings of their own poetry and fiction during the course of the conference, it occurred to me that the thesis topic I had so desperately been searching for had, literally, flown in from Canada. Meeting with these writers meant that I had finally found an engaging and new area of study. I was concerned however about the problematics of subjectivity that could arise when a white, female academic set about analysing texts by women writers of colour. When I voiced my concerns to the mentor of this group, the poet, critic and writer Roy Miki, he replied, “Well someone has to!”

Receiving this green light was a significant moment and I began to research and contemplate the body of work produced by these writers. I began to see a thematic link that circulated around an examination of the constructedness of identity. I observed that these writers engaged with issues of race and gender by using the motif of vision. As I began to read work by Asian Australian writers I realised that this engagement with the politics of the gaze was not geographically isolated. In identifying the use of the metaphor of vision within this body of work I began to simultaneously research how photography, art, film and literature have historically constructed and perpetuated hierarchies of difference. What became increasingly important to my project was the investigation into how Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers, minoritised as visibly invisible by a dominant, white, male, culture, engaged in a literary-based politics of counter-surveillance.

My project was challenged by the geographical distance of Australia from Canada and I have been fortunate to receive grants to extend my research abroad. I am extremely grateful to ACSANZ for their Postgraduate Travel Award which I received in 2003, and ICCS Postgraduate Scholarship (the International Council for Canadian Studies) which I received in 2004. The trips undertaken after receiving these awards were also generously supported by Wollongong University Postgraduate Research Grants. These

trips were instrumental in allowing me to network with scholars and writers who were based primarily in Vancouver. I also used this time to do archival research at the University of British Columbia and at Simon Fraser University unearthing treasures otherwise hidden, despite the information highway that I travel so frequently from my desk back in Australia.

While I had so many assumed knowledges about the history of race in Australia, I had much to learn about the Canadian context. During my first trip I discovered the huge parallel between both countries, in terms of political and cultural acts of racism against Asian sojourners and immigrants in both nations. I travelled home with a suitcase brimming with photocopies, books, journals and notes, and a head swimming with ideas for chapters. My second trip consolidated this research, but I also found time to attend a conference and interview the Canadian writers, Larissa Lai and Hiromi Goto as part of the stipulations of my travel grant. My work on the writers who feature in this thesis has been widely published.¹ While it is lifting to have had my early thesis research accepted by respected, refereed, academic journals, it is also particularly exciting to be a part of an ever-growing field of comparative race and gender studies in Australia and Canada.

¹ Published articles include: "Consuming Asianness: Food, Race and the Power of Recuperative Identity Politics within the Literary". *Journal of Australian Studies*. Special Edition. *Asian@Home: New Directions in Asian Australian Studies* (Nov 2008) forthcoming; "Japanese Canadian Border Poetics." *New Dimensions in Canadian Studies: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*. Eds. Stewart Gill & R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2008. 39-50; "'growing up an Australian': Renegotiating Models of Mateship and Australianness in Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon*." Special Issue *Journal of Intercultural Studies-Locating Asian Australian Cultures*, 27: 1 & 2 (Feb-May 2006); "'many degrees of dark and light': Sliding the Scale of Whiteness with Simone Lazaroo." Eds. Kam Louie & Tseen Khoo. *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005: 279-98; "Re-visioning Representations of Difference in Larissa Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*." *West Coast Line* 44. 38: 2 (Spring 2005): 69-87; "'What does it mean to be Human?': Racing Clones, Monsters and Replicants." *Foundation: International Review of Science Fiction*. 33:91 (Summer 2004): 81-96; "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; "Reading Photographically: Translating Whiteness through the Eye of the Empire." *Hecate* 27:2 (2001): 86-96; "Piecing Together Female Stories in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *New Literatures Review*, 36 (Winter 2000): 35-45; "'sites of articulation—An Interview with Larissa Lai.'" *West Coast Line* 44. 38: 2 (Spring 2005): 21-30.

Introduction

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.
(Donna Haraway 1991 190)

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 1994 219)

Recent feminist theories explore the link between the male gaze, images of the female body in mass media representations and the tradition of the high art nude but they have neglected to contextualise other forms of embodiment such as race. This study takes the theory of a gendered gaze into the area of race. The thesis title, “Looking Through the Twin Lens”, indicates one of the central preoccupations of this study. The title suggests that the act of looking is relational rather than one-sided,¹ but also that race, gender and sexuality are intertwined as key markers of identity. In her poem “The Body Politic”, Japanese Canadian writer Hiromi Goto asks, “Is white a colour?” (1994 219) and closely links “coloured” or racialised perceptions to vision and particularly the shape of human eyes. Goto writes of “seeing from slanted eyes rather than seeing with a slant,” using prepositions to emphasise the relationship between vision and the cultural construction of difference. Inferring that eye-shape is a determining factor in the dynamics of racism Goto questions the clarity of dominant white vision stating, “My slant is different from yours, don’t you see?” (218). Goto’s appropriation of a

¹ As in Kaplan’s use of the phrase “the looking *relation*” (italics original 1997 xviii).

visual metaphor indicates her awareness of the discursive, and visual, politics of colouring the look white. In “The Body Politic” Goto also emphasises the correlation between looking and seeing, condemning racialised perceptions that incite, in the “coloured other”, a desire to mutilate the body in order to become more like white. The poetic voice states: “I try scraping the hue/ off my skin.../I try sliding a razor blade/ to slice folds into my eyelids./ It is painful, and now I am deformed/ as well as/ coloured” (1994 219). The implication of such an act is that Asian corporeality is read as unnatural in comparison to the constructed normativity of the white, Western body.

Goto’s critical awareness of the way in which difference is constructed through Westernised/white visualising practices encapsulates the concerns of this thesis. “Looking through the Twin Lens” is a text-based study which examines the way Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers explore the link between the white gaze and a racialised and gendered Asian corporeality. Texts by Australian-based writers Simone Lazaroo, Lillian Ng and Hsu-Ming Teo and Canadian-based Hiromi Goto, Larissa Lai and Evelyn Lau, have been selected for their intercession and intervention with established ways of seeing, gazing and looking. These texts are connected not only by each writer’s Asian ancestry and their female authorship, but also by their “scopic” thematics, or rather, their differing views as to how racialised and gendered identities have become proceduralised and unquestioned in contemporary individual and national identity politics. The use of the term “scopic” throughout this thesis draws on Freud’s notion of the power and pleasure gained from scopophilic acts and, more principally, to Laura Mulvey’s extrapolation of the term and her theorising of the gendered gaze.

A central preoccupation of this thesis involves determining *whose* eyes have the power to see and *whose* reflection of the world is given primacy in a Westernised, prescriptive, economy of the visual. The term economy implies hierarchies of both consumerability and consumption; as bell hooks writes, “there is a direct

connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black [of-colour] people” (1992 2). If scopific consumption is exploitative for the object it is also, in Freud’s sense of the term, equated with power for the subject.

While this study explores white/Westernised visualising practices that perpetuate polarities of difference that are race and gender based, the thesis is, as noted, focused on multiple ways of looking. As Donna Haraway observes, “the topography of subjectivity is multidimensional; [and] so therefore is vision” (1991 193). 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” (1990 32). West’s concept of a plurality of gazes is useful in identifying a potential site of resistance to a cultural process that positions the look as singular and colours it as white. “Looking Through the Twin Lens” resists any singularised concept of a dominant white male gaze. However, in saying this, it remains essential to distinguish between the two very different acts of “looking” and “gazing”. E. Ann Kaplan defines the term “look” as “a process, a relation, [and] the word ‘gaze’ [as] a one-way subjective vision” (1997b xvi).

Naming colour, determining difference, marking the body as raced or gendered through the colonising power of the white/Western gaze, creates and maintains boundaries of normative white, heterosexual maleness. These inherently hierarchical discourses, as Stuart Hall observes, “produce, mark, and fix the infinite differences and diversities of human beings through a rigid binary coding” (1998 290). Within the constructed and politicised ideology of whiteness, or non-colour, its concomitant, blackness, or colour, becomes a trope of subordination and otherness. Goto writes, “I can never unzip my skin/ and step into another. / I am happy with my colour until someone points/ out it clashes with my costume” (BP

220). The controlled pedagogical monotone of the poetic voice accents the poem's political stridency. Imperative to any polemics of racialised difference is a critique of the ideological oscillation that occurs in the representation of colour as visibly undesirable and whiteness as paradoxically desirable, yet invisible.

Towards the end of "The Body Politic" Goto states that she would like to write "about the way the prairie curves into the mountains, / the feel of cool mud squeezing between toes and/ the shriek of children catching frogs" (BP 220) but she understands that, for the moment at least, writing the lyrical does not serve her politics of representation in the same way that her politically-driven poems and novels do. While many of the narratives examined in this study employ a lyrical narrative style it is the degree of political engagement which is more essential to this thesis' concerns. Much of this study is an evaluation of the way these texts and their authors make visible those acts and practices which have historically relegated Asian female corporeality to the realm of the exotic, sexualised and racialised other.

Given the emphasis in "Looking Through the Twin Lens" on the interrelationship of race, gender and vision, it is instructive to refer to Laura Mulvey's influential discussion of the gendered gaze. Despite critical reservations regarding Mulvey's work, its theoretical base is pertinent to the way this thesis examines how scopical regimes of power frame or Orientalise² Asian corporeality. Although the concept of a dominant white male gaze has been criticised for its lack of engagement with a female, a black or a queer gaze, it is essential as Richard Dyer has noted,

not to write off the 'male gaze' theory under the sign of a free-for-all of gazes, but rather to explore the complex interplay of power in looking and being looked at, above all in terms of who controls these reflections, who has the right to look unchallenged, uninterrupted and

² Said uses the term "Orientalism" to describe the way in which the West constructs the Orient by "making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (1978 3).

unembarrassed, who controls the conditions under which they themselves are looked at. (1997 227 n 33)

This consideration foregrounds the politics of representation evident in the texts examined throughout this thesis and the methodological importance underlying this thesis research which not only extends the theory of the white/ Western, male gaze into the arena of race but also to that of sexuality. This point of difference is an issue that is repeatedly returned to in the fiction of women writers of Asian ancestry in Australia and Canada.

The body of work examined in this study is, as noted, written by women whose ancestry straddles several geographical locations. Australia and Canada share similar histories of colonisation and immigration and, more pertinent to the concerns of this thesis, similar racist responses to patterns of Asian migration. Given Cornell West's argument that contestation of such acts are not new in the history of literary criticism (1990 32), the topicality of this thesis extends to the identification and analysis of how articulations of difference within Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women's fiction give rise to new ways of thinking about the normalising practices of white domination. Such practices mark out racial, gendered or sexual difference, and the use of the motif of vision, photography and the gaze by these writers, as a way of contesting Westernised productions of difference, invites readers to glance back and begin to question the genesis of such acts. As a comparative study "Looking Through the Twin Lens" will provide a timely and topical theoretical contribution to current debate in a field that West has termed the "new politics of difference" (32).

"Looking Through the Twin Lens" progressively analyses the varying strategic alliances and methodologies these writers adopt during the process of textualising or fictionalising their experience and reactions to racialised and gendered practices. Fred Wah observes that "for some writers this entails an alignment with mainstream and traditional strategies while for others the tactics of refusal and

reterritorialisation offer a more appropriate poetics” (2000 51). Employing and experimenting with tools of language might be called, as Wah terms it, an “‘alienethnic’ poetics” (52). The importance of these novels is the way their individual narratives enable readers to enter into a discourse that merges the literary with contemporary identity politics. Several methodological questions arise throughout the course of this study including: how do Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers engage with a stereotypical representation that places them outside of white, Anglo structures of dominance? Is it their project to question the limpet-like attachment of stereotypical traits that surround representations of difference? If it is, then are the novels produced by these writers strategic in their political motivation?

Another area of questioning that this study repeatedly returns to is: “who are these writers writing for”? Do they write outside of the paradigmatic structures of memoir that have enveloped fiction from the Asian diaspora or are their novels informed by an awareness and experience of racialised and gendered discourses? One of the chief findings of this study is that many of these novels are polyvocal texts in the way they interweave the personal, the political and the cultural. This finding resists the essentialising and reductive question of “who can speak for whom?” African Canadian critic, writer and race activist Dionne Brand writes that:

the racialised power relations that we live determine what I will say and how I will approach my saying it. Our relative positionings within the society are at the core of these determinations. Notions of voice, representation, theme style, imagination are charged with these historical locations and require rigorous examination rather than liberal assumptions of universal subjectivity or the downright denial of such locations. (1994 119)

However, the noticeable move away from a monolithic, or even introspective voice, and of writing for a perceived white audience within many of the texts examined in this thesis suggests two areas of investigation. Firstly, that there are many threads of identity and belonging being explored within these novels and secondly, that there are also variations in the way individual Asian Australian and

Asian Canadian writers renegotiate the notion of being consumed or appropriated by white mechanisms of power.

An analysis of the novels produced by Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers provides an intriguing starting point for a wider examination of the relationship between imaginings of otherness and the popular culture of the West. The return to the site of the cultural production of whiteness as power and normalcy is a mode of textual engagement which enables women writers and artists of colour to contest Euro/phallogentric discourses of identity. Many of the texts in this study also operate intertextually. They are both polyvocal and “polyvisual” in the way they draw iconic images, texts and films of the West into individual narratives. The value of this study then rests not only in its examination of a body of contemporary fiction by women writers of Asian descent in Australia and Canada, but also in the way it draws iconic and mainstream texts of popular culture such as *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner*, *Gallipoli*, *Little House on the Prairie* and *The World of Suzie Wong* into the analysis. While contemporary feminist theory has prompted a re-reading of well-known texts of the West through the lens of gender, the recurring reference to well-recognised filmic or literary narratives allows for an interrogative return to the original through the twin lens of gender and race. Contesting the dominance of white hegemony involves a return of the gaze and a return to issues of misrepresentation which are central to past and contemporary cultural politics of difference.

“Looking Through the Twin Lens” examines how women writers of Asian descent engage in revisionist tactics, complicating the hierarchical nature of the politics of looking. More particularly, this study revolves around an assessment of whether or how this emergent body of fiction by contemporary Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers employs a “tactics of refusal”. Do they, through reference to iconic and mainstream texts into their narratives, question the discourse from which the myth of the gaze is originated and perpetuated? Do they

offer an empowered look that is both polymorphic and correlative? The act of reappropriating an enunciative position that has historically precluded the voice and the gaze of the “other” is a strategic resistance to hegemonic notions of a white male gaze. Given the global retreat to a rhetoric that creates a racial divide through the visual, it is important to determine not just how, but why this body of fiction is interrogative and transgressive in its critique of the designation of difference at the level of skin. This is why, when in reading this fiction and in returning to familiar and iconic texts of the West, it is a necessary social and cultural adjustment to look through a multi(focal), rather than single, lens.

Chapter 1

The Politics of the Racialised and Gendered Gaze

‘Race’ — that four letter word,
making headway on visibility: the
zone of the body scanned by
surveillance monitors [...] There is
nothing more apparent and nothing
more transparent, than the signs of
‘race’ that circulate in the everyday
lives of people of colour.
(Roy Miki & Fred Wah 1994b 5-6)

I: Vision, Race and Gender.

Vision is a major structuring and ordering device of “normality”³ and, if “seeing is believing”, then, within Westernised constructions of difference vision is a primary consideration in renegotiations of not only the gendered, but also the racialised gaze. In “The Eye of Power” Michel Foucault equates vision with power, using as an example Bentham’s model of the Panopticon, an architectural model in which institutionalised subjects can be observed within their cells from a single and centrally placed observation tower (1980 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 under surveillance internalises the gaze and begins to police and categorise their own behaviour. Placed in a position of, to appropriate Laura Mulvey’s terminology, “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”, the institutionalised individual eventually internalises this constant exposure and becomes, in Foucault’s words, “his own

³ Anne Cranny-Francis notes that early feminist critics emphasise the many ways in which the “normal” body was assumed as male and suggests that this construction “is also a technology for maintaining the social dominance of a particular discursive positioning: Anglo, middle class, masculine, heterosexual and youthful to middle aged” (1995 9).

overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (155). 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 masculinised norm. To destabilise the power of the surveyor is to unmask its masquerade of invisibility and reduce or return its light and height enhanced gaze.

This is a formidable task when considering that visual metaphors are deeply entrenched in Western patterns of speech, history and cultural practices. Marcel Danesi provides a substantial list of socially embedded metaphorical thought patterns which reference the visual. Babies are entertained by games of *peek-a-boo* and at school, children have *show-and-tell* while adults use terms such as “there is more to this than meets the eye/ It all depends on how you look at it [and] seeing is believing” (1990 222). Vision, as Danesi suggests is a subjective process and moreover, “abstract thought is linked primarily to the visual system and to other sensorial modalities” (233). Danesi’s study has echoes of the opening statement to John Berger’s influential book *Ways of Seeing* (1972).⁴ Berger writes that, “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (7). However, Berger qualifies this statement noting that:

[T]here is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we *see* the sun set. We *know* that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation never quite fits the sight. (italics in original 7)

This gap between knowledge and sight is a central area of investigation in many of the texts examined throughout this thesis and these individual novels are, as noted,

⁴ *Ways of Seeing* was first published in 1972 as an accompaniment to Berger’s BBC television series of the same name. The book and series concentrate on how we look at art and are loosely informed by Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”.

thematically linked by the way they explore the notion of a subjective look that is intrinsically linked to unequal hierarchies of power.

Berger, like Laura Mulvey, links the gaze to both gender and power relations. More specifically, Berger argues that the category of European oil painting from the Renaissance onwards made women the principal subject; it is “in the nudes of European painting we can discover some of the criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights” (47). Berger notes that women only “appear” (47) for men and that “from earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually” (46). Berger’s work prefigures Laura Mulvey’s influential study on the filmic gaze in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) however both theorists note the way in which women are positioned as objects of a male gaze. In looking at the history of art Berger observes that “the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men — [for] the ideal spectator is always assumed to male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (64). It is worth noting that Berger’s assumed spectator is not only male, but is also heterosexual and white and Mulvey makes this same assumption in her theorising of the gaze, an issue that will be returned to in the following pages. What is of main concern here is that it was Mulvey who was instrumental in catapulting the organising principles of classic Hollywood cinema into public, critical and feminist awareness. Mulvey both defined and fostered an ongoing critical debate regarding the concept of the gaze, including her own contribution in “Afterthoughts” (1981). While focusing on a gendered division in which the male is defined as the bearer of the gaze and “woman” as its object, the importance of “Visual Pleasure” cannot be underestimated. Mulvey diverges from Berger’s critical path in the way she questions why the image of woman is positioned as fixed, passive and non-negotiable, as subordinated to the active and privileged (white) male gaze.

In linking the social construction of identity to that of a specifically Euro/phallogentric vision, Mulvey suggests that:

the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual pleasure and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (italics in original 1975 19)

Mulvey places an emphasis on the actual mechanism of viewing and further argues that the position of woman as object in classic Hollywood cinema is not an arbitrary occurrence but is integral to its institutional structure and perpetuation. Mulvey based her argument on the concept of scopophilia as it is translated in Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Her essay is largely an attempt to define how the mechanism of viewing perpetuates the active/male, passive/female dichotomy. The scopophilic attendants of voyeurism and fetishism particularly focus on the notion that the pleasure derived from looking has an erotic base, in which the voyeuristic look is distanced from, and controlling of, the object it perceives (17). In gaining a sense of subjectivity the voyeuristic look of the child is extended to include other ways of looking and in Mulvey's theory this is the narcissistic look associated with Lacan's mirror stage (17). It is the tension between voyeurism and narcissism that creates a conflict of identity within the (male) child, to distance the self or to identify with this self as it is mirrored or seen. Mulvey likens this process to the role played by female screen stars that "provide a focus or centre both to screen space and screen story where they act out a complex process of likeness and difference" (18). This connection between the image identified with and the visual pleasure received is premised on the assumption that the silent image of woman only appears in response to masculine desire.

Much has been made of the lack of engagement with notions of race in Mulvey's argument. Bell hooks in particular has criticised the essentialism of white mainstream feminist film criticism, pointing out that it fails to acknowledge black

female spectatorship. In her essay “the oppositional gaze”, hooks raises an essential issue: how is it that feminist film theorists⁵ have failed to “see the whiteness of the image” (1996 206) in their construction of a totalising category based on gender? The emphasis on a gendered look does not, as hooks notes, allow for any consideration of the possibility that women can construct an oppositional gaze via an understanding and awareness of the politics of race and racism (1996 205).⁶

In the theoretical work of hooks and also Trinh Minh-ha there is a concerted attempt to re-evaluate notions of difference in which gender and race are defined as inextricably connected. One of the central themes of the work by hooks and Trinh Minh-ha involves a redress of the absent figure of the black/coloured woman. As hooks asserts, white, Western feminist theory is often very much based on a replication of the master narratives it is seeking to re-evaluate. This is primarily because within much white feminist theory, gender is defined as the dominant oppressor of women, a main marker of identity, but the focus of which elides issues of race, sexuality and class. However, the value of historic feminist investigations into constructions of difference is, as art historian and critic Griselda Pollack writes in her Introduction to the Routledge Classics edition of *Vision and Difference*, that we have learnt “that knowledge is shaped in relations of power and invested with interests, political, ideological and psychological. Feminism was never alone in making this claim; but it made the challenge central to its politico-intellectual project” (2003 xix).

⁵ See for example, Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Women's Film of the 1940s*. New York: Macmillan, 1987. Deidre Pribram, Ed. *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*. London: Verso, 1988. Griselda Pollack, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge, 1988. Constance Penley, *The Future of Illusion: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1989.

⁶ Hooks has been instrumental in prompting white feminist critics to re-evaluate their own and Mulvey's work. E. Anne Kaplan's *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (1997), attempts to re-address the gap between theories of the gendered and the racialised gaze in her examination of films about travel.

Difference, particularly difference based on skin colour is premised on a hierarchical and historically sustained division between black and white and is inextricably linked to vision and power. Canadian poet and critic Fred Wah articulates the confusion evoked when white/Anglo people link his surname “Wah” to his white visage: “What I usually get at the counter is the anticipatory pause after I spell out ‘H’. Is that it? Double U AY AYCH? I thought it might be Waugh. What kind of name is that, Wah? Chinese, I say. I’m part Chinese. And she says, boy you sure could fool me. You don’t look Chinese at all” (2000 81). Wah’s skin is, to use Claudia Benthien’s definition of the term, a visible and a performative surface (2002 vii). Skin, however, is an unstable border. It is the site, as Benthien further notes, where “boundary negotiations take place” (ix). However, enforcing and perpetuating racial subjugation based on colour and the power of the white gaze, is, as bell hooks comments in “Representations of Whiteness”, “an effective strategy of white supremacist terror” (1997 30). hooks links the dehumanising process of African American slavery to control of the gaze stating 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 colourised/racialised hierarchy. If black engages in the act of looking then punishment from white is swift and fierce. This control of the gaze maintained a racialised code of difference and black oppression. hooks argues that in order to make black appear docile and puppet or doll-like, the black gaze was forced to be cast down “so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality” (30).

Such a power structure suffers from a crippling colour-blindness and Richard Dyer suggests it is “the colourless, multi-colouredness of whiteness [which] secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to

‘see’ whiteness” (1988 46). Normalising whites works to eliminate whiteness from any categories that mark difference such as gender, class or sexuality. In the unbalanced dynamics of racism, “race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/ we function as a human norm” (Dyer 1997 1). Indirectly addressing the conceptual framework put forward by Fanon but moving beyond Fanon’s essentialised dichotomies, Dyer’s study explores how whiteness is made “normal” and therefore is eliminated from any categories that mark difference such as gender, class or sexuality.

Hiromi Goto asks, “is white a colour?” (BP 219) and this is a vital question which must be addressed in renegotiations of the historical and cultural colouring of difference. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Franz Fanon observes that the division between black and white is inherently hierarchical:

Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black [...] Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation; and, on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. (1952 189)

While white is constructed as bright, active, Christianly and good, black signifies death, darkness and evil. The resplendence of white enables it to absorb all other colours, in effect donning a cloak of many colours in order to disguise its own base of whiteness. Conversely, black is so dark a colour as to be categorised as deprived and as lacking.

The process of normalising and not naming whiteness renders it invisible. As such, white dominance is decreed in absentia. As Dyer writes, “whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen” (1988 45). In a comprehensive study on the history of race and racism in the Western world, Maurice Wade notes that though the eighteenth-century marked human diversity through the physical, reading the body as though it were a text as such, it was the practice of scientific racism which took this notion to its illogical

conclusion in order to argue that the outside was indeed indicative of the inside (2000 33). In this sense, and according to that eighteenth-century vertical scale of creation, *The Great Chain of Being*, whiteness (just beneath God at the top) was associated with culture, intelligence and dominance (Wade 2000 35). Empathy, reason, eloquence and the desire for knowledge raises Caucasian males straight to the top of this hierarchical scale. Blackness, at the bottom of the chain and just above monkeys and apes, as Fanon observes, has historically been associated with darkness, the barbaric and the uncultured (1952 189).

The heritage of such “scientific” thought is that whiteness has come to be viewed as the dominant signifier of culturally, technologically and scientifically advanced Christian societies of the West. Marina Warner’s studies on whiteness trace the historical blinding, whitening or bleaching of mythic heroines and religious icons. Warner’s work emphasises the juggernaut-like run through the history of the word white where, in the twenty first century, its representational power is now that of goodness, superiority and light. The historical translation of whiteness and the attachment of the word to notions of fairness, beauty, superiority, light and heavenly resplendence is noteworthy when considering that the dominant marker of race is colour. If whiteness disassociates itself, in discourse at least, from the colouring process, then attention must be drawn to this process by textualising its embedded historicity.

In examining mythology and fairytales as historical traces of a process in which the gaze is coloured white, Warner confirms that, in the ideology of race, the invisibility and purity associated with whiteness is a contributing factor in the designation of racial difference. Warner rightly comments that “blondness is less a descriptive term about hair pigmentation than a blazon in code, a piece of a value system that it is urgent to confront and analyse because its implications, in moral and social terms, are so dire and are still so unthinkingly embedded in the most ordinary, popular material of the imagination” (1995 364). It is the historical, and

culturally embedded, blanching process that normalises whiteness while subordinating colour that the authors in this study attempt to draw attention to and counter within their fiction.

II: A “yellow peril” discourse

Within the vocabulary of Australian and Canadian immigration there exists a clear and historically entrenched distinction between those considered as an Asian “minority” and “coloured” and those considered as an Anglo “majority”, “white” or “non-coloured”. Both nations are settler societies with traditional links to Britain and Europe and both struggle with the increasing influence of American cultural, social and political values. In recent decades both Australia and Canada have also begun to redefine their historical connections to Asia. This is a major attitudinal shift when considering that Asia has commonly been constructed, in popular, historical and political discourse, as a threat from a collective “yellow peril” and that the rhetoric of race in both countries perpetuates a fear of an “Asian invasion” or border crossing. Questions of identity coalesce around notions of who does or does not belong to the national imaginary and this “imaginary”, is, according to a population census taken in both nations in 2001, predominantly white and coastal dwelling.⁷

If the term “yellow peril” has historically been employed to incite fear and visually mark (Asian) otherness then the use of the term “of colour” to describe the writers

⁷ In the 2001 Australian census, the two most common ancestries were Australian and English. The third most common was Irish (1.9 million people), followed by Italian (800,000), German (742,000), Chinese (557,000), Scottish (540,000), and Indigenous persons (410,000). A further six ancestries were each stated by between 150,000 and 500,000 people — Greek, Dutch, Lebanese, Indian, Vietnamese and Polish emphasising the dominance of Anglo ancestry in this nation (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats.ca> Date Modified: 20 April 2006). In the 2001 Canadian Census, the most frequent ethnic origins in 2001, after Canadian (11.7 million), were English (6 million) and French (4.7 million), Scottish (4.2 million) and Irish (3.8 million). The combined figures for people of Asian ancestry including South Asian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and East Asian makes this one of the largest ‘visible minority’ groups in Canada in 2001 (2.3 million), with those of Chinese ancestry comprising almost half of that figure (<http://www.statcan.ca>) (accessed 20 April, 2006).

who feature in this study could also be just as problematic given the inference that to be “of colour” is to be non-white or less than and other to white. Himani Bannerji notes that:

the expression ‘women of colour’ is primarily North American. Its use is not common in British feminist vocabulary, for example, where ‘black women’ or ‘black and Asian women’ are terms of choice. Also, women with African or Aboriginal backgrounds do not readily respond to this name, as they consider themselves to have highly substantive cultural histories and special claims to the politicised notions of blackness and Aboriginality. (2000 16)

The expression, “of colour” is, however, the descriptive by which most of the writers in this study have chosen to define themselves, a name which gestures towards what Bannerji terms “political agency” (2000 33) while also referring to the lived experience of women who are racialised under scopisic regimes of white power. The use of this term loosens the attachment of negativity and the implication of being “less than white” those nomenclatures such as “oriental”, “multicultural” or “ethnic” writers produces.

Naming subjectivity is problematic when historically the term “Asian” and “Australian” or “Asian” and “Canadian” are often mutually exclusive terms.⁸ Linking the politics of racism with a developing sense of Australian nationalism, Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles write that, “the demand to keep out coloured inferior races was dialectically linked with an emerging sense of an imagined community of Australians, a collectivity that signifies whiteness as a sign of superiority and of inclusion” (1996 176)⁹. The essentialised use of the term “Asian” to describe Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese or Japanese or “visible

⁸ In this thesis, the terms “Asian Australian” and “Asian Canadian” are taken to mean writing by people of Asian descent who were born or have immigrated to these particular locations. Although in his essay “Half-Bred Poetics”, Wah identifies the hyphen as an oppositional device for developing a “hybrid borderland poetics” (2000 74), this study does not make use of the hyphen between Asian Australian and Asian Canadian. Rather than reading this space as blank, this opening can be read as a critical and loaded site in which culturally hybridised writers negotiate a “poetics of resistance” to dominant, white processes of othering Asianness in Australia and Canada.

⁹ Quoting from R. Miles, *Racism* (1989 93).

minority”,¹⁰ perpetuates a racially-based divide. Moreover, the historical racism attached to the term Asian in both Australia and Canada, is a generic label that not only negates diverse geographical origins but also defines people of Asian descent living in the West more by where they are from than where they are at (Ang 2001 30). Ien Ang suggests that part of the problematics of belonging for the diasporic subject is the constant evaluation of difference at the level of skin:

The experience of migration brings with it a shift in perspective: to paraphrase Paul Gilroy, for the migrant it is no longer ‘where you’re from’, but ‘where you’re at’ which forms the point of anchorage. However, so long as the question ‘where you’re from’ prevails over ‘where you’re at’ in dominant culture, the compulsion to explain, the inevitable positioning of yourself as deviant *vis-à-vis* the normal, remains. (2001 30)

Such dialectics are what Stuart Hall refers to as a “retreat into the bunker of cultural and racist nationalism” (1998 297).

These dialectics are reflected in leading newspapers and journals in both Australia and Canada. Influential texts with both popular appeal and wide dissemination such as Australia’s *The Bulletin* and Canada’s *The Vancouver Morning Star*, perpetuated constructions of racialised difference while concomitantly normalising whiteness as not raced. The following quote is from a series of articles written during the 1920s in the *Vancouver Morning Star* and is suggestive of an othering discourse — one which cloaks a form of racism based on determinations of skin difference in terms of capitalist enterprise.

Both the Chinese and Japanese are fine people if you have just a few of them. But a proportion of one in twelve and a threat of that particular one securing a four-fold profit over others on the lands and the choice trading corners of the province is a bit too rich for our blood. We must either deport them [...] or close our ports to them entirely as immigrants and disqualify and handicap those already here whose work

¹⁰ Visible minorities are defined by the Canadian Employment Equity Act as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour”, <http://www.statcan.ca> (accessed 14 April, 2006).

takes the bread from the mouths of our own people. Thus we might encourage them to go home. (McInnes 1987 132)

This opinion is reflective of dominant ideologies circulating around reproductions of difference and is not by any means exclusive to Canada. One of Australia's most popular late nineteenth-century weekly journals, *The Bulletin*, was stridently xenophobic while also exceedingly misogynistic and nationalistic. It was not until 1961 that the *Bulletin* removed "Australia for the White man" from its masthead (Vasta & Castles 177, Broinowski 19). In an editorial titled "Australia for the Australians!" the author states that:

By the term Australian we mean not those who have merely been born in Australia. All *white men* who come to these shores — with a clean record — all men who place the happiness, prosperity, the advancement of their adopted country before the interests of Imperialism, are Australian. (emphasis added *The Bulletin*, July 2, 1887 cited in White 81)

Draped in nationalistic fervour, this statement heralds the gradual movement towards increased government control over "non-white", and more particularly, Asian, immigration to Australia. If whiteness (and maleness) signifies Australian, then coloured (and to a lesser extent, femaleness) signifies otherness. In *The Bulletin's* terms, "No nigger, no Chinaman, no lascar, no kanaka, no purveyor of cheap coloured labour, is an Australian" (July 2, 1887 cited in White 81). Literature and culture are entwined and xenophobic textualisations littered throughout *The Bulletin's* pages, though not entirely responsible, certainly worked towards shaping an idealised "national type" in the literary. Part of this thesis research is an exploration of how, in the emergent space of Asian Australian writing, the social acceptance of a monolithic and masculine literary heritage that imagines a "fixed" or idealised national type is made culturally complex and problematical by writers of Asian descent.

The Bulletin in particular led a lengthy and vicious attack on the Chinese in Australia through its articles, cartoons and even its Manifesto which specifically denounced "the Chinese" as well as "Religious Interference in Politics, Foreign

Titles and Imperial Federation” (August 22, 1891). Alison Broinowski’s study on the way “otherness” was constructed in high and popular culture notes that many of *The Bulletin*’s cartoonists and writers, despite their patriotic concern, were not even Australian-born (1996: 19). They did however construct negative and stereotypical “images of Asians as a pestiferous insect plague, an Oriental dragon, or a Mongolian octopus whose tentacles wormed into every hallowed Australian institution, a venal usurper of Australians’ jobs, and a creeping threat to their wives and daughters” (Broinowski 1996: 19). As an example, an article in *The Bulletin*, titled “The Chinaman and the Nigger” (August 21 1891), is informed by a eugenicist polemic which seeks to justify the denial of the vote to Aboriginals and Australian-born Chinese. The Aboriginal population, the unnamed author decides, “doesn’t want a vote, apart from the question of rum and tobacco” and the author ruminates that “a ballot-box is a hard substance with which to console a dying race” (4). In this misapplication of the theory of natural selection, race it seems is biologically and culturally determined for the Aboriginal subject. While the “dying race” theory was indiscriminately applied to the Aboriginal population, the “inferior race” theory marked the Chinese. Both the “Chinaman” and the “Nigger” are compared within this particular *Bulletin* article to the “naturalised German” who is “an Australian citizen in all essentials of citizenship; the Mongol and the nigger [the author writes] remain Mongols and niggers to the bitter end” (4).

A fear of miscegenation operated in both Australia and Canada and the following quote, again from the 1920s and the *Vancouver Morning Star*, encapsulates the popularist argument for keeping British Columbia wholesomely white.

Canada, of course is rightly intended for the Scotch and the French who made it. The French who originally came here were Nordic French and such remain [...] But all other Nordics born in Canada of Nordic stock, especially those of English and Irish parentage, rapidly acquire all the best characteristics of the Scotch, especially if they work on the land, losing at the same time the least desirable, which are few. The Americans may not expect much from the stew and goulash in their

‘melting pot’, but in Canada there is to be found a proper Nordic pot-still, turning out, as it were, a new Scotch blend equal to the best. Natives from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland and perhaps the more amiable parts of Germany, will always be acceptable in Canada, as they are easily blended with the novel Scotch. (cited in McInnes 1987 83)

White skin, in this historical instance, is an essential and desirable characteristic of those considered “suitable” for attaining citizenship. As this quote indicates, the cultural construction of racial difference is premised on a visually determined, sliding scale of whiteness. The measurement and indeed maintenance of the purity of whiteness is not simply contained within media-driven enterprises. In both Australia and Canada, immigration policies were introduced to define and contain difference. One of the first legislations to be introduced by the new Australian Government of 1901 was “The Immigration Restriction Bill”. More commonly known as the “White Australia Policy”, and not dismantled until the early 1970s, this Bill was predicated on preserving the purity of the imported white blood in Australia and provided a nebulous scale for various citizens of the empire to distinguish between white and non-white, majority and minority, citizen and alien, right and wrong.

Commenting on the White Australia Policy’s supposed non-racist doctrine the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell stated in 1939 that:

The only claim, ever made or implied in our policy, is that there are different varieties of human species distinguished from one another, not by skin pigmentation, but by languages, religion, standard of living, cultures and historical backgrounds, and that it is wise to avoid internecine strife and the problems of miscegenation which such differences have caused throughout history where races of irreconcilable characteristics have lived in the same community. Our policy is based on the proposition that anything which tends to unite a modern community is good and desirable and that anything which tends to rend it asunder should be avoided at all costs. The White Australia policy [...] has the fervent support of the overwhelming majority of the Australian people and has had this support since Federation. (cited in Hollingsworth 1998 232)

The White Australia Policy was largely premised on racial superiority and closely related to the colour of a person's skin. On May 1, 1942, Calwell, with uncanny echoes of the sentiments expressed by the writers in *The Bulletin* and *The Vancouver Morning Star*, said in the House of Representatives: "It would be better for us to have in Australia 20 to 30 million people of 100 percent white extraction than to continue the narrow policy of having a population of 7,000,000 who are 98 per cent British" (cited in Stratton 1998 58). Stratton also notes that in 1947 Calwell, who was defending the deportation of a Chinese refugee, said that "There are many Wongs in the Australian community, but I have to say ... that two Wongs don't make a white" (Stratton 58).

While the White Australia policy was initially introduced to preserve the "purity" of British blood in the growing colony, it was the threat to white homogeneity that had become "the Australian way of life" that led to an attitudinal shift in immigration policies following World War II. Governed by several convergent fears, including the need to "populate or perish" and the perceived threat of the Japanese, the restrictions on immigration were lessened so that non-British, though still white and European, people were allowed to enter the country (White 1988 159).

The "Australian way of life" assumes cultural homogeneity and gendered dichotomies. As indistinct as the concept was, it became a useful discriminatory stratagem for the dominant Anglo community. It is, as Richard White notes in his influential study on constructions of identity in Australia, a concept that was based on denial. This denial worked in two ways: it firstly prevented any possibility of cultural mixing or enrichment while simultaneously denying differing "ways of life" among Australians themselves (White 1988 160). The very notion of a distinct "Australian way of life" is an ideological construct which protects the interests of the ruling (white, male) elites. The idea of a cohesive community, and, in part, of a non-fractured national identity, obscures the very real tensions of both

race and class that have operated throughout the history of white settlement in Australia. Emblematic of an increased fear over lack of national cohesiveness, moves towards social transformation are thwarted and contained by a whiteness that continuously (re)presents itself as an unmitigated power.

The White Australia policy worked, much like Canada's Chinese Head Tax, as a safeguard against lowered wages through imported labour. As Peter Ward argues,

In each of these locations [both Australia and Canada] the elemental drama of racial encounter has been played out, whites achieving ascendancy and subordinating Asians and indigenous peoples to their rule. In each, the socioeconomic tensions engendered by interracial contact have given rise to racist dogma and conduct. (2002 x)

Attempts to disenfranchise the Chinese in Canada became a regular feature of government agendas in the late nineteenth century. Similar to representations in Australia, Asian maleness is continually manifested in Canadian filmic and literary accounts as a perilous presence that threatens to overwhelm the white female body and nation. The introduction of the Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1885 meant that only Chinese, male diplomats, merchants, or students of Chinese descent could enter Canada after they had paid their \$50 arrival tax (Ward 42). This was raised to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1903 (Cho 2002 62). This government and popularist discrimination against the Chinese is reflected in a cartoon from the *British Columbia Saturday Sunset* (Aug 1907) which not only calls for a hierarchical immigration policy that favours European immigrants over immigrants from Asia but also accords the white woman the role of racial housekeeper.



Please see print copy for Fig.1

Fig. 1. Calls for Selective Immigration Policies. ¹¹

If the Chinese were perceived as an economic threat, the large gender imbalance created by immigration restrictions also made them a sexual threat to white womanhood. In Australia, journal writers took it upon themselves to alert their white readership to the growing “menace” of the “yellow peril” during the mid to late 1800s with cartoons such as “WAKE, AUSTRALIA! WAKE”, which depicts a knife-bearing Chinese male stealthily climbing through the window of the

¹¹ BC *Saturday Sunset*. Aug, 1907.

bedroom in which white “Miss Australia” is peacefully sleeping (*The Boomerang*, 11 February, 1888).

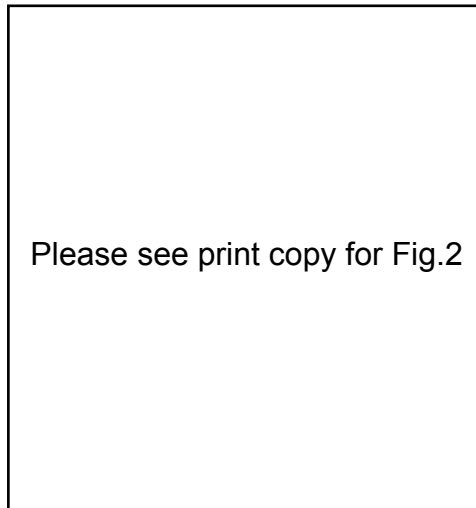


Fig. 2. Wake! Australia, Wake.

Tseen Khoo argues that in “the histories of Western nations such as Australia and Canada, diasporic Chinese and/or Japanese men are figurative and material threats to the integrity of perceived Australian—or Canadianness” (2003 120). These threats perpetuate a range of stereotypes: from the model minority, to the opium dealer, from the cheap labourer and sexual threat to white women, to the effeminate affront to heteromascularity. In examining the West’s practice of representing Asia it is useful to return to Fanon’s observation in “Algeria Unveiled” that the imperial eye pictures the “other woman” as “humiliated, sequestered, and cloistered, an inert, demonetized, indeed dehumanised object” (1965 38). In contrast, the colonised male is depicted as “medieval, barbaric, sadistic and vampirish” (Fanon 1965 38). This dichotomous split is frequently resurrected in early nineteenth-century literary representations of the Chinese in Australia and Canada, representations that revolve around a gendered division in which Chinese men are depicted as “utterly undesirable Others, addicted to opium-

smoking, gambling and prostitution [while] Chinese women are portrayed as exotic and mysterious beings, sometimes capable of sinister deeds” (Yu 1994 75).

In the past, Government-led policies helped diffuse or alleviate the popularist fear of these media-constructed “threats”. While Canada’s Chinese Head Tax became a central mechanism of exclusion, people of colour applying to enter Australia (and this included Asians, Africans and Pacific Islanders) first had to pass a “dictation test” (sometimes referred to as the “education test”). The test required a prospective immigrant to write out a passage of fifty words in a European language chosen by the officer and a language usually unfamiliar to the applicant. As a consequence, very few applicants managed to pass the test. Despite its subjective and questionable basis, the test remained on the statute books until 1958 (Murphy 1993 33). In Canada, the putative threat posed by the Chinese population to local white labour was diffused not by language tests, but by limiting those ships carrying Chinese immigrants to land only one immigrant for every fifty tons of the ship’s weight (Ward 2002 42). The 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration produced one of the first definitions of the Chinese immigrant in Canada: “We need not show that the Chinese labour is cheap labour. That is its *raison d’être*. We need not stop to prove that it is docile; that is one of its admitted attractions” (xcv cited in Cho 68).

While many commentators have suggested that the Head Tax was an example of racist governmental practices, Lily Cho argues that the tax and load limit were introduced by the Canadian Government with a twofold, but unacknowledged, purpose. Cho suggests that there is a contradictory gap between the purpose of the head tax/load limit (to keep Chinese out) and its actual effect (to facilitate Chinese immigration) (2002 72/76). With its outward show of making an attempt to restrict immigration the government allayed popularist fears of a “yellow peril” takeover of the white nation while also providing the still emerging nation with a cheap labour source. In Canada, race-based discrimination was also disguised in

legislative terminology and prohibited “others” included “the ‘feeble minded’, those ‘afflicted with a loathsome disease’, ‘professional beggars’, ‘prostitutes and those living off their avails’, or persons who ‘may become dangerous to public health’” (Whitaker 1987 11). Canadian immigration officers decided the suitability of immigrants through a nine-point system designed to gauge an applicant’s chances of successful integration. This involved a highly subjective “personal suitability” category that allowed individual officers to “assess an immigrant’s adaptability, motivation, initiative, resourcefulness and other similar qualities and entitled the officer to evaluate the applicant’s cultural background and personal style” (Henry et al 1995 77).

The practice of keeping “Asians” out of Canada became particularly fraught when war was declared on Japan during World War II. The cry to rid British Columbia of the Chinese threat shifted to what was termed as the “Japanese menace”. In December 1941 Japanese Canadians were fingerprinted and photographed. The Canadian Government then enacted the War Measures Act and began the forced removal of male Japanese Canadian nationals to camps. Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbour one thousand eight hundred Japanese Canadian fishing boats were seized and impounded on the British Columbia coast. Japanese Canadian fishermen were evacuated first in response to rumours that they might actually be operating as spies gathering information on coastal waters and were subsequently sent to the internment camps in the Canadian Prairies. Joy Kogawa’s much lauded *Obasan*, the first novel to be written by a Japanese Canadian woman, draws upon these experiences to tell a poignant but horrific tale of dislocation and dispersal. In readdressing the racism of the Japanese Canadian internment Kogawa has freely mixed fiction with truth by drawing upon the diaries and letters of Muriel Kitagawa, a political activist who was quite vocal in her critique of the actions of the Canadian Government. Kitagawa often wrote in *The New Canadian*, a weekly newspaper covering the news and social activities of the Japanese

community. In an Editorial from March 3, 1942, Kitagawa used the newspaper as a medium to voice her concerns regarding the increasing xenophobia. She wrote:

The first steps taken — immobilisation of fishing boats, special registration, parole permits and detention of certain individuals were accepted, on the whole, as obviously necessary in war-time. More drastic steps emerging from the Ottawa conference in January — the removal of alien nationals and the banning of short-wave radios and cameras — were likewise accepted [...] In quick order, a whole series of repressive measures, unlike anything before in the history of the nation, have been authorised. In effect, the new orders uproot completely without regard some 23,000 men, woman and children; brand every person of Japanese origin as disloyal and traitorous; and reduce to nothing the concept and value of Canadian citizenship. (1995 8)

In 1945, defining who (or what) is a Canadian became a topic of political debate when a Liberal Cabinet Minister, Paul Martin Sr., noted the confusion and embarrassment surrounding definitions of “Canadian nationals”. On October 22, 1945, Martin spoke in the House of Commons regarding the Amendments to the Canadian Citizenship Act:

Our ‘new Canadians’ bring to this country much that is rich and good, and in Canada they find a new way of life and new hope for the future. They should all be made to feel that they, like the rest of us, are Canadians, citizens of a great country, guardians of proud traditions and trustees of all that is best in life for generations of Canadians yet to be. For the national unity of Canada and for the future and greatness of this country it is felt to be of utmost importance that all of us, new Canadians or old, have a consciousness of a common purpose and common interests as Canadians; that all of us are able to say with pride and say with meaning: ‘I am a Canadian citizen’.¹²

The notion of citizenship in Canada, as Roy Miki has observed, is flawed by injustice and characterised by unbalanced power relations:

¹² http://canadawiki.org/index.php?title=Category:Human_Rights&action=edit accessed 20 June 2006.

the 'asian' inside 'canadian' has a long and painful history, marked as it is by the spectral evidence of voices gone awry, of intentions distorted, of subjects maligned and excluded. The colonial legacy manifested the 'not-white' body as a sign of the monstrous 'asiatic,' then later as a deviancy to be assimilated, and more recently as a variance that is scripted as the 'multicultural'. (1998 208)

Japanese Canadian citizens, politicised as other and as non-citizens, were not allowed to return to the BC coast until 1949, four years after Japan had surrendered. Injustices suffered as a result of these policies fuelled a redress movement in the 1980s which coincided with a similar movement in the United States. In 1988 redress for Japanese Canadians was passed with the provision of \$21,000 (Canadian) to each survivor of wartime internment and the Prime Minister Brian Mulroney issued an apology for the miscarriage of justice that had led to internment and incarceration.

Labelling the non-white body as generically "Asian", "Aboriginal", "Native", "coloured", "alien" or "other" and the white body as citizen of the nation is an insidious white mechanism of control. It is also a practice endemic to the literary, historical and political discourses of both nations. Hiding beneath its blanket of amnesia, contemporary Australia's preoccupation with notions of a cohesive community elides its socially splintered and racially exclusivist past (Webb & Enstice 1998 1). This "cohesiveness" was fractured with the arrival of Pauline Hanson on the Australian political scene in the late 1990s. Ien Ang argues that the Hanson "phenomenon" in Australian politics centred on a nostalgia for a mythical, culturally and racially homogenous past (2001 96). This is at odds with the discourse of multiculturalism introduced in Australia by the Whitlam Government in the 1970s.

The notion of social harmony, which is the touchstone of multiculturalism, is decidedly lacking in Hanson's rhetoric. In a well-known and infamous declaration during her maiden speech to Parliament in 1996, Hanson stated that, "I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians" (cited in Ang 2001 107). The "we" of

this statement obviously refers to white Australia and strongly echoes the ideology of the historian Geoffrey Blainey. In the mid-1980s Blainey criticised the then Hawke Labour Government for embracing multiculturalism. This policy would, he believed, lead to an abandonment of Australia's British heritage resulting in precisely what Hanson appears to fear most, and that is, an "Asian invasion" (Hollingsworth 1998 258-62). In what could be mistaken for a grotesque game of pass-the-parcel, Hanson's ideological leanings not only answer those of Blainey but are also disturbingly similar to that of the long-serving Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard in the late 2000s, despite his rhetoric being a little more carefully coded (Ang 2001 97). According to Ang, multiculturalism works, not to create tolerance for cultural difference, but to submerge the problematics of race in the history of white settlement in Australia (100). Howard's lack of critique of Hanson's provocative and racially-based statements and his reluctance to defend multiculturalism is suggestive of a deep-seated conservatism that hovers in both nations.

Howard's government was swept into office for a third term in November, 2001 on a fearful tide of racism. This racism quickly resurfaced following a combination of factors which included the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States and, closer to shore, the situation of 438 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia on board the Norwegian freighter, *Tampa*, to whom the Howard Government refused permission to land. This Howard-led Liberal Government based its election strategy on yet another media-driven rerun of the White Australia Policy with its slogan "We decide who comes into this country".¹³ The continuing debate in the media over the interment of refugees once in Australia and the labelling of their hunger strikes in February 2002 by government ministers as "moral intimidation" against Australian citizens,

¹³ (for a detailed case study see www.equalopportunitycommission.vic.gov.au/pdf/HRO2002EV.pdf)

indicates a continued sense of political uneasiness regarding exactly who is the “right type of Asian” to be allowed into Australia.

A similar issue arose in Canada in 1999 when four boats from the Fujian province of China carrying approximately 600 people were sited near the British Columbia coastline. Various cultural critics have noted the sense of racist hysteria that greeted this immigrant arrival (Beauregard, “What is at Stake?” 229, Lai “Asian Invasion” 31, Miki “Altered States” 45), particularly in media coverage, with Roy Miki stating that “the media and some Canadians, including Chinese Canadians, who accused the would-be ‘refugees’ of the impropriety of queue jumping, disguised the more violent desire to expel the figures from the territorial and symbolic boundaries of the Canadian nation” (2000 45). Similarly, Larissa Lai argued that:

much of the media coverage was strikingly similar in its positioning to that which took place earlier this century around the influx of Chinese labour to construct the railroads. The white fantasy of yellow hordes invading a pristine Canadian landscape appeared with little variation from its turn of the century version, and with tremendous virulence. It has not left us. (2000 31)

Central to Larissa Lai’s politics of representation is a critique of such social, political and textual rehearsals of marginalisation, particularly marginalisation through the paradigm of race. She asks: “how can people of colour and First Nations people empower ourselves and one another given the colonial and neo-colonial contexts we live with? In a collective sense, this means taking a particular stance on issues such as appropriation and affirmative action as a means of pushing white liberals to look at the hypocrisies of colour-blindness, multiculturalism” (1999 147). That the redress for Japanese Canadians occurred in the same year as the launch of The Multiculturalism Act of Canada is notable for the fact that this policy was little more than a surface recognition that “racism-was-terrible-but-now-it’s-over box—a quick fix product of official Multiculturalism that did precious little except sweep the problem of white racism

under the carpet” (Lai 1999 146). Indeed, although the Multiculturalism Policy Canada (1988) states that the Canadian Government,

recognises the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada (cited in Elliot & Fleras 1990 70),

Lai’s work, like many of her peers, consistently brings to notice the fact that inequalities based on race, gender, ethnicity and religion are still a prevalent part of the Canadian mosaic. Lai was a central member of the planning committee for the controversial “Writing thru Race” Conference held in Vancouver in 1994 and organised by the Racial Minority Writer’s Committee of the Writers’ Union of Canada. This controversy, largely played out in the popular press, centred on a perceived injustice (by whites), who became outraged by the Conference Policy which limited enrolment to First Nations writers and writers of colour. Vocal and insistent, this media-provoked fracas failed to listen to the moderating voice of Japanese Canadian poet and critic Roy Miki. Acting as Conference Chair, Miki stated that this policy was implemented in order to create a place where First Nation writers and writers of colour could meet to discuss their work “without the hysterical glare of public scrutiny” (Miki 1994a).

However, the repeated claim in newspaper editorials and columns that the conference policy was reverse racism functioned to resituate whiteness at the centre of a discourse from which it felt it had been excluded. An editorial in *The Globe and Mail* spoke of its “revulsion to a publicly-funded, racially-exclusive conference” (April 9 1994) while the conference policy was derogatorily labelled a “no whites rule” (Fulford 1994). That the policy was also described as an act of “apartheid” and a “cancerous threat” to Canadian cultural identity (Valpy 1994) indicates a deep-seated and historically continuous fear that whiteness has towards “colour” as difference. This media perpetuation of a divisive rhetoric resulted in a

government grant of \$22,500 being revoked just weeks before the conference start date. The backlash, based on protecting existing, unequal power relations, was, as Lai notes in a report on the conference, “a massive and dangerous shift to the right [it] was not really a controversy at all but a gun at our heads saying: move over” (Lai 1995b 17).

This construction of race as anti-nation and as anti-white within these media reports is a flexing of white power. It also indicates that the return by writers of colour not only to media reports, but also to filmic, photographic, literary or political mechanisms is an important strategy in re-evaluating how difference becomes embedded and naturalised in the dominant discourse of nation. As Aki Uchida argues,

when a group has the power to represent another group in terms of images and stereotypes and can use the images as tools of oppression in ways that the other group cannot, the structure of dominance is recreated and the hegemony of the dominant group is maintained. (1998 170)

It is precisely this “structure of dominance” which is analysed within many of the novels examined in the course of this thesis. However, while some of these novels look back at the way in which whiteness is constructed as normality with critical eyes, the strategies by which this is achieved varies between novels, writers and geographical origin. These texts issue a challenge based on questioning the dominance and power that has historically been accorded to the white gaze in both Australia and Canada.

Chapter 2

“being as white as they could possibly be”: Observing Race in Simone Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*

I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*.

(Frantz Fanon 1952 116)

Under erasure, race has to be continually brought to visibility as a construct that stands still, or if it does stand still, then its nets will continue to snare the body.

(Roy Miki 1998 151)

How can a writer employ a textual “tactics of refusal” to an endemic cultural practice that evaluates difference at the level of skin? Simone Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to Be Made* (1994), *The Australian Fiancé* (2000), and her most recently published novel, *The Travel Writer* (2006), bring to visibility the way race and gender are intertwined as artificial constructions of difference. Each of these novels examines how the bodies of their Eurasian narrators are racialised, coloured and exoticised under the dispossessing gaze of white Australia. In this sense, the white gaze “inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent, while escaping representation” (Haraway 1991 188). Lazaroo’s narratives reflect upon a process in which the white gaze imposes a subordinated subject positioning on these Eurasian narrators through a hierarchical viewing position.

Lazaroo’s body of fiction uses humour, pathos and satire to disrupt the hierarchical relationship that exists between the white gaze and its imperialistic marking of difference. Her first novel, *The World Waiting to be Made*, debuted spectacularly when it was awarded the TAG Hungerford Award for unpublished fiction in 1993. It was also a highly commended text in the prestigious Australian/Vogel literary

awards in the same year, and won the Western Australian Premier's Book award in 1995. This novel is marked by the dark humour and self-reflexive irony of the teenage narrator, an unnamed Eurasian girl. This narrator observes, internalises and recounts the experience of her family's relocation from Singapore, the home of their father, to Perth in Western Australia, the homeland of their white, Anglo Australian mother.

Considering that Lazaroo was born in Singapore in 1961 and migrated with her family to Perth, Australia in 1963, her fiction could be labelled semi-autobiographical in its examination of the sense of dislocation and relocation inherent to the diasporic experience. Like the unnamed female narrators of her novels, Lazaroo is also Eurasian, and her texts interrogate the problematics of a bi-cultural identity in twentieth-century Australia. Her fiction analyses the acculturated split between white and not-white using a metaphor of hybridity. *The World Waiting to be Made* is set predominantly against a backdrop of Australianness predicated upon protecting and perpetuating the supposed natural purity of whiteness. Read as physically bi-cultural, the unnamed Eurasian narrator spends her teenage years searching for stability of place, rejecting her father and darker skinned twin sister, and donning various disguises in an attempt to assimilate into whiteness.

The way in which hybridity is positioned within this novel not "as a 'natural' outcome of cultural mixing but rather a form of political intervention" (Lo 2000 153) signals Lazaroo's entry into a race-based politics. The depiction of the narrator's painful journey to adulthood in suburban and outback Australia allows for a critique of the way the bi-racial body is policed and categorised as deviant and other to the white body in the realm of the social and the political. Just as central, is the way this novel emphasises, through satire, how this same white body, at the very centre of racist discourse in Australia, refrains from marking itself. As Nicolas Mirzoeff so succinctly puts it, "The perfect body in Western

culture was sustained and made imaginable by the imperfect body of the racialised other” (2004 135). It is the exploration of the ongoing racism directed against the Eurasian narrator which lends the novel a degree of political edge. Whiteness is ratified in the official dialectics of governmental policy and Lazaroo analyses its appropriation and championing at the unequal level of Australian citizenship.

This first novel raises pertinent questions about the historical embeddedness and divisiveness of racialised boundaries. When the Eurasian narrator of *The World Waiting to be Made* and her family immigrate to Australia in 1966 they are greeted with “desultory lip puckerings” (*WW* 20) from the customs officer when the family declares cooking spices as “foreign substances” (*WW* 24). The officer opens these packets “as if they might contain sewerage” (*WW* 25) before disdainfully dropping them in a bin. Foreign spices are signified as a tangible and non-assimilable form of cultural difference. The narrator’s experience of the way in which her family are treated from this moment of arrival, and also, throughout her angst-ridden teenage and young adult years, results in deep psychological scarring. She spends the entire novel inventing ways to “blend in” (*WW* 50) to a community which consistently labels her corporeal and cultural disparity as exotic, foreign and other.

Straddling the Racial Divide

Lazaroo problematises place or nation as the site of identity formation by depicting a narrator divided between her Singapore heritage and her “longing to imitate th[e] vision of Australian life, to belong” (*WW* 275). The very notion of a distinct “Australian way of life” is an ideological construct which protects the interests of the ruling (white) elites. The idea of a cohesive community, and, in part, of a non-fractured national identity, obscures the very real tensions of both race and class that have operated throughout the history of white settlement in Australia. Emblematic of an increased fear over lack of national cohesiveness, moves towards social transformation are thwarted and contained by a whiteness that continuously re-presents itself as an unmitigated power. However, those who

belong to “the Australian way of life”, as the narrator sardonically notes, “don’t look like a slope or a boong” (*WW* 27).

The girl’s description of herself as “a brown girl in hand-me-down clothes” (*WW* 132), an individual who, in Fanon’s words is “dusted over by colonial culture” (1961 47) is a wry comment on a society in which the discourse of assimilation is a widely embraced practice of an, albeit fragile, national cohesiveness. The school playground is a breeding ground for the racism that rears its adult head in historical and political discourse. Being labelled “Slope, coon, chocolate face” (*WW* 40) fixes and colours the narrator’s body as other to white. The narrator internalises the shame of being “different” or “strange”, especially in comparison to the white body, and she notes that she repeatedly felt herself “slide down paler people’s eyeballs until they flicked me away with a blink of their disdaining eyelids” (*WW* 132). Lazaroo explicitly links the process of school-ground racism to political and cultural practices and the narrator states, “We continued bleeding from undiluted manifestations of the White Australia Policy in the playground long after official moves had been made to water it down” (*WW* 31). The narrator’s recollection of her angst-ridden years at school and at work in Australia describes an overwhelming desire to achieve “normality” by erasing her strangeness, or what she describes repeatedly as her abnormal “Asianness” (*WW* 107). To be a part of the unwholesomely white yet “in” beach crowd like her blond friend Sue, the narrator realises that “there were several darknesses about my appearance that I would have to alter if I wanted to obliterate my origins and be accepted [...] I would have to aim for as close to iridescence as depilatories and chemical warfare on my natural colouring would allow” (*WW* 99).

The narrator repeatedly describes and explains herself in terms that are “strange” to, or clearly outside of, the paradigm of whiteness. She is “not blond, not blue-eyed, not clear-skinned, [and] not full-bosomed” (*WW* 85). “Strange bodies” or bodies that are coloured-in and over by dominant discourse function:

at the border that defines the space into which the familiar body — the body which is unmarked by strangeness as its mark of privilege — cannot cross, and the space in which such a body constitutes itself as (at) home. (Ahmed 2002 95)

Whiteness, in this sense is the familiar body, unmarked, and not strange. Conversely the narrator's coloured body is made strange and unassimilable and for her, whiteness becomes an aspiration rather than an aberration.

Naturally coloured

It is the narrator's desire in *The World Waiting to be Made* not to be marked as coloured or as different that drives her to mutilate and bleach her body to a socially suitable degree of whiteness. Her ongoing performance which involves whitening her of-colour body emphasises that perceptions of skin difference, particularly within the realm of contemporary border/identity politics, is a highly problematic component. Lazaroo, however, emphasises that skin is an unstable border. Claudia Benthien argues that "skin is understood less and less as a given. Instead it is seen increasingly as a dress — something that is worn, something a person carries around" (2002 ix). In the context of contemporary race politics "skin" is read as "the outermost sheath, the 'corporeal' dress of human beings" (Benthien viii). The notion of boundary negotiations is one that the unnamed narrator of *World Waiting* finds fraught with difficulties. This is attributable to the constantly moving frames of reference that her dominant Anglo society devises for her. Just when she thinks she has achieved her aim of blending into whiteness her masquerade is revealed and she remains characterised not by her bleached appearance, but by her paternal origins. This habitual fabrication of self results in a state of in-between-ness, and despite her bleached appearance her corporeal difference, particularly her eye shape and skin colour, continue to be "diagnosed as symptoms of abnormality" (*WW* 99) by the people with whom she comes into contact.

Systemic racist acts contribute to her sense of a blurred identity and the narrator is psychologically paralysed, unable to deflect or return a gaze that marks her as not belonging. She is excluded from being part of the “in” crowd at school but she also resists contact with anyone who appeared “ethnic and weird [or] a dag” (*WW* 82). As such, the narrator’s construction of self oscillates between a desire for invisibility and a desire to be seen. If racist remarks such as “slope” or “coon” are disabling for the narrator, then the naming of herself and her Chinese Australian friend Eddie as “ethnic, uncool” (*WW* 83) could be read as a way of countering such immobility. This is a pained and fraught search for identity and one which is made more negative by the ambivalent relationship the narrator has with her blond and popular “best friend” Sue. But acceptance into the white world of Sue is made at considerable loss of the narrator’s sense of her bi-racial self. As Sneja Gunew argues, “the appropriation of racist terms by those who are intended to be its targets can paradoxically function to establish a sense of kinship and therefore potential agency” (2004 102). This is not achieved in *The World Waiting to be Made*. Despite its acknowledgement of the cultural and historical practices that have maintained the power of whiteness within Australia, the novel still falls short of critical edginess through an approach that simplifies the experience of migration in Australia to a series of anecdotal passages depicting an (albeit raced) teenage angst. The narrator’s self-deprecatory use of the terms “ethnic”, or “dag” mimics, rather than questions, the racist discourse she is attempting to shield herself from.

In examining the varying strategies of critique to racist and gendered practices with the novels featured in this thesis, a recurring question emerges. To whom have these novels been marketed? The title page of *The World Waiting to be Made*, for example, includes a reviewer’s blurb which makes problematic the notion of reader subjectivity. The novel is described “as exotic as it is familiar” and this rhetoric is mirrored on the following page which features a large photo and biography of Lazaroo both of which position her as exotic, in that Lazaroo hails from Singapore, and familiar in that Lazaroo has been educated in the

Australian school and university system. This marketing of the author and the novel as an interesting, but non-threatening journey into the world of the ethnic other is in danger of negating the “agency”, or critical autonomy, that Gunew has observed in fiction by Canadian writers of colour such as Fred Wah or Hiromi Goto (2004 102).

Gunew refers to the Helen Demidenko literary hoax in Australia, of a woman of British ancestry claiming an authentic Ukrainian speaking voice, and notes that ethnic minority writing (and Demidenko’s pre-hoax revelation novel is included) is read as a simple but authentic depiction of the trauma of the diasporic experience (2004 75). Furthermore, migrants “who came to Australia carried with them a certain foreign and exotic history which Australian readers could access as a bargain cultural tourism event” (Gunew 2004 75). However, *The World Waiting to be Made* can be read as more than a “tourism event” through the way in which it attempts to highlight racial discourses that polarise human differences. The novel is politically strategic and critical through the way it uses satire and pathos to emphasise how this dichotomy is based on a hierarchical system of classification which separates the whites from the non-whites. Naming colour, determining difference or marking the body as raced through the act of looking, creates and maintains boundaries of normative whiteness. As Hall writes, “Symbolic lines are being drawn, and what we know about culture is that once the symbolic difference exists, that is the line around which power coheres. Power uses difference as a way of marking off who does and who does not belong” (1998 298). The acculturation of race through the narrow frame of Western epistemology involves the designation of skin colour as an externalised marker of otherness. A “symbolic difference” rests uneasily on the bodies of Lazaroo’s Eurasian narrator for it is precisely her “coloured” skin which marks her, in the eyes of the dominant white community, as both “fixed” and “not belonging”. Hall refers to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to elucidate the fracturing of identity that occurs under white regimes of power (1990 231). The presence of whiteness is dependent on

exclusion and imposition. But, Hall warns, although this appears to be an external process, the psychological scarring, so powerfully revealed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is another facet which must be reconsidered in articulations of resistance to the imposition of fixity that emanates from the “imperial” eye of whiteness (1990 233).

Lazaroo consistently signals within *The World Waiting to be Made*, *The Australian Fiancé*, and *The Travel Writer*, that the “sliding scale” that determines degrees of whiteness, is an arbitrary calculation based on visual translations of the racialised/Asianised body. Connected to this entry into contemporary race politics in Australia is another issue similarly raised across the three novels and this is that the complexity of Australian identity is neither fixed nor singular. Identity formation is a fluid process, open to constant revision and translation despite the encroachment of dominant representational practices which work to contain the identities of Lazaroo’s three Eurasian narrators as other to white.

The unnamed narrators of *The World Waiting to be Made*, *The Australian Fiancé* and the narrator Isabel, of *The Travel Writer*, are read as physically bi-cultural. To survive in a culture predicated on marking out difference the narrator of *The World Waiting to be Made* notes that “whole wardrobes of faces to wear were what I needed for such sliding around as I was doing: between Eurasianness and Australianness” (*WW* 116). Despite a mimetic and repetitive cycle of bleaching, blonding, plucking and painting, this narrator finds no stability of place; she achieves no sense of peace or safety within her new homeland of Australia. It is the outward reading of her body as corporeally exotic by her society, family and indeed herself which prevents her from achieving any stability of place or self. It is not until the close of the novel, and after a return trip to Singapore, that she fully realises that her attempts to change the shape of her eyes or the colour of her skin is not only physically but also psychologically detrimental.

Yet, while this narrator recognises that she is being dispossessed in the very act of trying to emulate the centre, even her twin sister feels envy towards her stating, “you are lucky, you are paler than me” (*WW* 31). Despite their difference in skin colour both the narrator and her sister are similarly afflicted by what Fanon has described as “that corporeal malediction” (1952 111) of not being white. This “malediction” is succinctly summarised by the teenage narrator as “the shame of being different” (*WW* 75). Skin is a commodity, and the price the narrator pays for not being white in a culture which fetishises whiteness is this continual self-effacement of her cultural past. Dorothy Wang examines Lazaroo’s use of the metaphor of marketable consumption arguing that “the narrator’s sexuality is a commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand” (2000 48). The definition of the narrator’s marketability changes between her school and home. At school the performance of sexual availability, which includes bleached hair, and the wearing of mascara, tight shirts and short skirts gains points, whereas at home and according to the narrator’s father’s system of valuation, to remain chaste will bring the narrator “top price” in the marriage market (*WW* 84). What troubles most people the narrator encounters is the difficulty they have in labelling her as either Asian or Anglo-Australian. Defined during her teenage years as an Arab, an Asian, a Tropical Barbie and Mauritian the narrator notes, “she was any wog people wanted me to be” (*WW* 81). Her boundaries of self are consistently redefined by her dominant white community and she occupies the difficult and self-defined place of an “in-between” (*WW* 258).

Being scaled down by whiteness as either belonging or not belonging to the national imaginary, being repeatedly marked by what Bhabha has termed “cultural hybridity” (1990 211), results in an almost irreparable scarring for the narrator. The rhetoric determining purity of race is inherently bound to racist ideologies. Stepping outside the fence of whiteness incurs a liability and for the narrator’s Anglo-Australian mother in *The World Waiting to be Made* the penalty for having “mixed-blood” children is social ostracism. According to this communal judging

panel her “exotic-looking children, were evidence that she’d already made her own bed long ago in a dangerous place, beyond the pale” (*WW* 144). The mother is made to pay bitterly for her racial transgression eventually lapsing into a deep and long-lasting depression.

Desiring Asian femaleness

An inherent part of othering the of-colour body is a pervasive cultural stereotyping which exotifies and sexually objectifies the Asian female body as compliant and available. The narrator of *The World Waiting to be Made* is sexually objectified because of, and through, her racialised body. As Robert Young, referring to the cultural phobia/ fascination regarding miscegenation in the United States, observes, “disgust always bears the imprint of desire” (1995 149). White male desire figures prominently in all three of Lazaroo’s novels and Young’s comment regarding disgust and desire and Lazaroo’s concomitant interest in exploring the gendered and raced underpinning of such an assumption, is initially raised in *The World Waiting to be Made*. The intertwining of race, gender and sexuality is succinctly highlighted when the narrator, in her job as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant, is asked by a patron for “sweet and sour porn, prawn fuckers, flied lice. And your legs” (*WW* 102). Rendered speechless, the narrator is told by another waitress that “some orders you have to translate” (*WW* 103).

The narrator is able to “translate” such an order but she does so, again, at the expense of her autonomy. Her bodily difference is now equated with an assessment of her sexual desirability and the narrator observes that when Max Swift, her first serious boyfriend, initially saw her, he “passed his tongue once over his lips as he appraised me” (*WW* 161). During their first date at a restaurant he asked her if she had “ever heard about the Kama Sutra” (*WW* 163). The narrator’s flesh is assessed as sexually desirable precisely for its “Orientalised”, bi-cultural difference. The reactions of a “type” such as Max Swift or the restaurant client are representative of what Young defines as the “ambivalent driving desire

at the heart of racialism: a compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion” (1995 149). As the narrator understands, “we were like flavours or colours in a blur of incense, mantras and sheer veils” (*WW* 171). When the narrator resists Max’s sexual advances he tells her that “Perhaps you are more Asian than you think. No, no and finally yes. That’s how Asians bargain” (*WW* 166).

Racially submissive and gendered stereotypes such as this are continuously imposed upon the narrator. Her body is read as both sexually available and sexually exotic. While being outfitted for a costume for a multicultural parade in which she reluctantly takes part in Broome, she is asked by a pub patron “can you do the things the strippers in Thailand do with bananas?” (*WW* 194). This question replicates the depiction of a Filipino mail-order bride in the Australian film *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*¹⁴ being watched by both fascinated and repulsed male pub patrons as she attempts to shoot ping-pong balls across the crowded bar from her vagina. Both the question posed to the Eurasian narrator and the depiction of Cynthia, the stereotyped mail-order bride in *Priscilla*, is an Orientalist conjuring of the ghosts of Madame Butterfly and Suzie Wong in the extreme.

This is a type of representation that Said has described in *Orientalism* as “a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. *He* spoke for and represented her” (1978 6). While the dressmaker pulls down the blind to shield the narrator of *The World Waiting to be Made* from the gaze of this single white male it is a futile gesture when read against an endemic cultural practice. This form of racialised stereotyping transforms her body into “a screen onto which they [people like the pub patron, her boyfriend Max, her school teachers and her neighbours], project their own fantasies of another exotic kind of life” (*WW* 200). The repetition of

¹⁴ *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Dir: Stephan Elliott. Perf. Hugo Weaving, Terence Stamp, Guy Pearce. MGM. 1994.

such scenes throughout the novel, and indeed in a popular film such as *Priscilla*,¹⁵ works towards painting a picture of a racist and racially intolerant culture while also exemplifying the character annihilation that occurs from these repeated attacks.¹⁶

When viewed as an ongoing, stream of racism, these episodes suggest that there is no such thing as an authentic Asian identity other than that imagined by the West. The narrator's search for a non-fractured identity involves a double form of exile. Labelled as "a mix" (*WW* 160), "*chap cheng*" or "in-between" (*WW* 40) she is rejected because of her bi-cultural heritage in Singapore and yet, while in Australia, she struggles for recognition outside of a stereotype which "fixes" her as "tasty" or "exotic" but always different and non-white. Indeed, as Young observes, in perceived deviations from a white norm "none was so demonised as those of mixed race" (1995 180). The narrator's visible mixed race origin positions her as an object of sexual desire and a racialised/demonised other.

being home and not at home

In a physical sense the narrator is at home in Australia but, paradoxically she is psychologically severed from belonging because of the way her body is racialised and sexualised. The overwhelming desire to assimilate into an Australian "way of life" leads the narrator's family on a search for the typical Australian home. Their

¹⁵ This ping pong ball scene is resurrected in the recent (December 2006) stage/musical production of the film in Sydney.

¹⁶ Another example of the conflict and debate arising from reactions to the way white maleness is represented as morally superior to, and the saviour of a sexualised Asian femaleness, is Dennis O'Rourke's ficto-documentary *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1992). In this film, O'Rourke, who is a white, middle-aged, Australian male records his encounter and eventual romance with a young female, Thai prostitute, Aoi. The film plays out, albeit problematically, the archetypal cross-cultural encounter evoked in *The World of Suzie Wong* and one which Lazaroo attempts to satirise within *The World Waiting to be Made*. This encounter, in Ien Ang's response to O'Rourke's film is "overdetermined by the conflict-ridden divisions of male/female; rich/poor; white/coloured; first world/ third world; western/non-Western; dominant/subaltern" (1997 1). More telling to the polemics of unequal power relations at work and indeed reified in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, The filmic audience only sees Aoi, much like the representation of Suzie Wong, and Cynthia in *Priscilla*, through the desiring eyes of the white, Western male.

quest for a façade of suburban conformity is characterised by a feeling of bewilderment as the family are continually astounded by the variety of “typical Australian homes” offered to them in real estate advertisements and through their visits to Home Display villages. The narrator’s father is beguiled by the advertising blurb for the “True Blue Romeo” home:

True Blue Romeo, where art thou? Open plan living for Australians who love living in the land of wide open spaces. Feature walls, balcony, bar, minstrel’s gallery. Sliding doors, patio, pergola. Sumptuous drapes. For true blue Aussies with a taste for international sophistication, this one includes at no extra cost a bidet. (*WW* 66)

They collectively hope that the building of this new home will “work as a charm against being treated as aliens” (*WW* 65). But it is a futile gesture, much like the narrator’s spraying of air freshener “to mask the spicy smells in the kitchen” (*WW* 50) just before her friends come to visit.

While functioning to make the family feel less threatened from outside attacks, the home itself becomes an internal battlefield between husband and wife, father and children. Lazaroo links the metaphor of home to the notion of skin difference. Home in this sense could be read as a means of emphasising the way skin functions only as a border. The façade of a suburban home does not offer the family safety from racial taunts; it is still the border between fitting in and not fitting in. But Lazaroo also makes noticeable the issue that the exterior walls of home, like skin, are unreliable markers of identity. So when the narrator’s twin sister asks “will this house make us real Australians?” (*WW* 66), Lazaroo reveals, through the use of metaphor and parody, the very unstable notion of what is a “real” or “true blue” Australian.

In the physical and psychological sites of self the narrator is a stranger and her sense of identity is not preordained but written over by competing cultural influences. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty comment that,

Being home refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realising that

home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (1986 196)

The narrator is neither home in her body nor in the country called Australia and it is little wonder that she should describe herself as “the blurriness of who I was” (*WW* 121). The narrator’s protracted sense of social displacement is exacerbated by her inability to conform to her father’s cultural and gendered expectations. Throughout her teenage years she gradually removes the familial ties, she rejects his searing hot curries, she tells her school friends, “He’s not my real father, you know. I am adopted” (*WW* 51), she wears tight jeans despite her father warning her that she would be “unmarketable” well before she was married (*WW* 82). The only way the narrator retains a sense of cohesiveness during her teenage years is by forging a new identity from the stories her mother tells of the past.

These stories are recounted by the mother so that her children can retain their cultural links and also cope with the racism they encounter in the Australian playground. They also serve a dual purpose, in that their conjuring of a mythical past enables the narrator a momentary retreat from her father’s unrelenting strictness. These stories however, function problematically within the novel. They are recounted by the Anglo mother and while accepted as a truthful depiction of the narrator’s past they are told “to console us children and herself [...] to help us last the long distance” (*WW* 35). However, these floating stories conjure an idealised past, recounted as they are by a mother who married into an Asian family expecting quaint customs and an easy-going familial rapport. Rather than protecting the narrator from the reality of her racist present, they exacerbate her sense of in-between-ness, functioning to evict her psychologically from all that is now “home” in Australia. The narrator’s metaphorical and physical exile from, and return to, home is central to the process of piecing together her splintered self. It is not until she journeys to her imaginary homeland of Singapore that she realises that the past evinced in her mother’s “floating stories” is unlike the reality

she is confronted with. While on a picnic with her cousins, and as she dips sliced bread purchased from Woolworths into her aunt's home-made curry, she realises that this imaginary past is also subject to cultural influences and exchanges.

While food operates within this novel as an overt signifier of racial difference the metaphor is laboured. From the moment the family arrive in Australia and have their spices confiscated by Customs, to the narrator's gradual rejection of her father's curries and her embracing of drinking cow's milk despite developing an allergy to it, to the resurfacing of her taste for preserved plums at the age of eleven, to Max Swift asking her if she could show him how to use chopsticks; the narrator is confused by her culinary in-betweenness. The emphasis on food in the novel is not explored as a metaphor of consuming otherness. Lazaroo's entry into representational politics within this first novel tends more toward exposing how the teenage narrator is psychologically conflicted — should she embrace the white bread present of the West or furtively enjoy the tangy sweetness of the preserved plums of her past — rather than being critically aware of the cultural processes maintaining this divide.

The narrator's return to Singapore in search of her cultural heritage forces her to realise that her own perceptions about this past were just as constructed and inaccurately remembered. This notion of a return journey conforms to diasporic narratives which signal that the only way for an immigrant subject to negotiate a sense of in-betweenness is to make a pilgrimage to their geographical origins. The Eurasian narrator notes that, "I had to find a way of honouring [...] all the parts of my life that had been lost to me. And the only way it seemed to me I could do this was to go in search of Asia" (*WW* 209). In a parody of the Western tourist's penchant for bargain hunting in Asia, she embarks on a shopping frenzy that garners the disapproval of the aunts and cousins she is staying with. What this shopping trip does however, is reveal the extent of the racialised difference she has tried to ignore in Australia. In a lingerie department she notices that all the bras

“were Chinese manufactured and all ‘skin-coloured’ a uniformly darker shade than skin-coloured bras in Australia [...] the Chinese bras were almost the colour of band-aids” (*WW* 246). The novel repositions items, such as the skin-coloured bra and white bread, as commodified and insidiously normalised icons of white dominance.

Translations of whiteness

This return trip is an attempt to counter the sense of not belonging and of being blatantly ostracised from the white community she encounters during a teaching post in remote Western Australia. Although she was “schooled, beached, housed, shopped and groomed just like them” (*WW* 203) the narrator’s body is read as coloured by and through the correcting gaze of her teaching peers. Her difference, to this group at least, is palpable. She resigns from this position and as she packs her bags in a car before a short ride to the local airstrip, her colleagues gather and drink beer on the verandah of a distant house while also watching her. She notes that maintaining their status as icons of whiteness has made them look “exhausted by the daily efforts of being as white as they could possibly be [and] their gaze upon me made me a stranger to myself as well as to them” (*WW* 203). While the narrator understands that whiteness is a façade, it is necessary to her repossession of self that she also understands the psychological dispossession that occurs under the surveillance of the white gaze. Her resignation from her teaching position is a principal moment in what emerges as a gradual recovery of a divided and fractured self.

Homi Bhabha has noted that the act of inscribing race results in the assumption of a subject position which teeters “*somewhere between the too visible and the not visible enough*” (italics in original 1996 56). Lazaroo challenges the privileging of vision as a way of knowing and labelling the narrator’s body as raced and different. Her texts glance back at the imperial white gaze in order to expose its inherent schizophrenia. While this gaze operates predominantly within the social

as a strategy for defining otherness, the act of glancing back and naming whiteness functions as an enabling device for resisting any such categorisation of difference. In the act of being psychologically dispossessed by the white gaze it is the narrator's own glance back which functions to expose its fatal fear. Her colleagues maintain their own interpretation of whiteness through adherence to a ritualistic upkeep of their gardens and homes. The narrator's vitriolic description of these rites signals an assiduous glance back at the brittle facade of a suburban whiteness which has been transplanted to the Australian bush.

In the early years of Federation, Australia was identified with health, wholesomeness and purity and this was protected, as Richard White notes, "with an almost pathological obsession. All that was threatening, divisive, unhealthy, decadent and impure was seen as being foreign" (1988 115). The historical association of whiteness with cleanliness¹⁷ concomitantly implies that maintaining this pristine state requires diligence, vigilance and sheer hard work. The fear of "let[ting] themselves go" (*WW* 178), of not being as white as they could possibly be, drives the narrator's colleagues to tend their lawns and attempt to prevent the insidious red dust of the desert from entering their homes. Lazaroo's satire of the obsession with which the teachers in this remote desert town try to impart unnatural greenery upon a naturally brown land is essential to her critique of a far-reaching imperial mandate of control. The narrator's colleague's maintenance of their homes performs a pathological nostalgia for an unsullied whiteness, one which remains an unacknowledged core of phrenological race-based discourse.

Translating whiteness is a subjective exercise in imperialist ideology; neither objective nor unbiased, it is inextricably connected to acculturated hierarchies that privilege skin tone over essence. While Lazaroo is critiquing a cultural practice which writes over the racialised body she is also exposing an endemic fear within

¹⁷ See Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blond*, and, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*.

white Australian culture and that is the very death of whiteness. The acts of propagating the ideal of an Australia “dream home”, marketing skin and hair bleaching products or practicing stringent immigration laws can be read as attempts to reaffirm the centrality of white vision. Lazaroo’s ongoing and developing body of work exposes the othering practices of white domination in Australia and is a principal part of an emerging corpus within the Australian literary scene. Lazaroo theorises the process of identity formation by linking it to the visual while simultaneously examining the pervasive colour-blindness of Australia’s dominant political and social power structure. It is this examination of the politics of the white male gaze and the Orientalised female body to which Lazaroo makes a more critical return in her second novel, *The Australian Fiancé*.

Chapter 3

Reading Photographically: Vision and Difference in *The Australian Fiancé*

Ultimately photography is
subversive not when it frightens,
repels or even stigmatises, but when
it is pensive, when it thinks.
(Roland Barthes 2000 38)

All cultures previous to our own
treated appearances as signs
addressed to the living. All was
legend: all was there to be read by
the eye.
(John Berger & Jean Mohr
1982 115)

Simone Lazaroo's first novel, *The World Waiting to be Made*, functions as an uncomfortable tour through the cauldron of Australia's recent, yet still bubbling xenophobic past. However, it is her second novel, *The Australian Fiancé* (2000), which explicitly links the construction of a racialised difference to vision and surveillance. Employing an extended photographic metaphor, this novel explores how both human and technological methods of observation are privileged within a Western economy of difference. In *The World Waiting to be Made* otherness or "Asians" are defined by one of the narrator's school teachers as, "the dark and steamy peoples and the yellow peril" (*WW* 78). *The Australian Fiancé* exposes a fear that arises when one of these "peoples", a young and beautiful Eurasian girl, attempts to cross a heavily policed boundary and marry the son of a white Anglo Australian family, whom Lazaroo names "the Australian fiancé".

Set in post-World War II Singapore and Australia, the novel is described on its cover as a story about "desire, flight and the aftermath of war". But *The Australian Fiancé* is more than a love story between the unnamed narrator, a young Eurasian

girl, and her Australian fiancé. Deeply introspective, the novel plaits together past and present, East and West, presence and absence. The wealthy Australian employs the Eurasian girl as his travel guide while he is in Singapore recruiting divers for his family's pearling business. Her role is to reveal those sights to which only a local resident has access.

His purpose, as he informs the girl, is to "go below the surface, [to] take the photographs a native might take" (*AF* 26). The fiancé's nonchalant use of such a problematic and colonialist term indicates his mistaken sense of Western superiority to, and over, this amorphous "native" other. The fiancé's assumed sense of proprietorship, his act of reading "the native" photographically, informs a large part of Lazaroo's critique of the power and manipulation of a centred visual knowledge within this novel. Although his photos are composed with scientific and technological precision they are, as the narrative sets out to show, framed by a gaze that is both subjective and interpretive. This gaze and the fiancé's privileged, white background collude to prevent him from truly seeing what the "native" sees.

In linking the optical device and visual process not only to the male observer but also to cultural and political institutions Lazaroo emphasises that it is through Western eyes that the "other's" identity is captured and labelled. The novel explores the notion of hierarchical looking relations through the genre of romance, but while it is in part a story about a liaison between a white, wealthy Australian male and a poor, young Eurasian girl, the novel is also an exploration of the Eurasian's girl's traumatic past. The girl's experience of extreme poverty in Japanese-occupied Singapore during World War II, where she is forced to become a "comfort woman" or prostitute to Japanese soldiers, is initially hidden from the Australian male and during their first meeting she purposefully leaves out these details of her past.

During another of these initial meetings the fiancé tells the Eurasian girl of how particular he must be in recruiting Asian divers. He notes that they must be “the right kind of Asian [because of] the obsessiveness of the Australian government about Asian spies” (AF 28). This is July, 1949. Under the intoxicating effects of sexual desire, the soon-to-be fiancé momentarily lapses in his cultural duty of keeping Australia white and proposes to the Eurasian girl. They leave Singapore as an engaged couple, the girl full of hope for a new life of unlimited possibilities and freedom in Australia.

It is, however, a short-lived optimism; for despite this promising start to their relationship it must still withstand being battered by a divisive discourse of racialised othering that codes this relationship as unnatural and detrimental to the hegemony of whiteness once the couple arrive in Broome, Western Australia. The very notion of who is considered “right” or “white” enough to enter Australia is explored in the course of the narrative through the Eurasian girl. Her mixed Asian/English ancestry, her past life as a prostitute and her unacknowledged, part Japanese, part English/Asian daughter who is the result of this enforced prostitution, come under scrutiny and redefinition by the fiancé, his parents and the wider Broome community.

The Australian Fiancé extends the concept of a gendered gaze into the area of race by examining how white power is maintained through hierarchical looking relations. The novel is framed in and by photographic missives and begins with descriptions of the fiancé’s obsession with taking and labelling photographs. It concludes with the Eurasian girl’s appropriation of the fiancé’s camera. This appropriation, so essential to the critique of white Australia within the text, enables the Eurasian girl to look back at the world through the unfiltered lens of her own experience.

In an email interview Lazaroo notes that:

I did work for a while as both a writer and photographer, although initially an amateurish one. Also I had memories of watching my father develop prints in his darkroom. I was looking at the different ways of seeing things with these two people. I hoped for the photography to function as a metaphor — one particular art-form. Also it provided both promise and limitations as a tool for seeing. The failure of both characters to capture an accurate image of one another, this provided a parallel to the failure of their photos to capture the things they wanted them to.¹⁸

The white, wealthy and unnamed Australian fiancé “reads” the world through the lens of his camera in much the same way that Susan Sontag has described the process of photography. Sontag explicitly recognises the historical correlation between visual knowledge and (an unstated, Western) hegemony when she states that, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge and therefore, like power” (1979 4). Similarly, in an examination of the importance of photography to the late nineteenth-century British imperialising mission, James Ryan notes that photographs are invested with meanings:

[They are] composed, reproduced, circulated and arranged for consumption within particular social circles [so that they] reveal as much about the imaginative landscapes of imperial culture as they do about the physical spaces or people pictured within their frame. (1997 20)

Sontag and Ryan describe photography as both a tool of imperialism and a construct of discursive power, one that produces knowledge of the subject while maintaining power over the subject.

In this sense, whiteness frames raced and gendered differences in order to further empower, but also to contain the threat of contamination to whiteness. Lazaroo’s use of the photographic metaphor in *The Australian Fiancé* allows for an exploration of the way in which human differences are fixed and coded through the visual. The novel signals that this coding is more often a misrecognition which

¹⁸ www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/10111 (accessed 10 December, 2005).

requires contestation and critique. The racialised look, as the novel progressively suggests, is an external imposition culturally inscribed by and through the colonising power of white vision, and the difference between seeing and being seen is based on inequitable power relations. As Jonathan Crary writes, “vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions and procedures of subjectification” (*italics original* 1993 5).

The fiancé’s gaze maps the terrain he inhabits — whether in Singapore or Australia — as white. This act distorts and mistranslates the coloured reality of the captured “other’s” life. The fiancé’s reality is premised on notions of ownership, knowledge and control and he travels to various colonial outposts and “takes photos to help him remember what is his” (*AF* 125). Tainted by an “imperialist nostalgia” (hooks 1997 35), the fiancé’s scientifically composed and meticulously labelled photographs are placed in leather-bound albums. These volumes are dominated by images of the Houses of the National Estate of Europe, of businesses in Asian slums and of tropical islands the fiancé has visited.

The albums function as imperial artefacts, as carefully narrativised memorials for the present and the future to remember and rediscover their viewer’s links to the past. In one sense they could be read as an attempt to archive the history of empire and to delineate the difference between empire and its others. The albums produce racial differences by reaffirming a sense of cohesive, imagined Eurocentric community. They construct a discourse of spectatorship which is hierarchically based, and one, depending on the class, gender and origins of the viewer, which is meant to reaffirm the centrality of whiteness. When viewed as a system of representation, the photographs contained within these albums educate the other about whiteness’ imagined place at the centre. They offer a visual authority and employ a colonial didacticism through their careful coding and sequencing.

Sontag notes that the practice of photography developed in tandem with the cult of tourism and tourist photographs, as she argues, have a twofold purpose. For the tourist or sojourner, they “offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had” (Sontag 1979 9). For family members and friends “back home” (9) they also act as documents of exotic experiences. This is, as Sontag observes, “a way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it — by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir” (9). The camera functions then, as a soothing device for the tourist, suturing the gap between over there and home. The fiancé has no interest in the population of the lands he visits and when he does capture photographic images of people they are positioned as “far off and almost unreadable” (*AF* 125).

His photos of a “civilised” Europe and a “backward” Asia are visual definitions of a dichotomy that differentiates between us and them, sameness and otherness. Pultz observes that “the fact that the power of photographs to control and stereotype was invisible made them especially insidious tools in the establishment and maintenance of colonialism. This was furthered by their widespread distribution and consumption” (1995 21). However, the very notion of the “unreadable” subject implies that the “imperial gaze” (Kaplan 1997a xxi) is not as controlling or knowing as the fiancé, in his role as the eye of the empire, would believe.

This is vital in evaluating how Lazaroo uses the metaphor of photography as a tactics of resistance to hierarchical looking relations. As readers, Lazaroo is constantly asking us to question photography’s assumed verisimilitude. This interrogative stance emphasises an ongoing need, particularly in the context of the novel’s identity politics, to “put quotation marks around photographs, to place them as historical utterances of a particular time and place [to pay] critical attention to the content of the image themselves as well as the contexts of their

conception, production, dissemination, consumption and preservation” (Schwartz & Ryan 2003 7).

In a world of digital imaging photography can no longer be considered a mimetic representation of the real. Sarah Kember explores the contemporary preoccupation with the loss of the real suggesting that this loss is both a social and psychological manifestation connected to a perception of diminished white power. This is directly related to subjectivity and the way the subject, or in Lazaroo’s novel, the fiancé, views the world through a camera lens in order to seek both knowledge of it and to manipulate and control it (1996 146). Kember argues that there is a paradox at the heart of photographic representation; that its truth value is based on a myth and this demise of photography’s realism has been exacerbated by the introduction of digitally enhanced imaging. This new way of imaging no longer accords the spatiality and temporality of Barthes “that has been” (Barthes 2000 77).

According to Kember, time and space have been “looted” (148) because we can no longer determine if the referent or the subject of the past was ever truly there. Kember suggests that the cultural acceptance of photographs as a system of representation of the real is flawed. Our faith in photographs is based on a nostalgic return to the past in which time is stilled. Barthes writes that “in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here of reality and of the past” (italics original 76). Similarly, the fiancé’s photographs are premised on constructing a reality that captures the power of white imperialism and of proving the supposed superiority of Western standards of living to those in Asia.

However, while photographs may work as proof of a prior existence, Lazaroo’s examination of the fiancé’s obsession with taking, recoding and storing his photographs provides a platform from which to reassess or question the reliability

of the fiancé's historical referent. The Eurasian narrator of *The Australian Fiancé* is looked at, taken, captured and exoticised by the fiancé and the camera she labels "his loaded eye" (AF 123). She is fixed, in Fanon's sense of the word, much like "a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" (1952 109). The act of taking a photo functions not as proof that the girl existed, or even of her reality, but as a fixing of her subjectivity.

While Lazaroo is careful to accord the girl a measure of autonomy, one troubling aspect of this novel is the narrator's orchestrated meeting with the wealthy Australian male on the docks in Singapore. It is this meeting which is in danger of pandering to a white gaze or audience rather than encouraging a reassessment of the politics of constructing otherness. The Eurasian girl is first described as looking at the wealthy Australian as he disembarks. She notices his monogrammed luggage, his expensive clothing and his air of confidence during the entire process.

However, just as she looks at him, he is looking at her. When she is asked by the Australian if she would like to accompany him for a drink she also realises that while she was watching him, "he had been watching her for some time from some place on the deck, amid the clamour and bustle of the ship's mooring" (AF 19). Although there is a power in his gaze that hinges on colonialism and heterosexual desire, her gaze is one of longing to escape. As he walks to her along the dock that first time she believes that "what she has hoped for so long may finally be coming true" (AF 19). It is on the wealthy Australian that she pins her hopes of escaping the barely suppressed shame she has internalised during her enforced prostitution.

This articulation of the girl's hopes of escape from her present resurrects a myth of the poor Asian girl who requires "saving" from the excesses of herself and her

culture by a gallant and liberal, “white knight”.¹⁹ It is symbolic that when she and the fiancé initially meet on the dock, he walks towards her with his camera slung around his neck — a prosthetic eye that physically separates them but also a device that eventually enables him to construct an image of what he thinks she should be. In linking the construction of the girl’s subjectivity to the camera and the gaze of the wealthy Australian, *Lazaroo* highlights that it is through Western visualising practices that the “other’s” identity is captured and subsequently labelled.

Degrees of whiteness

Once in Australia, the Eurasian girl is racialised by an outward assessment of her skin colour. Upon arrival, the girl, whose mother is Singapore Malay and father British, is immediately asked by an immigration officer, “What percentage of you’s European blood?” (*AF* 80). Despite the scientific impossibility of ever being able to provide an answer the officer prompts her, “Full-blood? Half-caste? Quadroon?” (*AF* 80). The immigration officer voices a national anxiety over how to classify the bicultural subject, viewed as a threat to the imagined homogeneity of the white nation. In a culture that seeks to protect its mantle of whiteness through a stringent screening process predicated on preserving the purity of white

¹⁹ For an extend discussion of the role of the “white knight” in Hollywood films, see Gina Marchetti (1993) who examines the way filmic narratives reaffirm the difference of Asians to white Americans. Gina Marchetti argues that following World War II the appearance of Asians in Hollywood films acted as a strategy of avoidance, one clearly linked to the guilt arising over the treatment of racial tension between African American, Hispanics, Native Americans and white Americans (6). Noting that the classic Hollywood realist film participated in the construction of hegemony and power and is inextricably linked to the discourses of race, sex, class, gender and ethnicity (7), Marchetti observes that films such as *Love is a Many Splendered Thing* and *The World of Suzie Wong* deal with a similar and fundamental crisis which involves the dominant white American culture attempting to reconcile a liberal humanist value system with an overall dominance of this system by the white, middle class male (218). This hierarchical subject position is codified in these films by ‘saving’ the white woman from moral degeneration and preventing her sexual liaison with an Asian male, and also by ‘rescuing’ the non-white woman from the perils of her culture and assimilating her into the ‘superior’ American culture (218).

blood, the immigration officer's question is considered mandatory and representative of the policing and maintenance of racial boundaries.

Ironically, it is only because of the wealthy Australian fiancé's impeccable white pedigree in *The Australian Fiancé* that the Eurasian girl is begrudgingly allowed into Australia. As the officer states to the fiancé, "I have this sliding scale. Can't get a family more Australian than yours. Just being yours makes her, well, at least eighty per cent" (AF 81). Although, in terms of such "laws", race tends to be measured by blood rather than skin, it is the very visibility of skin colour which accords it a central status in the process of scaling racial difference. The girl is doubly dispossessed. She is not only made the property of the fiancé but her Asian identity is compressed to twenty per cent while her British heritage is emphasised and given a higher racialised valuation.

Her skin functions as an unstable border that is measured and assessed by the immigration officer as if it contained the truth of the Eurasian girl's identity. During the process of assessing the Eurasian girl's body for its degree of whiteness, the grateful fiancé assures the immigration officer that while she is in Australia he will control her: "Look mate, I'll make sure she doesn't do anything too foreign" (AF 81). While this Singapore "native" (AF 27) is defined by the fiancé as the colonised other in her own land, being foreign in Australia implies a discernible and unassimilable skin difference from an illusory white centre, represented by the fiancé and the immigration officer. Any deviations from this constructed national identity are contained by cultural and political edicts. The immigration officer's role in *The Australian Fiancé* is to uphold the centre and disallow potential immigrants who do not conform visually to the eighty per cent rule, from entering the country. But, as Lazaroo indicates on the first page of the novel, the act of looking is a process based on arbitrary interpretations, and her novel is important for the way it emphasises, from its first pages, that there are indeed "many degrees of dark and light" (AF 1).

Lazaroo's work is politically motivated in the way it links the racialised gaze to that of gender. She calls attention to the fetishist impulses of ownership and sexual possession underlying the white Australian fiancé's assertion when he first meets the unnamed Eurasian narrator. His statements, "I like to look at you" and "how he'd always hoped for a greater *intimacy* with Asia" (italics original *AF* 28) are doubly objectifying in their confluence of gender with exotic, sexual otherness. His statement reifies a Eurocentric image of "the Orient" as a geographical site "for wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe" (Said 1978 190). Said's description of a pre-Romantic association of the Orient with "sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy" (Said 118) still has currency for the way it notes how the Orient is inherently feminised. As Gina Marchetti observes in her discussion of contemporary Hollywood's representation of sex and the "yellow peril", "in the Western imagination, the entire continent becomes an exotic, beckoning woman, who can satisfy the male Westerner's forbidden desires and ensnare him" (1993 67).

This is a major point in assessing the representational politics of *The Australian Fiancé*. For while on the surface the fiancé tells the Eurasian girl he is in Singapore looking for pearl divers, Said's comment about wayward sons looking towards Asia as a site of sexual exploration can apply to the fiancé's motives for visiting Singapore. There is an ongoing linkage between Asia and Asian women as sites of sexual conquest, and it is vital to remember that the fiancé is also in Singapore looking not just for pearl divers; he is also looking for exoticness. He desires an Orientalised lover — never a wife. Aki Uchida argues that during World War II and the Vietnam War, the Orientalisation of Asian women both disseminated and further entrenched the West's historically active racism against Asians (165). More particularly,

the casting of the local women in terms of whores and prostitutes [...] perceiving them as dolls [...] useful toys or something to play with [...] enhanced the feeling that Asians are other than human and therefore much easier to kill. The use of the Oriental woman also helps to place the white woman back home on a pedestal, as superior beings to Asian women. (Uchida 166)

Although the novel is not didactically or overtly anti-racist, Lazaroo's representational politics remain generally critical of the continued historical correlation between Asian women, idealised femininity and a hyper-sexuality within Western culture. The narratorial focus on the way the Eurasian girl is objectified and framed by whiteness signals that an "oppositional gaze" (hooks 1996 205) is operating within the novel — one which indicates Lazaroo's more subtle engagement with the politics of race and racism. In depicting the Eurasian girl looking at whiteness while also looking within herself, Lazaroo enters into what Griselda Pollack has termed "the sexual politics of looking" (2003 122), allowing for a different reading or oppositional spectatorial position that challenges the cultural construction of the Asian female body as passive and doll-like under a controlling male gaze.

The sexual politics of looking

The Eurasian girl is pictured by white maleness as a consumable and exotic toy. When she is first introduced to the fiancé's parents, the now retired, pearling master father scrutinises the girl's body before turning to his son and describing her as "Tasty. Exotic" (*AF* 108) and, in his narrow experience of Asian women, "cheap" (*AF* 108) as well. He tells his son, "At least you'll always be able to afford her" (*AF* 108). Fascination is read by Lazaroo as white phobia. The girl's body, under this proprietorial and lewd gaze of whiteness, is valued only for its perceived exotification; it is both a consumable and expendable commodity. While the father and son's scopophilic gaze reads the Eurasian girl as an exotic, sexual toy, it is through the mother's gaze that the white horror of miscegenation is fully articulated. After their first meeting she retires to bed still grappling with her

disbelief at the sight of “the young Eurasian standing next to [her] handsome, pale golden son” (*AF* 107).

Jacqueline Lo notes that the term “Eurasian” is a “polite” reference to a culturally hybrid person while the terms “mongrel”, “half-breed” and “half-caste” are used in less polite circles (2002 298). More so, the act of “[p]athologising the Eurasian as depraved, [and as] inheriting the vices of both races, and the virtues of neither, resembles the construction of the Creole as the ‘tragic mulatto’ in North America” (Lo 2002 299). The fiancé’s mother’s horrified reaction and her conflation of the words “pale” and “golden”, indicates that the mother already sees her son as being tainted or coloured by his association with the Eurasian girl. The mother reads the future and envisages “mixed blood” grandchildren, the physical embodiment of the threat that the girl poses to her son’s greatest heritage, his lineage of pure “white blood”.

At the parent’s home an Aboriginal housekeeper describes the Eurasian girl as the “boss boy’s flank” (*AF* 92). The unofficial labelling of the Eurasian girl as the fiancé’s concubine within the township of Broome is a reflection of the racist ideology prevalent in post-World War II Australia in which a “half-breed”, “mixed blood” or woman of colour was never meant to marry the boss or his son. The Eurasian girl acknowledges the racism underlying this ideology; “I am the suspiciously alluring foreign body in which his blood might become mixed” (*AF* 119). The eventual union of the fiancé with a blond woman that the Eurasian girl meets and describes as the “woman of bells” is symbolic of the church and socially sanctioned act of marriage between a white male and white female. The underlying criticism within this passage rests in the subtle way that Lazaroo has drawn attention to the longevity of a myth of white nationhood — the very existence of which pivots on this union between the white prince and his equally white bride. The ideology operating in these examples indicates not just how

deeply embedded but also how intertwined are the ideologies of race and gender and (white) nationhood.

The fiancé's "pure" white lineage is perpetuated through an endogamous practice overseen by his assiduous, and ever-vigilant, white mother. The mother's role resurrects the image of the white woman guarding the borders of the white Canadian nation against threats of miscegenation depicted in the *BC Saturday Sunset* (1907) political cartoon lampooning/championing calls for selective immigration in Chapter 1 of this thesis. This was primarily a role of racial vigilance. Indeed, as Jacqueline Lo argues, "[t]he burden of maintaining racial purity was primarily assigned to women as mothers and thus gatekeepers of the White nation. Racial transgression was considered taboo and cross-racial marriages were regarded as treacherous" (2002 199). The fiancé's mother is also a contemporary representative of those who, during the Victorian era, and according to Anne McClintock, ascribed to the "poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress" (1995 209). McClintock links the imperial project to both capitalist civilisation and the emerging cult of domesticity, an enterprise bent on imparting civilisation through four commodities: "soap, the mirror, light and clothing" (32). Lazaroo critiques the perpetuation of a discourse of imperial hygiene in which "race" is systematically erased through a stringent laundering process. In the case of the Indigenous population of Australia this equated to genocide, but the sanitising of the national identity as white has an insidious longevity in Australia's history of colonisation, and the implementation of various governmental policies has also worked to launder "Asia" out of Australia.

Lazaroo uses parody to comment upon the historical basis of this process. She ridicules the way the fiancé's mother inexhaustibly upholds the values of her race and Victorian heritage. The mother ensures that her son is invariably dressed in the "pale tailored clothes of his class" (AF 203) and that he has fresh supplies of English bed-linen. The fiancé, thanking her for this stalwart task, observes that he

prefers the “nice and white” (*AF* 106) linen from England rather than the “yellowed” (*AF* 93) linen from Singapore. Maintaining a surface whiteness is a costly exercise and, ironically, all of the household linen is shipped back to Singapore for laundering (and monogramming) because of cheaper labour. This laundering of whiteness is an implicit part of Lazaroo’s critique of the commodification process inherent in Western capitalism in which racial identity is a cultural fabrication and whiteness is marketed as a social desire based on commodity fetishism.

The fiancé’s mother casts the Eurasian woman as siren-like, luring her pale son to his social death. In her position as the fiancé’s subordinate and “coloured” opposite, the Eurasian girl is criticised because of her preference for primary colours. A red dress she chooses to wear to a Christmas party is discarded because of the fiancé’s opinion that “the colour’s too whorish” (*AF* 137). He is oblivious to the girl’s cultural belief that the colour red represents good luck. He chooses instead, a shimmering white dress which the Eurasian girl describes as a “white disguise” (*AF* 137). The irony of her observation is that she is already labelled “the boss boy’s flank” (*AF* 92) by his housekeeper, his “business” by the fiancé himself and her position as “fiancé”, in the eyes of the Broome community, is nebulous. Her own recognition of her precarious status is indicated when, in a sea of whiteness — White Christmas, white dresses, white mayonnaise — she describes herself at this same party as “a hole in the light” (*AF* 147).

Lazaroo’s implied critique of the way the girl is named and defined as “other” within the Broome community is somewhat undermined by her insistence in labelling the novel’s main characters by their racial descent. Names such as the “Eurasian girl” or “Australian fiancé” detract from the poetics of resistance otherwise offered by the narrative. While Lazaroo states that not using first names

“was an attempt to get under the skin”²⁰ of her characters, it could be conversely argued that this is precisely what Lazaroo, unintentionally or not, has done. She has set up a racialised dichotomy and perpetuated a naming process based precisely on skin difference. In naming the male protagonist as “the Australian” or “the fiancé”, Olivia Khoo argues that the Australian male is “identified either by his nationality (always positioned as white), or by his heterosexual desire and their romance” (2001 77). In contrast, the female protagonist is “symbolically infantilised and racialised (without nationality, without citizenship)” (Khoo 77), through the constant description of her as the “young girl”, and the “Eurasian woman”. She is perceived as sexualised and racialised, an exotic hybrid. At their first meeting, and not long after she agrees to be his guide, the fiancé asks her, “What kind of Asian are you?” When she states “I am Eurasian”, he responds with “Ah. Eurasian. East meets West. Like in the Noel Coward song” (*AF* 28). Coward’s “Half-Caste Woman”, is quoted later in the novel:

Where did your story begin?
Half-caste woman
Have you a secret heart
Waiting for Someone to win?
Were you born of some queer magic
In your simmering gown?
Is there something strange and tragic
Deep, deep down? (*AF* 141)

Coward’s words also conjure the ghost of Suzie Wong, defining the Asian woman as alluring but dangerous — an exotic Eastern woman with a past history and one who, similar to the Eurasian girl, requires saving from her prostitute past. It also suggests a sense of unease, conjuring another Western stereotype of the East — that of the inscrutable, secretive Asian woman who dilutes the purity of whiteness through her sexual allure. This is problematically borne out in the novel. During their first sexual encounter we are told:

²⁰ www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/10111 (accessed 10 December, 2005).

They approach one another's bodies as if they're approaching new countries, skins jumping at changes in climate, ears and eyes overwhelmed [...] she slides like a fugitive under the white starched sheets that crackle like paper. It's as if the young woman's afraid he will see something about her she wishes to keep concealed [...] She has heard all about foreigners falling for the Orient before. Here today, gone tomorrow. But it is not just her body she's concealing as she huddles under the sheets. (AF 49)

It is in such depictions of the Eurasian narrator that the representational politics of the novel moves from an interrogative stance to perhaps an act of complicity with stereotypical and Orientalised constructions of a racialised and gendered otherness. *The Australian Fiancé* is problematic but only in the way that the novel's exploration of an interracial liaison ends by sending the "threat" of miscegenation posed by the Eurasian girl back to Singapore. The Eurasian girl is read as the antithesis of the white bride. She wears an imposed subjectivity and she is cast as Madonna/whore, alluring and dangerous for the secrets she harbours. Her eventual unveiling occurs when the fiancé's parents tell their son that his "fiancé" was once a comfort woman to Japanese soldiers during World War II.

The Eurasian girl is described by the fiancé's parents as a "temptress" (AF 183), "prostitute" (AF 181) and "woman of little trust" (AF 179). The girl's body is doubly colonised from without, firstly by the Japanese soldiers and then by the white Australian fiancé. However, this act of judging the girl as an untrustworthy temptress to whiteness, makes inconsequential not just the brutal act of enforced prostitution but indeed the white Australian male's colonisation of the Eurasian girl's body. She is marked as a morally corrupt threat to the representational whiteness of the fiancé. Rejected by the fiancé, she is forced to return home when the Immigration Officer refuses to renew her visitor permit. The fiancé, to the relief of his parents, is now free from his brief but potentially dangerous liaison with the Eurasian girl. He remains in the protective boundaries of his nation and eventually marries a white, Anglo woman, just as his mother had envisaged.

***The Australian Fiancé* and “the culture of light”**

It is here that Richard Dyer’s theory of a “culture of light” helps to elucidate the reading of *The Australian Fiancé* as a critique of contemporary visualising/racialising practices. Dyer argues that in the realm of photography and film, lighting has specific racial connotations which privileges white skin (1997 84). The opening epigraph of *The Australian Fiancé* indicates Lazaroo’s intention to interrogate racialised ideologies that are centred on theories of both colour and light. The epigraph, “*For this image, I ran through darkness from place to place, carrying my own light with me whilst leaving my camera’s shutter open*” (italics in original), and a succession of quotes that head each of the novel’s chapters, are taken from H.S. Newcombe’s *The Twin-Lens Camera Companion* (1948). It is a book the fiancé constantly refers to as he travels between Australia and Singapore. Suggesting the omnipresence of whiteness, the epigraph implies that it is the West which is the harbinger of light in an otherwise dark (read coloured and Eastern) world. Reminiscent of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, it is the West’s perception that darkness requires light which historically underwrites the myth of colonialism.

Lazaroo utilises the metaphor of the darkroom for the disparate and often competing practices of photography. As noted, on the one hand photography has claimed verisimilitude for its scientific and accurate representations of peoples, places and things. On the other hand photography is tainted both by its technological constructedness and by the fact that the power of representation belongs very much to the eye of the beholder whether they are the photographer or the person gazing at the photograph. Lazaroo quotes from *Twin Lens Camera Companion* to signal, in what is now a postmodern world of digital photography, the historical continuity of the constructed basis of the photographic image.

In interweaving Newcombe’s words with the fiancé’s photographs and photographic practice, Lazaroo is perhaps suggesting that past texts, while assumed as representative of a particular time and place, require questioning for

the way they embed historical and cultural discourses of empire. The importance of *The Australian Fiancé* is its move beyond an essentialist assumption that continually centres on the imperial eye of whiteness. The novel questions the way empire pictures and writes otherness through an ironic interweaving of Newcombe's words throughout the narrative. When reread from our current standpoint in history and against the Eurasian girl's story of her time in Australia they appear as outdated missives of colonial control. Lazaroo is certainly aware of the power of the printed word and Newcombe's book could be labelled as a "sign taken for wonders", exemplifying what Bhabha defines as the "ideological correlatives of the Western sign empiricism, idealism, mimeticism [and] monoculturalism" which, he suggests, "sustains a tradition of English 'cultural authority'" (1994b 105).

An essential part of the colonising mission of the West was the introduction of the (biblical) Word that began a process which Bhabha describes as "displacement, distortion, dislocation [and] repetition [in which] the dazzling light of literature sheds only areas of darkness" (1994b 105). When the Eurasian girl appropriates the fiancé's copy of Newcombe's book just before she is forced to return to Singapore at the close of the novel, it remains unclear whether she is attempting to silence the fiancé or use the book to relook at the world through her own eyes and perspective. Although Newcombe's book is not the Bible to which Bhabha refers, Lazaroo indicates that the fiancé's reverence for its directives is certainly on a par with those of the biblical Commandments. In obtaining the book the Eurasian girl has the potential to subvert colonial cultural power. As Bhabha asserts, there is an inherent paradox in the coloniser's word, for while it exudes power it is also open to translation and mimeticism in the hands of the other.

As a signifier of authority, the English book acquires meaning *after* the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity. Paradoxically, image can neither be 'original'— by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it — nor 'identical' — by virtue of the difference that defines

it. Consequently, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. (italics in original 1994b 107)

Lazaroo's choice to begin each chapter of *The Australian Fiancé* with missives from *The Twin Lens Camera Companion* is perhaps one way of signalling critique of an historical tendency to read the world as white and Western; one in which the gaze/word is figured as a central and controlling device of identity. The fiancé's inability to step outside the frame of Euro/phallocentricism indicates that, in post-World War II Australia at least, the process of a cultural recognition of diversity is embryonic and firmly attached to the notion of a fixed and superior imperial power.

Nowhere is this more telling than in a scene in which the girl is confronted by the fiancé's parents about her past as a comfort woman. The girl is placed opposite the fiancé who is seated under the pictures of his mother, father and the King of England. Her positioning as outsider to these pictures of empire indicates her awareness of a hierarchy of race and class that not only operates within the fiancé's parent's home but is a reflection of wider cultural mores that link Australia to England and indeed the implication of portraiture and the maintenance of hierarchies of identity. Coco Fusco has emphasised the link between an ethnography of race and Europe's fetish for portraiture suggesting that "the Euro-American middle classes not only used pictures of themselves to explain who they were but also to know who they were different from" (2004 42). Under the unrelenting gaze of England's king and the fiancé's parents the Eurasian girl is positioned as culturally and socially outside of whiteness.

At the close of the novel the Eurasian girl reflects on a photo that the fiancé took of her just before she returned to Singapore. Sent to her some twenty years later the girl notices a comment written in the fiancé's meticulous handwriting: "*Stray light and movement, but I have kept this*" (AF 211). While the "stray light" indicates that the photographic image can be flawed by human error, his statement

“I have kept this” links back to the overall themes of the novel and the twin notions of ownership and control. More importantly, photography is intertextual; it is both image and caption. As Ryan notes, this notion of intertextuality emphasises “that photographic meaning is not found lurking deep within the image, but is more akin to a projection flickering on the surface” (1997 220). The symbolic coupling of image and caption is a strategic way of writing empire, and the fiancé’s unfailing tendency to textualise photography emphasises an ongoing desire to reaffirm the centrality of Euro/phallocentric vision. Demarcating the division between I/this and subject/object the caption is testimony to an ideology that is both paternal and imperialistic. The blurred image is a direct result of the girl’s movement away from the prying lens of the fiancé’s camera. This movement suggests a resistance to an ideology in which identity is fixed by, and according to, a dispossessing white male gaze. Vision is repositioned in Lazaroo’s fiction as a discursive process that is subjective rather than objective, interpretative rather than scientific.

After a long period of readjustment, the girl, now home in Singapore, begins to take photographs of her neighbours. Closely scrutinising these images, she notices that “no two of [her] subjects were the same” (*AF* 204). Unlike the fiancé, the girl has no desire to archive her images in photograph albums or underwrite them with captions. Instead, she makes a point of personally handing the images back to their owners repeating to each one, “You are really something” (*AF* 201). She affirms their subjectivity in a way the fiancé, because of his myopic and colour-blinded vision, could not. Photographs, as the Eurasian girl realises, are like identity, mutable and malleable despite the captions they bear.

The fiancé’s unfailing tendency to textualise the visual accentuates his desire to reaffirm the centrality of his vision and white male subjectivity. As John Berger writes, “as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion” (1982 91). The fiancé’s captions

are representative of the elasticised bond between seeing and reading, knowledge and power. While the fiancé utilises language to further elucidate the images that he has taken under the directive of Newcombe's book, he also manipulates this image according to a specific perception or reading of a reality based on Euro/phallogocentric control. In his essay "A Small History of Photography", Walter Benjamin asks whether the caption will eventually become an indispensable part of the photographic process. He argues that photographic captions "turn all life's relationships into literature" (1992 256). The fiancé's need to textualise his perception of reality suggests a twin desire to capture or take, and a fear that this reality will dissipate or escape. These labels function as the physical manifestation of a fear of a loss of power and control over the object. The statement, "I have kept this", is an attempt to reassert his dominance. In linking race, gender, light and the written word to photography *and* nation, Lazaroo suggests the artful constructedness of both.

When used as empirical evidence of otherness, the fiancé's photographs attempt to reaffirm the centrality of white vision. If empire reproduces itself photographically as all conquering and all-powerful, then Lazaroo's work shows us that this is a contrived construction and that the gaze of empire, of whom the Australian fiancé and his parents are representative, is far from deadly to the colonised subject who looks back. Lazaroo's novel renegotiates this unequal power base, rejecting assimilationist and othering discourses of ascendancy. The novel shows how there is power in the act of looking, for the actual subject of *The Australian Fiancé* is as the title implies, the voyeuristic and policing gaze of the white male — the Australian fiancé, his father and the patrilineal underpinning of white Australia.

Lazaroo's fiction counters the embedded, orientalist image of Asian female passivity with that of a mobile and independent female body — a subject who acts rather than is acted upon, who speaks rather than being spoken for. *The Australian Fiancé* renegotiates normative notions of the passive/active dichotomy and

theorises the act of looking as an interactive process that resists the positioning of women of Asian descent as a Western sign of exotic, sexualised otherness. Directly readdressing textualisations of female passivity, her fiction enters into a politics of identity that reconfigures normalised representations of gender, race and sexuality that appear and reappear across differing cultural structures.

Chapter 4

Glancing Back at Constructions of Australian National Identity in Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon*

Let us stop deceiving ourselves that
we were cast in the mould of Bligh,
Wentworth, Ned Kelly, the
ANZACs, and other tough, devil-
may-care characters of historical
fact and fiction.

(Brian Penton 1943 1)

Hsu-Ming Teo's novels, *Love and Vertigo* (2000) and *Behind the Moon* (2006), are also set in contemporary Australia and, like Lazaroo's novels, articulate an experience of immigration that critically engages with stereotypical constructions of a bi-cultural or bi-racial identity. Teo's novels move away from the genre of immigrant memoir that has been described as "the Amy Tan-syndrome" (Wagner 2003 24) through their strategic questioning of whose and how particular stories of identity, such as that of the stoic bushman, brash bushranger or fearless ANZAC soldier,²¹ are given precedence in constructions of Australian nationhood. The move towards a critical stance within the literary is more strident within her second novel, *Behind the Moon*, which differs most markedly from many of the texts that have come to make up the category of Asian Australian fiction. This novel more fully articulates, in Fred Wah's use of the term, a politicised, poetics of resistance to authorial-orchestrated exotification or Orientalisation.

Teo's Vogel award-winning first novel *Love and Vertigo* sets up the discourse of anti-racism that she begins to focus upon more judgmentally in *Behind the Moon*.

²¹ Richard White notes that in the 1880s "the bush worker, rather than the urban or agricultural worker, gave Australia its identity in the empire" (1988 103). The bushman/drover refers to a horse rider who moves and herds animals, such as cattle or sheep, from one territory to the next. In contrast, the bushranger or outlaw "herds" humans or animals with a gun or with the threat of violence for personal (and usually illegal) gain. ANZAC is the acronym for Australian and New Zealand Army Corp while also referring to any soldier from both countries.

This first novel tells, as the title suggests, the “love” story of Pandora Lim and Jonah Tay in Singapore and Malaysia. The narrative, as recounted by their daughter Grace Tay and following the suicide of her mother, describes her parent’s imploding and vertiginous relationship as they move, first to Malaysia so that Pandora can escape the clutches of her mother-in-law Madam Tay, and then to Australia to escape the political unrest in Malaysia during the late 1960s. The narrative moves between continents and generations as Grace also describes her own and her brother Sonny’s fraught relationship with their parents and new homeland of multicultural Australia. Teo’s novel takes her readers on a tour of an exotified Asian past. This geographical space is marked by familial and political chaos, of squalid living conditions, of tradition and superstition, of patriarchal order. Tamara Wagner argues that the fiction of immigrant writers from Singapore and Malaysia such as Hsu-Ming Teo is characterised by four juxtapositions:

firstly the juxtaposition of a contemporary and historical plot, secondly, the paralleling of the mother’s and the daughter’s history, thirdly, the clash of traditional Chinese and ‘Western’ or ‘Westernised’ protagonists, and most importantly, a disconcerting juxtaposition of war-time or post-war atrocities and postcolonial Hybridity. (2003 25)

It can be argued that the delineation of differences between the East and the West within *Love and Vertigo* is perhaps symptomatic of the “Amy-Tan syndrome”; however, it is the novel’s critical reception which raises not the spectre of Amy Tan but rather that of neo-orientalist marketing and reading practices.

In a review published in the Brisbane-based *Courier-Mail* (which is reprinted on the inside of Teo’s second novel), *Love and Vertigo* is described as having: “the delectation and smiling cruelty of films like *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*; the tinkling laughter and rattling mahjong tiles of *The Joy Luck Club*. With the spiciness of an Asian supermarket, *Love and Vertigo* emerges from a dynamic cross-cultural tradition.” This review resurrects the same stereotypes — created in the pages of *The Bulletin* and reified in political discourse throughout the history of white settlement in Australia — of Asia and “Asians” as exotic and

tasty, but also as posing a threat to the imagined unity of the white nation. It resurrects tropes of consumption and spectatorship that privilege the “host” or home nation while exotifying and making strange, the cultural practices and lives of an amorphous “Asian” nation. The fact that this is but one of a series of similar review quotes is telling of the way Teo’s first book has been received and how her second novel, *Behind the Moon* is marketed.

The narrative of *Love and Vertigo* is recounted by an immigrant daughter who struggles, much like the Eurasian narrator or Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*, with how to minimise her Asianness during a period of Australian history in which official multicultural policies mask a deep-seated anti-Asian sentiment. The novel is at times in danger of becoming a tour of a cultural past that Anglo, and second generation Asian Australians, may have only been introduced to in the classroom or by filmic documentary. The novel assumes a strong pedagogical tone in the way it merges fiction and history. The narrative describes the Japanese occupation of Singapore, which occurs in the same year and at the same time that Pandora Lim is born. Later, when Pandora and Jonah move as a married couple to Malaysia, Pandora gives birth to their firstborn son during the commencement of the anti-Chinese riots in Malaysia on May 13, 1969.²² These extended passages could conform to Tamara Wagner’s notion of the way immigrant fiction, characterised as such by the “Amy Tan-syndrome”, contrasts war-time atrocities with the more liberal and humane lifestyle of the West and as represented by Australia.

However, when Grace travels from Australia to Singapore for her mother’s funeral, she wanders its streets and finds herself alone in a karaoke bar. In this space of noise, confusion and consumerism she thinks to herself that “this is not the Singapore my mother told me about. Her stories are a world apart from this; no

²² The history of these riots is described in accurate detail on pages 130-133. The narrative moves from fiction to an overt history lesson several times throughout the novel.

longer reality but history” (*LV 2*). Grace’s realisation is an early indication of an authorial response or stance on the issue of the disparity between mythologised stories of the homeland and the reality of the racist (Australian) present. Grace’s questioning of the veracity of her mother’s stories can be read as an indication of an emergent authorial self-reflexivity. Teo’s work is critically compelling in the way it signals acceleration away from the current and popularised tradition of writing the immigrant story as a geographical move from hardship to prosperity and peace. This growth emerges more strongly in her second novel *Behind the Moon* — a narrative that claims for itself a unique and more critically aware cultural space.

Behind the Moon disassociates itself from the “Amy Tan-syndrome” in the way it foregrounds how Asian Australianness is equated with outsidership in dominant constructions of an Australian national identity. The novel examines how gender, race and sexuality are excluded in a highly stylised and exclusionary concept of national identity that revolves around the idea of mateship. In an Australian context, mateship, or close friendship through shared experiences, is seen as the domain of white, heterosexual males and this notion of exclusivity is returned to within the novel through a cross-referential process. Interwoven throughout its narrative, are key scenes and characters from two well-recognised films: Hollywood’s production of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and Peter Weir’s *Gallipoli* (1981).²³ Thematically linked through their explorations of the concept of friendship/mateship these two texts are used by Teo as a methodology for

²³ Inarguably, one of the most enduring and revered myths of the birth of Australian nationhood circulates around the ANZAC soldier and *Gallipoli*, written by the award-winning Australian playwright David Williamson, and starring Mel Gibson and Mark Lee, is a potent cultural instance of such essentialised perceptions. The film’s title functions only as an incidental reference to what is a specific historical event in World War I and that is the ill-fated landing of the ANZAC troops in Gallipoli as part of the Allied attack on the Dardanelles of Turkey. Indeed, so pervasive is the myth of the Australian soldier’s heroism at this landing and in the protracted campaign in the Dardanelles that Australian audiences back in the 1980s required little explanation as to the actual historical event the film’s title referred to.

questioning and deconstructing embedded and tiered cultural, political and historical ideologies.

Behind the Moon explores the theme of friendship not just through the lens of Hollywood films but also through the notion of the immigrant journeys taken by two of her main characters and their families: Tien Ho from Vietnam and Justin Cheong from Singapore. While at school Tien and Justin meet Anglo Australian Nigel “Gibbo” Gibson and the three friends form a bond based on their “othered” status in Australian society: either by their race and sexuality (Justin), racial hybridity (Tien) or lack of sporting prowess (Gibbo). Each chapter of *Behind the Moon* begins with an extract from a Vietnamese poem, titled “The Tale of Kieu”. The opening quote of the first chapter indicates one of the themes that the novel will address and that is the difficulty children must face when choosing between “love and filial duty” for, and as a line from the poem states, “a child first pays the debts of birth and care” (BM1). In negotiating their “Australian” identities, Tien, Justin and Gibbo must also re-evaluate their relationships with both their friends and their parents.

Difference in the suburbs, mateship in the Dardanelles

The point of intervention in contemporary representational politics for *Behind the Moon* is the refocus on the lives and mateship of three friends who have been thrown together because of their status, not as heroes, but as social misfits. From their formative years at primary school, Justin, Gibbo and Tien, are labelled as physically different to whiteness and this form of social othering propels them to unite as “a gang” (BM 54). Gibbo proudly labels them “the Three Musketeers” (BM 54). Their tenuous stand against social ostracism allows them to negotiate the fraught arena of playground politics. Tien befriends Gibbo at school. Gibbo is a loner and sits every lunch hour waiting expectantly for an empty drink carton or apple core to be hurled in his direction: “he was used to being the schoolyard reject, the fat kid everyone picked on” (BM 28). As a new arrival in Gibbo’s

classroom, Tien is immediately aware of his outsider status. Made strange by her own lack of English language skills and her towering height over her new classmates (she is two years older than them), she instantly recognises that “they were the two class rejects” (*BM* 27).

When Justin, whom Gibbo has met through shared piano lessons every Saturday afternoon since they were six, is expelled from his private school and joins Tien and Gibbo mid-way through high school, Gibbo is ecstatic — “his two best friends — his only two friends — with him in school, fortifying him against his own oddness, demonstrating to the rest of his classmates that he was no longer an outsider” (*BM* 54). Stigmatised as not “normal” or not belonging, Gibbo “didn’t seem a proper man, a real Aussie” (*BM* 8). As an adult Gibbo still struggles with the role of masculinity that is expected of him at the level of the family and the social. He resorts, at the age of twenty-one, to a group dating service in order to “observe and learn the dating and mating habits of the average Aussie male” (*BM* 102). This is a failure and his first evening ends with him drunk and vomiting over Tien’s mother, Linh. On the eve of his twenty-first birthday Gibbo, not considering himself “in any way normal” (*BM* 102), looks in a mirror and describes himself as a “self-confessed friendless loner and lard-arse freak, an athletic philistine who tripped over his tongue as well as his feet” (*BM* 106).

Tien experiences a similar sense of corporeal-based outsidership because of her African American, Chinese Vietnamese ancestry. A motherless refugee transplanted to Sydney from Vietnam at the age of five, Tien struggles against both gendered and racialised stereotypes. She retreats to sullenness in order to cope with her hostile social world, and describes her racial and cultural hybridity as “her mongrel roots” (*BM* 72). In summer, her skin “tanned to a crisp, dark shade of honey soy chicken wings” (*BM* 28), and she is rejected by her peers and Vietnamese Australian family because of this darkness of skin. Tien struggles for recognition outside of a stereotype that fixes her as different and non-white. The

description of Tien's skin as honey-soy coloured is a considered and tactical way in which Teo urges her readers to reflect on a representational process in which coloured subjectivity is inscribed not only through a culturally specific process of visualisation, but in comparison to a fictitious white and Western norm.

Tien's story is arguably paralleled with that of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Tien arrived in Australia in 1982 as a refugee at the age of five. Her mother however, was forced to remain in Vietnam and although she is regarded as a burden, her Australian aunt and uncle decide to take her in and rear her with their own three daughters. Treated as an outsider and alien by her cousins, Tien's only joy lies in the companionship of her friends, Gibbo and Justin. She must not only struggle with this sense of family alienation but she is also burdened with a sense of social ostracisation because of her racial hybridity. Tien is introduced in Chapter Two of the novel. The epigraph to this chapter, again taken from "The Tale of Kieu", contains the question, "where was her home" (BM 22). This is immediately followed by the statement "Tien Ho would never outgrow *The Wizard of Oz*" (BM 22). Tien likens her motherless, lonely existence to that of Dorothy's in the *Wizard of Oz*:

[Tien] looked at Dorothy, and she knew how she felt. They told her to get out of the way, the adults; to find some place where she wouldn't get into trouble. She knew they loved her. But sometimes their love was so hard-lacquered with impatience and obligation that maybe her heart cracked with doubt because, after all, they were not really her parents. (BM 23)

Tien however does associate her sense of well-being with her friends and it is in this way that Teo begins to complicate established constructions of mateship as an exclusive, male domain.

She swore to herself that if, by some miracle, she should ever succeed, unlike Dorothy she would never click her red heels together to return to a land bleached brown and white. No. She would stay with her friends in Oz because however much your family might love you, they were not sufficient; they could not make you heart-whole and happy. (BM 24)

The novel examines how the varying manifestations and bonds of friendship, mateship and family are inflected by history, culture, sexuality and race. The novel also tests these friendships and all its intersections showing how these core relationships of the social are deeply affected by the historical and the political. This novel is also a journey of growth and each of the three main characters and their immediate family members come to realise that friendships are an evolving process. It is, in particular, the triangulation of friends that forms the structure of the novel which challenges the concept of mateship and belonging articulated in films like *Gallipoli* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

In interweaving references to both *Gallipoli* and *The Wizard of Oz* the novel forces a reassessment of not simply these iconic films but also how constructions of mateship and friendship have been central to that of nation building in Australia. Tien, Justin, Gibbo and their families live, as the novel's title suggests, somewhere behind the moon, over the rainbow — words sung by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*. The Land of Oz for these three friends is a place far from the mythologised beach at Anzac Cove, for the novel is set in Strathfield, an inner Western suburb of Sydney. The correlation between a contemporary Asian Australian novel, an iconic Australian war film and a Hollywood musical fantasy about an adventure undertaken by a young girl, her dog, a tin man, scarecrow and a lion, rests on the way each text makes complex the dynamics that underscore conceptions of mateship.

Behind the Moon, in part, reflects upon this process. This is an imperative step in renegotiating how people of Asian ancestry in Australia have been made outsiders within the national imaginary. The novel complicates and reviews the way culturally entrenched and politically endorsed dichotomies of difference, which fix and exclude colour, sexuality and race from the normative model of white hegemony, are reproduced in Western visualising practices. An integral part of such practices is the way whiteness positions itself as a marker of power, while

simultaneously marking and subordinating specific forms of embodiment as strange, alien and visible signifiers of difference. But skin difference, as Sara Ahmed notes, “is radically unstable given its dependence on multiple regimes of difference and identification” (1998 27).

The connection that Teo makes between the practice of fixing corporeal difference and the cultural reproduction of whiteness as non-different allows for her texts to be read a vital intervention in contemporary identity politics in Australia. *Behind the Moon* deliberately displaces both the mateship model of white male duos and embedded models of family and heterosexual romance, with shifting sites of queerness and hybridity in the suburbs. Teo complicates the very notion of belonging and being at home in what may be a subtle reference to the oft-repeated phrase to Asian immigrants in Australia. Newly arrived or decades old, people of visible Asian ancestry are routinely told to click their red shoes like Dorothy, and “go home”. Tien’s racial hybridity sees her questioned regarding where she hails from by her immediate family, her school peers and teachers and eventually, her Chinese Australian fiancé Stan. Stan views her as an exotic ornament and calls her “my artistic muse. My coffee-coloured Venus” (*BM* 168).

It is Tien, more so than Gibbo or Justin, who postulates on the requirements for a lifelong friendship.

What were the overlaps that kept human beings adjacent and anchored to your life? Shared interests or occupation? Ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, the common experience of rejection or failure? How was it that some people managed to manacle others to their lives, bearing their childhood friendships with them triumphantly into the future towards death, whereas others found friendship as weak as water, sparkling and slipping away through cupped fingers leaving only the impression of wetness and a thirst unquenched? (*BM* 174)

In searching for the mythical Land of Oz where she can prove to the world “that she was loved and wanted by a man” (*BM* 164) Tien accepts a marriage proposal from Stan Wong, the first boy who had ever asked her out. Tien marries Stan only

because Justin, the great love of her life, remains elusive and distanced from her. It takes the inadvertent disclosure of Justin's homosexuality by Gibbo's father at a reunion dinner of the three friends and their family to make Tien realise that Justin's lack of interest in her was only sexual. Tien however, leaves with Stan for America, but rather than finding friends and adventure, she feels isolated in the hippy culture of California and is betrayed by Stan who embarks on an affair. Essential to her journey of growth is the realisation that "she hadn't landed in Oz after all because she didn't have the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion with her, and what use was Oz without her friends?" (BM 323).

Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Tien is split between duty and care and a rebellion against authority. Both Tien and Dorothy return home after experiencing independence and adventure. For Tien, this return can be read in two ways. In one sense Tien's discovery that Oz/Australia is the place she feels she belongs is empowering. It is her group of friends in which she finds true love and she accepts her divorce from Stan as liberating rather than as socially disabling. As a newly single woman, she is admonished by Justin's mother Annette Cheong who tells her that marriage "is like buying a new pair of shoes [...] at first new shoes pinch and hurt [...] then you break them in" (BM 341). However, Tien discards the ideology underscoring this sentiment. Unlike Dorothy whose red shoes bound her to the patriarchal social order of home, Tien replies, "I can always buy a nice new pair of shoes" (BM 341).

Teo uses geographical locations as a methodology for rearticulating notions of self and belonging. *Behind the Moon* is not about an idealised/ magical/mythical place to be found "somewhere over the rainbow". The geographical reality of this novel lies in its depiction of the mundanity of simply trying to exist in an inner-west suburb of Sydney. Teo comments that Strathfield is:

the region I grew up in and where I still live. It is a place of endless fascination to me in its multicultural hybridity and middleclass suburban mundanity; its complete lack of 'cool' and unfashionable

‘westiness’; the tragicomic dramas of my neighbours and the quiet tales of heroic Cold war survivors and postcolonial migrants. This is the Australia that I know intimately, but it is not one that I encounter in many Australian novels. (2005b 1)

By tracing the conflicted lives of three suburban and othered teenagers, whose stories are otherwise negated in stories of the nation, Teo shows that the classic bush myth of Oz has no place in the reality of a suburban Australian existence. This decentring of whiteness, and the presence and voice of characters that have been previously “made strange” rather than heroic in stories of nation is integral to the novel’s politics of identity.

An essential part of these “politics” is the novel’s demonstration of the distance between embedded stereotypes of masculinity and mateship, and the contemporary reality of multicultural, multiracial Australia. This is achieved through the reference to an iconic Australian war film which centres on male friendships — Peter Weir’s *Gallipoli*. Teo introduces her readers to *Gallipoli* through the eyes of one of the novel’s central characters Justin Cheong, who is a gay, Chinese Australian male. This reference to *Gallipoli* and the unique friendship projected in this film through the characters of Frank Dunn (played by Mel Gibson) and Archy Hamilton (played by Mark Lee), is paralleled to Justin and Gibbo’s friendship.

This overt parallelism is calculated. It allows Teo to explore how the formation or “birth” of a seemingly unitary national identity through the experience of war is embedded in a stereotype that privileges the white, heterosexual male. These characteristics are embodied by *Gallipoli*’s central characters Frank and Archy. Ideologically driven from its first sweeping frame of the desert to its carefully controlled three-part structure, *Gallipoli* sets out to define what it means to be an Australian, what it means to be a mate and what it means to be a hero, specifically linking Australian hetero-masculinity to war and landscape.²⁴ Justin Cheong

²⁴ The film revives what Amanda Lohrey in an early review of the film has noted as “one of the most suspect and outdated aspects of the [Australian] Legend, namely the myth of rural virtue”

watches the underwater, nude male swimming scene from *Gallipoli* in a history class at school and later purchases a poster of the film picturing Frank and Archy. Although this poster operates as a commodified, cultural production of masculinity,²⁵ when Justin's father, Tek Cheong, sees it hanging in his son's bedroom he reads it as a sign "that Justin was growing up an Australian" (*BM* 6). Such a fusion of nation and maleness is not uncommon. Indeed Jane Freebury has commented that the film is an extended definition of "what is intrinsically Australian — mateship, endurance, the outback and a nationalistic belief in an as yet unrealised potential" (1987 7). While *Gallipoli* operates simultaneously as excessively nationalistic and anti-imperialistic, it is also gendered and raced in its implication that mateship is a game that only white men can play.

Behind the Moon aims straight for the heart of a white, nationalist culture. It tackles the pervasiveness of this sentimental heroism and the truth status of a myth that is so well-known and so deeply embedded in the national psyche that it is commonly regarded as a truth. The reference to *Gallipoli* in a contemporary Asian Australian novel signals a need for a reassessment of the film's ideological underpinnings, particularly of what it means to be an Australian in terms of race, sexuality, and gender. The novel situates the varying and conflicting forms of masculinity in a specific geographical (Australian and suburban) context, and its importance is the way the narrative links this to the institutionalisation of an idealised version of white hetero-normative masculinity that is culturally, socially and historically driven. Robert Connell, who coined the concept "hegemonic masculinity", notes that there is an implicit gender politics at work within masculinity (1995 37). Connell argues that "to recognise diversity in masculinities

(1982 29). Lohrey suggests that the film's sentimental nationalism circulates around "the legend of the bushman and its post-war transmutation into the Anzac myth" (29). The ANZAC, as Tony Ayres observes, "has always been one of the cornerstones of Australian national identity" (2000 162).

²⁵ This is especially pertinent in the context of Richard Dyer's analysis of white masculinity. Dyer notes that male "pin-ups" exude a potent form of "masculinity", while also operating within these posters is "the symbolic association of male power and the phallus, and masculinity-as-activity" (1997 269).

is not enough. We must also recognise the relations between different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination” (37). By drawing an iconic Australian “war” film that is intrinsically tied to a sense of white, national and masculinised identity into a novel driven by non-white, gay, “multi-racial” female and effeminate male characters, Teo creates a timely collision between the discourses of nationalism, friendship, mateship, masculinity and race.

While *Behind the Moon* problematises the very notion of mateship as the domain of white, male, heterosexuality, *Gallipoli* takes the ideal of platonic mateship and links the development of Archy and Frank’s friendship to the desert landscape. It is in this geographical space where these characters cement their deep and abiding (until death do us part) mateship; but any embers of queerness are quickly smothered by the narrative.

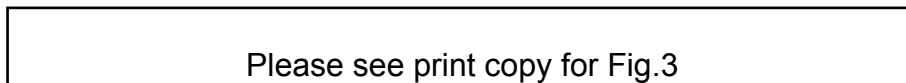


Fig. 3. The bonds of mateship: Archy and Frank in Egypt. ²⁶

It is interesting that in *Gallipoli* masculinity is defined more by mateship than by heterosexuality and this is encapsulated in the pyramid scene depicted above. Joined by what could be read as the pyramid/phallus, these men, gazing into each other’s eyes, cement their devotion to one another, not through a rough hug, a light shoulder punch or even a virtuous kiss on the cheek, but through a handshake. Given the geographical and historical reality — these boys are after all sitting on top of a pyramid on the eve of their move to the front line — the chasteness of this action appears incongruous when compared to the overwhelming emotion of the moment. The handshake, intimating a “manly” physical closeness, an emotionless, heterosexual contact of male skin, is an act of consequence in the script of Australian mateship for the way it reinforces the idea of an egalitarian, sexless, classless mateship. This handshake is the only socially accepted expression of

²⁶ © 2005 Anniversary Edition DVD, Fox Home Entertainment, Moore Park, Australia.

physicality that men can offer and the image speaks volumes, especially when read against Teo's text, for what is denied and suppressed.

The depiction of a camping trip taken by Justin and Gibbo just after the completion of their Higher School Certificate exams exposes the falseness of this ethos of mateship. After a day of sun and surf, a half-cooked barbeque dinner and too many beers, they lie wrapped in individual sleeping bags next to a dying fire and "[grin] idiotically at each other and [feel] exhilarated by enacting the sheer normality of being two Aussie adolescents smashed at the beach" (*BM* 90). This moment of fellowship is shattered when Justin leans over and "kisses Gibbo long and hard" (*BM* 92). Gibbo responds with "an explosion of fists on his face" (*BM* 92).

This reaction occurs because Gibbo has read the same script of masculinity that is encoded in *Gallipoli*. There is only one form of mateship — one which keeps a physical difference — and his violent response to Justin's homosexuality prefigures the reaction of Justin's three attackers that results in his eventual coma towards the close of the novel. While Justin lies comatose Gibbo replays the campfire scene in his mind:

He wished he had kissed Justin just once that night. If he could go back, rub out the past and rewrite his life, this was the thing he would change. He wished he'd had the maturity, the compassion and courage to kiss Justin back, hug him tightly, then ease away and say with a smile, 'Jus, if I was gay you'd be for me. Maybe in our next lives, mate. Let's drink to that, eh?' (*BM* 337)

Justin's momentary lapse in his self-suppression of his queer identity is paralleled with his pretence at heteronormativity with Tien. However, when Tien asks him to partner her to their school formal she not only excludes Gibbo (reducing the trio to a heteronormative male/female duo) but she also inadvertently catapults Justin's struggle with his homosexuality to the fore. Justin is torn by what he perceives as his betrayal of his friendship with Gibbo and his desire for a platonic rather than

sexual friendship with Tien: “He was angry with Tien. She had placed him and Gibbo in the position of being rivals. Instead of best friends, they were now winner and loser; the chosen and the rejected” (BM 75). Justin’s reaction signals a deep guilt over his sexuality. By being gay he feels he is rejecting the script of heterosexual romance that Tien, through her endless reading of women’s gossip and beauty magazines, believes is paramount.

The novel’s dramatic peak ends with Justin being beaten almost lifeless. His attackers call him a “Fucking Asian faggot” (BM 333) and Justin is doubly punished for his sexuality and for his visible Asian ancestry. The quest for Justin, and also for Gibbo and Tien, is articulated in Justin’s last coherent thought before he enters a coma, and this is a wish to live a life where he is not “reducible to his ethnicity or his sexuality or his occupation or geographical location or even his family” (BM 334). It is the very positioning of a dominant and desired subjectivity onto and from the markers of race, sexuality and gender that is perpetuated in *Gallipoli*.

Desiring “normality”

In order to survive in a world that fixes queerness and Asianness as symptoms of abnormality, Justin presents a façade of fitting in. This is why his father Tek is so pleased to see the *Gallipoli* poster in his son’s bedroom, reading it as a badge of Australianness, one that complements Justin’s sporting trophies and school text books. These outward trappings of normality belie Justin’s inner turmoil and he is depicted as a boy without essence, somewhat akin to the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. Justin is described as simply a “skinful of flesh and bone that did not seem to connect to the feelings or fantasies he harboured” (BM 13). He is consumed by guilt over his queerness and is psychologically traumatised by continually “mak[ing] himself normal for his parents — the good son — and then try[ing] to make himself normal for his friends” (BM 141). What Justin eventually realises is

that this is an impossible task, “because he didn’t know what normality was” (*BM* 141).

That Justin’s story and point of view is made prominent is a notable and politicised move given that, in the dominant Western pecking order of masculinity, it is the gay Asian male who is read as a symbol of national difference — a corporeal and cultural alien who is to be both feared and mocked. Justin is fully aware of these stereotypes and Teo writes that he “struggled with his Asian oddness and resented the knowledge that he was contaminated. He did not want to be Asian. He did not want to be gay” (*BM* 88). Tony Ayres also comments on this sexualised and racialised hierarchy: “Most gay Caucasian men in Australia have their earliest experiences with other Caucasians. This is the template by which desire is, initially at least, stamped. When desire is further shaped by public representations of what is considered ‘desirable’, there’s a marked absence of Asian men both within the gay and mainstream media” (2000 162).

In a study on Asian American masculinity, Jachinson Chan observes that images of Chinese American men as submissive and sexually inferior to the white, American male is reified in American culture through stereotypical and controlling images such as Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. These images have become the inheritance for males of Asian descent living in the West and this Charlie Chan stereotype situates these men at a social disadvantage so that they

constantly fall short of a hegemonic heteromascularity. Consequently, [these] men are forced to prove their heterosexual masculine identity, or risk the stigmatisation of being further subordinated as effeminate, sexless or gay. (Chan 2001 53)

In an Australian context, one which similarly normalises white heterosexual masculinity, Justin finds it very difficult being both Asian and gay: “Being gay was a complicated affair. Gayness was an identity and, if you got it right, it was a means of belonging. If you didn’t, if you were an Asian gay, it was practically an oxymoron” (*BM* 141). In the white gay scene in Sydney, Justin’s Asianness is seen

as undesirable: “he furtively bought gay magazines and responded to the classifieds. Nobody got back to him when he identified himself as Asian” (*BM* 149). When he is finally accepted by the investment banker Dirk Merkel, a middle-aged, divorced, father of two, he is incredulous. Justin simply cannot believe that “he was accepted, wanted, loved, *by a white man*. He didn’t deserve it” (emphasis added *BM* 162). Dirk is also aware of not just the orientalist, but also the ageist hierarchy at work in constructions of Australian masculinity and reciprocates Justin’s incredulity that “this exotic oriental youth with his beautiful dark looks and well-toned body actually desired him” (*BM* 158).

Another of his gay friends, André, summarises this acculturated desire to be like white: “We Asians who grow up here can’t help it. We just want potatoes because all the magazines, all the videos flaunt these gorgeous white beefcakes. Young, blue eyes, blond hair, muscle-bound in white T-shirts and tight jeans, dancing in the clubs and shopping at Ikea. How we long for them” (*BM* 331). But Justin hides his homosexuality from his family and is tormented by the fear that they should accidentally find out that he was not the “good boy” (*BM* 362) they thought him to be: “In his mind he rehearsed endless conversations with his family and relatives. In reality, he had yet to rev up his courage to declare himself gay” (*BM* 151). Playing the filial son is paramount to Justin and he leads a schizophrenic existence donning “separate masks, one for his friends and another for his family” (*BM* 145).

While Weir’s *Gallipoli* imagines the construction of a white Australian identity which is focussed on males, on mateship, on heterosexuality, *Behind the Moon* shows that what Australian culture idealises as “normal” and as masculine is in fact far from the reality of Justin, Gibbo or Tien. *Behind the Moon* reverses the inward looking, racialised and gendered gaze associated with the construction of a distinctive and desirable heteronormative “national type”. Although the dominance of a sense of nationhood which is attached to the bush landscape has been constructed by suburban poets, writers, historians and painters, Teo’s suburban

contemporary setting and focus on non-white females and males and on non-heroic males allows for other ways of imagining nation.²⁷ The resurrection of Weir's *Gallipoli* (and all its ideological implications) in a novel that questions constructions of national identity, one which steadfastly refuses to centre white, heterosexual masculinity, enables Teo to critique the constructions of a singularised national identity, one that is inextricably tied to homogenising and mythologising cultural practices.

Gallipoli's representation of masculinity creates a dichotomy in which those falling outside this paradigm of constructed normality are feminised and othered. Indeed, as MacKinnon observes, hegemony needs heroic, mythical, figures (and while he doesn't refer to *Gallipoli*, the characters of Frank and Archy are guiding examples of such creations) that "embody its particular variety of masculinity" (2003 9). Robert Connell writes "hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (1995 77). Connell stresses that although hegemony is historically mobile it does "relate to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (78). This is particularly relevant to the hierarchical relationship between heterosexual and homosexual men. Connell notes that:

oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the

²⁷ In a recent study charting the representation of masculinity in popular culture from the 1980s onwards, Kenneth MacKinnon notes that in commercially successful films such as *Billy Elliot* and *What Women Want*, there is less of an emphasis placed on the male heroic body as a heterosexually desirable spectacle. MacKinnon argues that "whatever version of masculinity is offered in Hollywood and other popular movies, one thing is certain: it is no longer unproblematic, normal, to be seen as part of nature. There is an increasing focus on masculinity as troubled and unsure of itself" (MacKinnon 2003 63). These findings are interesting because this is precisely the gap in representation between Weir's version of a homogenised masculinity connected to landscape in *Gallipoli* and Teo's contention of this through her portrayal of a "different" form of mateship to that enacted in stories of war and nation.

repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity [...] from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity. And hence — in the view of some gay theorists — the ferocity of homophobic attacks. (78)

The tragic attack on Justin results in Tien, Gibbo and their families being reunited around Justin's hospital bed after several years of estrangement. It also signals a fundamental shift in Justin's sense of self. This scene is the culmination of Teo's continual interweaving of the issues of gender and sexuality and a raced/racist sense of nationhood exemplified through Justin's search for an answer to the vexed question of what it means to be an Australian if you are of Asian descent living in a predominantly white community and you are gay. This questioning process makes visible the ladder of difference operating at the level of the social in Australia. When Justin's attackers ask him what he is, Justin replies, "I am me" (*BM* 333), and this is an epiphany in that it takes this attack and this question to make him realise "that he no longer needed the external markers of identity" (*BM* 333).

The best friends (ever)

This defining moment indicates Justin's connection and disconnection from the discursive processes of naming corporeal difference. Until this point the essence of friendship between Justin, Gibbo and Tien has not been validated because none of the three have discovered or acknowledged their own sense of self. They take on the nomenclatures of difference that are socially decreed and name themselves as other, odd or abnormal to the dominant Anglo culture within which they circulate. Despite the length of their friendship the three only reveal "slivers of the self" (*BM* 361) to each other and this is, in part, an act of self-protection from a hostile social world, but it is also motivated by a desire to fit into or belong. It is Gibbo who realises that "the people all around him — even those he was closest to — only

ever presented amputated selves to him. He would never see them as they really were” (*BM* 361).

Gibbo, the only Anglo male in this trio of friends, is not the centre of the narrative. He is plagued by insecurities and “as he watched Tien and Justin drawing closer together in the later years of high school, he felt the panicky sensation of being left out” (*BM* 61). He wondered if there “was some intrinsic Asianness that would bind Tien and Justin more closely together, cutting him out of the loop and leaving him alone once again in his not-quite-Australianness” (*BM* 62). Gibbo’s story provides a surface comedy but it is tinged by satire and pathos. His story serves as a point of divergence from one such as *Gallipoli* that idealises Archy and Frank as the golden, brave, Anglo, and athletic sons of the Australian nation. Gibbo, as is constantly noted throughout the novel, is overweight, non-sportive and extremely inarticulate. Apart from his friendship with Justin and Tien he is a loner. In late adolescence he attaches himself to Tien’s mother Linh which results, several years later, in his stalking of Linh through emails, letters and in person. His letters and emails to Linh allow for another form of friendship to be explored and satirised throughout the novel. Gibbo’s infatuation with Linh begins innocuously enough and he signs them:

“Your devoted friend” (182).

“Your true friend” (183).

“I need your friendship. I believe desperately in friendship” (183).

“I love you and only you” (188).

“I need you and only you” (188)

“Love is coming to get you” (189).

“I’ll never let you go” (189).

“There is NOTHING else in my life but loving you” (193).

The gradual drift toward desperation and menace in these notes is eventually halted by Tien who urges Linh to take out an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against Gibbo. This action buries their friendship and also brings down the wrath of Gibbo’s father upon Tien who calls her traitorous. Friendships, within this

novel, are constantly redefined, they are never frozen or immortalised, not even with the tragic bashing of Justin. The bashing precipitates a re-evaluation of the terms of friendship for Tien and Gibbo who are reunited over the comatose body of Justin. Tien apologises to Gibbo for the AVO incident and she echoes Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* when she tells him, “you’re the best friend anyone could ever ask for” (BM 360). Gibbo acknowledges this gesture of friendship but also knows its transient nature. He understands that “their friendship could not be snap-frozen at this point” (BM 360). Gibbo realises that friendship competes with the patriarchal constructions of family and heterosexual romance and he muses “for whatever the strength of their friendship now, he knew they would not resist the pull of romantic love and the promise of a special partner if and when one came along” (BM 361). The idealised friendships depicted in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gallipoli* are fantasy-based, and it is Gibbo who is the first to realise that friendship is cyclical rather than linear and that the truth of friendship is growth and fracture, love and loss, and quite a bit of regret.

The novel forces a collision between the discourses of race, sexuality, gender and mateship suggesting that identity is a fluid process, open to constant revision and translation despite the encroachment of dominant historical, social and representational practices. As Sneja Gunew writes:

for the first time in 200 years, perhaps, a space is opened up for alternative gestures of recognition and a consequent identity [...] In all these spaces which echo the discursive effects of ‘multiculturalism’ there remains the need to disrupt dominant categories and identities without at the same time containing the non-dominant within the same classificatory logic. (2004 106)

Behind the Moon explores the myriad varieties of friendship that exist outside of the dominant patriarchal order. These friendships are more often fraught and difficult and far from those idealised in stories such as *Gallipoli* and in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Consuming Cultural Difference

One way in which *Behind the Moon* explores this thematic concern is through a re-evaluation of a trope that is familiar in immigrant narratives and book reviews and this is the metaphor of consumption. Tien, Gibbo, Justin and their families come together through the ritual of sharing food but these characters find no peace, love or contentment in this process. While they may dine together at the family dinner table, this space represents a site of fracture but also a point in which individuals are catapulted towards a reassessment of their individual beliefs and values and those held by their friends and family.

The novel is peppered with vaudeville-like moments and the most momentous of these is the disastrous “dead Diana dinner” which is an orchestrated reunion of Tien, Justin and Gibbo and their families. The trio have grown distant with one another and their parents believe that “they can find each other again over food” (*BM* 114). They draw them back together under the guise of watching the funeral procession of Princess Diana while also sharing a meal. Gunew argues that, “the notion of multiculturalism as food is often the most benign version of accommodating cultural difference” (2000 227). However, the suggestion that the food metaphor or consumption trope operates as a form of bonding, is reversed in *Behind the Moon*. Teo shows that people gathering over food can also lead to fracture.

The dinner is held at Justin’s parent’s home where his mother, Annabelle, makes roast beef and Yorkshire puddings and where Gibbo’s mother Gillian brings along a curry dish. Both are equally inedible with Annabelle’s offering described as “something that looked like burnt boots and discs of hardened lard” (*BM* 115).

It was a dismal meal. Chewing doggedly on chunks of over-roasted meat, they waited for the awkwardness to dissipate, but the atmosphere simply grew more stilted and unnatural. They were overwhelmed by indigestion and everything in the universe seemed to circle back to this: the acutely uncomfortable feeling of fullness, of massive solidity, nudging insistently against the heart. (*BM* 116)

There is much disharmony throughout the meal. None of the guests can agree on whether to love or hate Princess Diana, to feel sorry for her tragic end or to say she deserved it. When Gibbo suggests that she took lovers so that she did not feel so alone he strikes a chord with all at the table and it is at this moment that his father realises it is Gibbo's birthday. His twenty-first. A collective embarrassment results in some candles being hastily lit on top of the Pavlova that Gillian had made for dessert. From this point on the dinner implodes despite Tek Chung telling his guests that "in Chinese culture eating together is a very important thing" (*BM* 124) and that his wife Annabelle "is so multicultural she always likes to experiment with other cuisines. Like tonight she cooked an English dinner for Diana's funeral" (*BM* 125). The notion of "multiculturalism" as food is a major area of address. When Asian Canadian writer and poet Hiromi Goto was asked whether food was raced, and whether or not it carried the mark of social difference or was it a cultural border crosser she replied:

Food is also a cultural player, at the same time intensely personal and of the body. Food is a constant, it is something we do everyday — almost religious in the way we ingest it — food is very cultural, it is racialised and that is when it becomes political. Food can act as a benign introduction to other cultures and it doesn't challenge you because you have the choice. You notice how, in multicultural festivities, food and dance are always called upon. This is a good starting point. It is sadly inadequate, however, if food remains the only point of cultural contact/outreach. Food heightens our palates and nourishes our bodies but we must also feed our minds. (Morris 2003)²⁸

Teo's use of the metaphor of food as a consumption of otherness signals her critical entry into contemporary Australian identity politics. While Mary Zournazi may argue that "narratives of food in Australia may embody certain consumptive processes that swallow up foreign bodies. Food signals an attempt to accommodate difference through assimilation and digestion" (1994 80), Teo resists notions of assimilation and pushes her narrative towards what Goto terms a nourishment of the mind. For this text, in its deployment of a food metaphor, articulates a reading

²⁸ See Appendix 1, p240.

against assimilationist discourses that promote the idea that the other's body/culture can be devoured by the vampiric-like white/Anglo body.

There is a long history in Australia of representing Asian otherness as swamping or consuming whiteness, of diluting or causing disease to whiteness. Discussions about immigration and race have a long and rich history of emotive and literary metaphor. Edwards identifies four main tropes — “inundation, contamination, disorder and the previously unidentified indigestion” — and suggests that the “indigestion trope” has been a particularly potent force in late-twentieth-century Australia as the subtle, new and acceptable language of racism” (2000 299). Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to parliament is redolent with such rhetoric: “Australians are sick of imported problems be they crime, disease or other aspects of cultural difference that will never be able to accept the Australian life” (cited in Ang, 2001 109). If official multiculturalism is associated with accepting cultural diversity then the notion of eating or consuming such diversity works, for the dominant Anglo culture, as a way of diffusing and dissipating the perceived threat to hegemonic whiteness. Teo's text tackles this continuation of a sense of oneness and postulates on a future in which the nation is read as “multi” in terms of national identity rather than an exclusionary hegemonic white whole.

Behind the Moon clearly indicates that identity formation is a fraught and complicated process. It is processional in the sense that it is impacted upon by not just the familial, but also the political, cultural and the historical. As Gunew observes, “the way ahead in terms of analysing cultural texts of any kind seems to be to denaturalize the classificatory categories invoked to stabilize and legitimate all types of nation-building and here the constellation of terms — multiculturalism, ethnicity, race, postcolonialism — all have their shifting and shifty roles to play” (2004 29). Teo explores these parameters through an intertextual process. Her novel encourages readers to readdress a well-known mainstream film such as *Gallipoli* from a more contemporary critical perspective so that the film's

seemingly benign constructions of national identity and deployment of metaphors that consume rather than acknowledge difference are revisioned through the lens of gender and race.

Chapter 5

“a pleasure to behold”: Consumption, Choice and Commodification in Writing by Lillian Ng and Evelyn Lau

But choice is a position of privilege
That needs to be addressed.
(Hiromi Goto “The Body Politic”)

I think for me the title [*Choose Me*]
works a little bit differently in that
it’s also about the choices people
have made that they have to live
with. It’s also about what happens
after people sort of take that turn in
the road.
(Evelyn Lau Interview 2000)²⁹

Cross-continental resurrections: the ghost of Suzie Wong

The visualisation of Asian women within canonical and popular cultural texts of the West as submissive, other, and exotic, denies subjectivity to Asian women, to diasporic Asians and to women of Asian descent living in the West by allowing them to participate in the white body politic only “at the expense of their agency and individuality” (Feng 2002 10). In the West’s conjuring of the “Oriental other” they are the ghostly symbols of female self capitulation. Gendered and racialised “Orientalised beauties” such as the self-sacrificing geisha Madam Butterfly,³⁰ or

²⁹ *Choose Me* is the title of Lau’s 1999 collection of short stories loosely themed around an exploration of a series of female narrator’s sexual and emotional entanglements with aging, white men.

³⁰ The “Butterfly” narrative, which is one of the most common and enduring interracial romances propagated by Hollywood (Marchetti 78), can be traced back to Pierre Loti’s 1887 novel *Madame Chrysanthème*. Despite its many reincarnations, this tragic tale of a romance between a white American man and Japanese woman has been embraced by the West since its literary release, and has metamorphosed from Loti’s novel, to stage play, to opera and numerous Hollywood films (Marchetti 80). Apart from Henry David Kwang’s award-winning stage production *M. Butterfly* (1988), all of these versions objectify Asian female corporeality as a fixed and conquerable site of Western, male sexual pleasure.

the alluring bar prostitute Suzie Wong,³¹ have been referred to as “dangerous” and as “spectres” for women of Asian descent by Asian Canadian critic and writer Larissa Lai (1999 153). While Lai’s comment has resonance in this chapter’s reading of the divisive academic debate arising from critical evaluations of fiction and poetry by Lillian Ng from Australia and Evelyn Lau from Canada,³² it is also instructive, at this point, to note that the ghost of Suzie Wong is referred to in two recently released novels by women writers of Asian descent in Australia and Canada. The young Chinese Canadian narrator of Judy Fong Bates’ novel *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2004) mentions reading an article about the actress Nancy Kwan who played the lead role in the Hollywood production of *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), and is intrigued because it is the first time she has read about a Chinese woman in a white movie magazine. That Nancy Kwan’s walk, which is described “as so sexy [it] made Marilyn Monroe look like a Brownie” (Fong Bates 2004 254), is the focus of this article speaks volumes for the way in

³¹ Like *Madam Butterfly*, the novel and film versions of *The World of Suzie Wong* also fall into the genre of interracial romance and, much like Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*, *The World of Suzie Wong* (Mason 1957) also first appeared in the West as a novel. Its author, English born Richard Mason, was fully conversant in Japanese, a skill which enabled him to be employed as an interrogator of prisoners during World War II and, more importantly, lent him a measure of authenticity in his fictional portrayal of an exotic Orient. Just as Loti’s novel is based on his experiences in Nagasaki Japan, so too does Mason attempt to blend his experiences in Hong Kong with fantasy and interpretation, by setting much of the tale of *The World of Suzie Wong* in the red-light district of a post-World War II Hong Kong. And, much like Loti’s novel, Mason’s novel also achieved popular appeal by providing the West with a safe peephole into the perceived alien decadence of the East. Described on the novel’s back cover as “touchingly innocent and passionately tormented”, this hint of illicit romance and exotic “Oriental sex” assured *The World of Suzie Wong* mainstream success. The novel was then dramatized and produced on Broadway in 1958 before being adapted by Hollywood and released as the film, *The World of Suzie Wong*, in 1960. [need to decide if footnotes are to be justified (as above) or not (as below)]

³² Lillian Ng was born in Singapore and immigrated to Australia in the late 1970s. She is a practicing gynaecologist in Sydney. Evelyn Lau is a second generation Chinese Canadian. While Ng was a studious daughter who travelled the world with her *amah*, Lau, disavowed her tyrannical and traditional Chinese parents by running away from home at fourteen. She survived for two years on the streets of Vancouver. Lau recorded this period of her life in a journal that was later edited and subsequently published under the title, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1995). It is an unflinching account of her two years as a drug addict and prostitute and this “peephole” into otherness, along with the novel’s commercial success, has accorded her a measure of notoriety while making her a figure of academic and public debate.

which a Chinese American woman is made visible and desirable in the West through the commodification of her perceived exotic sexuality.

If agency or subjectivity is assumed as a privilege that the West both beholds and bestows then Simone Lazaroo's most recently released novel *The Travel Writer* (2006) sets out to debunk this notion by exploring how the West has viewed, consumed and constructed Asian female corporeality through the eyes of the white, male sojourner. *The Travel Writer* plays with the notion of writing as truth and the story gives voice not just to the published articles of the male travel writer, Walter Humphries, but also to the woman Ghislaine de Sequeira, who falls in love with him in Singapore, has his child and makes a living for herself and her daughter by writing obituaries. It is their daughter Isabelle, who writes her mother's life story.

Suffering from unrequited love (and an early pregnancy), Ghislaine purposely seduces the tea-taster Rupert Balneaves, who visits her father's farm where she has been banished to protect her from Humphries, high in the hill tops of Malacca. In differing ways both Balneaves and Humphries ingest the exoticness that Ghislaine symbolises through the metaphor of consumption. While Rupert tastes the East, Walter observes and writes about it through the eyes of the white coloniser. Littered throughout the novel are the many articles that Walter has had published about his interpretation and reaction to the "Orient". In particular, an article he titles, "A World of Choice in Singapore" describes for his reader the exoticness of Asian dance halls and dance girls. Its strategic placement within the novel can also be read as a form of "critical ironising" (Wah 113), a term coined by Fred Wah and a strategy employed by Lazaroo to critique, through satire, historical textualisations of the Suzie Wong stereotype. Humphries notes that the dance halls in Singapore's Chinatown offer the expatriate bachelor "drink, food, entertainment and especially women" (*TW* 70). More telling is his added comment that these

women, “from white through to black and all shades in between — are *his* for the choosing” (emphasis added *TW* 70).

This suggests that Humphries’ implied readership is white and male and these readers are further told that for just seventy cents the “expatriate” can listen to the sounds of “some Oriental chanteuse howling songs from the silver screen” (*TW* 70). Humphries writes that this musical blending of East and West “reinforces the sense that the World is yours for the taking as you eye the hostesses, also called taxi dancers, who sit on chairs on the circumference of the floor” (*TW* 70). Having already drawn on Orientalist assumptions that accord the white, Western male the power in this racialised/sexualised looking relation, Humphries reinforces his Orientalist perspective by describing the dancer’s cheongsams as “tantalising yet demure”, worn “tight enough to reveal their curves” and who wear “just enough eyeliner and rouge to enhance their Oriental beauty” (*TW* 70). They are, in Walter Humphrey’s estimate, “a pleasure to behold” (*TW* 70).

Please see print copy for Fig.4

Fig. 4. Beholden: Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960)

The process of equating “the Orient” with the exotic, with Asian, with cheongsam-clad females and with sexual voraciousness, is embedded and normalised within the cultural archives of Western art, literature, photography, film and also, in contemporary mass media. Humphries’ image of the female taxi dancers waiting to be “chosen” by a white male provides Western audiences — in the same way that the positioning of Nancy Kwan in the “Beholden” image above does — with a visual feast of a passive, to-be-acted-upon racialised, sexualised and gendered Asian otherness. One of the key considerations in examining fiction by Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers is whether their texts offer a resistant textuality to dominant representations of otherness, or whether the Orientalised ghost of Suzie Wong hovers in each of these text’s margins?

Lillian Ng, Evelyn Lau and the Consumption of Difference

Lillian Ng's second novel *Swallowing Clouds* has been strongly criticised for its resurrection of this same image — that of the sexually voracious but passive, object-to-be-looked-at, Asian female. The discordant critical reception to *Swallowing Clouds* indicates both the interest in Ng's work and the conflicted nature of her identity politics. *Swallowing Clouds* reiterates the link between looking, consumption and choice through the detailed description of the sexual experiences of a young Chinese girl called Syn. Syn is stranded in Sydney after the Tiananmen massacre and, without family or welfare support, finds employment with a Chinese Australian butcher Zhu, eventually becoming his mistress. The blurb on the front cover describing the novel as “an elegant and erotic tale of a most unusual love affair” buys into Orientalised tropes of Asian otherness, and the further description on the back cover of *Swallowing Clouds* as, “Seductive and poignant, rich with Oriental tales and superstitions”, indicates that this is a novel that has perhaps been geared towards a predominantly white readership.

Tseen Khoo argues that “the novel's showcasing of Asian ‘sexotica’ is intended for a non-Asian readership” (2000 171). This also suggests that readers who are of Asian descent are implicated in a process in which they appear to be “‘perving’ on themselves” (Khoo 2000 172). Premised on a stereotypical reconstruction, the image that is being “perved” at is negative and one-dimensional. Khoo critiques the way stereotypes of Asian femaleness as servile, submissive and sexually insatiable are resurrected within Ng's novel, noting that:

Swallowing Clouds' complicity with mainstream literary discourse about Asian women and popular promotional strategies exposes the precarious nature of marketing Asian-Australian literature. This is especially the case for Asian women's literature, where the predominance of heavily publicized autobiographies and confessionals encourages few deviations in reading perspectives across the entire range of Asian women's writing. (2000 166)

When Ng states that “There’s a lot of talent among the Chinese writers, but they do not get much recognition by the media” (Yu 121), one wonders if her tale of Oriental(ised) sex under the Australian sun purposefully buys into a white fantasy mechanism.

Ng’s depiction of Syn in *Swallowing Clouds* is in danger of falling prey to a form of neo-Orientalism, one that reifies woman’s positioning as object of the gaze. The novel does this through the way Syn is characterised as being acted upon or consumed. Syn has few choices. She takes on employment with Zhu because she regards herself as an illegal immigrant. Zhu takes advantage of her naivety, quickly orchestrating opportunities for him to initiate an affair with her. Syn describes her sex role with Zhu as “the passive one, for she was to portray the garden where ‘her flowers bloomed with a hundred scents’, to be his Shangrila, his Paradise” (SC 56). In another scene Syn lies across Zhu’s lap:

He started to turn Syn’s skirt up, rolling and folding it with anticipated pleasure, slowly revealing her underpants of smooth black satin trimmed with black lace. Syn’s snow-white flesh was a stark contrast to the black lacy pants. Zhu Zhiyee bent down to sniff at her secret fragrance, warm and musty, which wafted from between the two cheeks. Then in one firm tug he pulled the underpants down and off her legs. Zhu admired this prized naked bottom, like the parson’s noses of the trussed-up chickens in his shop window [...] Now here was a full-sized rump, completely naked, lying across his lap, plump, well-rounded, beautifully curved, and with such well-formed meaty thighs — which he was dying to sink his teeth into — adorned with a garter of dark purple with a red ribbon [...] he pushed Syn’s skirt well up above her waist, and unzipped his fly, releasing his Chinese sausage to abut against Syn’s soft, unblemished belly. Syn felt its throb and pulse, and shivered. Slowly, Zhu raised and lowered his hands across her buttocks. Syn winced at each slap, which imprinted a red-petalled rose on her lily-white skin. As her buttocks became redder Syn couldn’t help but wriggle with pain. (SC 82)

This notion of Syn’s complete powerlessness and a lack of autonomy are further cemented in the novel when Zhu moves Syn to a house that isolates her from her friends. In a language that fully invokes the world of the harem as it has been

imagined by Western eyes, Ng writes that “He kept her in the semi, wrapped up as the Cantonese referred to a kept mistress. She was solely meant for his eyes and his service” (*SC* 140). From cover to cover, *Swallowing Clouds* conforms to a systemised visualising strategy that commodifies Asian female corporeality as exotic and sexualised but also as passive.

This criticism of an authorial reconstruction of gendered passivity has also been levelled at Evelyn Lau’s cast of female characters who, like Syn, are similarly situated as passive observers of their sexual entanglements and fixations. Despite name changes, Lau’s characters are recycled in her stories either as escorts, prostitutes or mistresses and the majority are, as Rita Wong terms it, fixated with “Old White Daddies” (2001 123). Lau’s characters can be read as one-dimensional in that their social, cultural or racial backgrounds are elided, their physical features are not described and as readers, we only observe these women as they dispassionately observe their lives and themselves. These characters are united by their sense of detachment.

In the short story “The Outing” in *Choose Me*, the narrator Julie, who takes on the name Sybil for her visit to a swinger’s club, watches as her breasts are being fondled by another man while her client, Hugh watches: “[Sybil] thrust out her chest for him to admire; her body felt numb, and for a moment she imagined she was only a mannequin, made of plaster, with a hollow, airy centre” (*CM* 48). Lau’s female characters might observe or gaze upon a culture which otherwise objectifies them but this vision-based interplay is not relational. Sybil can be likened to the mannequins Sylvia Plath describes in her poem “Munich Mannequins”, whose “perfection” rests in their inability to have children, their “sulphur loveliness” (74) and their very “voicelessness” (75).

Please see print copy for Fig.5

Fig. 5. Mannequin Factory³³

Created by man, their perfection is also described by Plath as “terrible” (74), suggesting both fear and fascination for an artfully contrived object that more or less solves the “problem” of female creativity, “unruly fertility” (Cavallaro 6) and self-determination entirely. As doll or mannequin woman is only “perfect” when she is an artificially manipulated object of plasticity, an object to be looked at, consumed or acted upon. Lau is in effect, reconstructing Sybil as a patriarchal figure of passivity and it is such constructions or depictions that have academics divided over her work. As Rita Wong notes: “How the women gaze and are gazed upon becomes an entry into reading the volatile power relations under which sex trade workers operate in *Choose Me, Fresh Girls and Other Stories* (2001 125). Lau’s positioning of woman as passive does little to challenge existing power relations and as Rita Wong argues, Lau’s refusal to enter into politicised rhetoric “defaults the said writer into reinforcing the conventional political and economic order that masks its reliance on exploitation as ‘normal’” (123).

Alternatively, Lily Cho, who reads Lau’s work through the rubric of diaspora, argues that, “neither obvious as a threat or as an overt retaliation, the gaze of the oppressed subject, of the sex workers, of the racialised women, works through a process of unrelenting objectification” (2007 178). Cho further notes that “Lau’s critique of whiteness extends beyond the individual white man in her intimate shredding of middle-class suburban life. She dismantles those hallowed structures of stability, marriage and family” (178). Throughout *Choose Me*, Lau’s female characters look back at whiteness and the build-up of their collective observations is vitriolic.

Aging, white males come under unrelenting scrutiny and this perhaps diffuses Rita Wong’s claim regarding Lau’s obsession with “Old White Daddies”. For example,

³³ <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/100photographs/086.cfm> (accessed June 30, 2006).

Lau describes the academic Douglas who has “folds in his stomach of incipient fat” (*CM* 25), and Hugh, who “wear[s] a pair of soft dress pants which draped his thick legs loosely, hiding his extra weight, and his white shirt was generously cut, bagging out over the waist [so that he] looked like a stocky wind-up toy, comical, preposterous, a figure of fun” (*CM* 33), or Jeremy, who “seemed terribly old-fashioned in the way he gawked at her nakedness — she believed him when he said he had slept with fewer than a dozen women in his life — and in his clumsy, eager lovemaking, as if he were a boy at the start of his sexual career, rather than a man caught in the physical limitations of its decline” (*CM* 125), or the unnamed sadomasochist in “The Session” who thanks his “Mistress” Mary, for letting him lick her shoes, begging “You’ll let me do more won’t you? You’ll treat me like white trash won’t you? You’ll spit on me and treat me like garbage?” (*FG* 23). This scornful gaze back at white patriarchy is quite critical both of the white men who benefit from it and of a social system that others and objectifies the bodies of women.

The worrying aspect of this is that Lau’s female characters, and this also applies to Syn in Ng’s *Swallowing Clouds*, appear to lack a critical self-reflexivity.³⁴ They do not look into their own constructions of self, or if they do, they find, like Sybil, that there is nothing but passivity, immobility and an airy hollowness. The uneasiness arising from both Ng and Lau’s characterisation is their fixation with disempowered females and empowered males. Even the sadomasochist in Lau’s short story “The Session”, a white man who chooses to play this role, wields economic power in that he is paying the prostitute Mary for her services. Another “escort” is Sybil who in the story “The Outing” notes that she would never have partnered her client to a swingers’ night “if Hugh weren’t paying her” (*CM* 40).

³⁴ This notion of the way women, and especially women of Asian descent, are positioned as object of the gaze — as passive and doll-like — is a dominant motif in the fiction of the Canadian-based writer, Larissa Lai. Lai’s work provides a critical comparison to Lau and Ng’s through its consistent and strident critique of this historicised subjectification and this evaluation occupies the final chapters of this thesis.

As if to assert his authority, Hugh reminds Sybil: “Remember what we talked about? You know what I want. Don’t disappoint me” (CM 37). In short, Hugh wants Sybil to have sex with other men and other women while he watches. Hugh’s money equates with power over Sybil’s body much as Zhu’s money and his determination to place Syn as his fully kept mistress does in Ng’s *Swallowing Clouds*. The female characters in Lau’s stories appear then, much like Ng’s description of Syn, as “trussed-up chickens” (SC 82). Both writers offer the (Asian) woman as a delectable, consumable and visually immobile morsel.

The Commodification of difference

Swallowing Cloud’s cover for example, which features a woman of Asian descent wearing operatic white make-up and “swallowing” a string of black pearls evokes, as Sandra Lyne observes, an image that is consistent with “China doll” stereotypes.

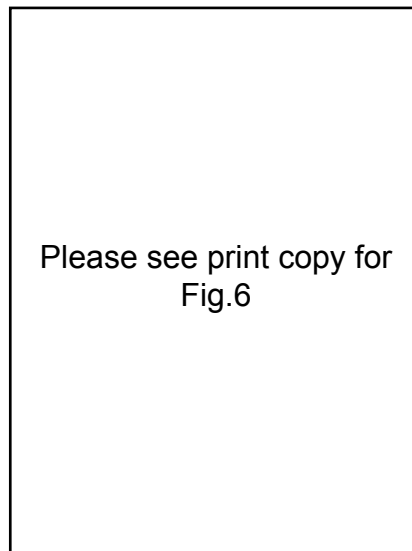


Fig. 6. Cover: *Swallowing Clouds*.

Lyne argues that:

very few books written by or about Asian women escape enclosure in attractive covers featuring an ‘exotic oriental Woman’ construct;

alluring geisha or courtesans these cover images of beautiful women are surrounded by Orientalist signs linking them to imperialistic economies of desire both past and present, thus reinforcing stereotypes and implicating the book in issues of race, essentialism and inequality. (2002 4)

Covers, in this case, matter, and as Miki so astutely notes, “the old truism, ‘you can’t tell a book from its cover’, may once have been true, but in this design-obsessed consumerist era, the cover is often a tell-tale sign of power relations, stereotypes, and expectations” (1998 120). The inclusion of the whitened and disembodied face of Evelyn Lau on the back cover of *Choose Me* mirrors the Orientalist stereotyping which characterises the cover of *Swallowing Clouds*. This also evokes an assumption that Lau’s work is autobiographical. Ommundsen argues that:

the prevailing tendency to read all her work as slightly disguised autobiography is undoubtedly partly due to her ethnicity and the desire to read her accounts of unorthodox sexual practices as signalling a deviant ‘ethnic’ sexuality; it is also a function of the texts themselves and their relentless pursuit of identical themes and preoccupations across modes and genres. (2003 45)

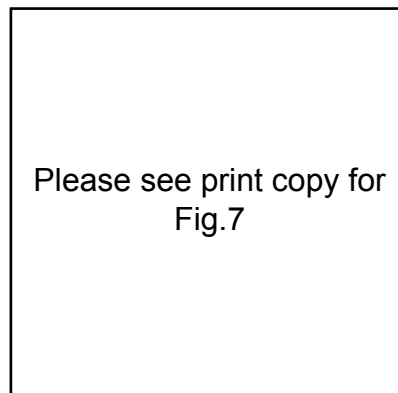


Fig. 7. Evelyn Lau — Back Cover: *Choose Me*

The titles of Lau’s short story collections *Fresh Girls* and *Choose Me* bring to mind the act of judging and consuming flesh but there is another form of consumption happening in the marketing of Lau’s work. The blurb on the back

cover of *Choose Me* describes the collection as one which “delves into the complexities of human relationships, exploring the ambiguous motives that propel her characters into emotional and sexual entanglements. With prose remarkable for its resonance, its beauty, and its candour, Lau tells the tales of women who long to be chosen by the men they can’t have”. The front cover of *Choose Me*, with its image of a disembodied female in a tight-fitting satin dress and of *Fresh Girls*, with a woman’s naked, opened legs reifies woman as passive, as body and as spectacle.

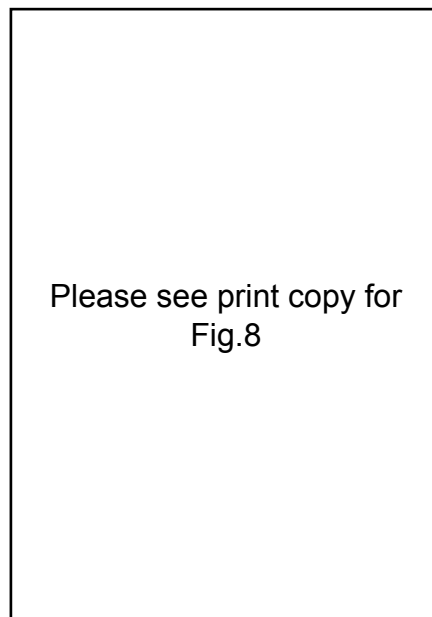


Fig. 8. Cover: *Fresh Girls*

Rita Wong is highly sceptical of the marketing processes driving Lau’s work. Wong observes that:

Before we ever touch the writer’s work there is a large machinery that determines who gets published and how they get promoted. Quality of writing is only one factor in this scenario; access to capital, profit margins and preconceptions of what is ‘marketable’ also play important parts in the process shaping the books to which we as readers have access [...] This commercial machinery makes me suspicious of

the ways in which the labour of a writer such as Evelyn Lau gets marketed as an object for consumption. [...] Somehow I have the disturbing feeling that, if Lau had not come along, the machine would have found someone else because it needs to have a bit of ‘colour’ (but not too much) mirroring or serving the symbolic order so that it can disavow its historical and systemic racist tendencies. (2001 123)

While sometimes what you see is not what you get, and book covers or blurbs can conflict quite markedly with the representation of Asian femaleness inside, for Ng and Lau’s fiction this is not strictly true.

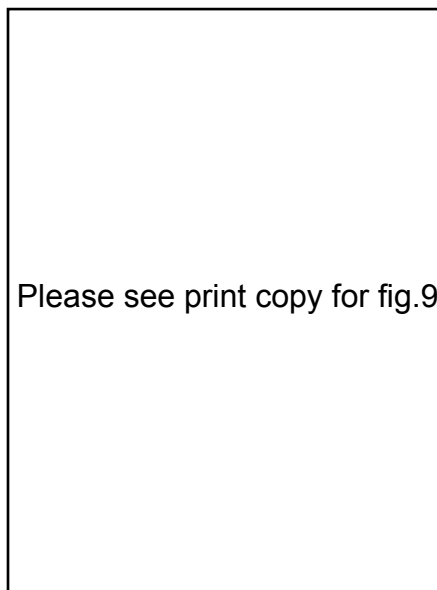


Fig 9: Cover *When Fox is a Thousand*

Even an overtly, staunchly anti-racist, academic, a feminist and lesbian such as Larissa Lai is not immune to othering practices which seek to commodify the assumed “Asianness” behind her work. The cover of Lai’s first novel *When Fox is a Thousand* features two images of a Westernised perception of Asian femininity, one gazing downward and the other gazing seductively at the viewer/reader, and

her second novel *Salt Fish Girl* features another recurring image of an “alluring” Asian femininity, that of the geisha-like woman with downcast eyes.

As noted, the commercial interests of the publisher can determine the type of cover, the target audience, forms of advertising and blurbs. In this sense competing interests can combine to write over the politicised content of, for example, Lai’s text. This silencing by larger publishing houses has perhaps pushed Lai, whose growing body of work refuses to conform to the reproduction of Orientalist stereotypes, towards more independent publishing firms and also to the self-publication of her chapbook poem “Rachel”. The covers of Ng’s, Lau’s or Lai’s novels suggest that the ghostly images of Suzie Wong and Madam Butterfly remain a contingent part of the marketing practices of Western publishers. The packaging of fiction by women writers of Asian descent evokes a mirroring, not of the symbolic order, but of Orientalist imagining of Asian femaleness. Said has described Orientalist³⁵ representations of otherness in terms of power and exteriority: “the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job” (21). The representational politics of Ng’s *Swallowing Clouds* both on and within its covers, is characterised by a neo-orientalism and a lack of critical subtlety.

Reading Ng: ‘a ‘cheap fling in Asia’?

The Prologue to *Swallowing Clouds* contains an explanation of the Buddhist sutra “karma, karma, ohm, ohm” (SC xii) which the adulterous woman chants before her drowning. This sets up the tourist-like aspect of the novel. The novel’s first chapter which describes Syn’s return trip to China where Beijing cyclists are

³⁵ Said uses the term ‘Orientalism’ to describe the way in which the West constructs the Orient by “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (1978 3).

described as “inscrutable, a seemingly impenetrable mob” (SC 3) is an extension of this pedagogical tone. Midway through the novel and back in Sydney, KarLeng, who is Zhu’s wife, is warned by her friends to be wary of Zhu’s growing attachment to Syn: “so good looking the ones from Shanghai with fair skin and delicate features are the ones to watch. They have a reputation for luring men and breaking up marriages. They are greedy for money and want security and hope, through such affairs, to obtain permanent residency in Australia” (SC 199). This description is far from satire and instead is very close to reiterating Arthur Calwell’s post World War II Orientalist rhetoric or that of *The Bulletin* writers during the 1890s. The targeted reader of *Swallowing Clouds* is a sojourner, who, it appears, is going to have, in what was touted in a recent travel advertisement, “a cheap fling in Asia”.

Please see print copy for Fig.10

Fig. 10. Travel advertisement: “A Cheap Fling in Asia” (Aug 2006).

Roy Miki’s observation that “the relative absence of theoretical awareness in minority groups has created complex risks of compromise and appropriation by publishers and otherwise well-intentioned editors and critics” (1998 119) is relevant to this analysis of Ng’s fiction.

Swallowing Clouds’ lack of self-reflexivity is one of its significant failings. As Khoo writes: “there seems to be a deliberate lack of sophistication in portraying Asianness or gender in *Swallowing Clouds*. Ng’s novel is notable not for its specific Australian resonance but, rather, for parading Asian exoticism and ethnic cultural baggage for its audience” (Khoo 2000 172). Khoo’s reading of the novel as a sensationalist, market-dependent text has been criticised by Wenche Ommundsen as an academic preoccupation with “literary standards” (2000 104). Ommundsen writes that objections to Ng’s “depiction of sex [a]s indecorous can be seen as versions of the idea that cultural forms should not be allowed to stray from the norms set by the dominant culture” (104). However, throughout the novel

Syn's body is articulated as food and we, as readers, literally ingest her through words. Syn³⁶ is described as a "plaything, a whore, a delicious side dish, a body" (SC 137). Zhu rarely refers to Syn by her name but by the title "my little dim sum", for she "provided [him] the tangy taste of the wild game bird which his wife of twenty-odd years had failed to supply" (SC 136). Furthermore, the title *Swallowing Clouds* brings to mind the act of consumption and of ingestion. "Swallowing clouds" refers to a sex-game initiated by Zhu whereby each partner must ingest the other's partly chewed wontons.

The metaphor of food and of eating the other is pertinent to an evaluation of *Swallowing Clouds*. In her work on comparative multiculturalism Gunew (2000) has explored the connection of food, bodies and language and ponders on the relationship between food and identity, particularly in the area of selves deemed minority to the dominant culture (227). Gunew observes that there is a link between depictions of "food of the other and the symbolic consumption of the body of the other" (228). In what could be read as an ethnographic feast, an entire chapter in *Swallowing Clouds* is devoted to an account of Syn's first experience of a "genuine" (SC 145) Peking Duck banquet in a restaurant in the Rocks area of Sydney.

The positioning of an "authentic" Chinese restaurant in what is traditionally a site of white settlement could function as a social critique of Aboriginal dislocation but the novel fails as satire because of this link between food and the body. Syn's body is a delectable morsel of otherness, to be broken down into its constituent parts and much like the duck, she is to be both disseminated and consumed. The representation of a "genuine" Peking Duck banquet in Sydney during the 1980s

³⁶ Tseen Khoo notes that the name is a deliberate play on the homonyms "Syn" and "sin" (2000 166). This offers a double meaning in that Syn's sexual liaison with Zhu in contemporary Australia is "sinful" and also that Syn is now being punished for having been an adulterer in a past life in rural, feudal China. Neither of these possibilities allows for a positive reading of Asian female sexuality.

enjoins the presumed white reader to taste and consume Asian difference. Bell hooks has argued that:

The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (1992 21)

In this sense, references to Chinese food in the *Swallowing Clouds* operate as an overt mark of otherness, a voyeuristic and descriptive display which buys into the notion of consuming ethnic diversity inherent to the ideals of Australian multiculturalism.

Rather than using the metaphor of food as a strategic intervention into race-based politics that might challenge the assumption of a monolithic national identity in which multiculturalism is equated with eating or tasting but disavowing the other, Ng uses the motif of food to attract and hold the tourist gaze. In her novel food, and racialised and gendered differences, are intertwined. The chapter in *Swallowing Clouds* describing the ten course, multicultural feast made from the duck's gizzards, heart, brain, liver and feet provides another safe eyehole into an "ethnic other's" cultural practices. Cynthia Sau-ling Wong notes that "food pornography" (1993 55) offers one way for otherness to offer itself up to the gaze of whiteness. Sau-ling Wong goes on to say that in food pornography — a display of cultural practices for the "curious gaze of outsiders" (56) — is based on an unequal exchange between whiteness and otherness.

[Food pornography] translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one's otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system. Like exchanging sexual services for food, food pornography is also a kind of prostitution, but appears important to be a promotion, rather than a vitiation or devaluation, of one's ethnic identity. (Sau-ling Wong 55)

When the ten-course feast in *Swallowing Clouds* is read in the context of consumption, Syn and Zhu become representative of a cultural implosion, slowly eating themselves into oblivion, and the neo-imperialistic insider, in ingesting this

same offering, simultaneously deploys and destroys the threat of difference operating from within.

There is an overt woman-as-meat metaphor operating in Ng's *Swallowing Clouds*, one which could have operated as a feminist critique of the representation of the female body in Western film, art, literature and law. The contentious nature of this issue of representation has seen academics divided in their response to the novel. While Shirley Tucker may argue that "Ng's complex and at times wicked use of Orientalist imagery invokes memories of stereotypes we would rather forget" (2001 130), the novel does far more than simply resurrect such typecasts, it firmly and dangerously embeds them. Tseen Khoo writes that "images of ever-willing sexual partners, global factory workers or asexual female Communist comrades are figurations still crowding the representational stage for Asian women and Ng's novel deploys just about all of these" (2000 166). In reiterating Orientalised tropes of otherness Ng's novel heralds a perfidious arrival on the Australian literary scene; a cleverly packaged and marketed piece of neo-orientalism in the levelling guise of a spectacular multicultural feast. While Sandra Lyne scathingly describes the novel as a "banal caricature of 'Asian' hyper-sexuality" (8), Kay Schaffer rejects this reading arguing that what Lyne defines as caricature is, in Schaffer's opinion, satire and parody (2003). It is difficult however to find any textual support for Schaffer's less than compelling argument as the novel abounds in passages of neo-orientalist posturing that steers well clear of any rhetorical strategies that could signify social critique.

Shirley Tucker argues that Ng's *Swallowing Clouds* offers a resistance to dominant representations of Asian femininity which have historically swung between notions of her as an exotic lure or as the harbinger of danger or death³⁷.

³⁷ Tucker also acknowledges that *Swallowing Clouds* is part of the tradition of Asian American women's writing. She argues that the novel's narrative of consuming passion is quite literally played out in this unorthodox 'love story' despite Ng's deliberate interweaving of familiar romantic

Tucker suggests that in *Swallowing Clouds*, “traditional erotic and fearful images of Chinese women are deliberately revived and revised to challenge outdated attitudes that still circulate” (139). When the novel is read however as a palimpsest of filmic and artistic representations of Asian femaleness that is sexually alluring to Western eyes, then Ng’s depiction of Syn as a sexually passive “plaything”, as a body to be devoured not just by Zhu, but by the voyeuristic gaze of the novel’s reader, might be understood to buy into the culturally embedded image of an exotic, Asian otherness.

The novel then, resists critique and emerges as an example of a writing and publishing process geared towards marketability. Perpetuation of a representational practice that hyper-feminises and exotifies the Asian female body serves the interest of Western patriarchy, embedding as normal and acceptable, in cultural and social ideologies, hierarchies of difference that are gender and race based. The recurring image of Syn throughout the novel as a “delicious side dish” clearly indicates that the ghost of Asian, female servility is still hovering. The overarching question that remains is in whose interest does this image serve? The implied observer of the Orientalist banquet that is *Swallowing Clouds* is not Zhu or the author Lillian Ng, but the Occidental outsider who is, cannibalistically, both the creator (publisher/marketer) and consumer (reader) of this text.

Lau and the notion of “ethical responsibility”

This is precisely the criticism which has been levelled at Lau’s ever-increasing body of fiction. In reading and evaluating Lau’s work Sneja Gunew asks:

Do we see her as a minority writer who refuses the ‘ethical responsibility’ of representing her community and of choosing the deliberate individualism associated with the subjectivity of late capitalism, or do we use her example as a way to move beyond the constraints of identity categories? (85)

tropes and a sub-text of female oppression made popular by diasporic Chinese women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Jung Chang, Amy Tan and Adeline Yen Mah (2001 124).

Lau's female characters in her short story collections, *Choose Me* (1999) and *Fresh Girls* (1993) are never described in terms of race and it is difficult in fact, to read race into her short stories. When the twenty-nine year old Melody, who is engaged to marry sixty-five year old Gordon, initially meets with his thirty-five year old daughter Janice in *Choose Me*, she is asked: "Will I get a half-brother or – sister? You two would have beautiful children!" (CM 102). This question could imply that Melody's racial ancestry is not the same as that of her intended husband and also, that their potential hybrid offspring would be extraordinary. This passage could also be read as a daughter's sarcastic response to her aging father's liaison with a woman much younger than himself. It is Gordon however who is described in detail. Melody observes him dispassionately: "the mucousy slip of his tongue in her mouth, the oils on his forehead, his ruined and sagging face" (CM 107). After five years of marriage Gordon repulses Melody and yet, as she observes, "the marriage was a mistake she had been eager to make" (CM 97). Her union with Gordon "was a final flouting of her critical family and her concerned friends, an act of rebellion. She had displayed him on her arm as a man displays a beautiful woman. Together they commanded the attention she craved, and if there was not envy on their second glances, well, no one knew of their private life together" (CM 97). Melody chose to marry Gordon. She also chooses to remain with him. As readers though, we are left to wonder why.

Lau is more subtle than Ng in the way she resists commodification of her work. She achieves this by positioning readers to empathise with characters such as Melody emotionally rather than politically. This same strategy is evoked through some of the female narrators of her short story collection, *Fresh Girls*. The narrator of the first story, titled "Fresh Girls", is a young female sex worker whom an older client calls "Baby Girl". This narrator espouses a sense of listlessness and apathy over her future. At nineteen she is feeling old, not quite so "fresh" as the book or story's title would suggest. One of her customers, a doctor from Alberta, calls her and says "I want to fuck your pussy all night" (FG 7). She goes to him

and he tells her, with her makeup half smudged, “You’re still pretty” (*FG* 7). She notes that: “To him, and others, I’m still in my Lolita years, but I have a birthday coming up soon. I’ll be twenty, and what then?” (*FG* 7). This girl appears trapped by a sense of hopelessness over her economic situation. She needs the work because she has, “what one could call expenses” (*FG* 11). This comment is worthy of exploration and could be Lau’s way of critiquing both the commodification and devaluation of female flesh. As Lau herself found out in her years on the streets of Vancouver, the only commodity, the only way of earning money to pay for her “expenses”, was to sell her body. This line of critique is not pursued however and the narrator notes with a detached apathy that: “I never wanted to get older like ordinary teenagers. I knew there was nothing up there to look forward to except smelly old regulars and a parade of new girls, sixteen, seventeen, coming in illegally through the doors of every massage parlour in town and crowding me out” (*FG* 11).

Again, this statement could offer some critique of the trade in Asian women’s bodies who enter the white nation, illegally or otherwise, but because of their “alien” status are tied to working life in which their bodies and their earnings are controlled by others such as Mario, the owner of the massage parlour in “Fresh Girls”. Choice, for the narrator of “Fresh Girls”, is linked to the commodification of her flesh and she realises at the close of the story that her value decreases with each passing year. Despite the overall sense of hopelessness, Lau’s prose does evoke sympathy for the narrator’s plight. While this evocation of sympathy does not equate with explicit criticism of the patriarchal social order which evaluates these girls’ value, the controlled vitriol which underscores many of these narratives, generates a sense that Lau is standing in the margins of these stories, observing her social world with a critical, ironising and ethically responsible eye.

This chapter’s evaluation of Ng and Lau’s fiction and the divisive critical responses regarding the ethical responsibility or extent of critical ironising within

their work is intended to provide an evaluative platform from which to determine whether the voices emerging from the sites of Asian Australian and Asian Canadian literature diverge or merge. Although writers like Ng and Lau can be subject to marketing practices and their works can be read as re-inscribing dominant representations of a raced and gendered otherness, writers such as Hiromi Goto and Larissa Lai from Canada enter this fraught arena armed with strategies of literary resistance. It is their work which will be examined in the remaining chapters of this thesis. In contrast to Ng and Lau's character-driven novels, the fiction of Goto and Lai engages the politics of the gaze through a strategy that involves the interweaving within their fiction of iconic cultural productions of the West such as *Little House on the Prairie*, *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein*.

Chapter 6

Changing the Ending: Hiromi Goto's Translations of Self

Ma set in the middle of the mantel-shelf the little china woman she had brought from the Big Woods [...] She stood on the mantel-shelf with her little china shoes and her wide china skirts and her tight china bodice, and her pink cheeks and blue eyes and gold hair all made of china.

(Laura Ingalls Wilder 1935 118)

Hiromi Goto's award-winning novels, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), *The Water of Possibility* (2001), and *The Kappa Child* (2001), and her book of short stories *Hopeful Monsters* (2004), are a powerful mix of realism, science fiction, mythology and satire.³⁸ These texts supplant images of a passive, supine, china-doll femaleness such as that invoked by Lillian Ng and Evelyn Lau with that of a mobile and independent female body — a subject who glances back and questions cultural constructions of difference. Goto negotiates this path of contemporary criticality armed with literary strategies that reconfigure stereotypical representations of a gendered, raced and sexualised otherness.

The various chapters of this study have indicated how vision is privileged within Western hegemony as a strategy of surveillance, of ordering and categorising otherness. The white gaze, as Donna Haraway suggests, “mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim power to see and not be seen, to represent, while escaping representation” (1991 188). As noted in this thesis Introduction, such a system of classification designates the of-colour body as other, alien and subordinate to the supposed invisible normality of the white

³⁸ Goto's first novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* was the 1995 regional winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book and co-winner of the Japan-Canada Book Award. *The Kappa Child* won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award while also being nominated for the Sunburst Award.

body. Goto's fiction, poetry and non-fiction questions the hierarchies that underscore this discourse and the generic interweaving and intertextuality which characterises her fiction constructs a multiplicity of subject positionings from which to speak and see. Goto stories are critically important because they are not written for a white readership. As she states:

I'm writing for my children and for people of colour whose stories and experiences are not reflected in popular culture. Our myriad of experiences are only just being touched upon and although I'm not interested in duplicating identity-based narratives, my novels will always be peopled by characters of colour just as my life is and has been. (Morris 2003)³⁹

This statement indicates that Goto chooses, much like that of Hsu-Ming Teo from Australia, to disassociate her writing from the "Amy tan-syndrome". While Teo questions how stories of identity such as that of the ANZAC soldier or bushman dominate constructions of Australian nationhood, Goto questions the invisibilising of people of colour within stories of the Canadian nation. Judy Fong Bates similarly recalls:

Going to school [in Canada] I studied books written by English writers of English American descent who were born to the English language so all my reference points were white, in books, in television, in movies. I remember as a child, the purely Chinese people found on television were either servants or very evil. (Cuder-Domínguez 2005 119)

Fong Bates is here referring to the Fu Manchu or Suzie Wong stereotypes — stereotypes that Goto refuses to resurrect or duplicate within her fiction. Goto's strategic decision, or in other words her determined choice to write outside of the frame of whiteness, signals a wariness of hierarchical boundaries of difference but also illustrates a critical path for questioning the longevity of such borders.

In "Translating the Self" Goto writes of being told how "lucky" she is, as a writer of Japanese ancestry with Canadian citizenship, to have such a wealth of culture to draw from in her writing. She responds that she is,

³⁹ See Appendix 1, p242.

Stunned. Amazed. That the person was so ‘white’ Canadian, she didn’t even have a culture any more. That she was in such a position of privilege, that her own racial/cultural identification became obsolete and my Canadian racialised position, a historically enforced weakness was a thing to be envied — it gives me lots to write about. (1996 113)

Goto’s work contests both the invisibility of whiteness in the Canadian imaginary and the concomitant perpetuation of racialised inequalities in social, political and historical discourse. This is why, as she notes in “The Body Politic”, she resists writing the lyrical in order to emphasise the political scaffolding of her writing. What this chapter argues is that the power of Goto’s work is in fact her ability to fuse the political with the lyrical.

Happy ever after?

Goto’s fiction is characterised by a deliberate fluidity and malleability and she constructs characters whose sexuality is *not* heterosexual, who are *not* young, who are *not* white but who *are* fully in control of their bodies and desires. She parodies stereotypes of cultural mores such as “oriental sex” in *Chorus* when Murasaki, the young female narrator states, “It was hard growing up in a small prairie town, the only Japanese-Canadians for miles around. Where everyone thought Japan was the place they saw when they watched *Shogun*” (C 121). On the eve of her three week anniversary Murasaki’s boyfriend Hank asks her if she can do “special things [...] without going all the way [...] Like Oriental sex” (C 122). When Murasaki asks him to define what “Oriental sex” is he replies, “You should know, you’re Oriental aren’tcha?”

The comic undertone of this section of the novel does not detract from the ideological critique of the way in which the Asian female body is positioned as an object of white, male heterosexual desire and Japanese culture with fixed and Orientalised images. Goto similarly addresses the perpetuation of such a discourse in “The Body Politic” when the poetic voice states, “People want to dress me up in/ ke-mo-nees and garter belts. / They want to hear about Zen and Buddhism and

ritual/ Hairy Carrie. / They want to squeal over tiny slices of raw fish/ And finish off with exotic Oriental sex, / whatever that is (BP 219). Goto casts aside this culturally constructed image by creating characters like Murasaki and her grandmother Obāchan in *Chorus*, and the unnamed, lesbian narrator of her second novel *Kappa* — women who attempt to live their lives independent of dominant perceptions of Asian female sexuality that Lillian Ng, arguably, resurrects through the characterisation of Syn in *Swallowing Clouds*. Goto's depiction of Murasaki's eighty-five year old grandmother in *Chorus*, who describes herself as “horny as a musk-drenched cat” (C 39), reigniting her sexuality through masturbation on a mushroom farm in Alberta, and who, after this experience, runs away from her daughter's home and begins a wild adventure which involves taking a truck driver as a lover and becoming a rodeo rider, indicates a direct engagement with the politics of the Orientalised body.

Both *Chorus* and *Kappa* reconfigure aged, gendered and raced stereotypes that have labelled first generation Asian women living in the West as silent and invisible in stories of the white nation. Obāchan notes that it is “easy enough for a woman to slip by security. If you're quietly Oriental [...] people are glad not to notice you” (C 215). However, Obāchan comes to notice in a way that could affront whiteness. She becomes the star of the culturally popular Calgary Stampede — a nostalgic festival that embraces a masculinised, white colonialist and frontier past. This past is even more popularly represented in Hollywood cinema through the genre of the Western. While Richard Dyer may argue that it is in “the visceral qualities of the Western — surging through the land, galloping about on horseback, the intensity and skill of fighting and jubilant music, stunning landscapes — that enterprise and imperialism have had their most undeliberated, powerful appeal” (1997 33), it is precisely this “appeal” that Goto is intentionally complicating through her depiction of a Japanese Canadian grandmother successfully and so very gleefully bucking and galloping her way through a countless number of prairie and city rodeos.

While Obāchan is off on her bull-riding adventure, her eleven-year-old granddaughter and narrator of *Chorus* comes to the realisation that “the shape of my face, my eyes, the colour of my hair affected how people treated me. I never felt different until I saw the look crossing people’s faces” (C 175). “The look” is one of negation and the narrator’s observation of feeling different echoes the sense of corporeal malediction experienced by the young Eurasian narrator of Simone Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*. However, while Lazaroo’s texts end ambivalently in their intervention in race and gender politics Goto provides us with a knowing and mobile female narrator who states at the close of the novel “you know you can change the ending” (C 220). In Goto’s words; “Within my fiction there is a resistance to the notion of closure for this is not the reality of women’s lives. Closure to me is very artificial, contrived and prescriptive” (Morris 2003).⁴⁰

Border Crossing in *The Kappa Child*

Goto’s second novel *The Kappa Child* further explores this notion of changing scripted, formulaic or closed endings through the construction of a female narrator who does not conform to the normalised aesthetics of gendered and raced “beauty” depicted in Western film, art and literature. It is in *The Kappa Child* that Goto explicitly links the white gaze to gender and race. Goto states that part of her identity politics within *Kappa* was the construction of “a character whose gender wasn’t limited to the socially constructed. I was hoping to explore an identity that placed no qualitative values on physical and social cues. I wanted to explore a character who was learning to *become*” (italics original Notkin 2002 18). This strategy is enacted through a retelling of the “pioneering” experience of *Kappa*’s young female narrator who moves, with her family, to a small town on the

⁴⁰ See Appendix 1, p238.

Canadian prairies in the 1970s carrying a copy of *Little House on the Prairie* as her guide.⁴¹

The narrator's Japanese Canadian family however, are not the idealised white, Anglo family of the *Little House* series. During their move to the Canadian prairies the narrator's father impulsively purchases a run-down property without any natural water supply. The narrator's father then announces, to his increasingly incredulous and ever-silenced family, that he is going to use this property to grow Japanese rice. Doubly silenced by their gender and race, the narrator, her mother and her three sisters' lives are one of poverty and hardship. They experience season after season of failed crops except for one, magical year when the rice grows in abundance with the help of a Kappa⁴² who is a green mythological creature with a bowl-shaped head. This head contains water and it is this which gives the creature its power to act mischievously or benevolently towards humans. To add to this magical mix, the novel's narrator is also visited by the textual and television character of Laura Ingalls Wilder who morphs in and out of the narrator's "reality".

⁴¹ The *Little House* series is classified as autobiographical in that it recounts the pioneering life of their author, Laura Ingalls Wilder in the American West during the 1870s and 1880s. Inevitably depicting a journey of self-growth, much like the journals of Susannah Moodie and her experiences in the Canadian "wilds", this mode of writing generically privileges white female subjectivity. Enduringly popular, the *Little House* series' recurring appearance on the American School Curriculum, their publication accessibility, and even the "truth" status accorded to this largely autobiographical narrative, has worked towards ensuring their continued publication success. Autobiographical writing such as that of Ingalls Wilder contributes to a national myth of identity circulating around a story of whiteness "going west" (*LHP* 1). The ideological premise which underscores the undertaking of such a journey, though not stated, is certainly implied. White settlers such as the Ingalls family made the journey West precisely with the aim of making a home on and out of the prairies with the full knowledge that this land, as Laura states on the first page of the novel, is "Indian country" (*LHP* 1). Although unacknowledged and heavily veiled, race matters in the Ingalls Wilder recollection not only as a way of marking out and describing otherness, but also in defining whiteness as a racial presence in the Western frontier. The act of colonial dispossession is glossed by both nostalgia and romanticism. When read as a "truthful" depiction of how the "savage" or "Wild West" was tamed, this series of books becomes a dangerous validation of homogenising practices that perpetuate narratives of control and domination.

⁴² The Kappa is defined in the novel's glossary as "a water sprite; a river monster, an excellent swimmer." (*K* 247).

So what does Laura Ingalls Wilder, a little green Japanese folk creature called a kappa and *Kappa's* narrator — a pyjama-wearing, lesbian, Japanese Canadian woman who, as an adult, collects abandoned shopping carts for a living, have to do with Goto's politics of representation? On the surface it provides an interesting juxtaposition of pioneering journeys. A key question resonates beneath this intertextual layering throughout *The Kappa Child*: "Why does that Laura girl want to see a papoose so bad" (K 43). Laura's desire to look into the eyes of the "other" signals that Goto is acutely aware of the power of white vision to name, construct and perpetuate polarities of difference.

Laura Ingalls' move from the American prairies of the book and television series to the Canadian prairies depicted in *The Kappa Child* is a vital border-crossing, especially in the context of Goto's critique of gendered and raced-based discourses. Goto conjures Laura's ghost and appropriates her iconic pioneering autobiography using both the subject and her story as instruments of social transformation. Ien Ang notes that:

autobiography is a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of 'self' for public, not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a *useful* identity, an identity which can be put to work. It is the quality of that usefulness which determines the politics of autobiographical discourse. In other words, what is the identity being put forward *for*? (italics original 2001 24)

The inclusion of the literary and television ghost of Laura Ingalls Wilder in *The Kappa Child* prompts a return to the *Little House* series with largely critical eyes. *Kappa* moves outside of the confessional/autobiographical style that has come to categorise and haunt Asian American and Asian Australian women's writing. The evaluation of Goto's identity politics then, involves the reader in a shift from "passive consumption to critical interchange" (Miki 1998 119). Goto's interweaving of the *Little House* books throughout her narrative signals a return to these texts, with, as Goto terms it, "new eyes"; a play perhaps on the authority

granted to the autobiographical “I” and the eye which visually marks and is a marker of identity.

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* series can be used as a point of contrast to Goto’s depiction of the Alberta prairies as harsh and as unforgiving. Ingalls Wilder constructs the North American West as a site of limitless, bountiful plains and also as a land of opportunity for those who settle there. The imperial gaze, which is so prevalent in the *Little House* books, is a record of the white colonial experience in which the land is positioned as empty, untamed and unobserved, prior to white invasion. The land is made known under the white geographical gaze, the gaze of Laura, her mother and her father and the white travellers they meet throughout their move West. In an interesting exchange in *The Little House on the Prairie* a friend, (Mrs Scott) of Caroline Ingalls (Ma), talks directly about westward expansionism and the “Indian problem”. She states, “land knows, they’d never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that’ll farm it” (Ingalls Wilder 211). This transnational and historically embedded assumption about Native land as both *terra nullius* and awaiting taming by the white colonialist, erases Indigenous claims to ownership while simultaneously maintaining Indigeneity as subordinate and Other.

Ma Ingalls’ role maintaining “civilised” values recalls to mind the role of the mother in Lazaroo’s *The Australian Fiancé*. Laura Ingalls Wilder recollects or constructs an idealised motherly image whereby Ma Ingalls’ is the harbinger of light, cleanliness and goodness within the wild, and untamed prairie space. The incorporation of Laura’s story within *The Kappa Child* is strategic. It works as social critique, especially of the way in which colonial expansionism is authorised and sanctioned within dominant stories of the white nation. By interweaving the *Little House* series into *Kappa*, by geographically centring her fiction on the Canadian prairies and in making central the lives of parents and their children who

are of Japanese ancestry, Goto's novel serves a critical purpose. *Kappa* brings to notice how the North American West is dualistically imagined in literary and filmic discourse as a site of exploration and (white) settlement but also a site of racial exclusion.

Miki writes that "the colonial legacy manifested the 'not-white' body as a sign of the monstrous 'asiatic'" (1998 208) which maintains the dominant and normative status of whiteness. This binary relies on the assumption of host/guest relations, of "the fiction that the geography of the public sphere is transparent to insider/outsider boundaries" (Miki 1998 212). While Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* shows how the prairies have been used as a geographical space that contains the threat of "race",⁴³ *Chorus* and *Kappa* write against the notion of enforced dispersal of Japanese Canadians. In both novels, Japanese Canadian families choose to live within what been constructed as a site of white opportunity and privilege.

The *Little House* narrative becomes problematic when recontextualised or re-read through the lens of gender and race. Since their publication, the *Little House* series has enjoyed an enduring popularity, particularly amongst an American female readership, rivalled only by Louisa Alcott's *Little Women* series (Romines 23). It was, perhaps, the television program "Little House on the Prairie" starring Michael Landon as Pa and Melissa Gilbert as Laura, which cemented its popularity in the contemporary American and Western European imagination during the late 1970s (Miller 1).

Goto reintroduces her readers to Laura's pioneering journey in *The Kappa Child* in order to, as she notes, "deconstruct the colonial mentality that we might have swallowed unnoticed when we read the *Little House* books as children" (Notkin 18). This strategic incorporation enables Goto to contest the narration of a homogenous national narrative of settlement, and one which has, much like

⁴³ See R. Miki, 1998 pp 135-44.

reverence of the ANZAC/Gallipoli myth within Australia, perpetuated the sense of a cohesive, non-fractured national identity. Goto juxtaposes Laura Ingalls Wilder's immigrant journey to that of the narrator's Japanese Canadian family. Goto contests Laura's recording of this experience by orchestrating a deliberate intercession between the Hollywood Laura and *Kappa's* narrator. On the first day of their move to the Canadian Prairies the narrator of *The Kappa Child* tries to explain the concept of *Little House on the Prairie* to her three sisters, Slither, PG and Mice. She tells them, "it's about being pioneers. See, we're like that right now" (K 43). But a long geographically-based journey is, perhaps, the only similarity. While the Ingalls family, as the narrator tells her sisters, "all liked each other and got along" (K 43), the narrator's family retreat inwards in an effort to protect themselves from their father's frequent and violent rages.

The narrator's father is not Pa Ingalls and particularly not the Pa so wholesomely portrayed by Michael Landon in the television series. Michael Landon's character certainly did not, as one of the narrator's sisters puts it, "hit the ma" (K 43). Even if Pa Ingalls did lose his temper it was never going to be recorded by Laura Ingalls Wilder, for hers is an idealised recording of the past. Ingalls Wilder is gratingly nostalgic in her depiction of both domestic and national harmony. While Pa affectionately calls Laura "little one", the narrator's father in *The Kappa Child* calls her "*bakatare*", and nobody, she notes almost with pride, "could say *stupid idiot* better than him" (K 77). The narrator's father is however likened to Pa Ingalls in that he undertakes this journey into the West with a sense of pioneering optimism: "maybe Dad was just like Pa parking his wagon wherever he wanted. Maybe it was like Pa chopping down trees by the river. He didn't ask for anyone's permission. It wasn't stealing. No one called it that" (K 129). Just as Ma's placement of the china-doll figurine on the mantle of their log cabin, which is described in the epigraph opening this chapter, is a potent image of white home-making, Pa's act of making a home on and out of the prairies, is also continually normalised within the *Little House* series.

Goto's concern is to make Westernised conceptions of "normality" both problematic and political. "Normal", to Laura is describing a log cabin as home in "Indian territory". Normality for the narrator of *The Kappa Child* and her family manifests itself in a desire to not be classified as "other". The narrator's father takes great offence when an owner of a motel they are staying during the family's move from the coast to the prairies tells him, "I always thought it was terrible what was done to you people" (K 70). "We are CANADIAN" (K 70) her father roars back, affirming a subjectivity which is otherwise effaced in post-war Canadian multicultural discourse. The motel owner gives voice to a racialised rhetoric which situates white Canadians at the centre of a national imaginary, while Japanese Canadians, demonised, alienated and forcibly interned during and after World War II, are positioned on the margins.

The forcible relocation and subsequent internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II, can be paralleled with an example in the *Little House* series. Ingalls Wilder romanticises the violent uprooting of Indigenous people from their homes and in one passage Laura watches their procession West from the safety of her home on the prairie, and desires "to be bare naked in the wind and the sunshine, and riding one of those gay little ponies" (LHP 307). Goto de-romanticises the notion of journeys that end in dislocation rather than relocation. Laura's overwhelming desire to see a papoose is rewarded as she watches this same procession. When she finally looks into the eyes of the papoose all she can say is, "Pa, get me that little Indian baby! Oh, I want it! I want it" (LHP 308). This moment has been read as a way of Laura aligning herself with the experience of the First Nations people (Mahar 137). However, it is the very desire to own "it", to control the "other", which underwrites the myth of colonialism. The statement "I want it", demonstrates the mentality of white colonial dominance that underscores this relationship. Laura's statement objectifies, exotifies and continues to demarcate the difference between them and us, same and other.

Looking into the eyes of the other

Laura's ghost makes one final visit to the narrator at the close of *The Kappa Child* and this is a pivotal part of Goto's glance back at the raced and gendered ideological underpinnings of the *Little House* texts. *Kappa's* narrator experiences a visitation while watching the *Little House* series on television. Melissa Gilbert, in her role as Laura, speaks to the narrator. The narrator notes however, that this Laura is vastly different from the robust, healthy book character. The televised Laura has "eyes [which] glitter bright in her starving face, lips cracked with malnutrition. Her braids messy, the hair dull and brittle" (K 252). Starving and close to death, she is not the healthy, wholesome Laura of the books but rather signals the dying myth of colonialism. The narrator listens as the television Laura croaks: "They changed the book you know [...] they got it all wrong" (K 252). The idealised story of building quaint log cabins on the American prairies, of riding "gay little ponies" and feeding cornbread to "wild Indians" is, as this ghost of Laura bitterly acknowledges, a carefully constructed myth premised on elevating the white settler to the iconic status of nation builder. *Little House on the Prairie* is a children's book and "children [as Laura notes] need happy stories" (K 252). The double irony of this statement is that adults clearly do as well.

The real story of war, death, and dislocation is filtered through the romantic lens of the *Little House* series. Since publication, generations of adults and their children have consumed an implicitly imperialistic tale of how the West was "civilised" by whiteness. This could be the "happy ending" that Goto is intent on deconstructing. Although the ghost of the television Laura acknowledges that she can do nothing about changing the ending of a story so deeply embedded in the national psyche as "truth", she tells the narrator of *The Kappa Child* that, "You can" (K 252). The narrator's story evolves as a direct response to this comment. By taking herself out of someone else's fiction including the *Little House* series and white narratives of control and domination, the narrator of *Kappa*, much like

Murasaki in *Chorus*, locates herself in a story of her own creation. The rejection of a romanticised story of colonial expansionism within *The Kappa Child* suggests that Ingalls Wilder's record of her pioneering experience was always a fantasy, her "story" was never the lived "reality" of the Ingalls family or those who followed in their wagon tracks. As the narrator of *Kappa* states, "it doesn't pay to believe everything you read" (*K* 69).

This statement can be read an authorial warning to readers, whether they are white or of colour. Goto alerts her readers that word choice and commodification of a writer's ancestry, particularly in the world of publishing, certainly matter. Goto is fully aware of the asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between publisher, author and reader and she refuses commodification of her work as a body of fiction that provides a peephole into otherness. Instead, and as she notes in her essay "Translating the Self: Moving Between Cultures", she views writing as an act of translation.

From oral sound to physical markings, from what something is perceived/experienced as to what it becomes in written form, and translated yet again in how it is read, and even further, what is written about it. So many layers. But what I think is the crux of translation is who is translating and for whom. (111)

In *Chorus*, Goto uses what Fred Wah terms "code switching" (2000 83), a tactical manoeuvre in which untranslated paragraphs of Japanese sit alongside paragraphs of English. This strategy is an attempt to subvert established storytelling traditions that have served culturally as another form of colonisation and oppression. Goto's decision not to translate her Japanese prose can, as Wah argues "act to buttress the materialisation of the hyphen, an insistence of its presence in foreignicity and between/alongside claims of source, origin, and containment" (83). This is another strategic move by Goto and the novel's bilingualism does, as Mark Libin suggests, challenge the monolingual, majority reader (121) to rethink assumptions about passive consumption of a text. *Chorus* is a text designed to make its majority reader think.

This term “majority” is taken from Miki’s essay “Asiancy”, in which Miki asks a very essential question in the politics of representation: “For whom do you write? For the majority? Or for the more limited perspective of a community?” (1998 146). The interweaving of two distinct languages throughout the narrative of *Chorus* provides a visual platform from which to question the role of language or print in both the construction and/or deconstruction of binaries and boundaries. This juxtaposition and the very nature of telling stories, allows Goto to show how language and narrative, as an intrinsic part of cultural production, work to produce and shape notions of otherness.

In both *Chorus* and *The Kappa Child* Goto subverts established literary traditions that have culturally served as another form of colonisation and oppression. In *Chorus*, the narrator’s father loses the power of speech when he attempts to assimilate into the dominant white culture of rural Alberta: “I lost my words, my home words, I didn’t have the heart to talk so much. I just put my energies into the farm” (C 207). The father becomes a stereotype of the invisible and hard-working Asian immigrant. Essential to Goto’s recuperative politics is a move from silence into speech and it is through her female characters, especially the young narrator Murasaki and her grandmother Obāchan, who tell and retell the stories in a language outside of white, Anglo Canadian discourse. These stories are drawn from memory and are revised and embellished. As the grandmother tells Murasaki, “Child, this is not the story I learned, but it’s the story I tell. It is the nature of words to change with the telling. They are changing in your mind even as I speak” (C 32).

In the Acknowledgments to *Chorus* Goto indicates that her novel is connected to her historical reality when she states that she is “re-telling personal myth”. She counters this by also stating that although she has embellished incidents from her grandmother’s life, *Chorus* is a story which departs “from historical ‘fact’ [and moves] into the realm of contemporary folk legend” (Acknowledgments). Goto

warns her readers that the novel “should (almost) always be considered a work of fiction” (Acknowledgments). This notion of playing with the reader and indeed, reader positioning, is an important factor to be addressed in critical discussions of work by culturally hyphenated writers.

Roy Miki, a mentor to both Goto and Lai, observes that their texts would

attract more attention as ‘insider’ accounts of minority subjectivities. And as the ‘margins’ constituted by centralization and dominancy become viable sites for domestication and normalization, particularly in economic and academic terms, the zone of conflict and transformation may well become the theoretical spaces of readers, writers and cultural workers of colour — though the relationship is still asymmetrical, since publishers, reviewers and critics (mostly white) control the conditions of receptivity and interpretation. (1998 121)

Indeed, Goto herself has the following to say in regard to the process of writing

Chorus:

When I began writing *Chorus* it was clear in my mind that this would be a novel about identity politics and about women’s lives. This was a very close, personal and experiential starting point. When I approached it as a text I was politically motivated. My artistic intents were braided with my political agenda. It was the early 90s and I was shocked by the fact that *Chorus* was only the second novel (well technically the third since Joy Kogawa’s *Itsuka* was published in 1992) by a Japanese Canadian writer in Canadian history. This absence of texts says a lot about the politics of publishing and racism in Canada; that there was a need to take up a politically identifiable space. But alongside of race politics I was also exploring narrative forms. It seemed less important to write another story with a beginning, middle and end than to play with a narrative form which reflected our experiential world. (Morris 2003)⁴⁴

Goto is aware that a critical reception to *Chorus* which would read the text as an exotic piece of fiction purely because of its author’s Japanese ancestry, would disregard the novel’s identity politics. As Miki argues, “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

⁴⁴ See Appendix , p239.

which dominant values are aestheticized” (1998 117). Referring to Kogawa’s *Obasan*, Miki observes that formal literary disruptions, such as the blurring of genres, have become central strategies of resistance to white hegemony (117). *Chorus* refuses mimicry of the dominant social order through its combination of a poeticised narrative style and politicised content and this combination in turn refuses both generic categorisation and canonisation. Goto’s direct engagement with issues of race, sexuality and gender allows her fiction and her poetry, to write out of, and against, the poetical politics of representation that is, perhaps, the legacy of *Obasan*.

Myths, legends and origin stories are written and re-written throughout *Chorus* and this strategy enables Goto to readdress the notion of a fixed and othered Japanese Canadian female subjectivity. In particular, *Chorus* questions the idea of “an immigrant story with a happy ending” (C 159). This is a politically loaded statement especially when read in comparison to novels that are categorised as falling prey to the “Amy-Tan-syndrome” such as Lillian Ng’s *Swallowing Clouds*. Guy Beauregard argues that Goto’s challenge is to resist Orientalised stereotypes of Japanese-ness and to speak out from a “hybrid space” as articulated by Trinh Minh-ha. He argues that Goto achieves this through the process of “translation”, that is, by using narrative forms and conventions to “recuperate storytelling’s potential to renegotiate gendered, racialised and cultural borders” (1995/96 60). In this shifting terrain Goto evades hegemonic forces that would otherwise seek to valorise her ethnicity as exotic or as an authoritative voice on Japanese cultural mores.

Kappa is just as pointed in its renegotiation of raced, gendered and sexualised borders as the earlier work. Characteristically postmodern in its interweaving of myth with symbology, reality, fantasy and with the satirical, self-deprecating reflections by the novel’s unnamed narrator, this is a novel of contrasts. In *Kappa* Goto uses cultural parallelism to dispel the idealising of immigrant journeys with

happy endings by having the narrator symbolically burn her copy of *Little House on the Prairie*. In this journey of self the narrator finally realises the impossibility of locating herself in a white colonial fiction. The narrator comes to understand the inadequacy of the *Little House* book. With this realisation she moves towards a sense of identity independent of a romanticised colonialism and fully aware of its false claim to truth.

Goto's inclusion of the *Little House* book in her own novel signifies a need for a revaluation of the monolithic homogenising practices of whiteness. In referring to and quoting from the recorded recollections of Laura Ingalls Wilder Goto emphasises both the privileging of the white voice in settler narratives and the accompanying lack of self-reflexivity in the production and subsequent canonisation of this text. The *Little House* books function as an evolving performance (in Toni Morrison's use of the term) of the way in which whiteness defines, presents and performs itself. The act of writing through and over this series in *The Kappa Child* indicates Goto's awareness of the way in which whiteness constructs itself, through storytelling, as normal and not other. Goto's novels look beyond the "coercive gaze of homogenizing discourses" (Miki 1998 123), for their textual politics indicate an understanding that the storytelling circle is never closed; the listener is also the interpreter.

What is of issue here is that the television character, Laura Ingalls Wilder, is a construct of a filmic apparatus whose thematic interest circulates around a central notion or story of white nation-building. This series is also the culmination of many re-readings and translations of the original Laura Ingalls' reminiscences, for Laura's words are filtered through the lens of publishers and family members, all with conflicting and competing agendas. In one sense *Kappa* works with and against Laura Ingalls Wilder, simultaneously allowing Laura to contest the nostalgic rereading of her books by giving her a voice otherwise denied or lost during the publication process. In writing back to, and indeed over the Ingalls

Wilder's recollections, Goto questions both their enduring popularity and their claim to truth. In burning the books and writing her own narrative, the narrator seizes the potential of words to subvert colonial cultural power.

Goto's narrative questions the way in which the gaze and the word are figured as central and controlling devices of identity. It is in this sense that Goto's intertextual border-crossing and her deliberate act of peopling her narratives with Japanese Canadian characters can be read as a strategic tool of social criticism. While Gloria Anzaldúa observes that borders or divisions are "set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (3), Goto's work traverses generic and geographical boundaries. Erasing boundaries that would demarcate or mark out a centre is essential to Goto's politics of representation and both *Chorus* and *Kappa* are characterised by a narratorial interest in a transient, permeable and flexible border poetics. These texts are important for the way they disturb established generic, racial and gendered borders and in the way they knowingly enter into a politics of identity premised on redefining the concept of personal and national identity.

Chapter 7

Making Eyes: Colouring the Look in Larissa Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

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*)

Larissa Lai's fiction and non-fictional work, like that of Hiromi Goto, enters into a dialogue with contemporary constructions of a racialised and gendered difference by subverting established literary conventions. Understanding Lai's politics involves a shift for the reader from, what Miki, in an influential essay titled, "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing", describes as "passive consumption to critical interchange" (1998 119). However, despite being short-listed for the Chapters/First novel award for *When Fox is a Thousand* (1995) and the City of Calgary W.O. Mitchell Prize for her second novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Lai's fiction hovers outside of mainstream awareness. Lai's novels, like her non-fictional pieces, require a complicated entanglement of political and poetical awareness. Both *Fox* and *Salt Fish Girl* are highly critical of the self-perpetuating stereotypes of white/hetero-normativity and in both Lai draws on the mythological and the science-fictional to contest what Miki terms "the race codes that bind" (1998 205).

Lai's fiction is "peopled" by a wide-ranging cast of culturally hybrid characters of colour. In *Fox* these include 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. *Salt Fish Girl* is similarly cast and includes women factory workers who are cloned predominantly from the DNA of Third World and Indigenous peoples of the past, or their rebel leader Evie, who is a mixture of human and point zero three percent freshwater carp. These characters defy labelling while also adding to the complexity of both novels' structures. The generic hybridity of Lai's fiction, when coupled with the inherent hybridity of each novel's central characters, suggests that Lai is writing from outside of the cultural space that canonises "happy immigrant" stories.

Lai, again, much like Goto, also employs the technique of cultural parallelism to question the way mainstream and iconic texts of the West construct racialised, sexualised and gendered differences. However, while Goto draws into her narrative the autobiography of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Lai draws on well-known texts of science fiction such as *Blade Runner* in *When Fox is a Thousand*, *Frankenstein* in *Salt Fish Girl* and the Replicant Rachel from *Blade Runner* in her long poem "Rachel", to disaggregate the visual and textual representations of identity that have historically acted to construct and affix labels according to externalised perceptions of difference. Lai's consistent return to iconic science fictional texts identifies the dualistic nature of this genre. The intertextuality that characterises Lai's body of work exemplifies how a major literary and filmic genre can simultaneously work to entrench cultural constructions of difference while also acting as an explorative site that allows for the possible dismantling of the notion of an all-seeing, all-knowing, normative white gaze.

In particular, Lai's fiction renegotiates the way in which those markers of identity — race, gender and sexuality — are constructed as hierarchical through scopic

regimes of white, male power. Lai's description of Artemis Wong, the central character in *Fox*, watching and contemplating pivotal scenes from *Blade Runner*, signals that she is acutely aware of the way in which mainstream cultural productions entrench dichotomous relationships based on domination and subordination. *Fox* intricately interweaves three distinct and historically "othered" narrative voices and this connectedness enables Lai to redefine 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.

Fox is characterised by generic hybridity and it intertwines marginalised voices that oscillate between the mythological Fox, the historical ninth-century Chinese Poetess Yu Hsuan-Chi and an unnamed narrator who lives in contemporary Vancouver. This plurality of voices allows Lai, who is also Vancouver-based, to review 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 Liao-zhai* (Lai 1999 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 she is a trickster and enjoys above all else observing the effects of her orchestrated mischief in the human world. Indeed, it has been argued that Lai uses the Fox "as a metaphorical

figure for constant transformation of ethnic and sexual subjectivity, affirming both difference and resistance” (Yu-Hsiang Fu 2005 158). Fox’s representational strength is multi-tiered in that this cross-dressing, cross-generational, cross spectral, sometimes cross and not always courtly character, allows Lai to assume a feminist stance while simultaneously questioning the politics of sexual and racial stereotyping. As Tseen Khoo argues, the depiction of the Fox’s adventures creates an “incisive feminist rewrite of a misogynistic tale [which] offers an ironic and adventurous critical journey away from certain types of tradition and the unquestioned authority of ‘master’ texts” (2003 166).

The Fox is able to assume a human form through the power of being able to animate the bodies of dead women. She does this in order to haunt her contemporary human prey, repeatedly 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 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 fully to acknowledge her lesbianism. This melding of ancient spirits and ancient bodies with contemporary student life emphasises not only the historical continuity of the female story but also the importance of the past in the formation of a bicultural identity in the Canadian present. The experiences of Artemis, Diane and another of Artemis’ friends Ming, allow Lai to explore how contemporary Canadian immigrants with Asian ancestry renegotiate their othered place within the discourse of nation.

Lai is steadfast in her assertion that her body of work is not pitched for a white audience. As she states,

What my project is about is making a narrative mythological landscape for people like myself so we have something to hang our hats on when we come into the world. I want my brothers and sisters in ‘likeness’ to have a better place than Suzie Wong or Madame Butterfly to hang their hats on — a place to begin to see their reflections. Even if they don’t fit perfectly at least they can fit a little better. (Morris 2005)

Subjectivity for Lai is not about jostling for position on the rickety ladder of race but it *is* about questioning a vertical hierarchy that gives primacy to the visual in determinations of “difference”. Lai’s incisive incorporation of several principal scenes from Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (Director’s Cut 1992)⁴⁵ within *Fox* is a symbolic extension of her exploration of the notion of hybridity and more particularly, how the white nation reads racial or sexual hybridity as less than white. In *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 *Fox*, that links two seemingly disparate texts.

⁴⁵ In the two decades since its original release, the film has achieved cult status and is linked to a conveyor belt of essays, reviews and internet discussions that hover precariously between criticism and fandom.

In reading *Fox* through *Blade Runner* this chapter explores 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 racialisation that questions the presumptiveness of a world that colours the look in every hue but white.⁴⁶ As noted earlier, the title of this thesis, “Looking Through the Twin Lens”, infers a multiplicity of viewing positions that resist any singularised concept of a dominant white male gaze. The gaze is defined in *Fox* as an external imposition and as such, this “gaze” is constructed and perpetuated by a cultural system predicated on white supremacy, in which, referring to the dialectic that began this chapter, white is hierarchically positioned as the only “non” colour.

Fox’s narrative voice is at once ancient and contemporary; it is, also 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/phallogocentric 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. (Mathur 1998 2)

Lai’s comment indicates the key thematic of her novel — one which questions 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. As Lai writes in “Corrupted Lineage”: “I am interested in the questioning of origins as a counter to the Judeo-Christian myth of

⁴⁶ 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 (1997 45-46).

the garden” (2001 50).⁴⁷ *Fox* is notable for the way it signals Lai’s emerging commitment within the literary to a strategy of interrogation. Lai propels Artemis towards 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 dominating and pervasive white gaze.

However, 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” (1992 169). This “apparatus” is for Lai a Hollywood-produced science fiction film and her intertextual engagement with *Blade Runner* articulates an awareness of the power of the paternal viewing apparatus to colour the look white and perpetuate gendered and racialised dichotomies. As a product of Hollywood *Blade Runner* privileges a specific way of seeing and vision functions within the film as both a dominant motif and a motif of domination.⁴⁸ Vision, as Scott Bukatman writes, “both makes and

⁴⁷ This stance is explored in detail in the following chapter on Lai’s second novel, *Salt Fish Girl*.

⁴⁸ 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” (36) 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 is illustrative of a general understanding that categorised the film as a meditation on definitions of humanity. J.P. Telotte argues, though 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 that requires strict policing and control (156). 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 underpinnings, as observed by Robin Wood, problematise the fear of the unknown other and are 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, such 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” (quoted verbatim 66). The Replicants exist outside of the social (dis)order that characterises this city and difference is perceived as a “dangerous malfunction” (70).

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 1980, 156), surveillance has long been utilised by the coloniser to maintain inequitable power relations between “the free” white and the coloured/ colonised other.

Are you looking at me?

Striking similarities exist between the disembodied eye of René Magritte’s “The False Mirror” (1935) and the unblinking, hovering eye in *Blade Runner*.

Please see print copy for Fig.11

Fig. 11. “The False Mirror”.⁴⁹

Please see print copy for Fig.12

Fig. 12. “The flaming eye”, *Blade Runner*.⁵⁰

Both are similarly blue, similarly disembodied, and similarly severed from its human source despite the implicit coding that the surveyor is human. The very notion of the falsity of representation and reflection is indicative of an historical preoccupation with ascertaining differences between the simulacra and the real. Commenting on “The False Mirror” Arthur Kroker observes that:

The implications of such a definition of difference perpetuate hierarchical binaries in which anything outside of 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*.

⁴⁹ <http://elsa-rieger.fv-verlag.de/false-mirror.jpg> (accessed 24 June 2004).

⁵⁰ http://www.brmovie.com/Images/BR_Eye_2.jpg (accessed 8 June 2004).

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 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 point of 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, it could be argued, belongs to the penultimate eye-maker and postmodern mechanic, Eldon Tyrell. Both Magritte's eye and Tyrell's eye in *Blade Runner* are illustrative of Western, patriarchal domination and both images signify a voyeuristic white gaze that seeks dispossession of, just as it seeks to control, the object under scrutiny.

Lai takes to task the perpetuation of a racist stereotype based on the essentialised notion that "all Asians look the same". Lai's critique and parody of this practice is evident in 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" (*F* 63). In Roman mythology the name Diane is identified with that of Artemis who, in Greek mythology, is the virgin

huntress. Earlier, at their first meeting, Artemis is mesmerised by what she describes as Diane's "carefully put-together" (*F* 24) look while simultaneously thinking to herself "*We have the same name, [...] Just different versions*" (italics original, *F* 24). Despite sharing their first and last names, Artemis Wong and Diane Wong, as Lai pointedly demonstrates, are not at all alike. Later in the narrative, the cultural equating of Artemis with Diane is made ironic in a scene in which Artemis is told by a storekeeper that her "sister's [Diane's] fries are ready" (*F* 65). Although Artemis replies, "She's not my sister", she is nevertheless told by the assistant that "She looks like you" (*F* 65). There is a subtlety to Lai's critique of a naming process that simultaneously accords sameness and difference to Asian corporeality. Artemis has no choice but to live with her racialised body. 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 (2000 111). As the mirroring of Artemis and Diane's names and indeed the morphing Fox figure suggests, identity is a fluid rather than fixed process and, like the trickster Fox, very hard to pin down.

Are you speaking to me?

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. Toni Morrison is critical of the way in which language is used both to deny autonomy and maintain white male power. In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature she noted,

There is and will be more seductive, mutant language designed to throttle women, to pack their throats like pâté-producing geese with their own unsayable, transgressive words; there will be more [of] the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute. (1995 17-18)

Language is indeed acknowledged by Lai as a powerful tool of domination when utilised as a policing device for the shaping of identity. Her characters are shown moving through a historical space in which their bodies are problematically named and labelled as other. In *Fox*, Artemis recalls her teachers complaining of “not having much practice with foreign names” (*F* 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 Anglicised and she is told that, “Anderson is an unusual name for an Asian woman” (*F* 37). The term “Asian woman” implies that Diane is a national rather than historical subject; that she is Asian, not Canadian, and it would appear that at this level of the social, Asian and Canadian are mutually exclusive terms.

Naming functions as a categorising tool, one which determines who, and who does not, belong to the national imaginary. For while Artemis describes her name as a “keepsake” (*F* 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 can also serve to mask the fear of difference operating within the white body politic. As Morrison writes, “Sexist language, racist language, theistic language — all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas” (1995 16). Naming the “other” is an insidious process in which the label is affixed through verbal and non-verbal means.

While Artemis may appear disempowered Lai uses language as a tool of empowerment and critique. Miki and Wah co-write in the Preface to *Colour. An Issue*,

One means of resistance to homogenization and the elision of racialisation has been the unpredictability of writing in terms of both transference and textuality. In the actualities of language, contemporary writers have located a medium to make visible the subjectivities, histories, narrative, and theoretical issues that sound that four letter word [race]. (Miki & Wah 1994)

Rather than referring to specific histories of racism in Canada such as the Japanese Canadian internment in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, or Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, the role of the Chinese in building the Canadian Pacific Railway in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, or even Sakamoto's second novel *One Hundred Million Hearts* that takes as its focus, the life of a Japanese Canadian girl crippled physically and emotionally by the aftermath of World War II, Lai moves outside of the historical story and makes the textual intertextual, for 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" (*F* 45). Lai problematises 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 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 sexualised and racialised hybridity pervades the narrative. Though Artemis is defined as Eastern and as Other by her racialised body, her upbringing is predominantly Westernised Canadian.

In Part Three of the novel, 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?" (*F* 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" (*F* 153). Artemis is classified as non-Western and therefore as a non-English speaking other by her racialised 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 parents' occupations. Their combined desire to study the Orient and fetishise 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?" (F 31).

In order to deflect the implied Orientalised gaze, Artemis attempts to assimilate into whiteness by denying her cultural past. She cloaks herself in the trappings of whiteness and this act enables Artemis to render her cultural self invisible. In doing so she 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 (F 21). Later, when her mother takes her to Chinese grocery stores, always when her father is away on business, Artemis looks quietly, but with distaste, at what she believes is foreign or "creepy" (F 21) food. The father's denial of her cultural past and her mother's fetishisation of it, results for Artemis in a schizophrenic subject positioning.

Artemis is doubly objectified and exotified for her external visage or "Asianness" and for her cultural roots. There is an implied link between this process of othering and Lai's incorporation of *Blade Runner* into the *Fox* narrative. While Artemis is "skin" different to her adopted Caucasian parents, the renegade Replicants in *Blade Runner*, who physically resemble their human designers, are described as "skin jobs". In this futuristic film difference is determined by exteriority. *Blade Runner's* Prologue foregrounds a definition of difference that can be read as a diagnostic of the film's racialised perspective. The Prologue constructs totalising 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 viewers 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 an indication of the identity politics of the film.

There is an 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 interpolate the viewer 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 by effacing difference and therefore eliminating any perceived threat from the “illegal alien” other.

One of several embodiments of supposed 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 (*F* 15). Perceived by the West as the personification of Eastern exoticism, the Geisha is significant to the novel’s interrogation of the racialisation of the other’s body. Given Lai’s contestation of a passive gendered and racialised subject positioning, it is not surprising that *gei*, which is “art” in Japanese, and that Artemis, sometimes called Art, should react so adversely when confronted with the image of the Geisha in *Fox*. Artemis can see

herself reflected in this celluloid and stereotypical representation. That Lai is conscious of this Westernised inscription of exoticism onto historical players is evident not only through her parodies, but also 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*” (F 35). There is nothing “charming”, however, about a subject position that is codified as servile and subordinate because of gender or race.

Vision(w)ary Replicants

That the renegade Replicants, Roy, Leon, Zhora and Pris, are aware of this 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 coloniser 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 coloniser 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 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 God-like Eldon Tyrell. The racialised polemics of the film, though carefully coded, have a history 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 (1991 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 problematises 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). 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. Slavery, as Silverman observes, remains an acculturated category that "still manages, in an attenuated way, to rhyme with negritude" (115). It is Batty's show of whiteness

which prompts us to reconsider his servile positioning as slave so clearly defined in the Prologue.

Blade Runner is an accessible product of the Hollywood filmic apparatus and its popular appeal perhaps masks its racialised polemics. While Silverman 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), it could be argued that the film works instead to further *entrench* the division between “master” and “slave”, whiteness and colour/other. Drawing this iconic film into her novel enables Lai to further complicate 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” (*F* 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” (1985 219).

Identifying, maintaining and surveying the division between the naturally white and non-white, alien, “other” is central to the racialised 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” (1996 8). And yet, as Minh-ha asserts, there is a shift occurring in the politics of representation, particularly the politics of difference. Minh-ha suggests 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” (*F* 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 politicised 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 reconceptualises dominant assumptions of an authentic and singularised 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?

Holes in the Wall

Rick Deckard, the Blade Runner played by Harrison Ford, is central to Lai’s rewriting and questioning of the cultural construction of identity. 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 however, to look behind Deckard's "ordinary" white exterior and examine his pathological make-up.

Deckard is, above all else, a killer. However, in the process of hunting Zhora it is Deckard who is almost killed in her dressing room because his single focus, killer clarity blurs and Deckard becomes the "peeping tom" he purports to be 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. In a film in which power is maintained through vision it is not surprising that Deckard should uncover Zhora's identity with the aid of two prosthetic eyes. The first is a powerful microscope that allows Deckard to trace a snake scale he finds in Leon's bathroom. Identification of the maker of the scale leads Deckard to its buyer who is the owner of the club at which Zhora dances. The second is a video-like device called an Esper that turns the past of a two-dimensional photograph taken by Leon into a three-dimensional present. This prosthetic eye, however, severs any link with the original photograph's historical referent by enabling us to see into the photograph. Like the Replicant's memories, Zhora, who suddenly appears in the photograph, could also be an implant in the original copy.

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. While Deckard may ultimately help Rachel to escape Zhora's fate, she remains fixed and "othered" 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 rather than the hunter of her mythological namesake.

In another scene, Artemis 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" (*F* 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. Lai's novel seeks to renegotiate the very structures that attempt 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, 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" (*F* 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.

As historical subjects women have been culturally conditioned to fear the act of looking or speaking back but it is a fear that the supernatural Fox is set on exposing as invalid. The Fox journeys through feudal China and as readers we are introduced to an array of characters who refuse to conform to the Western fantasy that equates Asian with Madame Butterfly and Madame Butterfly with passive, subservient, exotic and heterosexual. Lai states:

I've had white people come up to me and say, I didn't realise there were so many lesbian stories in Chinese culture. I made them up I tell them. Of course there are lots of stories in Chinese culture about women's alliances, sexual and otherwise, just as there are in European culture. But they are there beneath the surface, between the lines [...] They are not necessarily framed in the ways contemporary Western and/or diasporic desires and expectations might demand of them. (Mathur 1998)

However, 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" (*F* 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 emphasise 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 further distinguishes between the active and passive, natural and

technological vision, suggesting that these divisions emphasise the very unnaturalness of the act of looking. She observes that “vision is *always* a question of the power to see — and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualising practices” (italics in original 1991 192).

The gaze of the white, Western, male coloniser is personified within *Blade Runner* 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.

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” (*F* 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” (*F* 103). At the close of the novel the Fox, finally revealing herself in human form to Artemis, and echoing the words of the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood”, states, “What big eyes you have” (*F* 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 reveals 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 associative human act of interpretation in what is a highly technological and theorised 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 marginalised subject's life. It is the lack of such visionary space in *Blade Runner* that ensured its inclusion in Lai's politicised fox tale. Lai's ever-expanding body of work teases out the implications of a system that accords primacy to the white male gaze and indeed, the white male body. It is through a return to iconic texts such as *Blade Runner* in *Fox* and *Frankenstein* in her second novel *Salt Fish Girl* that this assumed normativity is both highlighted and questioned.

Chapter 8

“What does it mean to be Human?”: Racing Replicants, Monsters and Clones in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

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*)

The dialectic that Larissa Lai began between *Fox* and *Blade Runner* and the notion of engaging intertextually with culturally notable or well-recognised literary and filmic texts, is continued in her second novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). Like *Fox*, *Salt Fish Girl* interrogates the construction of identity through allusion to an iconic science fictional text, in this case Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. This literary interweaving is both enabling and strategic in the sense that *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* are not only texts located within the genre of science fiction, but also texts that explore what it means to be “human”. Both *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* ascribe to a definition of a pure, originary and unmarked humanness. Lai’s novels however contest this positioning by exploring the inherent hierarchies underscoring the term. While *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein*’s definition of humanness accords the white, Western heterosexual male a universal and centred subject positioning, Lai’s fiction links this ideology to past, contemporary and futuristic classificatory systems that are race and gender based.

In order to explore these concepts *Salt Fish Girl* is, much like *Fox*, constructed as a multi-layered narrative that oscillates between the past, present and future. In *Salt Fish Girl* the past is located in nineteenth-century China and from this

geographical location, the tale of Nu Wa, the snake woman, and her lover, the Salt Fish Girl, emerges. The novel moves between this past and a dystopian future which is set between 2044 and 2062 in a walled city called Serendipity. Serendipity corresponds to the current location of Vancouver and it is in Serendipity that we are introduced to the novel's primary narrator, Miranda Ching, and her family.

Into this already dense interweaving of differing stories Lai introduces a rebellious band of genetically engineered female factory workers labelled "the Sonia series". Designed by their genetic scientist father, Dr. Rudy Flowers, as a vast source of expendable factory labour, 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. This construction of the Sonia series and the focus on their social othering allows Rita Wong to argue that "far from legitimizing the official history of the nation, *Salt Fish Girl* critiques it by exploring the subjectivities of those who, having been marginalised by the nation's priorities, do not self-identify through the nation's lenses" (2003 113). In their search for a sense of identity outside of a system that "others" and devalues them, the cloned Sonias surreptitiously imprint a question upon the soles of the shoes they produce for the Pallas Shoe Corporation.⁵¹ In a rhetoric that is both poignant and political, the Sonias ask, "what does it mean to be human?" (*SFG* 237), a question which not only gives the novel its thematic unity and political impetus but one which Lai uses to trace and expose past and contemporary anxieties about difference.

⁵¹ There is a veiled link in the novel between the Pallas Shoe Corporation and the practices of the Nike Corporation in China.

At the textual level, *Salt Fish Girl* redefines conceptual paradigms that conflate difference with otherness while equating 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” (1997 2), Lai’s complication of the term “human”, through the introduction of the female Sonia clones and through her reference to the *Frankenstein* narrative, is a strategic intervention in contemporary identity politics. The Sonia’s haunting question recurs in the novel and this associative return to the myth of origins is a defining aspect of Lai’s work.

Lai commences *Salt Fish Girl* with three opening words from Genesis, “in the beginning” (*SFG* 1); however she reverses reader expectations by relocating this biblical creation scene to the muddy banks of the Yellow River in China. This is an early narratorial signal that part of the novel’s representational politics involves a return to and a questioning of Western paternalistic stories of creation and origins. Lai imbues her narrative with a mythic aspect and the story begins in ancient China where the half woman, half snake goddess, Nu Wa, creates the first humans from yellow river mud. This is not a loving and benevolent act. The birthing scene is one of carnage for Nu Wa is unhappy with the way her creatures talk back to her, and ridicule their maker. She tears her creations apart in anger before falling asleep amongst what she describes as “the wreckage of my monstrous creations” (*SFG* 3), a phrase that uncannily echoes Victor Frankenstein in Shelley’s novel.⁵² Nu Wa, however, becomes lonely. She states that:

they became so absorbed with one another that they forgot about me altogether, except for those that could not have children. These built temples and burned incense for me. They laid out plates of pork and

⁵² 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” (Shelley 1980 73), a “fiend” (Shelley 89) and a “dreaded spectre” (Shelley 60). Positioned as different and “other” to humanness by and through the visual, it is, significantly, the very “horror of [his] countenance” (Shelley 57), his “*unearthly* ugliness [which] rendered *it* almost too horrible for *human* eyes” (italics added Shelley 95) which makes him an object to be feared by his creator, Dr Victor Frankenstein.

whole steamed chickens and sweet round oranges laced with a few tears of longing. I helped them when I could but after a few thousand years there were so many of them, I could not help them all, though I revelled in the success of my latest project [...] Because their affection for me diminished so gradually, I didn't know how resentful I had grown, or how lonely. (SFG 6)

In order to ease her loneliness she desires to be like her creations, to walk amongst them. Addressing the reader directly Nu Wa declares that,

You might think it odd, to envy the beings one has created. I can't explain, except to say that it happened and that it consumed me with such a burning longing that I could think of nothing except how I might walk among them undetected and experience their joys and sorrows. (SFG 6)

With echoes of *The Little Mermaid*, Nu Wa foregoes her magnificent tail in exchange for human legs and experiences a very painful act of rebirth. This birth is made possible because Nu Wa uses Miranda's sixty-three-year-old mother as the vessel. Miranda in the future has no idea she is Nu Wa in the past but she does note that her conception was unusual

given the fact that my mother was a good eight years past menopause [...] From time to time I get an inkling, enough to sense that there was something I knew before this moment, but whatever it was flooded away from me in that instant, before I could grasp a sense of what I was leaving. (SFG 15)

The dreaming disease

Although Nu Wa's past has been left behind, History does find a way of seeping into Miranda's present in the form of dreams. Dreams are a running conundrum throughout the narrative and Lai states that the motif of the "dreaming disease", as Miranda's condition is called,

is my attempt to think through a North American relationship to the past, one that is repressed and broken but keeps surging violently to the surface precisely because we try so hard to hold it back. Doing anti-racist work in the early to mid-90s this was something I noted very much among well meaning, democratically minded folk who nonetheless did not want to deal with the inequities and violence of the past. 'We have a democracy now that is all over. Why can't you just

forget about it?’ they’d say when someone would bring up the Japanese Internment or the Chinese Exclusion Act or First Nations residential schools or the Komagata Maru incident. It is also a way of working through the loss of language and culture that a lot of us immigrant children have experienced and, in many cases including my own, participated in.⁵³

Miranda spends much of the narrative trying to suppress these dreams as many of them recall the history of human atrocities, including war and genocide, and of the difficulties faced by past and present generations of immigrants from Asia to a predominantly white, Western nation. In this sense history is circular and to Miranda “it seemed the most natural thing in the world that I should remember things that went on before I was born, things that happened in other lifetimes” (*SFG* 70). Part of Lai’s pedagogy within *Salt Fish Girl* is this emphasis on the link between the past, the present, and the future. While living a sheltered existence within the walls of Serendipity, Miranda is unaware that other people also have these dreams and that these dreams manifest themselves in distinctive odours. For Miranda this is the unpleasant smell of the durian and for her family and friends “There was no escape from that terrible odour [...] That foul odour of cat pee and pepper not only infused the external fabric of our house, it seeped into the skin of all my family members” (*SFG* 16-17). Rita Wong argues that “Miranda’s smell is an undeniable symptom of social histories that are not speakable in the corporate compound” (2003/4 115). In Kristeva’s sense of the abject they are the histories that cannot be faced but instead are denied or buried so that the nation performs an idealised act of cohesion while attempting to ignore cracks and fissures through which the stench of past atrocities might escape.

When Miranda’s family are expelled from Serendipity and forced to begin life anew as owners of a grocery store in the Unregulated Zone outside of the city, it is not clear whether this is because of Miranda’s “cat-pee” smell or her father’s failure in his job as a Tax Collector for the Saturna Corporation. What becomes

⁵³ <http://www.uclagary.ca/~lalai/dreaming.htm> p.1

central is Miranda's growing realisation that there are others like herself who live outside the walls of Serendipity, others who not only experience dreams of the past but also have a distinctive, generally unpleasant body odour: "We heard from one of our customers of a girl who smelled of cooking oil who remembered all the wars ever fought. She could recall every death, every rape, every wound every moment of suffering that had ever been inflicted by a member of her ancestral lineage" (*SFG* 85). Miranda's dreams are also anchored to the past, and like the cooking oil girl, they are based on a reality which, however brutal, cannot be forgotten. Miranda's mother tells her of the importance of "keeping old games, old stories and traditional values alive" (*SFG* 65) suggesting that in its attempt to obliterate the unpleasant past, the future world of Serendipity is in denial and its citizens live a reality that is constructed and perpetuated by corporations that are profit rather than people-driven. The citizens of the future, like Miranda's family and like the Sonias, are an expendable resource valued only for their servitude. They are non-citizens in the sense that their reality and access to knowledge is carefully regulated by corporations like Pallas.

The narrative emphasis on Miranda's struggle to suppress the dreams of the past from seeping into the future is further complicated when Miranda begins stealing antique wind-up toys because of their "lifelikeness" (*SFG* 219). There is an intertextual link here with the *Blade Runner* narrative and its filmic concern over the inability to distinguish Replicants from humans. In Lai's Serendipity, the future has also lost touch with the real and this is exemplified in a video book called "Forbidden Tales" that Miranda immerses herself in during childhood. Miranda is particularly captivated by the tale of the "The Snow Princess". This is a fully interactive game and Miranda is able to interact with the heroine helping "the princess decide what to wear for her kidnapping and then for escape. The array of outfits was astonishing, ranging as it did from brassieres and hot pants to tiaras and long flowing dresses. But for the most part [Miranda] was much more interested in the mechanics of escape" (*SFG* 34). Her father dismisses these tales

as “unwholesome, [perpetuating] socially destructive stereotypes” (*SFG* 34). Her mother, apart from thinking they are “cute” (*SFG* 34) regards them as a chief aspect of Miranda’s learning for the part they played in what she terms “our collective unconscious” (*SFG* 34).

The spectre of the hybrid

Lai introduced the notion that identities are not fixed through the shape-shifter fox character in *When Fox is Thousand*, and through the Replicants in *Blade Runner* who try to deny the reality of their four-year life-span. This issue is returned to in *Salt Fish Girl*. 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” (2000 20). Although the cloned Sonias 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 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” (Bhabha 1994b 116), but moves beyond its ideological confines. Contesting an acculturated split that invariably privileges the West over the East, and sameness over otherness, Lai’s fiction emphasises the trope of splitting, doubling and shape-shifting in order to critique such divisive underpinnings. It is then, with more than a little authorial irony, that Lai titles the opening chapter of *Salt Fish Girl*, “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” (1995 175) which results 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” (175). Jacqueline Lo (2000) distinguishes between two opposing applications of the term “hybridity”. On the one hand the concept of a benign hybridity or “happy hybridity” as Lo terms it, is employed to diffuse cultural difference and this usage entrenches existing and unequal power relations. This application denies the tensions that underscore cross-cultural contact (Lo 152/53). Lo argues that hybridity is a politically-charged concept and its application and usage, particularly in the area of cultural studies, endows the term with “the potential to unsettle and dismantle hegemonic relations because it focuses on the process of negotiation and contestation between cultures” (153).

Lai’s conceptualisation of hybridity, as pressuring the borders from within, falls into this second approach. Lai’s literary exploration of the notion of hybridity as an artificial production is libratory 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*. Lai likens the Sonias and their rebel leader Evie (formally Sonia 113) to the story of Frankenstein’s creature and Mary Shelley’s literary examination of the question of what it means to be human.

When Evie recounts her escape from the Pallas Shoe Factory she states “I crossed a glacier to throw them off the scent. Just like Frankenstein” (*SFG* 159). Both Evie and Frankenstein’s creature are hunted because they have been culturally othered. Frankenstein’s creature internalises his social 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” (Shelley 130), a prejudice which, the creature notes with

unintended irony, “clouds their eyes” (Shelley 130). 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. In attempting to redefine the parameters of what it means to be a human through the figures of Evie and the Sonias, Lai repositions 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.

Canonical articulations of otherness

One of the defining characteristics of the science fiction 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, and her own narratorial construction of the cloned Sonia’s whom their creator, Dr Rudy Flowers, defines as “not human” (*SFG* 255), draws attention to stereotypical representations of difference and Lai uses the genre of science fiction to emphasise the “artificiality, simulation and the constructed ‘otherness’ of identity” (Janes 2000 92). 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” (1991 70), and Lai’s deliberate rupture of established boundaries of identity, of generic conventions and her intertextual reference to *Frankenstein*, illustrates the possibility of a futuristic site of identity. This site rejects the notion of fixed boundaries and is instead characterised by an ongoing process of negotiation and transformation.

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 crucial 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 *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*. While one text emerges from early nineteenth-century imperial England and the other from the late twentieth-century, both have spawned an entire industry of reviews and responses. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, like the Director’s Cut of *Blade Runner*, has also received an enviable reader reception, one which oscillated between veneration and censure.⁵⁴

Both *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* also allude to various canonical texts within their own narratives and it might be argued that such literary mirroring works towards ensuring the longevity of the original. However, the “reappearance” of *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* within Lai’s fiction achieves the ulterior aim of interrogating the fixity of divisive race and gendered discourses. Her evocation of canonical texts is critically strategic because of their location within the genre of mainstream science fiction and more particularly so since, in the plethora of

⁵⁴ Early reviews of *Frankenstein* are an ambivalent mix of praise and criticism; praise for the “author’s original genius and happy power of expression” (Scott 305), and for its “exhibition of intellectual and imaginative power” (P. Shelley, 312), and critique of a text in which “dreams of insanity are embodied in the strong and striking language of the insane” so that the work is seen to inculcate “no lesson of conduct, manners or morality” (Croker 309). In a more contemporary reception Kate Ferguson Ellis suggests that the novel is a subversive critique of the family unit (185) and, more particularly, that the monster exists outside of the realm of domestic happiness and affection because his father withholds from him any possible union with a mate. According to Ferguson Ellis, the violence and notion of retribution which so pervades the novel is essential to Shelley’s “language of protest” (185), by which it is meant Shelley’s feminist stance that critiques the rigid separation of the private and public spheres.

In contrast, Linda Bradley reads the creature’s body as “spectacle, as biological machine, as commodity, as material construction, as ethical issue and site of contestation” (68), but it is a “body future” (99) which signifies not the abomination of a masculine-based misuse of technology but one which alerts us, to a paradigm shift and the responsibility that comes with choice. Victor Frankenstein is an autonomous agent, his class and education codes him as moral, as philanthropic. As Percy Shelley so assiduously noted in his 1832 review of the novel, the creature, though described as an “abortion” (311) is born with an innate “affectionate and full of moral sensibility” (311), his whiteness, in this novel’s definition of the term, is skin deep. 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” (311). The creature becomes other through his social construction. It is this notion of the social construction of identity, that Lai complicates and critique within her own body of work.

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.⁵⁵ Politically engaged and actively interventionist in the context of critical race studies, both *Fox* and *Salt Fish Girl* are strategic texts in the 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” (Chow 2002 1). 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” (Chow 1). The intrinsic link between Lai’s fiction and *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* is an interrogation of a colonialist discourse that perpetuates a fear of the visually raced other. 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” that has been 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 science fiction literature and film is an essential aspect of Lai’s politics of identity. The inclusion, and reference, to such 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 postmodern age, to bind discussion

⁵⁵ Exceptions to this would include Anne Mellor who construes the creature as a racial other in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth century theories of “race”. H.L. Malchow 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 whites by the “nonwhite” (10) populations of Asia and Africa. Elizabeth Bohls 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 (Bohls 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 (25).

of human variation/otherness to skin colour and race. 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.

In *Salt Fish Girl* life is artificially, magically and naturally created. Lai emphasises that not all offspring are created perfect or even equal through her intertextual reference to *Frankenstein*. 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? (Cixous 1975 540)

In her 1831 Introduction Shelley bids her "hideous progeny [to] go forth and prosper" (10) 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" (74). Although 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" (1991 151), is useful to this reading of Lai's literary interrogation of social and cultural 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 their offsprings' wrath of abandonment. As fathers, they make themselves inaccessible to their offspring. This indicates, perhaps, an underlying fear of the created returning to destroy the creator. This fear is not at all misplaced and all three literary and filmic "offspring" return, albeit confrontationally, to meet their paternal maker(s). They

do this to contest the production and marking of their body as unnaturally “other” and their casting out by the various societies in which they seek to live. The idea of manufactured servitude is central to the *Salt Fish Girl*, *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* narratives. The Sonias are brutally repressed and are denied even the most basic of citizenship rights. They exist on the outside of the nation and yet work at this corporate heart in order to keep it economically mobile. Like the Replicants in *Blade Runner*, they are the immigrant or slave labour of the future.

Fallen Angels

This 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” (1997 45). The inherent power of whiteness resides in the paradox that despite the mixture of brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, red, brown and blond hair and all the variations that these combinations offer it still presents itself as visibly invisible (Dyer 1997 48). This invisibility means that in social discourse whiteness is taken for what Dyer describes as sameness or “the human ordinary” (47) 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. The skin of the human hybrid bears its coloured mark of difference to whiteness through skin hue. In contrast, the figure of human-like doubles such as the Sonias is feared because of its unrecognisability; they

have been made in the image of humanness. 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 becomes too much like an animate one” (Freud 354). To protect itself at the centre and to allay its fear of the inanimate 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 and are controlled through a disc called a “Guardian Angel” that is wired into their backs at “birth”. Evie notes that this device is used “to keep track of us [...] The GA looks after us, monitors our body temperatures, notes the presence of disease, helps rescuers find us if we get lost” (*SFG* 159). 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” (Shelley 23).

In contrast, Victor Frankenstein, who boards Walton’s stranded ship just after this sighting, is described as “a human being [...] a European” (Shelley 24). 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” (Mellor 2001 2).⁵⁶

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 Prophecy” stating “Fiery the angels fell/Deep thunder roll’d around the shores/Burning with the fires of Orc”. In Blake’s original the angels do, of course, rise.⁵⁷

In *Frankenstein* 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” (Shelley 97). Such a self-definition, 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 (Shelley 9), is central to Lai’s appropriation of the original in her own hybridised-postmodern-science fiction-horror story. The

⁵⁶ Mellor’s argument moves beyond traditional readings of the creature as the abject, a monster who occupies the in-between space of the dead/not dead. It is not the creature’s gigantic stature or grotesque body piercing that makes him a figure of horror, but rather his yellow-skinned countenance. Mellor’s research into late eighteenth-century contextualising of the origins of the human species carefully historicises the hierarchical and deeply entrenched notions of a racial divide premised on skin colour. But Shelley’s novel does more than set up a distinction between white and non-white, Caucasian and Asian, civilised and barbaric. Mellor’s positioning of the creature in a liminal “third space” fails to account for Victor Frankenstein’s suppressed fear of miscegenation or rather, the “polymorphic perverse people” to which Young refers to in *Colonial Desire*. It is only through an examination of *both* Victor Frankenstein (and his lack of love and benevolence) and the creature that the coded racialism of the text becomes apparent.

⁵⁷ The original lines are:

“Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd
Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc
And Boston’s Angel cried aloud as they flew thro' the dark night.”

http://www.english.uga.edu/nhilton/Blake/blaketxt1/america_a_prophecy.html (accessed January 2006).

revulsion Victor Frankenstein feels upon the birth of his creature relates to a (mis)reproduction and this is much the same reaction that Dr. Rudy Flowers has to his own progeny — the Sonias. It is not so much who, but what, is the object and underlying cause of this evocation of revulsion, terror and horror (Halberstam 1995 28) that Lai's text seeks to address. Onto this already heavily laden palimpsest of iconic texts, Lai projects the figures of the cloned Sonia series, and their renegade leader, Evie. The Sonias are to be feared by their maker because of their random capacity to reproduce, something which Rudy Flowers did not factor in his cloning of these women. Evie however 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. They have discovered that the few Sonias who have escaped Pallas and founded a safe haven have been found and killed while their home is completely destroyed by the Pallas Police. 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. 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 telling Flowers that, "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" (*SFG* 253). 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.

Looking through the Lens of Nation

In *Salt Fish Girl* Lai further explores this inscription of a passive and gendered otherness through the metaphor of vision that she began in *When Fox is a Thousand*. *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. 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” (1991 340). Lai accords the Sonias a measure of power and autonomy by giving them 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. The Sonias resist their slave status by ripping the Guardian Angel out of their backs. It is their chance discovery of the reproductive capacities of the durian seed however, 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.

The Sonias use the fertility power of the durian seed and they give birth to 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 that 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" (*SFG* 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" (Shelley 160) upon the earth making "the existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror" (Shelley 160). There is an historical fear of the "yellowing" of whiteness and both Frankenstein and Flowers attempt to perpetuate 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.

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" (Haraway 1992 299). 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 states that:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized 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. (1952 216-17)

If the desire to reproduce copies is a confirmation of the superiority of humanness then in seeking a reflection or recognition of itself “on that other being”, 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, perpetuates the myth of human worthiness and ordinariness in his own terms. The invocation of Frankenstein’s creature and *Blade Runner*’s Replicants within Lai’s fiction allows her to navigate across established generic and racialised 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 Lai returns 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. Being a mixture of human and point zero three percent freshwater carp, Evie acknowledges that this aquarium is the home of her “mother” and the place, as she notes with understated irony, in which “many lives begin” (*SFG* 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” (*SFG* 262). While Evie is suggesting that there is pleasure in surveillance there is also the implied association of the gaze 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” (*SFG* 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 unequal power relations. 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 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* 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" (1978 91) but Lai's novels have resonances beyond merely the repetition of ancient paternalistic 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" (1989 122). 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. Frankenstein's creature comes to voice through the language, customs and culture as recorded in several texts of whiteness, not only *Paradise Lost*, but also Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and a volume of *Plutarch's Lives*. Is it any wonder then, that under this literary tutorage he should regard himself as the fallen other? In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon writes that the black man "will be proportionately white — that is, he will come closer to being a real human being — in direct relation to his mastery of the French language [...] A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (1952 18). As Fanon observes, "mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18). In writing back to iconic texts of whiteness that can be characterised by a grammar of race and gender, Lai exposes not only their cultural centredness but also the assumption of power that has helped position it there. Fanon further writes that,

Every colonised people [...] finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his

adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes white as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (18)

Frankenstein's creature begins life in the forests of rural Europe, consuming foliage and berries, truly the jungle fare of Tarzan! Frankenstein assumes a mantle of whiteness when he adopts the language and customs of the De Lacey family whom he voyeuristically observes from his place of darkness. When the creature does come to speak it is with an articulateness and eloquence that beguiles his listeners especially when they do not look at him. However, despite the creature's amazing powers of oration he can never be fully white for his physicality is read as coloured and other. Even though he may mimic the master's voice his physical presence denies him entry in the fiercely protected bastion of humanness.

Different stories

How can someone who is socially othered counter this othering process and begin to tell their own story? Lai addresses this issue through Nu Wa's betrayal of the "salt fish girl", who, despite the novel's title, stands on the periphery of this story about non-white origins. In one of her past lives Nu Wa meets and falls in love with a young fish vendor whom we come to know only as the "salt fish girl". Graceful in appearance and characterised by the strong odour of fish and ocean salt, she is the point of suture for Nu Wa between her past watery origins and life in the present. Theirs is a grand passion until Nu Wa abandons her lover for the charms of a foreign white woman whom she follows to a place called the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness. This is a white world and one where Nu Wa is classified as an illegal alien. Fearing detection Nu Wa adopts the official language of this new country. As a diasporic subject Nu Wa's enforced assimilation into whiteness results in a severing of all ties with her original culture and the love of the salt fish girl which linked her to this culture. By implicitly referring to imperialistic acts of enforced assimilation, Lai contests the historical domination of a discourse which speaks over the language, customs and stories of the non-white cultural past. While Lai's novel is not about whiteness it is about difference. *Salt Fish Girl* is a

positive reading of difference for, and as Nu Wa/Miranda states, “By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future” (*SFG* 259).

By engaging with iconic texts of science fiction and using the figure of the clone Lai is able to explore the divisive underpinnings of ideological assumptions which reiterate that whiteness is indeed, the “real thing”. Whiteness is positioned within *Salt Fish Girl* as socially constructed, produced and marketed, much like “Coca Cola”. While Nu Wa, Miranda, Evie and the Sonias are defined as non-human, Miranda’s only childhood friend, Ian Chestnut, is overdetermined in his humanness. Appearing and reappearing at formative moments in Miranda’s life, his presence is suspicious for Ian’s own origin and subjectivity is just as mysterious as Miranda’s. Arriving in Serendipity because his parents were declared spies in one of Pallas’ rival company compounds, Ian appears to know more than most about the genetic commodification of cloning. While it is difficult to determine where Ian’s information is derived from, it is highly likely that he and his parents are clones.

His mother is described by Miranda as “having teeth which gleamed white. Her eyes were both prosthetic and had a terrible piecing intelligence to them” (*SFG* 65). Ian’s father is described as a tall, wide man whose “arm muscles rippled unnaturally” (*SFG* 65). In this instance, Miranda, with her fish origins, appears more “natural” than this genetically altered and engineered facsimile of 1950s domestic bliss. As children, Ian leads Miranda into the depths of their school where she sees, for the first time, a series of dark skinned, cat-like female clones called Miyakos, that have “the contagion” (*SFG* 76), which Ian likens to Miranda’s durian-like smell. They are, in Ian’s words, “the afflicted” (*SFG* 76) of the future. This equating of otherness and dark skin with disease and contagion has long been an historical practice. Lai observes,

[y]ou've only to look at the reaction to SARS, to Iraq, and all this discourse around the axis of evil. This rhetoric is quite medieval, it is regressive, we've lost centuries in just one decade. With SARS there's the whole connection of Asian to contagion and disease which again, is medieval in its origins. It was always the other who was diseased. It is discourse that belongs to the Black Plague. Such a notion, in our contemporary media climate, is ancient, barbaric and unbelievable in its backwardness. All the discourse around the current war in Iraq belongs to the same era — all this talk about axes of evil, and just wars and so on — it's the talk of the Crusades. We're being sent right back to feudalism. At least in the moment of 'Writing thru Race' we were still talking about democracy. It was still a liberal discourse which belonged to the twentieth- rather than the eleventh-century. This worries me greatly. The concerns about race and nation that were so important in the 90s really need to be deepened and complicated. Yes, I still want to talk about representation. But I also want to talk about travel, mobility, the movement of money, goods and people across all kinds of terrains, borders and distances, about propaganda, about the manufacture and replication of violence, about fundamentalism, about war, about corporate greed. (Morris 2005 30).

What this historical practice does is to reify, for whiteness, its self-assumed position of normalcy at the centre. Both *When Fox is a Thousand* and *Salt Fish Girl* interrogate the normalisation of such a process. They achieve this through a dual examination not only of the way in which humanness is constructed as white, male, Western and heterosexual, but also of 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 not only of racial, sexual and gendered, but also of generic stereotypes and constrictions. *Salt Fish Girl* links racial discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 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 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 body of fiction operates 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.

Chapter 9

Desiring Dolls: Celluloid Displays of Gender and Race

their good woman is a queer thing,
half doll, half angel; their bad
woman almost always a fiend.

(Charlotte Bronte *Shirley* 343)

woman: the paradox of a being that
is at once captive and absent in
discourse, constantly spoken of but
of itself inaudible or inexpressible,
and still unrepresented, invisible
yet constituted as the object and the
guidance of vision.

(Teresa de Lauretis 1990 115)

The automated doll Olympia in Hoffman's "The Sand-Man", the exquisitely crafted "puppet", Lady Purple, in Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple" and the *more human than human* female Replicants, Pris, Zhora and Rachel in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* are created as/for spectacle. Literally *man*-made, they are hyper-feminised copies for male display. The construction of the automated doll, puppet, robot, cyborg or Replicant in the form of the female body evokes ambivalence in its human creators, one that oscillates between fear of the copy and a desirous fascination for it. As Freud observes in "The Uncanny", "the things, persons, impressions, events and situations which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny [include] waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata" (347). Existing in a stage of arrested development, these doll-like creations reappear and are reanimated in Larissa Lai's most recent work, a long poem in the form of a self-published chap book bearing the title of "Rachel".

Referring to the Replicant Rachel in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, and linking a contemporary politics of the body to the past and future, the poem re-imagines a gendered and raced subjectivity through Rachel's fictional diary entries. The interrogation of the way the genre of science fiction perpetuates racialised and

gendered dichotomies that Lai began in *Fox* and continued in *Salt Fish Girl* is furthered in the “Rachel” poem. As Lai states, “I think there is, in a lot of contemporary science fiction, a reproduction of the raced body and of whiteness that is unquestioned” (Morris 2005 27). However, Lai also qualifies this by adding, “It also works the same way in historical fictions and other kinds of fiction” (Morris 2005 27). The Rachel diary further questions cultural reproductions of difference and acts as a vehicle of not only social but also literary transformation. It offers a revisionary way of looking at the social fabrication of selfhood and is a strategic addition to Lai’s body of work, the progression of which indicates a precise pattern of interrogation; one that explores and complicates the way the Asian female body is marked as gendered and as raced through scopic regimes of white power.

The power of this poem rests not simply in its gendered and racialised thematics but also in its production, publication and intertextual referencing. That the “Rachel” text is metafictional in its engagement with not just *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein*, but with “The Sand-Man”, “The Uncanny”, Greek mythology, “Paradise Lost”, *Swan Lake* and the work of Angela Carter and Sylvia Plath is noteworthy. It links the past, present and imagined future by connecting acts such as the real world Nazi quest for Aryan dominance, to literary and filmic accounts of the drive for immortal perfection in human constructions of the copy — and all of this through the perspective of Rachel’s fictional, science-fictional diary.

This diary of a female Replicant allows the reader to glance back at, and through, the original film, just as the video-like Esper machine that Rick Deckard uses to track the Replicant Zhora in *Blade Runner* is able to turn what Barthes’ “that has been” of a two-dimensional photograph, into a three-dimensional present (1975 77). The diary in effect functions as a correcting postmodern prosthetic eye and in enabling readers to see what is hidden, it animates the otherwise unanimated, doll-like and one-dimensional on-screen figure of Rachel. In offering a different,

multidimensional view of Rachel, Lai is suggesting the possible dissolution of such boundaries while simultaneously rethinking discourses of otherness particularly relating to gender and race. She achieves this by looking at the figure of the doll, or more specifically, women of Asian descent, to whom Rachel is likened to, as a Eurocentric patriarchal construction of female passivity. Lai questions this passivity in a way that Lillian Ng and Evelyn Lau do not. The “Rachel” poem differs from the work produced by Ng and Lau in that it allows for an alternative perspective in which the traditionalised object of the male gaze becomes the bearer and creator of her own meanings.

Lai’s choice of the diary mode is important and her ever-increasing and thematically linked body of work is both a continuing and complicated entanglement with fixed modes of address — of not just who speaks and who is spoken for — but, and as a central critical response to these authors’ work, who is listening. This is best articulated by Lai in a recent interview where she states:

I think it is important to recognise that writing is always pitched at an audience. That it always imagines and at the same time constructs its reader. So I think of my first line of address as other people like myself; my own generation of younger Asian Canadians, women, maybe lesbian, maybe feminist, maybe not, but those who feel like outsiders for whatever reason [...] I’m very seldom in the first line of address. It’s an interesting place to read from. In some ways, you could say I’m providing the pleasure of that experience to people who aren’t conventionally put in that place. (Morris 2005 22)

Lai’s work occupies what Roy Miki has termed a “shifting terrain, a future place, a textual place where literary and cultural conversations can perhaps begin” (1998 53). By this he means a place outside of white mainstream CanLit because, and as he cautions, “No one involved in the production or reception of literary texts — from the writer to publisher to bookseller to reader — is free of the boundaries that get drawn by editors in privileged positions” (35). Noting the selective nature of anthologising and canonising specific works, Miki further observes that it is perhaps the “best” rather than most “relevant” texts that are chosen by editors who

favour “conservative poetic forms” while championing “values belonging to the ideology of positivist humanism and its colonialist legacy” (1998 36).

However, as Helen Buss argues, “It is not so much that women are in a position of lack in entering language as it is that language, and by implication, generic formats, construed and limited by patriarchy, lack the ability to fully express female subjectivity” (1993 5). The poem “Rachel” is confronting both in the way it is structured as diary entries, and in its intertextual layering. Rachel’s diary operates as a poetic intersection between Rachel’s iconic status as romantic love interest in a science fictional Hollywood movie and her emerging claim for an autonomous subjectivity.

The almost random, stream-of-consciousness flow of Rachel’s diary entries gradually builds towards a self-reflexive interrogation of cultural constructions of selfhood. This level of introspection differs markedly from that of the characters depicted in the fiction of Evelyn Lau and Lillian Ng. Indeed, Rachel’s glance back at the past through her diary and her very questioning of the truth status of her origins is essential to Lai’s representational politics. While nostalgia (visually reinforced by the repeated appearance of sepia toned photographs throughout the *Blade Runner* narrative) may sentimentalise the past, memory for Rachel is an act which “may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relationship to the present and the future” (Green 1991 298). This diary of a female Replicant then, is not a conventional prose style memoir and the diary/poem is noticeably indifferent to punctuation and syntax. While Rachel describes the futuristic world of 2019, the diary emerges as a critical comment upon both the past and the present.

Like the vast majority of women’s diaries, Lai’s self-published, labour intensive chap book has a restricted audience, predominantly due to its limited print run. Recording a previously othered and silenced insider’s perspective on an iconic

Hollywood film in a mode that is not fiction, and not autobiography, is potentially subversive in that there is no accepted textual measure by which to categorise such writing. While Rachel's diary may exist outside of the science fiction canon in which *Blade Runner* is firmly placed, it heralds a brave new critical voice that publically engages with language in a way that is satiric and interrogative. This is evident from Rachel's first words which indicate a sense of self complacency:

2019 and all's well
i tower my mythic birth
my father's a doll maker
his algorithms spill life
'more human than human' (R 5)

Beneath this feeling of rightness however lies a growing sense of anxiety about her birth:

pretty policeman's seen the letter
the law of my birth
my four years trickling out
was there a start point?
i search my memory for
the moment i became me
and can't remember (R 12)

Her eventual knowledge that "what's past is polaroid" (8) that,

i dream my insect hatching
my brother's incest
curious as logic
of folded paper
i hang my memory on icy lines
tedious laundry
someone else's dirt (R 9)

and also that,

the old man is not my father
is god in his heaven (R 10),

prompts her to ask herself "what's right with the world" (R 10), propelling her towards an existential identity crisis. From these poignant snippets in the poem/diary we begin not only to read, but also to see, Rachel anew.

Looking at Rachel

Please see print copy for Fig.13

Fig. 13. The Replicant Rachel.⁵⁸

The thematic continuity apparent in Lai's work opens a space for a revisionary feminist engagement in contemporary identity politics that emphasises the complex intertwining and historically constructed basis of gender, sexuality and race seen through the long lens of science fiction. Her work is not transparent, accessible, or even marketable in the same way as Ng or Lau's fiction is. Lai is deeply committed to issues of human rights and addresses what she perceives as violations in a way that mainstream publishers would perhaps find unpalatable in the sense of return on investment. Her voice is vital and imperative in the context of Asian Canadian literature. In examining the "Rachel" text and tracing connections back to its literary and filmic precursors such as *Blade Runner* and "The Sand-Man," it is possible to read Lai's work as an evolving critique and challenge to the cultural construction of gendered and raced hierarchies of difference.

This notion of border-crossing — of a constant movement between texts that represent our past, present and future — is an important issue, for "movement" as Griselda Pollack notes,

is also associated with that of the eye as it reads a text: re-vision in Adrienne Rich's terms. Reading has become a charged signifier of a new kind of critical practice, re-reading the texts of our culture symptomatically as much for what is not said as for what is. Meaning is produced in the spaces between, and that is why we are moving across canons, disciplines and texts to hear, see and understand anew. (1999 26)

⁵⁸ <http://frames.free.fr/Images/bladerunner5.jpg> (accessed 2, July 2003).

In giving voice to the previously silenced but iconic filmic character of Rachel, Lai offers a reinterpretation of the repeated image of woman as passive, silent and subjugated as it has been produced by and through patriarchal culture. As the idealised embodiment of feminine display in mass consumer culture, the glamorous and polished Rachel of the film, despite a slight “mechanical” gait, generally talks, looks, moves and acts, right down to her deftness at lighting cigarettes, just like a human. Buying into, amongst many things, a false myth of origins, this Rachel fully believes herself to be human. But Rachel is a Replicant. She is a copy, a facsimile, a reproduction, and “a reproduction, as well as making its own references to the original, becomes itself the reference point for other images. The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it” (Berger 1972 29). The dominant image of Rachel is that she is less than human.

Rachel’s pouting red lips and carefully coiffed black hair are likened to that of the geisha who appears on what Lai describes in the diary/poem as the “Kabuki coca cola billboard”. Although created in the image of her (Western) human makers, Rachel, linked to the exoticised, doll-like image of the geisha, is “*both the same and different*” (italics original Hall 1990 227). The significance of Lai’s use of the trope of the woman as *man*-made doll and her linking of this to the image of the geisha, rests in its explicit connection to the politics of the body, indicating that there are varying edifices of oppression which are not simply gendered, but are also raced and sexuality based. As Gina Marchetti notes, the representation of the geisha in Hollywood films “is not only a fantasy that underscores questions about gender; it [is] also, despite whatever narrative mechanisms come into play to try to suppress it, a fantasy about race” (1993 197). Rachel, as doll, is gendered but she is also raced. She is almost but not quite real or human. The parallel to this is that if she is not quite human then she is also, not quite white.

Lai draws attention to the coded, racialised and gendered polemics of the film by allowing Rachel to question the paternalistic and fabricated nature of her origins. The danger of Rachel's representation in *Blade Runner* is that she sheds her "geisha masquerade" (Marchetti 176) towards the close of the film, emerging as a "true" woman, her hair loose and her make-up skin-tone in colour rather than Kabuki theatre white. Thus armed, her metamorphosis indicates that she is ready, much like Cho Cho San is scripted to in *Madam Butterfly* (1915), or Suzie Wong in *The World of Suzie Wong*, to sacrifice herself or be sacrificed by the white hero.

Returning to *Blade Runner* and "The Sand-Man" via the "Rachel" text allows us to review not just her subject positioning within the film, but also that of Pris and Zhora, as the doll-like objects of male scopical desire. In an analysis of the history of the female nude in Western art, John Berger notes that "*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (italics original Berger 1972 47). The female Replicants are positioned in *Blade Runner* as already narrated female subjects and this positioning of woman as, in Berger's words, "an object of vision: a sight" (1972 47), is, as previously noted,⁵⁹ located within a white colonialist and masculinist point of view. Rachel's diary allows us to confront the nature of the dispossessing male gaze, for rather than reproducing Rachel as a figure of passivity, Lai rewrites her from a first person perspective thereby giving Rachel control of her own representation.

Lai's glance back at *Blade Runner* through Rachel's diary provides a critical standpoint from which to begin an interrogation of the film's gendered and raced underpinnings. The imagined future of the filmic world of 2019 is a reflection of our past and present and the servile positioning of the female cast in *Blade Runner* is not surprising given the film's central polemic which positions the white, Western, male gaze as god-like in its policing and construction of identity. This could be one of the reasons Lai appropriated scenes from a popular science fiction

⁵⁹ See Chapter 1.

film in her first novel *When Fox is a Thousand*, but also why she returns to the figures of the female Replicants in order to challenge dominant mythologies of a raced and gendered female subjectivity. As Lai observes,

It was an interesting exercise to write a science fiction piece in which the protagonist is not that white, human, good, man. I'm interested in this whole relatively recent circulation of the figure of the Asian as a figure that belongs to this mythologised future. I think it is very interesting how all science fictions, including mine, are recirculations of myth. A site outside of time, a conflation of past and future, a site that belongs to the other because they are not here and now. (Morris 2005 27)

In particular, the *Blade Runner* film presents us with a stereotypical progression of heterosexual romance through the genre of Film Noir. This genre generally circumscribes woman's role as subjugated to that of the male (usually white) hero and privileges heterosexual desire as a way of reaffirming male dominance.

In another scene from *Blade Runner* Deckard is shown using force and power against Rachel, coaxing her language to be a mimetic repetition of his. Deckard's silencing of the female voice is reversed in Rachel's diary. The diary, in effect, provides us with a sub-text to the film, offering another way of reading its raced and gendered ideologies. Deckard's romancing of Rachel (and she does, by the close of the film appear to have fallen "in love" with him) also indicates another cultural fall that has been termed "the Pocahontas Paradigm" (Ettinger 1994 52). Part of the Pocahontas myth and especially that propagated by Disney and one dearly beloved by the white, colonial imagination, is that of a syrupy, racial harmony between the white invaders and the indigenous American population. As Maia Ettinger puts it, in North American Thanksgiving pageants,

year after year, a little white boy in a pilgrim hat and buckled shoes clasps hands on stage with a girl in a leather dress with fringes. Little John Smith, who has ventured into unchartered territory populated by an unfamiliar Other, is rescued by a girl in braids whose spontaneous, unsolicited love transcends his foreignness and his whiteness and drives her to protect him from the more threatening elements among her own people. (52)

In buying into this myth, the dominant white population idealises heterosexual love while negating the racial genocide that is of course the unacknowledged underside of this narrative. It is the white, heterosexual male who is positioned as superior not just in this account of the past but also in a futuristic chronicle such as *Blade Runner* which is, quite unsurprisingly, also set in America. As a designated “other”, the Replicant Rachel can buy into the myth of white power by choosing to love an icon of whiteness, one that is symbolised in *Blade Runner* by the figure of Rick Deckard who carries out a genocidal mission designed to maintain not so much a racial harmony but certainly a racialised order.

In this sense, the filmic Rachel’s construction of selfhood comes from the social — one that seeks to maintain the myth of white patriarchal dominance — and it is hardly coincidental to Lai’s politics of identity that Rachel’s initial entries in her diary indicate that she understands she is a man-made doll. She describes her father as a “doll maker” (R 5), her birth as “mythic” (R 5) while also noting that “I’m all business/ here to demonstrate perfection” (R 6). Dolls are described as “both a subset of the double and a manifestation in literature of the uncanny, eerily repetitive, begrudgingly recognised, familiar, yet unknown (Carriker 1998 13). Interestingly, in a landmark study in the United States during the 1950s, African American psychologist Kenneth Clark conducted a study aimed at understanding the impact of systemic acts of cultural racism on African American children. When given a black and a white doll and told to choose which they preferred there was an overwhelming preference for the white doll (Fusco 2004 30).

Please see print copy for Fig.14

Fig. 14. “Black Children with White Doll”

In a study of the Barbie doll Anne Ducille argues “more than simple instruments of pleasure and amusement, toys and games play crucial roles in helping children determine what is valuable in and around them. Dolls in particular invite children

to replicate them, to imagine themselves in their dolls' images" (1994 48). The children in Clark's experiment chose white dolls because they represented "desirable human qualities" (Mirzoeff 2004 124) and because it was the white doll rather than the black doll that had the chance of being "happier in life" (Pultz, 1995 95).

Lai's Rachel poem is intent on exploring the notion of what is a "desirable" human quality. She does this by returning once more to her examination in *Fox* and *Salt Fish Girl* of the problematics of white fathers as creators or "doll-makers". In an oblique reference to the original text of *Frankenstein*, Rachel describes herself and her fellow Replicants as

we illegitimate offspring
our father's lawful
monsters turn or not turn (R 30).

However, rather than focusing on the monstrosity of the progeny, Lai's "Rachel" poem articulates the notion, and one so astutely put forward by Angela Carter in her short story "The Loves of Lady Purple", that it is indeed the makers who are monstrous in their god-like machination and manipulation of creation, "dusted [as they are], by a little darkness" (Carter 23). This notion of darkness circulates around the gendered split between performance and display. According to Berger, "to be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded" (1972 54). The "Rachel" diary reveals that this "disguise" is a patriarchal construction, and in unveiling Rachel looking at us and looking at herself, Lai enters "the sexual politics of looking" (Pollack 2003 122). The diary in this sense allows for a different reading or spectatorial position that challenges the cultural construction of the female body as passive and doll-like under a controlling male gaze.

Rachel's glance back is contextualised in Lai's text through Freud's reading of E.T.A Hoffman's "The Sandman" in "The Uncanny". Focusing predominantly on the story of Nathaneal and his descent into madness, 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 problematises 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 falls in love with Olympia believing her to be "the real thing" while Rick Deckard falls in love with Rachel fully aware of the knowledge that she is not the real thing, that she is a replication, a simulacra of humanness.

Cloaked by a similar aura of humanness, Olympia, as Bruno observes, "is such a perfect 'skin job' that she is mistaken for a real girl" (68). This façade of perfection however eventually arouses in the hero Nathanael, and his friends and community, a fear and suspicion of this human-like other. 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" (Hoffman 117).

Homi Bhabha uses the figure of Olympia to "explicate this strategy of cultural splitting: human/non-human; society/other" (1994c 136) arguing that she "stands between the human and the automaton, between manners and mechanical reproduction, embodying an aporia: a living doll" (136). Olympia's role in "The Sandman" is however, rather glossed over by Freud who argues that it is Coppélius/the Sandman and Nathanael rather than Olympia "who must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story" (Freud 348). But Lai draws Olympia back into the story linking the construction of femininity to male creators, to males reading the female figure, to

males writing the female figure in science fiction, and to the representation of women of Asian ancestry as passive, supine and less than white in popular Hollywood cinema. While Lai's revisionary feminist work in the realm of science fiction draws "on feminist analysis of the construction of gendered subjectivity in order to suggest possibilities for more plural and heterogeneous social relations, and to offer a powerful critique of the way in which existing social relations and power structures continue to marginalise women" (Wolmark 1993 2) it is also arguable that it her intertwining of the discourses of gender with race, and her very questioning of the way Asian femaleness is read as doll-like, not-quite-white and therefore less-than-human, that gives Lai's work its powerful and critical edge.

Animating the inanimate

This incorporation of the doll-like figure, as she has been envisaged in Western patriarchal art, film and textualisations, is also evident in the work of Hiromi Goto and Simone Lazaroo. As noted, Goto introduces us to Laura Ingalls Wilder in *The Kappa Child* who, as she journeys through the "Wild West", articulates an overwhelming desire to see a papoose. When she finally does look into the eyes of the papoose, Laura sees a reflection of herself. As such, the papoose can be read as doll, as object of ownership and also the self's (Laura/whiteness) double. *Its* black eyes are pupil and the word pupil, derives from Latin *pūpilla* meaning little girl or doll, suggesting minaturised reflections. Freud observes that a moment of mirroring such as this can provoke a favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings especially, as he asserts, "when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one" (354). Poulson argues that accounts of the frontier by whites focus on describing the eyes of native Americans and that this is an interest which has persisted through textualisations of Western experience of otherness (1992 47).

Griselda Pollack makes an interesting observation on Western artistic representations and one which is relevant to Goto's re-reading of the *Little House* series, when she states that:

Colonial culture does not positively mirror back the subject's body to itself as the basis for ego formation. Instead, it turns onto the racialised other a gaze in which s/he can only experience her/himself as coloured — as thus negatively devalued object of a sovereign Other's refusal. Racist stereotypes are thus projected through a beam of blackening light directed at the colonised subject who then perceives skin colour as the indelible mark and bodily sign of an internal otherness that becomes a self-alienation created in this subjection to the epistemic violence of racism: a racial epidermal schema. (1999 256)

The stereotype of the submissive doll (docile/idol) is a reflection of an ideological fantasy premised on unequal power relations, but one that is nevertheless, culturally reinforced and repeated as norm. While the doll is more often a reflection of its human maker, in drawing on this figure Lai, and also Goto and Lazaroo, suggest a break-down of existing boundaries between self/other, animate/inanimate. The incorporation of the figure of the doll into their fiction prompts the reader to reconsider entrenched notions of what is the original and who or what is the copy? Created by *Blade Runner's* white patriarch Eldon Tyrell, Rachel is, of course, the desirable doll *par excellence* but the doll-like other is also feared because of its uncanny human likeness. While Rachel might comment in her diary that "our perfection is our flaw", she also understands that this perfection is *man-made*, "our father which art/ artful we tender girls" (R 26). Dolls reappear in Lai, and Lazaroo and Goto's work, in order to emphasise the link between ideological inscriptions of Asian female passivity, and of reading Asian female corporeality as alien to and less than white.

In Lazaroo's first novel, *The World Waiting to be Made*, the teenage Eurasian narrator, struggling with feelings of alienation in her new home of Australia, takes a plastic troll with lime green acrylic hair to her friend Sue's house only to find Sue playing with California versions of Barbie and Ken. Sue squeezes purple fruit

over Barbie's naked breasts and explains to the narrator "this is how they dress in Oobla-Oobla land where you come from" (*WW* 29). Later, on her first day of high school and not having seen Sue for two years, Sue greets the narrator as she walks into class with "Hello, Tropical Barbie Doll" (*WW* 77) and the narrator is instantly othered by a class full of "more pale eyes than I'd ever seen in one room" (*WW* 77). Later, in this same class and studying a topic titled "Our Asian Neighbours", the narrator extols the benefits of bargain shopping in Singapore. She is met by hostile stares and realises "that muteness and invisibility might be my proper state" (*WW* 81).

Lazaroo further explores this link between exotified dolls and being made voiceless by white, patriarchal hegemony, in *The Australian Fiancé*. In one compelling scene, the Eurasian girl and the Australian fiancé pass a lantern doll shop while she is showing him the streets of Singapore. Seeing her staring at these dolls and wanting to buy something for her, the fiancé engages the doll-maker in conversation about how straw wrapped in newspaper, paper triangles and plaster of Paris are assembled to form a doll which, the maker notes, can be anything the buyer desires, from a scholar, to a maiden to a civil servant (*AF* 33). The fiancé "assumes she'll want the maiden with her long hair of fine black thread, her sky-blue gown with white blossoms" (*AF* 34).

Essential to Lazaroo's representational politics is the girl's rejection of this scripting of her as a cheongsam-clad, lotus blossom commodity. The Eurasian girl understands that in her role as "tourist guide" for the Australian it is her body which is being purchased. It is the fiancé's perception of her as fragile, vulnerable and doll-like which attracts him to her. She both resists and uses this market appraisal hoping to help her impoverished family through contact with the wealthy Australian. But, like the severed doll that Pris holds in the film *Blade Runner*, the fiancé sees the Eurasian girl as a body without a head; voiceless but sexually available and compliant.

Please see print copy for Fig.15

Fig. 15. The Replicant Pris.

Understanding this, and in an attempt to counter this perception of her, the girl chooses what she calls a “woman warrior” (AF 34) doll. This is perhaps a reference to Maxine Hong Kingston’s now canonical *The Woman Warrior* (1977), one of the first texts by an Asian American female writer to achieve widespread literary recognition and best seller status. In this novel the “No Name Woman”, a dead aunt of the narrator whose history is effaced after the discovery of her adulterous affair, is eventually given voice through the narrator’s textual re-imagining. She is the woman/word warrior. Read in this context Lazaroo’s politics of identity engage in a similar dialogue to that initiated by Hong Kingston’s text: that of re-inscribing a voice that has been continually silenced and made doll-like by racialised and gendered historical and cultural practices.

Speaking for Rachel and Olympia

Lai’s “Rachel” poem continually links the figure of the doll to the process of constructing and speaking for Rachel. Rachel describes herself as her maker’s “beloved daughter” (R 22), a “princess with perfect clothes” (R 22). Earlier in the poem she notes, with a sense of abject futility, that

my body ticks out
its even rhythm too flawless
for birth i athena my own sprouting (R 8),

understanding that this constructedness denies her an autonomous subjectivity. For, and as Rachel further observes, she is inextricably tied to “the hand that winds me” (R 9). Overt references to “The Sandman” are dotted throughout the poem. Rachel describes her face as “plastic” (R 11) and her eyes “fine as china” (R 17) with a further definition of herself late in the poem as “I Olympia this cursed vision” (R 18). This string of references allows the reader to trace the

connection between the figure of the automated doll Olympia and the futuristic female Replicants, Olympia, Rachel, Pris and Zhora.

Like Olympia in “The Sand-Man”, the Replicant Rachel is suspiciously similar to her white makers —she is almost, but not quite human, she is almost, but not quite white. Lai challenges us to reconsider how whiteness constructs and continually reconstructs itself within a mainstream text such as *Blade Runner* as naturally not “it” or other. A central question arising from the “Rachel” poem is how does whiteness position itself within the social as a real or original entity rather than a replicated, doll-like other? Rachel is gendered as a doll, but another factor to consider is that this figure of the doll is also raced. If the doll is a construct, raced as “Asian” and perceived as “not real”, than conversely “the real thing” is whiteness or humanness and in *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* this is equated with white maleness.

Despite the fact that Freud dismisses the role of Olympia in “The Sand-Man” as “irrelevant” (351), choosing instead to focus on the fraught relationship between Nathanael and Coppelius, Lai’s text asks us to reconsider the artfulness of this highly constructed and subjugated subject positioning. The very notion of “voicelessness” of the perfectly silent, non-reproductive but always desirous female is central to a rereading of both the Hoffman portrayal of Olympia, Freud’s lack of engagement with her (in effect denying her a voice) and Deckard’s manipulation of Rachel’s subjectivity in *Blade Runner*. Olympia is valued by Nathanael because she is a projection of his self: “she expressed thoughts about his work and about all his poetic gifts from the very depth of his own soul, as though she spoke from within him” (Hoffman 118). Similarly, Rachel’s thoughts are all dictated by Deckard, from the initial Voight-Kampf test to his recounting of memories about her childhood she had previously thought were hers, to the language lesson during the problematic “love” scene. Rachel’s diary and short story however, emphasise the very constructedness of the notion of a speaking

voice, for “giving voice” remains, in contemporary culture, extremely paternalistic (Minh-ha 1992 18).

Much of contemporary feminist discourse is centred around the notion of women finding a voice, but this voice is, as bell hooks notes, predominantly white and Western. hooks argues that the struggle for black women and women of ethnic minorities “has not been to emerge from silence into speech [instead, the struggle involves] chang[ing] the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (1989 6). In this context, the meaning of the “Rachel” diary is premised on a major paradox — for how is it that the historically silenced “other” gains a voice by writing back in the very language that functions to silence her? Lai’s answer is, and has been in *Fox*, *Salt Fish Girl* and the Rachel poem, for subjugated women to glance back. This look back offers an alternative way for a raced and gendered subject to articulate the self. Lai manipulates both language and filmic narrative, and the postmodern pastiche evident in her work “authenticates” or gives voice to the female Replicant’s experiences and emotions that are otherwise denied in the film. Rachel’s description of Deckard in her diary as “my policeman” (18), is an indication of ownership and love, and offers possibilities for thinking about women’s subjectivity as something far more than that of object of male heterosexual desire. Paul Coates writes that:

In love, the other is one’s double [...] that when selecting a partner we tend unconsciously to choose [an other] whose features echo our own [...] When the similarity between self and other is so great, however, as to suggest identity, the feeling it generates is not love but the uncanny. (1988 1)

In her diary Rachel describes the Replicant Pris as “my dangerous twin” (R 25), “my quick twin” (R 28) and “my deadly double.../ (R 27). Pris is designed, so we are told in the film, as “the standard pleasure model”; she is the sex doll of the future, all “scrupulous correctness and perpetual willingness” (Schwartz 2000 125). Rachel asks “can a machine die?” (R 21) and this question is directly related to a gendered and sexualised identity. Machines of the early modern period were

not only equated with sexuality, but this rise of the machine was commonly depicted as gendered and unwholesome; an evilness that threatened to consume maleness through its association with a rampant, devouring female sexuality (Grenville 2001 25). Bruce Grenville observes that,

the construction of the robot or cyborg in the form of the female body represents a conventional patriarchal response to the growing presence of the machine in culture. Within the patriarchy the female body is a desirable object, a subject of visual pleasure that can be manifest in many forms. (25)

Taken in this context, one possible answer to Rachel's query is that no, as a machine she cannot die, but the certainty is that she will be superseded by newer, more desirable but similarly contained models. Lai's description of her Rachel as mannequin/bride and Rachel's diarised observation that "i'm inflatable/ sex doll requires your mouth/ to animate/ you pull the plug" (R 21), signals not simply a critique of the historical idealisation of the heterosexual marriage and woman's role as nothing other than a hyper-visualised, feminised sex-doll in it, but also the continued mirroring of stereotypical constructions of femaleness in science fictional texts. In *Fox* Lai uses the character of Artemis to question the continued depiction of women of Asian ancestry as doll-like and less than white. Artemis, as Lai shows, has no choice but to live with her racialised body in contemporary Vancouver. Artemis, as Lai reflects in an article written eight years after the novel's publication,

is a product of my thinking through what happens to young Asian Canadian women in the absence of a radical community-based identity politic. She has some awareness of colonialism and white-privilege, and some awareness of how her body is read within mainstream white society, but she does not really have any useful tools to deal with this knowledge. (2005 168)

While traversing many genres including that of science fiction and mythology, Lai's body of work remains firmly anchored to, and highly critical of, a contemporary, gendered and racist reality. The "Rachel" poem shows Lai's deepening exploration of the link between the racialised body and constructions of

difference that she began in *Fox* in which a character such as Artemis is read as almost, but not quite white. The reality of living a racialised life is depicted in Lai's work as non-idealised and despite the message that Hollywood propagates, not *everyone* lives happily ever after. The "romantic" union between Deckard and Rachel at the close of *Blade Runner* is an attempt to allay contemporary anxieties about difference. Lai's rewriting of this script critically exposes them. While science fiction is a wonderful medium to play out these anxieties and to contemplate the meaning of difference, the film itself is hardly pluralistic in its basic assumptions about definitions of humanness and what it means to be non-human, raced or different. Lai's focus on *Blade Runner* and on the Replicant Rachel is noteworthy. For Lai, the genre of science fiction offers a way of questioning fixed categories or seemingly immutable boundaries. Lai's choice to focus on Rachel allows her to explore a link between futuristic technology and the commodification and reproduction of gendered and raced differences that serves the interests of white patriarchy. Rachel is not quite human and the concomitant of this implies that she is also, not quite white.

The self-reflexive and thematically linked nature of Lai's work indicates a direct glance back at the eye of whiteness. This is a glance that challenges not simply the notion of origins and originality of white maleness as power but the very constructedness of this image. We can (re)look at Nathanael's "uncanny" moment as occurring not when he sees Coppeliuss again but, and as Francoise Meltzer has suggested, when he realises that Olympia is both a "lifeless doll" and the love of his life (1982 231). The moment is made more significant if we link it to that of Deckard's growing sense of self, particularly when he returns to his apartment and finds Rachel shrouded by a sheet, a death-like, "sleeping beauty" whom he kisses, thus simultaneously bringing the doll to life and confirming his love for her. Rachel's note to Deckard in her diary is important in this context. She asks "when did you know what you were? / when did you choose/ a lover like yourself?" (29). If Olympia is Nathanael's double and Rachel, the "lover like yourself" is

Deckard's double then Lai's revisionary return to "The Sandman", *Frankenstein* and to *Blade Runner* offers true libratory potential in its re-envisioning of a futuristic subjectivity as a non-gendered and non-raced bifurcation.

Lai's revisioning of Rachel repositions representational hierarchies that are gender and race-based as multiple sites of interrogation. Far from being an inarticulate "it", Lai's Rachel asserts the status of woman as a thinking, speaking subject. In a rather embedded reading, Hélène Cixous asks in her analysis of Freud's reading of Hoffman's "The Sand-man", "What if the doll became a woman? What if she were alive? What if, in looking at her, we animated her?" (538). The "Rachel" text in effect animates the celluloid Rachel, fleshing her out so-to-speak. Retelling the *Blade Runner* narrative from Rachel's perspective is central to the process of self inscription. Lai articulates a concern common in recent women's writings, more particularly the writing of women of colour, and that is the difficulty of reinscribing the female "I" as animate rather than inanimate subject. The process of Rachel's self-actualisation is linked to the notion of "rebirth", signifying the maternal rather than patriarchal experience. Rachel's diary allows for the possibility of a distinct female narrative that is otherwise "othered" in historical discourse, and more particularly, one that is entirely negated in both *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein*. These are narratives in which the maternal is elusive, superseded as it is by a commodification process that serves the aims and desires of white patriarchy. Lai's implicit questioning of Rachel's fixed subject positioning in *Blade Runner* indicates that her body of work is part of a wider project; for while undertaking a project of redress, more fundamental to Lai's politics of representation is the notion of address. That this addressing comes in the accessible packaging of science fictional prose and poetry rather than, for example, critical non-fiction, works perhaps to widen the circle of addressees. And Lai's answer to Deckard's well-known question in the film, "How can *it* not know what *it* is?" is a vision of Rachel turning around and looking within and across the differing paradigmatic structures of cinema, literature, art, photography and all its

attendant criticism. This glance back (and at) these structures foregrounds the transformative values available to the subject who looks at and records her life through her own eyes, overtly challenging the elisions and silences of white patriarchal inscriptions of subjectivity that would otherwise place her as a racialised, doll-like object of desire.

Conclusion:

Writing against a Racialised and Gendered Space

Marginality is in the eye of the beholder.
(Marlene Nourbese Philip 1992 43)

In addressing the question of whether women writers of Asian ancestry employ a “tactics of refusal” or “critical ironising” to stereotypical and entrenched representations of Asian femaleness as passive, exotic and other to whiteness within their fiction it is instructive to glance back at Western cultural constructions of difference. In current debates about race and difference it is mass culture which, as bell hooks observes, provides “the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference” (1992 21). Hooks defines this cultural codification of difference as “exploitative” for the way it maintains the status quo of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (22). The notion that pleasure can be gained through whiteness consuming the exotified/racialised other indicates the hierarchical basis of looking relations. The focus on “looking relations” within this study extends the theory of a gendered gaze into race and provides a springboard from which to re-address cultural representations of Asian corporeality in an Australian and Canadian context.

By connecting the corporeal to the visual, this body of work by Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers not only identifies, but more importantly contests the embedded principles of surveillance inherent in Westernised othering processes. Their work is important for the way it highlights an emerging site of cultural embattlement in Australia and Canada. This body of fiction questions the dominance of a white, male gaze that desires and perpetuates sexualised, racialised, and gendered differences through the language and ideologies of

Western phallocentrism. More particularly, the generic intertextuality of this body of fiction enables these writers to begin a process of questioning and alteration of the discourse from which the myth of a monochromatic look is originated and perpetuated. Many of the writers featured within this study employ a strategy that I have termed “cultural parallelism” in order to complicate and critique the otherwise exclusionary and rigid paradigmatic structures that bind race, gender and sexuality. The incorporation of texts such as *Gallipoli* in Teo’s *Behind the Moon*, or *The Twin Lens Camera Companion* in Lazaroo’s *The Australian Fiancé*, or *Little House on the Prairie* in Goto’s *The Kappa Child* and *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* in the fiction of Larissa Lai encourages a re-envisioning process and illuminates how the ladder of race and gender is built and propped up, through seemingly benign cultural paradigms.

The intertextual engagement by women writers of Asian descent from both Australia and Canada suggests that there is a commonality of strategic devices being adopted by writers of colour. Their fiction assumes a form of resistant intertextuality which is enabling in the sense that they initiate a literary process of re-evaluation of established Eurocentric dichotomies. This engagement signals an empowered form of cultural critique aimed at igniting debate on texts, be they literary, filmic, photographic or art, which articulate a hierarchical discourse of otherness. In other words, these texts have been deliberately drawn into these writers’ narratives because they process and transmit an image of difference that is premised on negative, racialised, sexualised and/or gendered representations.

One of the important considerations in examining this diverse body of fiction by Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers is whether their texts resist being commodified as fiction that resurrects tropes of Asian difference. The work of Lillian Ng from Australia and Evelyn Lau from Canada has received a divided critical response with claims that their texts mirror, rather than critique, the dominant patriarchal social order. Both writers enter into the thematic of looking

relations producing fiction which is in danger of embedding Asian female corporeality (in the case of Ng) and female corporeality (for Lau) as subservient and as object to be looked upon. While writers like Ng and Lau can be read and critiqued for further entrenching dominant representations of otherness, writers such as Simone Lazaroo and Hsu-Ming Teo from Australia and Hiromi Goto and Larissa Lai from Canada enter a contemporary politics of identity equipped with strategies of literary opposition in their refusal to accept the cultural continuation of stereotypes of Asian female subservience.

What begins to emerge in a systematic study of the fiction of these women writers of colour is that there are differing degrees of critical empowerment. These differences pertain to the strategies each writer employs as a way of complicating practices that perpetuate hierarchical gendered, raced and sexualised difference. Goto and Lai's writing has been nurtured by an established intellectual milieu determined to break down the barriers of race and gender. Both writers are also united and active in their resistance to othering practices implicit in popular and mainstream cultural productions. Through a layered, postmodern, self-reflexive literary mode, and through the use of intertextuality, their fiction highlights the way racialised and gendered texts "innocuously" circulate myths of difference. Their novels, poetry and non-fiction are forthright in the way they tackle issues of race, gender and sexuality with consistency and also with urgency. What their textual strategies do is to bring attention to how innocuous and noxious the perpetuation of a raced and gendered subjectivity is within Western, mainstream, cultural productions.

The very study of practices that privilege the white imperial project of domination issues a challenge to re-visit, re-read and re-vision the embeddedness of these practices in the context of contemporary representational politics. Monika Kin Gagnon notes that there are numerous ways of institutionalising difference which must be addressed by feminists, queer or people of colour. She argues that, "At

issue is visibility, visuality, and power, and what is often referred to as a politics of knowledge; it problematises who defines and who determines cultural value” (2000 23). If Asian Australian and Asian Canadian writers explore, with varying degrees of critical engagement, the structuring devices that have traditionally captured and established people of colour’s identity as singularised and as other in filmic, cultural and political discourse, then the question, as articulated by Roy Miki to writers of colour in Canada, “for whom do you write? For the majority? Or for more localized perspectives?” (1998 118) also has resonance for Australian writers and critics.

Miki’s comment emphasises the complicated relationship between writer, reader and publisher. Larissa Lai notes that:

In the late eighties and nineties, a remarkable movement in Canadian cultural politics blossomed. It was marked by a major change in the way that Canadian artists — First Nations, of colour and white — organized and produced art. This was a movement within a particular historical moment, one that began with the recognition of how deeply embedded race and racialisation are as forces within Canadian society, and are reflected, among other arenas, in its art production. (2000 15)

While both Australia and Canada have followed similar political trajectories premised on an unacknowledged championing of racism, one of the reasons for this variation in the level of critique of racialising practices might well lie in the fact that there is a sense of community, as Lai points out in the above quote, not simply between First Nations and of colour peoples, but also between Canadian writers and artists. This is a political alignment that was not quite as evident in Australia during the 1990s but has, in the last ten years, begun to gain critical impetus (Lo 2006 24). In both nations, community and strategic alliances are important. Lai, for example, states that in terms of her entry into contemporary Canadian representational politics, she would not have achieved what she has without “the remarkable flourishing of communities — gay, lesbian, of colour, Asian Canadian, artist, women’s — that I participated in and was nourished by in the early 90s” (Chow 2002 2). Asian Canadian poet and critic Rita Wong

summarises this succinctly when asked in an E-mail interview by her peer Larissa Lai “who supports you in the production of your work”.⁶⁰ Wong’s answer, “you’ve heard the saying, it takes a village to raise a child. It takes a community to raise a writer” (6), introduces a crucial point about the importance of a supportive cultural milieu to writers otherwise made invisible in literary discussions and publications. Wong names writers such as Hiromi Goto, Ashok Mathur, Lydia Kwa, Fred Wah, SKY Lee and personal experiences such as being on the editorial collective of the Calgary-based journal *absinthe* and the Prairie Reading tour as central to shaping and nurturing her literary production (6). As Wong notes, the support of her fellow travellers in the production of Asian Canadian literature and being able to actively participate in conferences such as “Writing Thru Race”, provides a cultural space in which criticism of othering practices can be seen and heard.

The vibrancy of this culture is supported by a wealth of intellectually dynamic mentors such as Roy Miki, Fred Wah, Himani Bannerji, and younger critics such as Larissa Lai, Ashok Mathur and Rita Wong. Active in promoting their literary output, these writers and critics continually ask politically-charged and difficult questions relating to constructions of nation. Female writers such as Joy Kogawa, Kerri Sakamoto, Sky Lee, Judy Fong Bates, Hiromi Goto, and Madelien Thein have contributed to this corpus. Critics such as Monika Kin-Gagnon, Larissa Lai and Rita Wong are essential to its ongoing development. Goto, for example, notes that a critical awareness of race issues began in her writing classes at the University of Calgary.

Fred Wah was my first instructor. Critical awareness would come up in class in terms of people’s writing. This class provided the opportunity for me to meet other writers of colour and we’ve gone on to become friends and publish together. Fred encouraged me to attend the ‘Appropriate Voice’ Conference and this had an enormous impact upon my politics. I realised I was not alone in the experience of the racist

⁶⁰See <http://www.eciad.bc.ca/~amathur/writers/rita-int.html> (accessed August, 2005).

incidents — minor in the context of world events — but a daily wearing down of your inner core. To meet other writers and students who knew what you felt like and were also exploring these same issues within their own fiction was both liberating and empowering. (Morris 2003).⁶¹

Similarly, Lai recalls a pivotal interview question that prompted her to reconsider whether her writing emerged from a racialised space:

When Ashok [Mathur] asks me how I see my work coming from a racialised space, he is implicitly acknowledging that we both know this. He is asking me, faced with this recognition, what I intend to do about the injustice of it. He is asking me whether I see this othering of my body and my work by the mainstream as my responsibility to undo. If it is not my responsibility, are there reasons why I would choose to do it? He is asking me whether or not I have a choice. (Lai 1999 146)

Goto and Lai's realisation that they were not alone in taking an anti-racist stance and the acknowledgment of being mentored by intellectual peers is vital in the nurturing of their body of work. Both Goto and Lai have moved in an environment where their writing skills have been guided by writers and intellectuals of colour who are united in their anti-racist stance regardless of whether they are of Asian, African or Indigenous descent. Their writerly choice has been to produce a body of fiction that glances back at, and contests, cultural constructions of otherness.

While there is a strident and fully-recognised voice on the Canadian literary scene regarding literature from the Asian diaspora the production and critique of Asian Australian literature has, comparatively, only begun to gain momentum from the late 1990s (Lo 2006 13). Jacqueline Lo observes that the growing appearance of articles, edited book collections and sole-authored tomes is a positive turn-around in contemporary Australian identity politics and indicates the potential for growth in the field of Asian Australian studies.⁶² Lo also notes the growing literary profile

⁶¹ See Appendix 1, p. 243.

⁶² For example, journals include *Australasian Canadian Studies*, *Asian Studies Review*, *Journal of Australian Studies*, *Australian Cultural History*, *The Journal of Intercultural Studies* and sole-authored books such as Peta Stephenson's *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* (2007), Tseen Khoo's *Banana Bending: Asian Australian and Asian Canadian Literatures* (2003), and Ien Ang's *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001) have made significant

of authors such as Brian Castro, Merlinda Bobis, Hoa Pham and Hsu-Ming Teo whose work features in writers' festivals and is becoming known to the wider reading public within Australia (2006 20). Added to this is the fact that writers, critics and academics are joining forces to host conferences and symposiums and form associations aimed at profiling the work not only of writers of Asian descent, but also of artists and filmmakers in what is a vibrant and rapidly growing cultural space. However, and as Lo astutely observes, "Asian Australian studies is [still] a nascent field of research that is positioned somewhat uneasily between Asian and Australian studies" (2006 21). One area of growth identified by Lo is that of a dialogue between Indigenous and Asian Australians. As she notes:

There is some very important work emerging on how Aboriginality and Asianness have defined and framed discourses of Whiteness, but work on Aboriginal-Asian histories and cultural relations remains relatively underexplored [...] Academic work in this area is vital to not only broadening Asian Australian research but challenging the racial codification of the Reconciliation process as a largely Black/White matter. (2006 24)

Lo points to a strategic alliance — one which would open up a new site in which to question both the normalisation of whiteness and the marking out of colour as difference within an Australian context.

The twin terms "site" and "sight" have been integral to this study of contemporary Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women's writing. The return, in many of these writer's works, to the site of the cultural production in which white maleness is positioned as the origin of power and normalcy, and the creation of a passive female body as sight and as display, allows for a contestation of patriarchal discourses of identity. It offers a methodology for exploring new systems of reading the immobilised and Orientalised female body. Writers such as Lazaroo,

academic contributions to the field. Essay collections such as Tseen Khoo and Kam Louie's *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English* (2005), and Wenche Ommundsen's *Bastard Moon: Essays on Chinese Australian Writing* (2001) show the cross-disciplinary potential for Australian and international researchers in the field of Asian diasporic studies. For a full evaluation of this growing research interest see Jacqueline Lo, 2006.

Teo, Goto and Lai critique ideological rehearsals of difference within their literary output. Their fiction enters into a vibrant politics of identity that reconfigures normalised representations of gender, race and sexuality that appear and reappear across the differing cultural structures of the West. More crucially, this body of fiction and non-fiction enables these writers, their peers and readers to begin a process of questioning and alteration of the discourse from which the myth of a monochromatic gaze originated and is perpetuated.

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Appendix: 1

“Braiding Race Politics and Narrative Form: An Interview with Hiromi Goto.”
(unpublished interview)

HIROMI GOTO: I’d like to begin this interview just by stating that my responses or answers are related to this particular moment in time. Even when I go back to my first novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* I realise that I am not the same person I was when I wrote it. So what it means to me now is different to what it meant to me at the moment of its writing.

ROBYN MORRIS: That being said, do you agree that there is a shift in your identity politics, away from the colonising of the female body and the female story in *Chorus* towards a critique of the experience of diaspora and the colonising of the raced body in *Kappa*?

HG: I don’t know if I would use those specific words as I’m not approaching my work in terms of theorising what I’m writing — that comes after it is written — obviously by academics. When I am writing I’m examining or exploring incidents, ideas, concepts, etc which puzzle me or trouble me. In the writing I can begin to realise a world which is relevant to my experiences and inscribes my presence. When I began writing *Chorus* it was clear in my mind that this would be a novel about identity politics and about women’s lives. This was a very close, personal and experiential starting point. When I approached it as a text I was politically motivated. My artistic intents were braided with my political agenda. It was the early 90s and I was shocked by the fact that *Chorus* was only the second novel (well technically the third since Joy Kogawa’s *Itsuka* was published in 1992) by a Japanese Canadian writer in Canadian history. This absence of texts says a lot about the politics of publishing and racism in Canada; that there was a need to take up a politically identifiable space. But alongside of race politics I was also

exploring narrative forms. It seemed less important to write another story with a beginning, middle and end than to play with a narrative form which reflected our experiential world.

In *The Kappa Child* I was not interested in exploring the same issues — it moves away from that overt political imperative. I wanted to explore more the poetics of languages and ideas while still looking at the politics of the body, of gender. The strong focus on personal politics in *Chorus* is not as crucial in *Kappa*.

RM: Is the reference to *Little House on the Prairie* in *Kappa* part of this shift, that is, the move from the politics of the personal to the politics of nation and nation-building?

HG: Yes, I'm interested in the pioneer mentality of how we come to call a land or country our home and that movement of people from country to country. When you read the *Little House* novels as a child you are not really thinking about them in terms of nation but you can think of them in terms of land. *Little House on the Prairie* was an interesting book to revisit especially when you start to reconsider how land becomes inhabited. This series of books assumes a great deal about the land, especially the American West, and you really have to have a certain arrogance to inhabit it in that pioneer type way.

RM: A highly romanticised way?

HG: Yes. Yes. There is no critical awareness around the notion of nation, identity or colonisation. These books can appear as places of childhood innocence but are actually sites of a great deal of violence and appropriation. It is interesting how these books develop the notion of the dual nature of the "Indian", as savage and frightening or as noble.

RM: And also the white male pioneer as benevolent, happy and educated.

HG: Yes — Charles Ingalls — he's no racist! He had good intentions! I look at one scene when an Aboriginal man comes into Charles' house wanting to speak with him. He converses with Charles first in two Aboriginal languages and then French. But Charles, the educated white man, cannot understand him as he can only speak English!

RM: What then, do you make of the construction of the white woman in the *Little House* series?

HG: The novels do speak volumes regarding the repressed lives of women at that time — you can see this in the Laura Ingalls character. She is always wanting to take off her bonnet, her layers of petticoats; she is always being told to be seen and not heard. There are many rules that circumscribed the lives of female children at that time and Laura is depicted as being a bit of a wild spirit. So, alongside of the colonialist construction of Aboriginal people as other, there is, in these series, that effort to address the limitations of women's lives at that time.

RM: The story of the mother in both *Chorus* and *Kappa* is silent, but the mother is given voice through that of the daughter(s). In telling female stories, is it important that we, as Virginia Woolf asserts, think back through our mothers?

HG: Mothers are the nexus of our existence, the centre of our growing consciousness of our physical and emotional selves. I think this sense of centrality comes into a state of conflict because of the sexist world we live in. As a result, we fall into a state of disenchantment resulting in an alienation from the mother. Mothers are a central, yet still unrecognised and unacknowledged authority, so it is always in a state of great conflict, both externally and internally. It is in my writing that I can start puzzling this out.

The impact and importance of our actual mothers and the role of mothering in the world and in our personal lives is profound and yet it is still so completely undervalued — almost a schizophrenic way of inhabiting the world. I write and publish within a sexist system, a system that works mainly for people without children or the aged to care for. If you are woman, if you have a very busy life in terms of children, relationships, it is made more difficult to maintain an organised writing schedule. Another form of conflict. Within my fiction there is a resistance to the notion of closure for this is not the reality of women's lives. Closure to me is very artificial, contrived and prescriptive. I'm real and this is not how I live my life. Life narratives are circular and ongoing.

RM: Can you tell me, what events or people have been instrumental in propelling you towards an interrogation of race within your fiction and poetry?

HG: Interrogations of race always happen at a personal level every day, socially — just living in this country, particular while I was living in Alberta because you are a racial minority. So race would come up and you'd have no control over it except your own particular reaction at that time. But critical awareness began in the Creative Writing classes at the University of Calgary. Fred Wah was my first instructor. It is quite interesting because when I first signed up for the class I thought "Wah", he's Asian, he's Chinese. But when I saw him I thought, "he's white!" I was not consciously politicised when I applied for the class but there is something going on so that when I heard he was Asian Canadian I felt happy and safe. Critical awareness would come up in class in terms of people's writing. For example, we discussed how we would write characters of different backgrounds — so politics were developed alongside of writing skills. This class provided the opportunity for me to meet other writers of colour and we've gone on to become friends and publish together.

Fred encouraged me to attend the “Appropriate Voice” Conference and this had an enormous impact upon my politics. I realised I was not alone in the experience of the racist incidents — minor in the context of world events — but a daily wearing down of your inner core. To meet other writers and students who knew what you felt like and were also exploring these same issues within their own fiction was both liberating and empowering. Until this point, taking an undergraduate course in English I had thought that you just wrote about pretty things and read works by dead white authors — it was like a dam burst.

RM: Your stories emphasise a sliding between two cultures, especially through language and also stories. How important to you is the converging of different cultural myths to your feminist and anti-racist work?

HG: Our worlds no longer exist in isolation. The arts are a place where cultures and stories can intersect, overlap. Just as our lives are touched by experiences not limited to our own, our literature needs to reflect the possibilities of growing formations of languages and cultures. Of course we need to work with respect and honour. We can't just go bumbling and meddling in traditional stories, for instance, just because we can research them on a database and we've found something “interesting and won't it fit nicely in the novel I'm working on.” I've rewritten Japanese traditional folk tales with a North American feminist sensibility. This reflects my particular circumstances. I make sense of my world with the instruments of the cultures I've inhabited. I feel lucky in that I'm in a position to choose the best of both worlds.

RM: The tone of your writing has been described as “whimsical”, and “friendly”. Could you comment on this?

HG: My texts are weaving in and out of friendliness because if I want the medicine to go down “friendliness” does nothing to alienate the audience who needs the medicine the most!

RM: Food features quite prominently in your narratives. Is food raced, does it carry the mark of social difference? Is food, like language, a cultural border crosser?

HG. Food is also a cultural player, at the same time intensely personal and of the body. Food is a constant, it is something we do everyday — almost religious in the way we ingest it — food is very cultural, it is racialised and that is when it becomes political. Food can act as a benign introduction to other cultures and it doesn't challenge you because you have the choice. You notice how, in multicultural festivities, food and dance are always called upon. This is a good starting point. It is sadly inadequate, however, if food remains the only point of cultural contact/outreach. Food heightens our palates and nourishes our bodies but we must also feed our minds.

RM. What do you make of claims that *Chorus* is a text which writes back to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*?

HG. When I was writing *Chorus* I knew that people would compare me to Kogawa because we are both Japanese Canadian, we both write about a prairie setting. This is, however, just like comparing Margaret Lawrence to Sinclair Ross in terms of topic and subject matter. They are just different texts. When I was writing *Chorus* the only thing I was writing back to was that it was *not* a redress book — not that I think redress is done and finished — it's ongoing and nations re-enact that all the time — it is doing that right now in terms of people who have Iraqi citizenship — but I was not interested in exploring redress in *Chorus*. This being said, and even though I had no intentions of writing back, I was a little bit shocked to find that that the name I'd picked for my character Muriel was also the name of Muriel Kitagawa. But this is just coincidental.

RM. Why do you think *Obasan* has been canonised? Is it a “friendly” text?

HG. I find Kogawa’s work more cool than friendly. It exhibits an emotional distance from the crisis — which is very large — but because you are not in the centre of this emotional turbulence and by viewing it externally, it is easier to read. This emotional distance makes Kogawa’s work easier to handle for people, it is not a “hysterical” text — so that might make it friendly in the sense that it doesn’t frighten.

RM. Who then, do you think is your audience? In other words, who are you writing for and who do you think is listening?

HG. I imagine my audience to be mostly women, inclined toward a feminist position be it conscious or unconscious. I think men would have a great deal to learn from my work but I don't know if they would come across my texts as “general reading. It’s unlikely it would be shelved that way. I’m writing for my children and for people of colour whose stories and experiences are not reflected in popular culture. Our myriad experiences are only just being touched upon and although I'm not interested in duplicating identity-based narratives, my novels will always be peopled by characters of colour just as in my life is and has been. I don’t know who is listening but I hope the numbers are growing. Fingers crossed.

Hiromi Goto spoke with Robyn Morris in Vancouver, Canada, June 2003.

Appendix: 2

“sites of articulation—an interview with Larissa Lai.” *West Coast Line* 44. 38/ 2 (Spring 2005): 21-30.

ROBYN MORRIS. Larissa, though your fiction interrogates racialised, sexualised and gendered borders I would like to focus this interview around the notion of racialisation. Given this, you have noted, in a previous interview, that mainstream Canadian culture defines you as an outsider and from the outside, at the level of skin. You also note in this same interview that there is a lot of “stuff” you can see from the outside. Could you comment further on this?

LARISSA LAI. If I remember correctly, I think that what I was saying was that part of the frustration of growing up as a person of colour in a white country is that people have certain expectations of you on the basis of what you look like. This doesn’t allow for a fullness of subjectivity that is admitted to you if you are born with white skin. This is not because of something innate in the skin itself, but because of the way in which one’s appearance gets loaded with all kinds of culturally and historically constructed expectations.

RM. Do your politics of representation reject such a division, premised on and at the level of skin?

LL. Rejection is difficult. There’s a very concrete and material history that puts a specific type of reading upon racialised bodies moving through space as opposed to bodies codified as “white” moving through that very same space. This sets up an expectation about what the racialised subject will know, what her experience of the world means and also how she responds to or articulates this experience. As good old Althusser tells us, how one is read affects how one conceives of oneself. I don’t necessarily think that racialised subjects take on the cultural expectations

of the mainstream in a direct way. We don't mirror what the mainstream thinks or what it sees. But there is a relation there, one that is always complicated and always contingent. So I don't reject the division because I see that as a surefire way to bring it back stronger than ever. To react is to reproduce. But I do see talking about it as a large part of my work. To keep stereotypes in play, critically, is the best way I can imagine to undo them.

I want to show this complexity at work. I also see my writing as action, situated in time. Hopefully it is action that can change the way we see and the way we move through time and space. I'm not looking for perfect solutions to racism. I'm looking for those little moments of intervention that work then and there. In that kind of way, I'm very much interested in a sort of "politics of contingency."

RM. Who are you writing for?

LL. That is a good question. I think it is important to recognise that writing is always pitched at an audience. That it always imagines and at the same time constructs its reader. In my fiction, I try to centralise the experience of people like myself. But I mean "like myself" in the loosest and most fluid way possible. Sometimes it can be racialised or gendered, or of a particular sexual orientation. Sometimes it's reactive. Sometimes it's constructive. Sometimes it is a lot of contradictory things at once. But I am definitely trying to break away from a unitary Western liberal subject.

My first line of address is not necessarily a white readership, though a lot of "Asian" readers, particularly of my mother's generation, will say, "oh Chinese people aren't going to get this". So I think of my first line of address as other people like myself; my own generation of younger Asian Canadians, women, maybe lesbian, maybe feminist, maybe not, but those who feel like outsiders for whatever reason. It's a kind of contingent essentialism of the moment, in which I

centralise “likeness”, whatever that means to the reader in the moment. I want to recognise that none of these things are fixed. Whoever gets caught in the crossfire though, that’s also fine. I’m caught in the crossfire of most writing in English. I’m very seldom in the first line of address. It’s an interesting place to read from. In some ways, you could say I’m providing the pleasure of that experience to people who aren’t conventionally put in that place. If it is interesting to them, then that’s great. I think there’s something particular about the Novel, perhaps because it has played such a large part in the formation of various national psyches that makes it construct its readers in very particular kinds of ways. It’s always a challenge, and in some ways, always an experiment to try to undo that.

What my project is about is making a narrative mythological landscape for people like myself so we have something to hang our hats on when we come into the world. I want my brothers and sisters in “likeness” to have a better place than Suzie Wong or Madame Butterfly to hang their hats on — a place to begin to see their reflections. Even if they don’t fit perfectly at least they can fit a little better.

So there are two things going on. One is the construction of the reader, which happens in the mode of address. The other is the production of reflections of various sorts. But my other investment is on making sure that none of these things gets too solid, because to let them would be really just to make a whole other set of fixed types, which is what I want to move away from. Hopefully my narratives open questions — about race, about class, about gender for sure, but also about being human, about ethics, about action. I’m particularly interested these days in the figure of the traitor.

RM. In both *Fox* and *Salt Fish Girl*, you return to a past which interweaves both ancient Chinese mythology and European fairytale. Is this an instructive

or explorative strategy in terms of your critique or complication of loaded terms such as “skin” or “race”?

LL. I’m trying, in my fiction, to move beyond the instructive mode. My coming of age, coming to politics, happened in a context in which a certain kind of didacticism was very much in play. There are a lot of earlier works by writers of colour, particularly by women of colour, that were written in an instructive voice, representatives of which can be found in early anthologies which contain many useful and productive discussions. They were very important in the particular historical moments in which they were written. One of the inadvertent side-effects of those discourses, however, was to both crystallise whiteness and to address it much more than I like to do. They also tended to crystallise positions of marginality more than I’m happy to right now. I want to emphasise, however, that I think those writings and those discussions were of tantamount importance at the moments when they took place. I just don’t think it’s healthy or helpful to stay there.

Fox was written as a sort of experiment to find another strategy. It wasn’t meant to be instructive. It was meant to be productive. It was meant to open up a sort of imaginative geography that could be inhabited as opposed to articulated. The place that opened up was admittedly loose, chaotic and contradictory. I think that was the only way it could be, because to construct a literary geography that is tight, cohesive and coherent is essentially to produce in the service of nation-building. Nation-building and capitalist consumption! At the time, those were things I was very much interested in working against. These days, I’m still interested in chaos, but I think my chaos might include the nation, and the market — not sure, still working that out.

It’s such a balancing act, you know. These places of production, even ones as chaotic and multiple as mine are dangerous. Productivity is always a positive act.

And positivism, as much of the history of the twentieth-century has borne out, is a breeding ground for fascism. To stake out a place of belonging, however much comfort one gets from doing so, is also to commit an act of violence. It's also to exclude. That's one reason why I'm so interested in the figure of the traitor. Our hands are always dirty.

The alternative is the much-trodden path of criticality, which, of course, I do consider a useful activity. But I think in the identity politics of the early 90s, in Canada, the end result of too much critical awareness was to reproduce these dreadful hierarchies of oppression in the most destructive sorts of ways. You got all these radical people of colour competing for the lowest, most unhappy place in the hierarchy. I can't imagine anything more miserable. If a kind of positive chaos, inhabited rather than articulated is the only way out, I was fully ready to go there. I'm sure there are other ways, but that was what I could imagine. *Fox* was my attempt to put that into motion, to see if it was possible to break out of prescribed categories, to produce rather than react.

RM. Is this why, perhaps, your novels are characterised by a generic intertextuality, a postmodern mix of science fiction, the mythological and the real?

LL. Unlike my theoretical writing, my fiction writing is never quite that deliberate. I think my stories come from somewhere behind me and not necessarily from myself as an individual. While I've thought a lot about both my own and other people's politics of representation, when I come to the page I put this aside. My writing is largely an act of listening and, quite often, to many voices at once.

This being said, I don't go out of my way to shut out influences. A lot of the work I was doing before I started creative writing was working with visual and video

artists (I wanted to be a video artist) so I was looking at a lot of contemporary, (mostly Canadian and American) experimental film and video, as well as a lot of installation work. I have a lot of admiration for the work of artists such as Paul Wong, Richard Fung, Shani Mootoo, Jamelie Hassan, Sharyn Yuen. I've spent a lot of time thinking about their work. I wonder if their visual strategies have somehow translated into an unconscious textual strategy for me.

I probably do have alliances with postmodernism as an artistic movement but I don't really think about my work in those terms. Certainly when I was beginning, I thought about postmodernism as a Euro-centric movement that I didn't particularly want to be allied with. Whose modernity was it that we were supposedly "post"? I found the notion of the "death of the author" particularly annoying, as it seemed to be widely in play at precisely the moment that many marginalised people were finally beginning to find their voice. But regardless of whether I took postmodernism on in an overt way or not, I suppose it was hard to avoid. I, and many like me I'm sure, am as much a product of European intellectual and political movements as people of so-called "European" descent. It's only that the trajectory of my lineage is a bit more broken and scattered.

I am interested in the notion of truth as a construction. Is that an idea that belongs to postmodernism? Or could it equally well belong to liberatory movements from the margins? The thing is, in the end, these aren't separate discourses. I've become interested in the way ideas flow through various communities at various moments, and how their use and weight changes depending on who is using them, where and when.

Politically, what I was interested in when I was writing *Fox* was exploring the multiplicity and instability of the notion of truth while also producing a subjectivity that doesn't seem to have a stable site of articulation.

RM. Could you comment on the trope of rebirth which is present in both your novels?

LL. A good question also as I don't think I've fully registered that I've been doing this. But now that you say it, yes, it is something that seems to keep coming up for me. Perhaps what I was thinking is that the chance to come back, to be reborn, works well with the idea of experiment, that you can keep trying until something desirable comes of it. This allows me a sense of hopefulness that I really want to have.

In *Fox*, the logic worked something like this: if we keep revisiting and returning to the same life over and over again, maybe we can bring knowledge of the past to bear on our actions the second or third or fourth time around. I imagine that this might be possible whether or not our memories of previous lives are conscious or not. If we're doomed to repeat the past, perhaps at least we can have Butler's repetition with a difference?

In many ways, *Salt Fish Girl* is a much darker book. I'm thinking a lot more in terms of systems and a lot less in terms of individual capability, individual power. Nu Wa and Miranda are both implicated in systems they cannot control. The future is more violent than the past. Hope lies in the random, the idea that even out of the worst situations, sometimes mutations occur in a liberatory direction. You get this with the Sonias, the cloned women who somehow escape and manage to reproduce without the intervention of the corporation. It's not about having learned anything, consciously or subconsciously. It's about a bit of will and a bit of luck. Or a lot of luck even, what the Sonias have done is in some ways quite miraculous, to have achieved this sort of superhuman fertility beyond anything technoscience could ever bestow. It's a breaking out beyond the imagination of the technology itself.

RM. How important then is the notion of female storytelling to this notion of what you term “breaking out” of a colonialist/technology-based Euro/phallogentric discourse?

LL. As I was saying in the first question, I think there is something important about locating myself and though I don't declare it as located, it is. There is more a sense of situating in *Fox* but there is an awareness of writing from a racialised and gendered position in both novels. I don't think about storytelling as a civilising force, as a way of imposing an ethics, a morality. I am aware of trying to normalise things that don't regularly get normalised. In my work I'm interested in things that get left over, shut out; things that people don't want to see, hear, and smell. You'll notice that things fall apart because of the weaknesses of my characters, Miranda betrays her father, Nu Wa can't be there for the Salt Fish Girl in the end. My work is not meant to present heroic figures.

RM. Do your character's inadequacies, their foibles, make them more human?

LL. I think so. It does make them human, less than heroic. I don't want them to be heroes. I find that those stories of heroic women of colour have a false and irritating ring. They are not about us, how we move through the world, how we get scared, make mistakes or commit acts of selfishness. This is evident even in my characters that aren't human, like the Fox. I suppose this is also a response to second-wave feminism that wants to posit powerful women as a way of countering patriarchal representations of woman-as-victim. Again, I'm not saying this wasn't an important move, but it was a reactive one. Can we only be free if we are heroes? Do we deserve our freedom only if our actions are heroic? This is an important question if you think about the way racism often gets played out, especial in the so-called liberal democracies of the West. We're all granted equal rights until we step out of line. But the law invariably comes down heavier on

people of colour, women, queers, the working class, and the poor. So it's precisely at the points of our weaknesses that we most need affirmation and empowerment.

There is also another sense in which I want to think about the way power works. It's never the case that one party has all the power and the other parties have none. Without a doubt there are some entities that have way too much power. But even the most oppressed of us have power and use it irresponsibly, including Miranda, the poetess, Artemis, the Fox, the Sonias or Evie. What, my novels ask, does it mean then to have this power and what is an empowered position? Is there an ethical way of using this power? Is there a fundamental difference between the kind of power exercised by oppressors and the kind of power exercised by the oppressed? In other words, is it merely a question of quantity, or is there a qualitative difference? Though the novels might ask this they don't offer definitive solutions. What they do say however, is that we aren't these perfect objects of repression. We do have subjectivity. We do have access to power, it's just different from power that men have access to; that white people have access to. It is about power, but what we must ask ourselves is just how does it work?

RM. There is a scene in *Blade Runner*, which you refer to in *Fox*, which encapsulates this notion of power. In the *Blade Runner* world of 2019 Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) appears to run across the heads of Hari Krishnas, Jews, Muslims, Hispanics and punks who not only mingle at street level but are fully visible to the police vehicles hovering above them. Do you think of this scene as a contemporary division of skin difference, of the way in which whiteness makes itself elevated but invisibly powerful while otherness is coloured and visible?

LL. I think there is, in a lot of contemporary science fiction, a reproduction of the raced body and of whiteness that is unquestioned. It also works the same way in historical fictions and other kinds of fiction. I find this frustrating and irritating.

I've recently been thinking about the way in which genre fiction in general works — I've been writing about the figure of the detective in Kazuo Ishiguro's work. But of course, Deckard in *Blade Runner* is also a detective of sorts. What is apparent in the work of Ishiguro is that the detective figure's ability to solve the crime is directly connected to his racial purity. This is a problem for Deckard too, though in a different kind of way from Ishiguro's Banks. Deckard is not a figure of purity at all. He fights dirty, and may even be a Replicant. Roy Batty, on the other hand, as a sort of Nietzschean superman, is purer than pure. His bright whiteness is highly over-determined. So on the one hand, the film does replicate a sort of multicultural notion of racial diversity, as in the scene you describe, with the universal (white) man still at its centre, and on the other hand, it does crack it open, which is part of what makes that film so interesting. *Star Trek*, especially "Deep Space Nine", is another example of the liberal whitewash you're describing.

It was an interesting exercise to write a science fiction piece in which the protagonist is not that white, human, good, man. I'm interested, especially in *Salt Fish Girl*, in this whole relatively recent circulation of the figure of the Asian as a figure that belongs to this mythologised future. I think it is very interesting how all science fictions, including mine, are recirculations of myth. A site outside of time, a conflation of past and future, a site that belongs to the other because they aren't here and now. *Salt Fish Girl* explores how race can work in futuristic texts.

RM. How do you think whiteness functions to normalise or (un)race itself?

LL. While I haven't done a lot of reading about whiteness I've done a lot of watching. I think the most primary and effective way it works is by declaring itself to be universal when it is not. It uses the power of the universal as a cloak of invisibility to parade around in. This cloak allows whiteness to say that whatever works for whiteness should work for everyone and if it doesn't it is because of the

deficiency of the other. At the level of the body white people aren't white, they're sort of pink and beige; similarly, black people aren't black, they're more inky brown. We call them "black" and "white" and invest them with certain moral expectations. At the level of the visual this isn't as easy. So we use language to code the visual, and I think it very much affects the way we relate to one another.

If the effect of my fiction is to centralise somebody of my description, it would be interesting if whiteness did become marginalized as a sort of side-effect. But I don't think the language is constructed that way. It might be interesting for whiteness to find itself not at the centre of a narrative. But this is not the primary motive of my work.

It was interesting watching the 1994 conference "Writing thru Race" unfold, and white power freak out at this notion that it might not be at the centre of this discourse. All that the conference wanted was to centralise somebody else — not that it actually ever had the chance. There was an intense backlash in the pages of some of the country's major publications, in which a few white male journalists complained vehemently about being marginalised. These articles merely had the effect of centralising the experiences of those whose experiences are always centralised, and worse, without them ever having to declare that that was what they were doing. That's the power of the universal (white) man.

RM. How important was "Writing thru Race" to your own practice of writing?

LL. It was and it wasn't. I was one of the organisers and I had been doing this type of work for four or five years previous. I guess it was formative in its omissions, in the things that we dreamed of doing when we were putting the conference together, the things that got side-tracked by the backlash. I don't think that the anti-racist movement of that moment, got much further than being able to

articulate the way in which marginalisation has worked in this country. This is obviously a very useful thing, but in terms of trying to imagine another way of living, in terms of trying to undo the effects of assimilation, or empower people after the fact of assimilation (since I don't think history can ever be "undone" there wasn't really much of a chance of that. That was what the hijacking of the conference shut down. What was shut down was a real possibility for the voices of writers of colour and First Nations writers to blossom. Instead what we got was a bunch of white men whining in the pages of the *Globe* and *Mail* about how they were being excluded.

There were, of course, a number of writers of colour and First Nations writers who did produce some pretty amazing work after "Writing thru Race". But *Fox* was already well under way before we'd even begun working on the conference. So too, I think, was Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, which was published in the same year as the conference.

What am I trying to say? Not that the conference wasn't fruitful — I think that it was. I heard that it was afterwards, from people who had attended, but whom I didn't get the chance to speak to during the event itself. But I refuse to buy into the idea that it's only through abuse and trauma that good art or good writing can be produced. That's not what I want for myself or any of the creative people that I know.

RM. The media was used then to perpetuate white power?

LL. Yes, while appearing not to do so. It made me more determined to find a language to try to produce that space in literary texts that wasn't about white people. This isn't an act of shutting them out; my texts just aren't about them. I think we are now living in a much more aggressive, conservative moment than the moment of "Writing thru Race" and the backlash that occurred around that

conference was, in a sense, more progressive than what is happening now. You've only to look at the reaction to SARS, to Iraq, and all this discourse around the axis of evil. This rhetoric is quite medieval, it is regressive, we've lost centuries in just one decade. With SARS there's the whole connection of Asian to contagion and disease which again, is medieval in its origins. It was always the other who was diseased. It is discourse that belongs to the Black Plague. Such a notion, in our contemporary media climate, is ancient, barbaric and unbelievable in its backwardness. All the discourse around the current war in Iraq belongs to the same era — all this talk about axes of evil, and just wars and so on — it's the talk of the Crusades. We're being sent right back to feudalism. At least in the moment of "Writing thru Race" we were still talking about democracy. It was still a liberal discourse which belonged to the twentieth- rather than the eleventh-century. This worries me greatly. The concerns about race and nation that were so important in the 90s really need to be deepened and complicated. Yes, I still want to talk about representation. But I also want to talk about travel, mobility, the movement of money, goods and people across all kinds of terrains, borders and distances, about propaganda, about the manufacture and replication of violence, about fundamentalism, about war, about corporate greed.

Larissa Lai spoke with Robyn Morris in Calgary, Canada, June 2003.