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DOI 10.5937/kultura1652064M

UDK 821.111(71).09-31 Лаж Л.

82.09:007.5

141.319.8

stručni rad

THE CYBORG CONTINUUM: FROM MYTH TO TECHNOCAPITALISM IN LARISSA LAI'S SALT FISH GIRL

Abstract: *The paper makes use of Judith Butler's poststructuralist approach to gender and Donna Haraway's theorization of the posthuman figure of cyborg to explore the subversion of the heteronormative apparatus in Larissa Lai's novel Salt Fish Girl. This work of the early 21st century Canadian speculative fiction weaves a narrative continuity between a mythical serpent goddess, her reincarnation as a natural woman and her final embodiment as a cyborg in a late-capitalist technocracy. The queer poetics of the novel intersects with the exploration of the boundaries between the human, animal and the machine in a multilayered narrative that imagines a technologically-mediated reproduction of the two lesbian protagonists, thus transcending the heteronormative institution by means of a posthuman subjectivity. Ultimately, Salt Fish Girl may be said to take issue with coextensive ideologies of sexism, racism, scientism and speciesism by imagining a radical agency of a self-reproducing female subject that combines different natural species and a machine, challenging the humanist assumptions about the privileged position of man (or, the male, to be more precise) in a chain of beings in which the exploitation of women, nature and animals has been rooted.*

Key words: *Larissa Lai, posthumanism, cyborg theory, heteronormativity, technology*

A Chinese-Canadian academic, author and LGBT activist, Lai rooted her first novel *When Fox is a Thousand* (1995) in a Chinese myth about foxes who can transform into women to explore the experiences of racialization and gender oppression. Also penned within the postcolonial and feminist tradition, Larissa Lai's second novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) is another critically acclaimed contribution to the genres of science-fiction/speculative fiction, fantasy and biopunk (akin to cyberpunk) which takes the experiments in bio-engineering as its main subject. The feminist reinvention of the relationship between nature and technology align Larissa Lai's text with sci-fi authors such as Octavia Butler, Ursula LeGuin and Margaret Atwood, but her work is also heavily indebted to the cyberpunk film classic *Bladerunner* and Shelley's gothic exploration of what it means to be human in *Frankenstein*. Invested equally in myth, history and the burgeoning 21st century issues such as migration, ecology, biotechnology, the collapse of nation-states, the boundaries of ethnic memory, and the gendered and racialized nature of capitalist exploitation, Lai writes a double-frame narrative set alternately in near-future dystopic Canada and in ancient China, spilling into the early 20th century. This complex time-space canvas is straddled by the picaresque (anti) heroine who starts her shape-shifting journey as the serpent goddess Nu Wa on the bank of the Yellow River creating the first humans out of mud, and finally settling in the body of an 18-year-old Miranda Ching in 2066 Pacific Northwest, partaking in the enslaved clones' revolt against the dark forces of corporate technocapitalism¹. The narratives of mythical Nu Wa and (post)modern-day Miranda converge toward the end of the novel to reveal recurring embodiments of one woman as a snake, a fish/mermaid, a human, and a cyborg, who is propelled to action across the different geo-temporal plains by her love for the eponymous Salt Fish Girl, also a reincarnating character. The central lesbian relationship in the novel is historicized by the specificities of the patriarchal and capitalist oppression, while it is also fraught with Nu Wa's/Miranda's morally dubious behaviour. By making the marginalized heroine of the novel morally flawed, Lai avoids the pitfalls of absolute victimization of the sexual and ethnic Other, thus declaring there is no such

1 I understand technocapitalism as "a new form of capitalism that is heavily grounded on corporate power and its exploitation of technological creativity" as discussed in: Villa-Suarez, L. (2012) *Technocapitalism: A Critical Perspective on Technological Innovation and Corporatism*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

thing as an innocent historical subject. This political lucidity is important for a text such as *Salt Fish Girl* due to the markedly activist tone of Lai's writing that transpires in her trenchant critique of hegemonic power structures which dominate over the female/animal/machine heroines in the novel.

Through the confusing origins and multiple rebirths of Nu Wa/Miranda and Salt Fish Girl/Evie, the last of which is aided by modern technology, Lai rewrites traditional masculinist origin myths from a queer perspective, and reclaims paternal science for the feminist cause of establishing a matrilineal genealogy for her characters. The novel is acutely aware of the political and economic implications of who owns the means for the production of "the technologies of the body"² which are used to create categories of race, class, gender and species. The feminist-Marxist frame informs the narrative, and it is particularly palpable in Lai's imaginative visitations to the 19th century Chinese factories running on cheap female labour, paralleled by the 21st century corporate exploitation of female clones, the Sonias. This paper will interpret Lai's novel as a piece of cyborg writing as theorized by Donna Haraway that weaves a continuous thread among capitalism, technology and patriarchy, which it sets out to dismantle by constructing a new agent of historical transformation, a cyborg continuum³ of human-animal-machine, embodied in the novel's two protagonists.

The Cyborg in Theory and Text

Writing a chapter on the applications of Marxist theory for *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay asserts the important role of Marxism in sci-fi criticism since the 1960s which paralleled its influence on feminism, race-criticism, queer theory and cultural studies. Marxism (and

2 Foucault refers to disciplinary technologies that integrate power and knowledge and construct the body through state apparatuses such as school, hospital, judiciary system, etc. One is the "gaze" of the subject who observes, and the other is the "archive", i.e. a record of observations, organised topically, which facilitates the development of institutional and discursive strategies for exerting power over the body. Foucault sees these technologies of the body as constitutive of modern scientific research. See: Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Pantheon Books.

3 The phrase *cyborg continuum* alludes to the famous term *lesbian continuum* by the author and feminist scholar Adrienne Rich. Her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" charts the broad platform of intimate relations and bonds between women, ranging from sexual/romantic, to mother-daughter relationships and female friendships, operating as a lesbian continuum which defies compulsory heterosexuality. See: Rich, A. (1980) Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5.4, pp. 631–660. JSTOR 3173834.

the wider socialist thought) has been particularly applicable to the sub-genre of utopian fiction that transcends the ills of contemporary society with its imaginative alternative worlds on the level of the entire human species that are rooted in scientific discoveries. Csicsery-Ronay notes that these are also the concerns of Marxist utopianism, in which an analysis of the capitalist economy coupled with a dialectical view of history has “a universally just and democratic way of life in the future as the goal of human history” (113). Csicsery-Ronay goes on to map the links between Marxist thought and postmodern theory that rarely and uneasily meet in science fiction criticism. Among several complaints from the postmodernist camp raised against contemporary Marxist sci-fi criticism is that it ignores the ways new technologies have transformed the means of production, and consequently, cultural values and human bodies. Csicsery-Ronay remarks that although a major figure of Marxist literary and cultural criticism Fredric Jameson has been an exception with his interest in postmodernism and Third World cinema, he has frequently been found guilty of conceiving technosocial changes as a negative totality, while rarely acknowledging the transformative powers and potential for radical paradigm shifts portrayed in science fiction (121).

What is especially poignant for Csicsery-Ronay is the chasm he notes between the “traditional” Marxist theorization of sci-fi and feminism. In spite of the fact their cannon admits some works of feminist science fiction (e.g. by Piercy and Russ), critical utopian/socialist theorists have shown disregard for feminist questions, whereas feminist thought has drifted away from the Marxist analytic to which it was once indebted for its progressive historical model. A feminist scholar trained in biology who stands out in this regard is Donna Haraway, whose ground breaking theorization of the cyborg combines sci-fi narratives, historical materialism and feminism (122).

Invited to envision the future of socialist feminism in 1983, Donna Haraway published a seminal piece of contemporary critical theory, “The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”. Haraway takes over from the works of science fiction the figure of cyborg and uses it to diagnose an ongoing breakdown of the boundaries between humans, genders, animals and machines, as well as between the “real” and “virtual” – binaries produced through the Western humanist discourse, which is also the engine behind the technoscientific revolutions of our age. She argues that, as postmodern identities are increasingly fragmented and technology spills into the realm of “natural” ever more often, the capitalist network of connections has inadvertently given rise to

a new form of social being, the cyborg, which the marginalized groups can use as a metaphorical tool of resistance against the technocapitalist exploitative matrix. Haraway sees the cyborg in today's humans, whose minds and bodies have become integrated with artificial elements, and defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" inhabiting today's high-tech world in which "boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* 149). The cyborg's contribution to feminism rests in its myth of a genderless world, a world free of hierarchies between genders, species and races imposed by the patriarchal-capitalist logic. Hence, the cyborg offers the possibility of new counter-hegemonic social imaginaries, and as a creature without origin or stable identity, it can serve as a much needed basis for political unity of dissimilar identities that all share a common experience of oppression. For Haraway, this common ground for activism is vital, for, as she remarks, "the need for unity of people trying to resist world-wide intensification of domination has never been more acute" (155). The socialist aspect of Haraway's cyborg lies in its modelling on the proletariat and on women under patriarchy. The cyborg is capable of class-consciousness, and can orchestrate a subversion of the technoscientific network of domination with the aim of a positive social transformation toward the inclusion of all difference. What is radical about Haraway as a socialist-feminist thinker is how she weds her vision of liberation of the oppressed with the postmodern optimism about the uses of technology, an institution that has largely been attacked by feminist scholars as an extension of patriarchal-capitalist exploitation of nature and reinforcement of hegemony.

Haraway extends her disapproval of Western logics in another of her influential articles, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", where she attacks Objectivity in science, defined as "an external, disembodied point of view" that supposedly provides a complete and thus the only legitimate perspective on an issue, whereas it conceals its own subjectivity and the epistemic violence, to use Spivak's term, which inevitably limits the field of vision. Moreover, in this essay, as well, Haraway takes on the problem of opposing currents within the feminist movement and argues for a constructive feminist dialogue based on acknowledged partial perspectives, i.e. a dialogue between individuals with "subjective" and particularized interests and experiences, and proposes such partial vision which she calls "situated knowledges" as a united feminist front against forces of oppression.

The radical criticism of the technologies of the body brings Haraway into dialogue with the philosopher and theorist Judith Butler. The practice of gender deconstruction that is an important aspect of Haraway's cyborg is paralleled in Butler's work by the figure of the drag queen. She employs the figure of the drag queen, a male-sexed body that looks like a female, to prove the constructedness of both genders, i.e. that there is a "myriad of open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body" (in *Gender Trouble* 112). Drag is a parody of gender, according to Butler, a profoundly menacing subversion of identity that breaks down the discrete borders between male and female, exposing both genders as effects of the real constructed through a series of performative acts, such as dress, hair length, language use, etc. In her founding work of queer theory, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler sets out to disprove not only the category of gender as a culturally produced identity, enacted and attached onto a sexed body, but also the very notion of sex as a natural given. Butler's complex arguments in the book unravel as she, as a classically trained scholar, engages with the arguments of other theorists of gender (including Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault, etc.) before she proceeds to her conclusions. Butler's main line of argument can be summarized as the following: the gender categories of masculine and feminine are not "natural" but are mere cultural effects (or "gender performances") produced discursively through systems of signification. In itself, this is not a new argument, as it has already been established by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. But what does this imply about the supposedly naturally sexed body of a man or a woman which performs the gender, and which Beauvoir does not comment on? Butler's radical response, similarly to Monique Wittig's is that, since one is always already born into language/ the system of signification, this precludes the possibility of a pre-discursive and pre-gendered body, i.e. it is impossible for one to conceive of a pure biological sex without the taint of gender performance through which sexes are distinguished. From this follows that biological sex, too, has no claim on an ontological status and cannot be seen as an essence of the body that precedes the culturally constructed gender (*Gender Trouble* 111-128). For both Wittig and Butler, "the category of sex is itself a gendered category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural (*Gender Trouble* 112).

The point of convergence for Haraway's cyborg, Butler's drag and the novel *Salt Fish Girl* is the idea that biology is a form of discourse which needs to be countered with anti-essentialism

and posthumanism⁴ to lead the way out of duality of man vs. woman, a problem that haunts much of feminist politics and fiction. Heteronormativity is the main byproduct of a binarist conception of both gender and sex which Haraway, Butler and Lai's novel seek to dismantle by arguing against its naturalized status in the Western logoi. Drawing on Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysical binary structures, the cyborg and the drag both prove a destabilizing contingency of heteronormativity on the queer identity, just like "the human" is defined against its Others, such as animals and machines. Haraway proposes a genderless, posthuman world of fusions between animal and machine, while in an analogous argument, Butler invites us to imagine the plurality and diversity of gender possibilities. The cyborg/lesbian continuum that consists of animal-human-machine in the novel *Salt Fish Girl* synthesizes both Butler's and Haraway's arguments into a projection of a fictional future in which feminine-gendered cyborgs produced by bio-technology for the pleasure of the male gaze and for the exploitation in a technocapitalist metropolis learn to take over the means of their own production and subvert the established order, blurring the lines between several contingent dichotomies: male and female, human and animal, creator and creation, and natural and artificial.

*Salt Fish Girl: The Cyborg Continuum and
Continuity through Technology*

"In the beginning, there was just me" (*SFG* 1) says Nu Wa, the serpent-goddess and the creator of the first humans, commencing her journey through several lifetimes. The chapters of the book intertwine the narratives of Nu Wa's first, second and third embodiment, but her final life, in which she is largely unconscious of her mythical origins. The reader is presented with the tales of two different narrators, the chimerical, fallible and assertive Nu Wa and the disconcerted and less audacious, but equally erring Miranda, who converge into a single character toward the end. Nu Wa's first life is mythical, her second reincarnation in 19th century China contains elements of the surreal, whereas in her final embodiment in a 21st century North American technocracy, the setting is a sci-fi imaginary. Nu Wa as the narrator is careful to emphasize both the animalness and the femininity of her body: she is a proud owner of a tail, but also of "a woman's

4 I use the term *posthuman* as a notion derived from science fiction and philosophy denoting ambiguous organisms that transcend the human state, but also as a criticism of the humanist, Enlightenment ideas about the privileged status of man in the chain of beings that produces the dualities of species, races, genders, and nature and technology.

lips, a woman's mouth" (2). Nu Wa's is the mythical part of the narrative, yet she is not contrasted to the post-industrial technocapitalist setting of the second part of the novel. Rather, there is a continuity between the mythical creation of the first humans by Nu Wa and the latter-day breeding of cyborgian organisms through biotechnology. Nu Wa is interestingly not only biologically sexed as a woman but also feels like one, i.e. she is a gendered body. Yet, the ambivalence of her species (a serpent with human qualities) will soon be coupled with an androgynous doubling of identity: when Nu Wa transforms into a mortal human because she yearns to feel the desire and love she sees in humans, she encounters a face above the river surface that is strikingly like hers, only male. The scene evokes Butler's call to imagine multiple possibilities of gender for a sexed body. The feminist undercurrent of the narrative is established not only through Nu Wa's gendering, but also through her criterion for the sex assignment of her creations of mud: she turns "the strong ones into women, the weak ones into men" (3). Nu Wa also does not have heteronormative reproduction in mind for her creations, since she originally invents sex for pleasure and revitalization, and only later thinks of procreation.

Nu Wa's rebirth in the late 19th century China introduces the topic of asexual reproduction in the novel, which is a radical counter-heteronormative act, and a breach with biological categories, but one which paradoxically, at the same time, has a firm ground in nature and is a familiar reproductive strategy of several animal species. Lai deftly weaves a queer poetics in her heroine's narrative by infusing her body with animal genes, making her ambiguously monstrous and natural at the same time. Interestingly, Nu Wa reproduces herself by impregnating her chosen mother through polluted water: "she lifted the cup to her lips, and down I went in the first gulp. I glided down her throat and slid into her womb" (48). In a parallel act in the 21st century, Nu Wa will once again utilize nature and a borrowed womb to perpetuate her existence, only this time, it will be the durian fruit. Along with practicing asexual self-reproduction, Nu Wa is also dedicated to creating a matrilineal line of descent for herself: the fact that the father is left out of the reproductive act in Nu Wa's conceptions posits a radical agency of the female subject and the seizing of the means of reproduction from the masculine authority. The narrative goes even further in tackling the principles of heteronormativity by downplaying the role of the mother, as well. Namely, Nu Wa's 19th century Chinese mother only seems to serve as a surrogate-like vessel for the creation of her child which is a self-sufficient, self-replicating individual. The nameless mother is not only unaware of the circumstances of her pregnancy, but Nu Wa also informs us that

motherhood is an involuntary role for this woman, forced upon her by patriarchy:

“She was never the type for motherhood. If it hadn’t been expected of her, if she had had other options, she would have been an empress, or a poet, or a martyr. Something grand and perhaps a bit tragic” (*SFG* 49).

Yet, while Lai deconstructs the mother’s body, she puts her center-stage in the preservation of ethnic memory in diaspora, which is also Aimee’s central function in the shaping of Miranda’s identity who remembers her mother’s voice “reminding (her) of keeping old games, old stories, and traditional values alive” (*SFG* 65). Miranda eventually inadvertently kills her mother by dropping a box of durians on her, but it is only after this Lacanian tragedy of final separation from the maternal body that Miranda becomes a person in her own right, exploring the world of biogenetic experimentation and corporate exploitation that she has previously been naively unaware of.

Returning to Nu Wa’s past life in China, she falls in love with the eponymous Salt Fish Girl, a teenage daughter of a local fish merchant. From this juncture, the story evolves into a macabre examination of lesbian life in rural 19th century Canton, and the limited options available for the two heroines that force the girls to commit a crime in order to continue their illicit relationship. A critique of the exploitation of female factory labour is broadened in the next episode, which follows Nu Wa’s misadventures on the fantastical Island of Mist and Forgetfulness on which she is seduced and betrayed by a glamorous Western woman. The chapter reads as an allegory of the deceit of the American dream that entices immigrants to move to the global North with the promise of splendor and pleasure, but then dupes them into forced labour and a life of crime. Nu Wa’s narrative strand ends in her brutal death by drowning as a community punishment for breaching the rules of patriarchy, primarily the male monopoly over his wife’s body. By marrying an older man in order to compensate the wrongs her family has suffered for her youthful sins, Nu Wa relinquishes her lesbianism, and is then encouraged by her elderly husband to pursue a sexual relationship with a younger man, in order to provide the family with offspring. When Nu Wa fails to meet the manifold and contradictory requirements of patriarchy and is caught in adultery, she is hunted through woods and then drowned by the villagers in a basket, thus violently returning to the water from which she originally emerged centuries ago as a serpent-godess with a split tail.

Nu Wa resurfaces in the 21st century coiled around a seed of a durian fruit, eaten by a new unsuspecting mother well past her menopause, a 60-year-old Aimee Ching. The mythical reincarnation of Nu Wa as Aimee's daughter foregrounds once again the problem of uncertain origins, as *Salt Fish Girl* fittingly defies easy explanations by offering to the reader at least one more possibility when it comes to Miranda's conception. As a teenager Miranda learns from a controversial biogeneticist named Dr Flowers that the durian fruit her mother had eaten was possibly a product of gene manipulation or pollution by biochemicals that causes uncontrolled fertility. Hence, apart from indeterminacy and diversification of origin in the novel, which is the crux of Reimer's examination of Lai's cyborg politics, it is also vital to acknowledge the narrative's appropriation of technology in the deconstruction of humanist categories of gender, race and species. Through the theme of technology, the novel weaves a cyborg continuum from the serpent-turned-fish goddess of the mythical opening of the narrative to the 21st century Chinese-Canadian girl whose trouble is not only that she is "the only Asian in her class" (*SFG* 23) as her mother laments, but also the fact she exudes the repellent durian smell, making her a social pariah. Consequently, biotechnology, which brings about an unprecedented environmental catastrophe and social divides to the denizens of the Unregulated Zone, providing new possibilities for exploitation and violation of basic human rights, also mediates in the transposition of Nu Wa's mythical lesbianism and the formation of posthuman, hybrid subjectivities which have the potential to overthrow the established order. In this way, technocapitalism, to (ab)use Marx's phrase, produces its own means of destruction.

Nu Wa's 21st embodiment as Miranda is at first unknown to her as she is leading a sheltered life in a techocapitalist quasi-utopia, and her connection to Nu Wa begins to unravel as the five-year-old Miranda spots fish scales in the bathtub after she takes a bath. Miranda's temple fistulas also release a briny sea odour — presumably a relic of Miranda's past life as a fish or a mermaid, which she has curiously inherited from her mother, Aimee, hinting at Aimee's own kinship with the sea world. Miranda's family abode, the walled city of Serendipity is a flashy, hi-tech, and rigidly controlled space, run with an iron fist by the Saturna corporation, while the rest of former Canada is apparently divided among other three major corporations, marking a triumph of corporatism⁵ over the state. Yet, the

5 Corporatism is defined by its theorists as "the power of business corporations over society" which, significantly for *Salt Fish Girl*, has an "authoritarian control over technology". See: Villa-Suarez, L. op. cit., pp. 1-2.

operating corporate capitalism is also faltering toward the end of the novel, as we learn that the economy of Serendipity has suffered a downturn which caused thousands of lay-offs. Outside Serendipity lies the overtly dystopian and dilapidating Unregulated Zone, which is not under direct auspices of any of the corporations, yet, it is a site of all four corporations' surveillance systems, military violence and extraction of resources and labour power. The Unregulated Zone stands as an antipode to Serendipity, a testimony to its failed free market utopianism. The overlapping binaries of the real and the virtual in this economically and socially compartmentalized space are made explicit in the corporations' organization of middle-class labour – Miranda's aged father is employed as a tax-collector partaking in a simulation of a war zone, much like a video-game, where he undergoes an array of humiliating and painful injuries in the virtual world (which is in an act of Orwellian double speak called *The Real World* in the novel) and which take a toll on his physical body.

The Chings are banished to the Unregulated Zone where women are routinely subjected to sexual harassment on the bus, where corporate police violence is ubiquitous and where basic supplies are considered luxury items. It is also a place where corporate giants, such as the Pallas shoe brand, sets up factories where their cloned female workers toil on end, secluded from the eyes of society which echoes Haraway's claim in "The Cyborg Manifesto" that cyborgs are omnipresent, yet invisible. The legal invisibility of the cyborgs is reinforced through dated humanist assumptions that the human rights may only be granted to those individuals who are biologically constructed as human. The corporations bypass this by inserting 0.3% carp genes into their Sonia clones and cat genes into their Miyako clones, thus making them less-than-human and enslaving them on legal terms. In Dr Flower's morbid clinic, Miranda is reunited with her beloved Salt Fish Girl, now called Evie, whom she recognizes by her smell from the past life. Evie has apparently also been reincarnated, but as one of the Sonia clones, and as she shares with Miranda the details of her "sordid" origins, she imparts that the carp genes are the "unstable factor" which the scientists cannot control, and which have consequently instigated Evie's unpredicted willfulness, as opposed to the timidity and servility of most other Sonias. Birns reads the story of Sonias' forced factory labour as "quasi allegory of the condition of working class Asian women in the global marketplace", "indicators of the low-wage jobs occupied disproportionately by people of colour in the postmodern, global economy [...], the constructed avatars of the hegemony of transnational capitalism" (7). While the Sonias certainly are a part of Lai's socialist-feminist critique, as cyborg

characters they also stand for a wider probing of the ossified humanist assumptions of what makes a human and what the implications are of the porous boundaries between the species. It is central to the novel's plot that the violent homogenization, limitation and engineered identities of the Sonia and Miyako clones do not obstruct selfhood and independent consciousness, prompting the question that the clones are asking the consumers of the shoes they make: What does it mean to be human? Evie constructs her subjectivity through her acts and her self-naming. In her first act of self-fashioning, the savagely pursued, but relentless Sonia 13 (Evie's clone name) rips from her body the surveillance system, ironically called the Angel, which her laboratory father Dr Flowers has built into to monitor her movements, and she escapes to join the other rebelled Sonias' commune dedicated to the subversion of the oppressive technocapitalist order.

Sonias' organized silent revolt takes the form of consciousness-raising: the remaining Sonias still toiling in the Pallas corporation shoe factories print the messages on the soles of the feet that testify to their humanity (such as the poetry they write) or provoke the consumers into pondering the brutal exploitation of the workers. The rebelling Sonias also seize the means of their own production from Dr Flowers for a brief period before they are uncovered and brutally annihilated by the corporation – they utilize the genetically manipulated durian fruit for their own impregnation, once again bypassing both the institution of heteronormative sex and the coextensive institution of biotechnology which perpetuates the male scientist's authority over the female object. Dr Flowers, as the dethroned father figure, protests this usurpation of his control over the female body and the terms of its (re)production by assuring Miranda that “the fertility those durians provided was neither natural nor controllable. It was too dangerous” (249). Dr Flowers's reasoning clearly represents the dualist Cartesian worldview, originally attacked by Beauvoir and later taken up by Butler, among many other feminist theorists, which inspires “cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity” (*Gender Trouble* 12), and according to which it is the task of men to tame the monstrous female sexuality and fertility. Flowers might be said to function in the novel as an extension of the Roman family's *patria potestas* which Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. I) as the right of the father to “dispose of the life of his children and slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take them away” (256). Yet, Evie and Miranda exact their revenge on Flowers before he gets a chance to dispose of them, and the novel ends with the girls

transformed into mermaids in a hot spring, where Miranda gives birth to a baby girl.

The inconclusive origin of the child – whether it is the result of the durian fruit or a mutation during an intercourse of the two female lovers – affects new and unpredictable possibilities of imagining both desire and reproduction as independent from the categories of sex and gender, thus transcending the truth claims of hostile scientism and heteronormativity. Moreover, Evie’s and Miranda’s relationship is not idealized in either of the novel’s time-spaces, but an ongoing dialogue, a negotiated state. Its prime importance lies in its disruption of heterosexual hegemony, since their non-phallogocentric erotic exchange defies the illusions of seemingly stable identity categories. Hence, *Salt Fish Girl* proposes a strategic break with the heteronormative binary by weaving a mythical lesbian genealogy and imagining a hybridized, cyborgian future that makes use of technology to render reproduction possible within a lesbian union.

Beyond Heteronormativity: A Posthuman Future

Miranda and Evie, the two heroines, are both radically “othered” in the world of 21st century technocratic Western dystopia because of their ethnicity, gender and species. The establishment of such a broad platform for a common experience of subjugation aligns the novel’s themes with Donna Haraway’s cyborg-socialist-feminist politics that focuses on the political unity of disparate marginalized subjects, while the themes also converge with the critique of gender in the works of Judith Butler, one of the key thinkers of postmodern philosophy and queer theory. *Salt Fish Girl* has been hailed as an exemplary novel of cyborg politics as theorized by Haraway⁶, but it also lends itself well to a Butlerian interpretation because of its portrayal of technologically-mediated subversion of constructed gender categories. Lai weaves multiple and at times contradictory origin stories for her 21st century cyborg characters, engendering them through a narrative of a human-animal-machine continuum, but at the same time gendering them as feminine and investing them with lesbian sexuality. Consequently, both Haraway’s and Butler’s theorizations are applicable to the interpretation of the novel’s construction of a polymorphous cyborg genealogy through a continuum of woman, animal and machine in *Salt Fish Girl* and both elucidate this novel as a text that approaches the genderless

6 See Reimer, S. (2010) Troubling Origins: Cyborg Politics in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, *Atlantis* 35.1, pp. 4-13; Villegas-Lopez, S. (2015) Body Technologies: Posthuman Figurations in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56.1, pp. 26-41.

body of a cyborg to imbue it with mythic lesbian femininity. Focusing on the posthuman figurations of the human-machine couplings, Villegas Lopez writes that *Salt Fish Girl*, together with Jeannette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* portrays "anxiety over technology, represented primarily as a tool for progress and as an integral part of human lives but used by those in power to discipline the other, variously identified as nature, women, animals, and machines" (1-2). I would argue that *Salt Fish Girl* casts technology in both a negative and a positive light, depending on who controls it, and advocates for the subversion of masculinist origin myths and the coextensive technocapitalist discourse in order to open up possibilities for alternative lines of descent.

The line of descent for Lai's protagonist, Nu Wa/Miranda, is markedly matrilineal, in the sense that the father is excluded from reproduction and continuity while the mother figure remains important. Yet, the novel is equally ambiguous about motherhood, because the womb in the novel is often a vessel for the practice of self-replication, a quality that Haraway ascribes to the high-tech cyborg in an act of its radical subversion of the biological givens. Hence, the novel can be said to betray an ambiguous attitude toward technology: biotechnology in the novel is a product of patriarchal-capitalist power structures that recreate through cloning, gene manipulation and exploitation of thus produced female cyborgs the masculine authority over the Other and perpetuate the subjugation of women, but at the same time the cyborgs surprisingly turn out to be reincarnations of mythic lesbian identities that in the course of the story develop agency, radical independence and creative strategies for the destruction of the confounding technocapitalist and heteronormative regime that created them. The lesbian Other is at first threatened by technology in the narrative, but ultimately, the instruments of technology are seized and appropriated for its perseverance and continuity. Hence, Lai's novel can be said to share Haraway's hope for a positive employment of technology in dismantling the power structures that oppress those identities that fall outside the heteronormative matrix, creating space for a utopian conceptualization.

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КИБОРГ ОД МИТА ДО ТЕХНОКАПИТАЛИЗМА У
РОМАНУ *SALT FISH GIRL* ЛАРИСЕ ЛАИ

Сажетак

Рад користи постструктуралистички приступ роду Џудит Батлер, као и теорију киборга Доне Харавеј не би ли осветлио критику хетеронормативности у роману канадске књижевнице Ларисе Лаи која проистиче из постхуманих идентитета главних јунакиња романа. У овом делу савремене канадске спекулативне прозе успоставља се наративни континуитет између приче о митској богињи у облику змије, њене реинкарнације у жену у Кини 19. века и њеног коначног отелотворења у киборга у свету корпоратизоване Канаде касног 21. века. Квир поетика романа преплиће се са испитивањем границе између човека, животиње и машине на више приповедних нивоа, а нераскидива веза између две главне јунакиње (које су хибриди човека, животиње и машине) обједињује све наративне нивое и подрива институцију хетеронормативности. Значајно је приметити да љубавна прича Миранде и Иви садржи мотив биотехнологије и представља технолошка достигнућа као оруђе у овој субверзији, док ауторка третира биолошке категорије пола и врсте својих јунакиња као културолошки и историјски условљене дискурсе а не као природне датости, чиме релативизује однос природе и технологије са постхуманистичког становишта. Може се стога закључити да роман истовремено критикује више облика дискриминације маргинализованих идентитета, било да су оне засноване на полу, роду, раси или врсти, и доводи у питање хуманистичко гледиште света које додељује човеку (или, боље речено, мушкарцу) привилиговани статус у природном поретку и легитимизује његову власт над категоријама дефинисаним у хуманизму као његово Друго – природа, животиње и жена.

Кључне речи: *Лариса Лаи, постхуманизам, теорија киборга, хетеронормативност, технологија*