The Psyche of Neoliberal Multiculturalism: Queering Memory and Reproduction in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*  

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Beginning in the 2000s, speculative fiction has become more common in Asian diasporic writing, and has represented a sea-change in genre and form that deviates from widely-taught Asian American ethnic autobiographies, wherein the protagonist is often taken as a stand-in for the author, or for the shared experience of a particular racial identity. As scholars like Paul Lai have pointed out, autobiography, when done by a racial minority, is often read as autoethnography, which is invested in telling white audiences “something about another culture in a truthful manner” (56). This slide from autobiography and memoir to autoethnographic expectations, for Lai, “is a function of multiculturalism and its need to make sense of minority peoples against a normative mainstream” (56).

Though memoirs like Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* were first received as experimental mixed-genre publications, today novels that blend autobiography, memoir and autoethnography have become easily incorporated into post-racial notions of immigrant progress. In response, scholars like Stephen Hong Sohn have pushed for “reading practices that move away from an autobiographical or autoethnographic impulse attuned to authorial ancestry” (3), as such reading practices can reinforce the ghettoization of ethnic literature and can restrict race narratives to particular times, histories and spaces that seem to “illuminate only Asian American social contexts,” while leaving other literary texts by white writers open to post-racial imaginings (209). Similarly, scholars such as Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn have asserted that moving beyond autoethnography in Asian Canadian literature necessarily works against the tendency to reduce this writing to purely sociological or authentic information (11).

Whereas autoethnographic literature has diversified the American experience, it has also reproduced notions of ethnic authenticity by representing racial persecution within a particular historical context (the past), thereby buttressing a post-racial ideology that can be used to see contemporary forms of affirmative action and multicultural inclusion as no longer relevant. In her book *Represent and Destroy*, Jodi Melamed argues that by presuming ethnic literary texts to be “authentic, intimate, and representative” (37), educational institutions have deployed such literatures as a cultural technology that inculcates young people to “appropriate sensibilities for a multiracial, multicultural professional-managerial class” (32). Canadian writer and scholar Larissa Lai expresses a similar critique when she writes that the Canadian publishing industry has a taste for texts that “speak of Canadian history, speak of histories rooted in past injustice, or else treat brutal histories of ‘over there’” (“Corrupted” 53). By locating “oppression in history” or “over there,” the post-racial state “both denies and reproduces it in the
present, and further creates target market groups through this re-valorized production of identity” (“Corrupted” 53). In this sense, even canonical Asian American novels such as Carlos Bulosan’s America Is in the Heart or John Okada’s No-No Boy can be read to simply represent a difficult past for Filipino Americans or Japanese Americans. For Lai, this “native informant” function can be even more virulent than assimilation, because it is “sanctioned by the stamp of authenticity” (“Corrupted” 53). In contrast, less conventional reading methods that disobey autobiographic assumptions have the potential to “radically widen the social contexts of Asian American cultural productions” (Sohn 3).

This essay explores how reading Asian American texts as “speculative” rather than “autobiographical” can be a first step in enabling readers to see a text outside of its assumptions as an authentic ethnic text. As Madhu Dubey points out in her readings of neo-slave narratives, speculative fictions “overtly situate themselves against history” (784) and “suggest that the truth of this past is more fully grasped by way of an antirealist literary imagination that can fluidly cross temporal boundaries and affectively immerse readers into the world of slavery” (785). As Dubey stresses, speculative fiction has the capability of continuing projects of anti-racism, as their mode of analogizing (rather than historicizing) racial, class and gender persecution can better imagine cross-ethnic and transnational coalitions. In particular, we examine how Larissa Lai’s novel Salt Fish Girl (2002) and Chang-rae Lee’s novel On Such a Full Sea (2014) use speculative tropes to unsettle the tethering of neoliberalism and multiculturalism that promises a “post-racial” future. By combining speculative elements with tropes of queer reproduction, both novelists forgo the racial identities that make individuals recognizable to neoliberal multiculturalism. Instead, these texts focus on how the bodies, talents, stories, and memories of racialized subjects become appropriated and reconstructed for the purpose of maintaining a multi-racial upper class. Rather than make ethnic identities irrelevant, these Asian diasporic speculative texts represent futures where “post-racial” sensibilities have become ubiquitous. They re-invest racial identities by focusing less on the authentic Asian American subject, and more on the traumatic violence, exploitation and structures of power that cross racial, ethnic, and national boundaries.

We use the term Asian diasporic speculative fiction to account for how both texts highlight the experience of migration as a complex overlapping of capitalist and imperial violence that often gets erased by multiculturalist discourses. We also consider how these texts enact their critique of neoliberal multiculturalism and its instrumentalization of ethnic memory through the deployment of speculative tropes
of (queer) reproduction. As Rachel Lee argues in *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, imaginative representations of queer reproduction can expand the “notion of what counts as reproduction” beyond biological parameters (129). For example, Lee points to “racializing dynamics in the health industry” and “international geo-economic inequities” that have led to a surrogate industry (130). For Lee, the representation of such queer reproduction prompts a “rethinking of normative heterosexual reproduction” which lies at the core of “future continuance” (142). Encompassing the non-normative identities of both queer identified and non-queer identified subjects, queer reproduction, therefore, reflects a wide range of practices and identifications that disrupt patriarchal, heterosexist, and neoliberal configurations of familial reproduction. We argue that the tropes of queer reproduction in both texts are also inextricably tied to the novels’ unconventional treatment of Asian historical memory. In these novels, memory is importantly delinked from notions of ethnic authenticity and genealogical or familial transmission, and tied, rather, to a politics of queer and feminist solidarity.

*Salt Fish Girl* and Neoliberal Multiculturalism’s Post-Racial Future

Larissa Lai’s novel *Salt Fish Girl* evades autobiographical readings by deploying fantasy and science fiction conventions to explore how capitalist and imperial dominance cannot be contained within a particular time and space, but are part of our past, present, and future. While suggesting that the commodification and marketing of ethnic diversity marks the contemporary North American present, Lai’s novel at the same time stresses the larger transpacific history of commodification and exploitation of racialized subjects. Lai uses the parallel narrative structure of her two main characters, Miranda and Nu Wa, to depict the way in which the bodies, talents, stories, and memories of racialized subjects become appropriated and reconstructed for the purpose of capital accumulation and to legitimate state violence. Lai’s novel revises both forms of ethnic autobiography and science fiction by interweaving two narratives, one of the past and the other of the future, only to skip over the author’s own historical period by about forty years. The past, mythical narrative is of Nu Wa, the Chinese creation goddess who, out of loneliness, takes human form and falls in love with the daughter of a fisherman from the 19th century, the salt fish girl. The futuristic narrative takes place in the year 2044, where Miranda, a girl of Asian descent living in the city-state Serendipity, struggles with smelling like durian. Lai’s blatant refusal to write about
her own historical moment is driven further by her imaginative genre style, which combines myth and science fiction to link Miranda’s struggles with that of the queer Asian goddess Nu Wa.

In *Salt Fish Girl*’s splicing of a mythical past with a techno-heavy future, its absence of the contemporary period can be read as an attempt to distance the reader from both autoethnographic and post-race discourses of multiculturalism. In placing the complex subjectivities and struggles of its two Asian female protagonists at the center of the narrative, the novel resists a techno-orientalist imagination that is, as David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu argue, “rooted in this view of the Asian body as a form of expendable technology—a view that emerged in the discourse of early United States industrialization and continued to evolve in the twentieth century” (11). The novel’s depiction of a futuristic city run by company-states comments upon spaces of the transnational Pacific Northwest like urban Vancouver and Seattle, where the acceptance of people of color (especially Asians and Asian Americans) in businesses like Microsoft and Intel posits the Northwest as a multicultural haven. With the United States’ 1965 Immigration Act and Canada’s 1976 Immigrant Act, restrictions on national origins were exchanged for provisions that increasingly preferred upper-class skilled migrants, redefining “inadmissible classes” as persons who could potentially become a burden on social welfare or health programs (Kelley and Trebilcock 408). As Patterson has previously written, so-called havens like the transnational Pacific Northwest can also be understood as spaces of “liberal tolerance” that see violence “as a cultural characteristic to be contained” (2). Here, historical and racial violence is blamed “on the individual who chooses to retain an intolerable version of the immigrant culture” (Patterson 2). Post-racial discourse thus emerges in the confluence of capitalist success and national multiculturalism, effectively masking histories of racial violence and exclusion such as Oregon’s exclusion of black migrants in 1847, or anti-Chinese racial riots in Vancouver, Seattle, Tacoma, and much of Oregon and Idaho in the late nineteenth century. As LeiLani Nishime argues, while post-racial discourses may assert “that there is no genetic basis for race,” they in turn trivialize racial identity as a category, equating “people’s recognition of race with racism itself,” thus repressing racist histories as well as contemporary racist projects (6).

Often criticized for its deployment of post-race rhetoric, Canada’s discourse of multiculturalism has risen to heights only implicitly imagined in the United States, and has been described as “the most successful pluralist society on the face of our globe” (Stackhouse and Martin n. pag.). Larissa Lai, who is also a professor of English at the University of Calgary in Canada, writes of Vancouver as the
exemplary pluralist society for the Canada model, as such multiculturalism has efficiently de-politicized cultural politics so that “the radical and productive aspects of [the identity politics] strategy have been largely contained, and . . . what remains effective is its conservatizing function” (Lai, “Identity” 138). In her interviews, Lai criticizes Canadian multiculturalism as a discourse that celebrates diversity while distracting from racial prejudices that help maintain income inequality and immigrant vulnerability. Canadian scholars such as Smaro Kamboureli, Eva Mackey, and Richard Day have similarly argued for an understanding of Canadian multiculturalism as a form of pluralist governmentality that serves to manage racial difference in order to sedate radical political solidarities. Post-racial discourses posit an end to ethnic narratives by labeling all ethnic and migratory peoples as simply “Canadian,” thus imagining the nation as the benevolent space of multiracial tolerance. In post-racial discourse, the work of the nation to incorporate ethnic identities is heralded as a qualified success.

**Refusing the Heroine**

In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai seeks to unsettle uncritical celebrations of state multiculturalism by refusing to depict her two main female characters as authentic ethnic narrators who are either victims of historical/patriarchal forces or empowered heroines. Instead, Lai focuses on their weaknesses and betrayals, marking their complicity, their desire for wealth and love, and their convictions for misplaced notions of progress. In her academic scholarship, Lai writes of strong and idealized ethnic narrators as a trope that continues to buttress state and capitalist power, as she says, “stories of heroic women of colour have a false and irritating ring. . . . even the most oppressed of us have power and use it irresponsibly” (qtd. in Morris 26). Narratives of victimization and uncritical empowerment, for Lai, are too commonly used to reproduce state and capitalist power that posits itself as a resolving force. In contrast to “heroic women of colour,” Lai’s mythical character Nu Wa struggles with her own betrayals and her desire for progress over love. When Nu Wa creates humans out of clay, she notices their sexual desires, and decides to bifurcate humans into different genders, doubling the value of sex acts as not “just for pleasure, but also for procreation” (5). Though done out of loneliness, Nu Wa’s actions have the effect of producing marginalized groups defined by their inability to procreate and their queer desires. Nu Wa witnesses the brunt of this oppression when she takes a human female form and falls in love with “a girl from the coast,” who smells of salt fish (48). Refusing
to marry a “suitable husband,” Nu Wa announces to her family that she wants to be a spinster, yet the salt fish girl, raised in traditions from the coast, cannot do the same (53). Nu Wa entices the salt fish girl to murder her caretakers, then to escape to Canton, where they seduce and rob “Western tourists and businessmen” (120). The stigma against queer desire here intersects with class hierarchy and the burden of race reproduction. Nu Wa’s decision to make sex reproductive rather than just pleasurable helps produce the taboos against her own sexual desire for the salt fish girl.

Blackmailed by a factory foreman into taking a job in a wind-up toy factory, salt fish girl’s eyesight and health slowly disintegrate as she spends “all the hours of daylight, and often many of darkness too, crouched under the dim lights of the factory, straining through a magnifying glass” (120). In contrast, Nu Wa’s willingness to exploit her sexuality to seduce and then rob drunks saves her from the salt fish girl’s fate, and she abandons the salt fish girl to travel to a floating island, an act that “took more weakness than strength” (125). The floating island is marked by an east gate sign displaying the word “Progress” and a west gate sign displaying the word “Democracy” (125), signs symbolic of the ideological promises of economic prosperity and freedom made to Asian migrants in Canada (Mansbridge 127). Lai reveals the hypocrisy of such liberal discourse when Nu Wa is blackmailed into taking “a job as a toilet scrubber and a bedsheet changer” (129). While in China the salt fish girl is blackmailed into exploitative labor, Nu Wa is coerced by her own desire for wealth, progress and democracy, values that are used against the Asian migrant to exploit her labor all the same.

Like the islands of many speculative travel narratives since *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), the floating island is a satirical space, one that espouses ideas of progress and equality, yet confines Nu Wa to low-wage labor as a telecom operator and hotel maid. Her price of entry into this labor is to give up her language, and to later be framed for drug trafficking, resulting in five years of prison. Rather than seem heroic in her migrancy, Nu Wa seems both pragmatic and naïve, and when she finally encounters the salt fish girl again in China, she discovers the consequences of her abandonment: the salt fish girl’s eyes have decayed, and because of her queer desire, she is harassed by her neighbors as “the unnatural one” (173). Ridden with guilt, Nu Wa realizes she had “taken the easy way out,” and thinks, “how easily we abandon those who have suffered the same persecutions as we have. How quickly we grow impatient with their inability to transcend the conditions of our lives” (172). Rather than isolate violence and dominance in a particular group or historical
circumstance, Nu Wa’s narrative considers how values of progress and democracy can be deployed to lead one to commit acts of shame and abandonment.

The complex technologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality are made even more unsettling for the reader as no clear authentic subject emerges as either victim or hero, keeping the story of racial persecution from completely resolving with a celebration of ethnic identity. While Nu Wa’s narrative reframes migrancy as a naïve desire for progress and equality, Miranda’s narrative of the future Pacific Northwest questions how the cultural empowerment of liberal multiculturalism is employed to produce this desire for progress. Like many middle-class Asian Americans and Asian Canadians, Miranda’s family is comfortable, but their comfort is “supported by tremendous chaos and abuse of power” (Lai, “Future” 174). Similar to Nu Wa’s narrative, complicity here is wrought through Miranda’s fear of falling into an unnerving limbo between two different but co-constitutive spaces: the walled-off, geometrically perfect urban space of Serendipity, and the Unregulated Zone, a chaotic space of disease and poverty, where plants and people breed without the control of the state. Though they appear as distinct spaces, Serendipity relies on the Unregulated Zone both as a source of cheap labor and as a consistent incentive to keep middle class workers, like Miranda and her family, docile and obedient.

Lai underscores the novel’s refusal of uncomplicated heroism by showing how Miranda sells a song willed to her by her mother—one of many such songs which hold the history and rich memories of her mother’s life as a cabaret singer (25). Miranda is not tempted to sell her mother’s song until an agent working for a show company, Pallas shoes, suggests that she could “buy [her] way back into Serendipity” (198). The shoes, as Miranda is aware, follow an exploitive production process of “mad, dark factories” enabled by exploiting female brown bodies (202), yet Miranda gives away the song rights anyway, believing that her family could use the money to migrate, to “go anywhere we wanted” (199). The migrant’s dream of reaching a space of progress is only made accessible through acts of complicity, betrayal and cultural containment. Miranda gives up the cultural link to her genealogy and family history, her mother’s song, in order to ascend from the Unregulated Zone, while the song itself goes on to create consumerist desires that sustain the poverty and exploitation in the Zone’s factories. Lai captures the desires of the Asian migrant in facing the promise of migration, driven by neoliberal logics of greed and individual selfishness:
What the hell, I thought. I didn’t personally do anything to those factory women, did I? What harm could it do for my mother’s song to have a second life? It would bring the memory of her to millions, introduce her genius to a new generation who hadn’t heard it for the first time. (202)

Miranda’s rationalization of the sale here reveals the extent of her internalization of global consumer capitalism’s logic, which also becomes apparent in her indifference towards the factory women, and in her refusal to connect her actions to a larger social context, demonstrating, as Tara Lee argues, “the difficulty of breaking capitalism’s hold” (103). Nu Wa and Miranda’s actions dramatize the complex experiences of racialized agents who are neither innocent victims being blindly duped or robbed of their cultural production, nor uncritical participants willingly abetting global capitalist forces that seek to package and sell their stories, memories, and talents. In Lai’s speculative future, race functions as a genealogical trace that appears less through skin color and more through biological traces and genealogical memory. Racial consciousness has been forgone for narratives about the individual body, which, as Tara Lee suggests, is “pitted against a consumerism that commodifies everything that crosses its path” (94). Lai imagines a future in which neoliberal trends such privatization, erosion of state power, and corporate dominance have become fully realized in the form of corporate regulation of everyday life.

Queering Memory and Reproduction in *Salt Fish Girl*

Lai’s use of speculative elements in *Salt Fish Girl* prompts readers to think of race as a genealogical trace inextricably linked to modes of biological and social reproduction. Through such an optic, Lai’s novel allows readers to recognize racial modes of class management and refuses readings that would naïvely historicize racial identities into a particular violent past. In refusing the post-racism of Anglo speculative fiction, *Salt Fish Girl* emphasizes what Alys Weinbaum calls in *Wayward Reproductions* the bind between race and reproduction that constitutes national and ethnic belonging, as Weinbaum calls it: “the inextricability of the connection between race and reproduction—the fact that these phenomena ought not to be thought of as distinct, though they have all too often been analytically separated” (5). Lai’s novel stresses the biopolitical control of the “race/reproduction bind” through tradition (the past), and medical science (the future), which produces
biological and genealogical differences that continue to organize communities, leaving some vulnerable to exploitative labor and violence. Lai’s novel thus highlights the continuous history of race by refocusing it upon women’s reproductive capacity, opening the concept of race from skin-color, culture and identity, towards genealogical history, reproduction, family ties, and the capitalist need for low-wage workers produced through recognizable modes of difference.

Lai’s novel exposes the race/reproduction bind through the racialized stigma against queer subjects in Nu Wa’s time, where the streets of a Chinese city are lined with factories of women producing silk, paper, and toy commodities. Women with no husbands, families or who have been branded as sexually aberrant, find themselves in queer communities performing exploited labor for a distant “first world.” Similarly, Miranda’s future contains “thousands of compounds” owned by various multinational corporations who have engineered female clones to perform labor in the factories (160). Significantly, these clones were first created as a result of the corporation Nextcorp’s “Diverse Genome Project,” which, as the character Evie, a clone who escaped from a shoe factory, explains to Miranda, “focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction” (160). Lai’s play on the meanings of “human” and “diverse” draws attention to the way in which the liberal discourse of multiculturalism is, as Katharyne Mitchell suggests, easily appropriated and reconstructed by private institutions to facilitate the interests of capital (221). The Diverse Genome Project—a neoliberal project that replicates the oldest forms of colonial oppression—works by violently eradicating and suppressing “natural” difference and by producing a mechanized, homogenized form of “diversity” that can be capitalized.

The Diverse Genome Project employs notions of aberrant sexuality and reproduction to produce female clones—all named Sonia—who are “point zero three per cent . . . freshwater carp” (158). Because these laborers are not technically human, companies invest in them to bypass laws regulating wage-labor. Evie (formerly Sonia) tells Miranda that the Sonias were cloned from the genes of “a Chinese woman who married a Japanese man and was interned in the Rockies during the Second World War,” and uses the genetics of “peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction” so that each cloned body has “[b]rown eyes and black hair” (160). Such allusions recall Canada’s genealogy of state-sanctioned racism and invoke present circumstances in which Asian women from developing countries constitute the highest proportion of workers in transnational production sites. Indeed, such physical characteristics
meshed with the history of Asian migration and Japanese internment make the Diverse Genome Project seem explicitly racist, and when Miranda hears of it, the post-racial ideology of the future restrains her from adequately describing this mode of oppression, saying “stuff like that is not supposed to happen any more” (160). “Stuff like that”—the repressed organization of bodies by race and reproduction—is the “stuff” that has never stopped happening, the same “stuff” that becomes unrecognizable given the modes of historic narration that segregate racist violence into particular times and places. It is this repressed “stuff” that links the two narratives, as the taboos of the mythical past that group sexual deviancy, dishonorable family lineage and poverty, all reappear in the post-racial future, though Miranda can only recognize them as historical remnants.

Despite the absence of race as a discourse in either the mythical past or the post-racial future, Lai traces the continuities of racial and ethnic management through regimes of sexuality and reproduction. In doing so, she calls attention to the historical and geographical continuities of what Rey Chow has described as the “ethnicization of labour” (34) and what Laura Kang has described as the complex ways in which “Asian women have been figured as especially suited to conduct certain labor needs of transnational capitalism” (165). Like the women in the toy factory in China who are driven to the point of hysteria due to the “sheer frustration with the dreariness of their toil” (123), the Sonias labor under inhumane, prison-like conditions, provoking some of them, like Evie, to escape. Mirroring the injustices of Nu Wa’s experience as an illegal immigrant on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, the escaped Sonias in the Unregulated Zone are unfairly detained or made to disappear. The narrator explains that “[w]ithout a legal existence to begin with, they [the Sonias] could not be reported missing” (249-50). As queer figures themselves, the Sonias articulate “a historic desire to defy institutionally managed borders of ethnicity, race, and gender” through refusing to reproduce their society’s given post-racial assumptions, which repress discussions of race while taking total control of the process of reproduction (Ho n. pag.). These escaped Sonias, who are factory-made brown women, offer the hope of an alternative, queer reproduction, as they have learned to reproduce as lesbians through integrating genetically modified durians into their sex acts. This mode of reproduction, only made possible in the “unregulated zone” that refuses state control, allows us to begin imagining queerness as what José Muñoz might call a “queer futurity,” one built not on the social reproduction of power or the straight reproduction of bodies, but on the desire for “better relations within the social” (30).
Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* follows Lai’s novel in analogizing the transpacific into a post-racial future. In his city of B-Mor, a futuristic envisioning of Baltimore hundreds of years in the future, Chinese migrants have fled the ecological catastrophe in China, displacing local black communities to build a society premised upon health and stability. “Most would agree that any rational person would leap at the chance of living here,” says the novel’s narrator, who speaks in the communal “we” of B-Mor (2). According to this narrator, B-Mor is characterized by its “stability,” which organizes social life, becomes “the bonds of blood or sexual love,” and is “what we ultimately produce, day by night by day” (7). As in upper-class housing complexes, from suburban sites in America to tightly structured sites in Asia like Hong Kong’s LOHAS Park, stability and safety are less a human right and more a commodity purchased through one’s complicity to the system. The stability of B-Mor is provided by the surveillance and social management of the Charters, a multicultural (but mostly white) upper class of future Americans who ensure that all social bonds are made calculable and optimized. The B-Mors gladly accept this stability in exchange for their prime fish and vegetables, which go to feed the Charters. While B-Mor follows the logic of Asian “New Towns,” the “famously nervous” Charters follow that of the North American upper class, “obsessed with minimizing hazards of any kind, and are perhaps wracked most of all by the finally unknowable dangers of what they ingest” (99). Since stability in B-Mor is marked as a commodity, as soon as a food scare casts doubts on B-Mor’s fish, the entire community is sundered from its promised stability.

Like *Salt Fish Girl*, what anchors the narrative of Chinese American futures is a young girl, and like Lai’s Miranda, Lee’s young protagonist, Fan, cannot be simply remembered as heroic. Rather, she navigates complex ethical terrain relative to her daring, constant movement. Both novels are picaresque narratives wherein the protagonist has little control over *how* they go from place to place; rather their departures and arrivals are structured as a series of betrayals. Nu Wa betrays the salt fish girl only to be betrayed again by Eve, while Fan is betrayed by almost every adult she comes across, but also does her share of using them so as to reunite with Reg, the father of her unborn child. While Lai’s novel deliberately skips past the contemporary era, Lee’s novel begins in a future where memories of the contemporary era have become unreachable and unimaginable. In this post-racial
society, the narrator only sees China as a trivial side-note as they say, “It is known where we come from, but no one much cares about things like that anymore. . . . It was on the other side of the world, which might as well be a light-year away” (1). In de-historicizing the circulation of diasporic bodies and memories across the globe, Lee’s novel joins Lai’s in marking such migration as ethically complex territory, not without some duplicity, abandonment and cost.

Despite the novel’s attempts to negotiate the conjoined logics of Asian and American futures, reviewers have chastised the novel for not living up to the rigid assumptions of dystopian science fiction, a genre form that has become more dominant in the Young Adult fiction market of the 2000s. Critics like Maureen Corrigan from National Public Radio have read the book as failed attempt to follow a speculative fiction trend, calling it a “video game of a novel” and adding that Katniss Everdeen of The Hunger Games was “a much more genial companion to have along on a trek through dystopia than the monochromatic Fan.” More famously, speculative fiction author Ursula Le Guin rebuked the novel for “irresponsibly” and “superficially” using dystopia as “a major tourist attraction,” writing that Lee’s book is “full of ingenious variations on predictable themes.” Like Corrigan, Le Guin’s critique rests on the unbelievable nature of the world and on Lee’s refusal to capture Fan as heroic. “As a result,” she says, “[Lee’s] imagined world carries little weight of reality” (n. pag.)

While the reviews of Lee’s novel hardly qualify as substantive critiques, they do draw attention to the difficulty of reading Asian diasporic speculative fiction within the terms of established (and popular) genres. As Betsy Huang argues, science fiction’s appeal “resides in its capacity for social and material critique through the deliberate use of nonrealist, nonempirical, highly representational and metaphoric literary devices” (100-01). If “reality” is conveyed through the expectations of a genre form, then the genre mixtures of On Such a Full Sea and Salt Fish Girl may be illegible to the majority of audiences, especially since science fiction often implicitly celebrates a post-racial future. At the same time, Lee’s novel resists the ethnic autobiographical assumptions common to Asian American literature, as there is no intimate portrait of Fan. Instead, the reader only sees her as a legend told by the unnamed third person narrator, thus denying the reader access to her interiority and inner thoughts, leaving her motivations open to the unknowability of fable and myth. Indeed, Lee himself refuses to call the novel Asian American, stating in interviews that, while “ethnic heritage” is important, it is “not so much in terms of Fan” (Leyshon n. pag.).
Le Guin’s evaluation of *On Such a Full Sea* as an irresponsible dystopic novel seems ironic as Lee’s novel carries substantial similarities with Le Guin’s own speculative fiction, particularly her often taught short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. Like Lee’s novel, Le Guin’s story allegorizes the first-third world relationship, mirroring the privilege of the Pacific Northwest (the city of Omelas is “Salem O[regon]” backwards). Omelas is a futuristic utopia that only maintains its high lifestyle through the suffering of a single child who is made miserable and tortured in a basement. This contradiction of pristine happiness resting upon a child’s misery haunts many of the city’s residents, some of whom chose to leave Omelas. As in Lee’s novel, the narrator is left only to ponder the ethical reasoning and consequences of leaving a space of harmony and stability. Indeed, Lee’s novel follows Le Guin’s speculative tropes. Fan’s leaving of B-Mor produces such an anxiety that the entire community begins to question their place (“where you are”) (30), while her supporters organize a series of protests, demonstrations, and graffiti art. What distinguishes Fan from the rest then is less her ethnic identity, but like those who leave Omelas, it is the act of migrancy itself. It is the audacity of her leaving a place where stability comes at the cost of inequality.

To read Lee’s novel in any single genre form will mask the novel as a failure. Such critique misses the larger generative work that Lee’s novel achieves, as it mixes multiple genre forms—dystopia, myth, fable, Asian American—while refusing to stay faithful to any single genre. Lee’s novel reflects Huang’s assertion that “science fiction offers Asian American writers a unique way to engage in subversive political and ideological critique not by contravening genre conventions, but by using them to rewrite the rules of the genre” (101). We therefore call this novel’s seemingly mixed genre form Asian diasporic speculative fiction in order to recognize the novel as a surreal reflection of Asian diasporic subjectivity that fleshes out the inchoate anxieties of diasporic experience. If Fan’s ethnic heritage is a mere subtext, her journey itself metaphorizes the migrations between East-West, first-third worlds, where Fan cannot help but symbolize the many spaces she has inhabited, while always being seen as a foreigner in her new land. For Asian American audiences, the inexplicable moments that seem to contradict the realism of dystopia do not break the rhythm of reading, but rather reinforce the reader’s own relationship to the work as it strives to allegorize their experiences, as it places routes and the exchange of bodies outside of the American (and Canadian) ideology of pluralism and multiculturalism. In doing so, Lee’s novel critically reflects on the process of migration as a series of betrayals and violent acts, a process far
disassociated from the celebratory narrative of immigration propagated by multiculturalist discourse. As Asian diasporic speculative fiction, Lee’s critique relies less on his protagonist as an ethnicized subject in relation to a white majority, but more on the visible critiques within the world it builds (of the Chinese B-Mor, the multicultural American Charters, and the “counties”).

To claim that the novel is dystopic itself seems like inhabiting a myopic gaze at the world from a first world/American perspective. Lee’s novel germinated from visits to China, where, as he explains in a recent interview, he “intended to write a social-realist novel about the factory towns of the Pearl River Delta.” Yet, upon returning to the poverty and racial discrimination in the United States, he began “musing about a different novel” (“Chang-rae Lee: By the Book” n. pag.). The limits of the social realist form, it seemed, would only violently recreate “techno-orientalist” stereotypes of an Asian labor-class, which perceives Asian subjects as “producer (as cheapened labor), designer (as innovators), and fluent consumer (as subjects that are ‘one’ with the apparatus)” (Roh, Huang, and Niu 14). The Asian diasporic speculative genre here emerges as a way of dealing with the transpacific context without over-historicizing a particular apparatus (like the factory), but rather de-historicizes the Shenzhen factory to focus on its transhistorical and transnational mode of social reproduction, where life is always in service to imperial and capitalist regimes. For Lee, the factory space symbolizes “a run-down prep school” that “had everything [the workers] needed, but nothing more. And so they’re accepting that monotony—hours, rules, regulations—for something greater” (qtd. in Brockes n. pag.). The set-up engendered, he thought, not just a code of conduct, but “a code of psyche” (qtd. in Brockes n. pag.). This idea of a transnational and transhistorical “psyche” of neoliberalism reflects what Neferti Tadiar calls the “remaindered life times” of neoliberalism (22)—“a diverse array of acts, capacities, associations, aspirations in practice, experiential modes, and sensibilities that people engage in, draw upon, and invent in the struggle to make and remake social life” (23). Tadiar’s theory is useful here for considering neoliberalism “[b]eyond the domains of political and economic practice and rationality” to examine its impact on “lived subjectivities and feeling” (19). Chang-rae Lee’s novel attempts to capture this “psyche” or “remaindered life times” in the singular plural voice of the narrator, who attempts to make sense of Fan’s legend in terms of the neoliberal and biopolitical regimes that run B-Mor, where every citizen is led to optimize their production in the name of health and self-improvement. The narrator’s obsession over the question “Have we not done the job of becoming our
best selves?” ruptures the values of B-Mor, which have allowed oligarchy to run rampant, seeing “wealth” as synonymous with “success” (21).

The speculative elements of Lee’s novel speak to social realism’s limits in capturing the “unrealistic” or “speculative” connections between Asia and the West. The speculative mirroring of contemporary diasporic situations proves consistent throughout the novel: multiracial identity, human trafficking, myths from the homeland, and the settlement in a futuristic Chinatown. Similar to Salt Fish Girl, Lee’s novel metaphorizes states of Asian migrancy across the globe, especially the current ecological migrancy occurring in contemporary China as documented by films such as Jia Zhangke’s Still Life (2006) and Yung Chang’s Up the Yangtze (2007). Indeed, the obsession with health and convenience reflected in the Charters seems to reflect features from both the contemporary Asian Tiger states (Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore) as well as the contemporary 1% of the United States, as B-Mor’s broken and incredibly lucrative healthcare programs reflect the problems of United States’ healthcare policy, whose fees are “well beyond most any B-Mor clan’s capacity to pay” (50). The Charter’s space also captures a “psyche” of neoliberal and multicultural competition, while absorbing women from the counties as nannies “generally darker skinned and squatter” (163). Rather than read Lee’s novel as an “irresponsible” dystopia text (Le Guin) or as “a truly Asian American feminist story” (Jenn), Lee’s text brings together Asian and North American contexts, as well as multiple genres, producing a surreal rendering of the Asian migrant experience.

**On Such a Full Sea’s Queer Reproductions and Ruptures**

In its ability to expose the fissures of neoliberal multiculturalist ideology, On Such a Full Sea, like Salt Fish Girl, broadens conceptions of race by focusing on biological reproduction as its material (and transhistorical) core. These literary texts’ complex treatment of race and reproduction reflects a strong engagement with advances in science and technology studies, which parallels trends in humanities scholarship by scholars such as Rachel Lee, whose work is “informed by a particular feminist-inflected branch of Science and Technology Studies (STS)” (12). Chang-rae Lee’s novel is permeated with concepts of reproduction, from genetic mixing to animal husbandry to references of reproductive popular culture. The most prominent trope is Fan’s occupation in B-Mor, which is “to husband and nurture” the community’s valuable fish (3). When Fan leaves B-Mor, she decides to kill the fish in her tanks, marking her journey as a refusal to take on the Charter’s
“stability”-driven conceptions of reproduction, of “the bonds of blood or sexual love” (7). Refusing the apparatus of regulated reproduction that B-Mors are otherwise subjected to, Fan leaves B-Mor to search for her boyfriend, Reg, who is the father of her unborn child, and has inexplicably disappeared.

While Fan remains pregnant for the entirety of the novel, her distinctive physical trait, as the narrator frequently remarks, is in appearing younger than she really is. In looking prepubescent, Fan is not categorized by her sexuality, and thus escapes the confines of those who would otherwise threaten sexual violence or attempt to control her sexuality. Upon leaving B-Mor, she is struck by a car and rescued by Quig, an ex-Charter veterinarian who heads a small community of people he has rescued in exchange for the “policing” and “procurement and trading of supplies” from the men, and from the women, “the raising of the kids” and “making a periodic nighttime visit” (89). Fan appears to have no sexuality, so instead of expecting her for a “visit,” Quig advises her to keep safe by allowing everyone to “[consider] her to be still a child” (78). But as a child, Fan has value as a tradable commodity, and Quig is able to barter her off as a house servant to a wealthy Charter family. On the way, Quig, his “helper” Loreen, and Fan, are captured by the Nicklemans, a family of religious vegetarian circus performers who plan to feed Quig and Loreen to their dogs. Fan’s prepubescent appearance marks her as too innocent, and the family decides to instead “rescue” her by trying to convert her to their religious way of life. Instead, Fan kidnaps one of the family’s daughters, Hilton, and barters her for Quig and Loreen’s freedom. While Fan’s physical traits thus help keep her from violence, they also encase her as an object to be bartered, rescued or admired. Her choice to keep both her pregnancy and her age a secret seems the only respite from the neoliberal and biopolitical “psyche” of her surroundings, as she appears too young to have tested the limits of free choice, her objectification acting as the very condition of her survival.

Fan’s prepubescent appearance backfires when she is treated as a pet by her Charter “Masters,” Miss Cathy and Mr. Leo. There she meets Mala, who seems of Southeast Asian descent, and contrasts Fan as a metaphor for an East Asian migrant. Fan sees Mala as “an Asian of some kind” but with dark skin and with “hair wiry and thick,” leading the narrator to surmise on labor groups brought from “places like Vietnam and Indonesia and the Philippines,” only to be forced out for refusing to assimilate, resulting in “violence and some bloodshed” (172). Like many Southeast Asian migrants worldwide, Mala is only allowed to return to the counties to see her family at set times (once every twenty days), and she sends nearly all of her income to them as remittances. When Fan is “rescued” by Miss Cathy from the
perversions of Mr. Leo, a pedophile who attempts to rape her at night, Fan leaves Mala downstairs, and it is never clear whether or not Mala is subjected to the same sexual violence, or why she, as a migrant laborer, is not a subject to be “rescued” like Fan. In any case, Miss Cathy does not fetishize Mala, who does not appear cute or as an object to be admired. Rather, only the young-looking Fan is permitted to live upstairs, in a room adjacent to Miss Cathy’s, where she is kept as a pet alongside “the Girls”: seven young girls with “bizarrely large eyes” made to look like “anime characters” (212).

The novel’s focus on themes of youth and reproduction does not ignore racial identity so much as broaden it towards a transhistorical approach that de-contextualizes race and reproduction from the political alignments of the present moment. Fan’s journey contrasts the Charter’s feelings towards child-birth, and her journey to find Reg appears less as a romantic fairytale and more as a refusal to go along with the reproductive system set in place by the Charters. Indeed, the plight of Fan and Mala allegorizes the position of women of color whose husbands/boyfriends go overseas to work or are disappeared by systems of incarceration. Fan then does not tend to represent Asian diasporic identity, but to metaphorize the Asian diasporic position and process of migration. Appearing too young to make her own decisions, she is subjected to a series of violent “rescues,” which help keep her from harm but also retain her as a pet and/or affective object. Her company pleases her captors, yet leaves her vulnerable to betrayals by them, marking their affection as a means to their own self-fulfillment—the last of these in her long lost older brother, Liwei, who attempts to sell Fan to a genetics company as a test subject. Despite their admiration of Fan, all of these characters end up betraying her, using her “cuteness” to presume her helplessness and thus her vulnerability to routes of exchange. Fan’s sustained pregnancy throughout the novel can also be seen as a state of reproductive potential, a constant reminder that her migrancy will have an impact on the future. The narrator infuses her fable with such potential, claiming that “within her was the one promise that could deliver us, the seed of all our futures” (104). Since Fan keeps her pregnancy a secret from everyone (even Reg), and Fan never gives birth within the novel itself, it seems plausible that the narrator imagines the pregnancy to emphasize her as a figure of infinite possibility. Indeed, analogies to her pregnancy appear throughout the novel, particularly when Reg watches an anime that could only be *Ghost in the Shell*, a classic anime wherein a female ghost (human soul) is trapped in a cyborg body, and is haunted by its inability to biologically reproduce, choosing by the end to reproduce digitally (by combining with a similar life form and evolving into fully
AI consciousness). Because the story of Fan escapes the narrator’s grasp, the birth of her child seems lost to an uncertain future.

Like Miranda’s of *Salt Fish Girl*, Fan’s moment of redemption comes in refusing dominant conceptions of reproduction, and choosing instead to stay with an all female community that queers and broadens notions of reproduction. Despite the romantic narrative and mythology surrounding Fan’s search for Reg, the actual redemption comes when Fan chooses to align with the Girls, casting her longing for Reg aside to remain with them. Like the Sonias in *Salt Fish Girl*, the Girls are biologically enhanced in order to fulfill their labor requirements (in this case, as affective laborers). While the Sonias reproduce through genetically altered lesbian sex acts, Miss Cathy’s girls do so through a long mural that captures their varied histories:

This was the way of the mural; it reflected whatever was happening at the moment, and by reading it from the beginning, Fan could trace the looping arcs of their time and how each girl had come but also whatever was of interest or concern, becoming a more intricate map of their consciousness as it was emended and evolved. (220)

The Girls’ mural represents their shared histories, but inflects such histories onto their present conditions. Fan can tell which of the Girls drew “straightforward and even childlike in their depiction” and when the Girls’ emotions became “more potent” and “raw” (220). Like historical memory the mural is not easily organized, but can be understood in “traces” that, only when standing back, can be seen as an “intricate map” (220). The mural can be seen, in José Muñoz’s terms, as a project of “queer utopian memory,” which seeks to pull alternative histories not to claim “some nostalgic past” but to work towards creating “a utopia in the present” (37), when the present itself has become “impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations” (27). In the post-racial future of Lee’s novel, “unregulated” queer reproduction, which mixes the Charters with that of B-Mor, the counties, and Asian migrants, employs mural and portrait to conjure alternative historical imaginings. As the novel itself is a mythical telling of a past event (taking place in our future), the mural reflects on art itself as capable of producing queer utopias that resemble a disruptive and subversive force.

Enchanted by Fan’s stories of Reg, the Girls voluntarily poison themselves in order to provide a distraction for Fan to escape. But seeing her new sister’s sacrifice
awakens a spirit in Fan that refrains from repeating the same cycles of betrayals that have conditioned her journey. Refusing a path that offers a greater chance of finding Reg, and a better life for her unborn child, she chooses to remain with the queer community, choosing not to abandon them, but rather to take their cause as her own. As the narrator writes, “It was a matter of simply walking out. . . . And yet there was not a mote of her that could have abandoned those girls now. . . . Fan at least loved them as if they were of her household, those dear cousins whom she ought to always nurture and safeguard” (243). Rather than escape, Fan appeals to Miss Cathy as similarly a victim of patriarchy, obsessed with prettying up her appearance, and holding back a history of sexual assault. Once Miss Cathy commits to treating the Girls better, number Six erases their hugely complex mural and replaces it with “a portrait of sorts” (254) that combines “some distinctive notation of each of the Girls,” as well as Fan, Mala, and Miss Cathy (255). Like the Sonias of *Salt Fish Girl*, the new portrait is both an individual and a queer reproduction, a conglomerate of women and a product of the vast histories that came before her, including the servants, the masters, and the pets.

The Girls of Lee’s novel act as a metaphor for the queer “psyche” of the entire novel, and in exchange, Asian diasporic experience and movement. The Girls yoke together a constellation of contexts: B-Mor as well as Baltimore itself, the factory hands in Shenzhen, the Asian diasporic experience, and the whittling American middle class. Like the Girls, the “psyche” of the Asian diasporic experience is being held captive under the impression that they are stable and happy, that the alternative (rape and service work) presents a hellish past (still occupied by brown bodies such as Mala) that contrasts their future in affective labor and carework (in serving whites as beloved pets). The B-Mors, as “in-between” the third and first worlds of the counties and the Charters, are made to idealize their stability as it keeps them from the “unstable” counties, while at the same time doling out labor for the Charters in vastly unequal routes of exchange, and stoically accepting that their lives will be far shorter in comparison for want of healthcare.

The Girls as metaphor for Asian diasporic experience unveils the novel’s most radical critique. “Perhaps,” the narrator surmises, “we B-Mors—and perhaps your people, too—are merely the Girls writ large, our leagues, clustered for best use and sanctuary, at last achieving a modest state of grace that for too long has been our lone, secret pride” (246). Forgone of the presumptions of multiculturalist ideology and deracinated from its real context, Asian migration to North America thus appears as “merely the Girls writ large,” that is, in being held captive by feelings of gratitude while beckoning constant comparisons to “the old life” figured
through brown bodies, service work and sexual assault. In keeping this allegory of
the Girls well alive, its only resolution is not through radical politics or revolution.
Fan finds it impossible, “given [the Girls] utter acclimation to their lot and devotion
to her” (224). Rather, the “happy ending” that Mala and the Girls receive after
Fan’s departure comes in small adjustments: less working time and slightly more
freedom than before (the Girls can leave their room, but not the house) (268). While
these achievements are celebrated in the novel, it is not without the tinge that the
Girls’ status as captives, pets and servants remains unchanged.

While the multiple resolutions of Fan’s episodic narrative remain but small
achievements in the grand scheme, Fan’s story itself, as a myth and fable that grows
among the B-Mor populace, carries revolutionary potential. For the narrator, Fan’s
journey enchants B-Mor as she comes to represent “the grit of life accumulated
inside her” (63). As Fan’s journey is really a travel narrative meant to explicate
Lee’s imagined world, the context itself operates like characters from many “ethnic
literature” novels, like Carlos from America Is in the Heart as well as the narrators
of nineteenth century African American slave narratives. Lee’s world acts as a
portrait of collective Asian diasporic experiences, rendered through Fan’s journey
through it. While Fan is notably reticent and unremarkable, the world around her is
loud, violent, and vibrant. The narrator can only speculate on the effects of Fan’s
legend, often seeing it as responsible for much outlandish and unusual behavior,
from harming their own fish to galvanizing protests and demonstrations. The
revolutionary potential of the story itself influences even the well-behaved narrator,
who begins to “feel the rends in our finely spun society” (240). The narrator, caught
up as they are in the sequence of events, seems unable to comprehend the larger
view of the mural, until they describe a security drone recording of B-Mor’s
demonstrations. At first, the recordings are “unviewable, jittery and useless,” until
the lens “zoomed out to capture the entire massing” (292). Like the mural turned
portrait, the narrator examines the new social “psyche,” the unintentional product of
a queer, unregulated, and mixed historical process that accounts for all the members
of the household.

Speculations on Asian Diaspora

Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl considers an imagined depiction of the future,
wherein neoliberal multiculturalism has reached its inevitable conclusion by
engendering a supposedly post-racial world. Salt Fish Girl represents a future
where all discourse concerning race has been nullified into commodified objects,
yet racial and ethnic histories continue only biologically, as an infectious disease that brings forth smells from repressed memories of past lives, forcing those infected to recall histories left out of official narratives of multicultural success. Similarly in Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*, race has also subsided as a discourse, yet still carries a strong afterlife in the state’s management of biological reproduction and the rigorous surveillance of the body. The Charter’s spaces capture a “psyche” of neoliberal and multicultural competition, as racial consciousness has nearly disappeared, yet society continues to absorb nannies who are “generally darker skinned and squatter” (163). While immigrant narratives often tell of the traumas inflicted on the immigrant’s family, these novels complicate stories of migration to also tell of the complicity and violence inflicted upon those back home, those who could not migrate. These memories of violence leak into the world of the post-racial future, uncontained by notions of liberal progress, immigrant gratitude and multicultural harmony.

By bringing these novels together, we have sought to explore the conventions of Asian diasporic speculative fiction as a genre, as both novels deploy tropes of queer reproduction to unsettle science fiction and fantasy genre conventions, while deracinating Asian diasporic experience from its contemporary literary form of Asian American autobiographies. Unlike ethnic autobiographies, both Lai’s and Lee’s imagined futures resist post-racial discourse by seeking to represent the implicit effects of a society where racial consciousness has been extinguished by the visibility of a multicultural upper-class. Race continues to structure these imagined societies, yet is only recognized through the state’s obsessive focus on reproduction and health. In contrast, both novels stress race less as an identity and more as a mark of one’s kinship and relationship to the past. While Lai’s future reimagines queer reproduction through a group of radical brown proletariat, Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* similarly imagines “the Girls” creating a queer utopic space that resists the Charter’s obsessions with health and biological reproduction. As in Lai’s novel, race remains a critical feature of the text through its emphasis on reproduction—mainly, the main character’s pregnancy that lasts throughout the entire novel. Similarly, both novels attempt to metaphorize the Asian migrant experience, as they focus on communities who rely on a “myth of the homeland” while also maintaining a position of gratitude towards their “hosts.” In reflecting and refracting the context of multiculturalist policies instituted in the 1980s and 90s, which helped give rise to the notion of a foreseeable post-racial future, Asian diasporic speculative fictions like Lai and Lee’s novels strive against a multiculturalist discourse that sees migrants as being rescued from their homelands.
to live in a tolerant North American space, where they (and their offspring) are figured as grateful migrants, and as guests of their host country.

Works Cited


