

The Diasporic Inheritance of Postmemory and Immigrant Shame in the Novels of Larissa Lai

Malissa Phung
McMaster University

Since its consolidation with the publication of *Diaspora*'s first issue in 1991, the field of diaspora studies has remained divided over determining who is truly diasporic. Discussions over diaspora's definition have created a theoretical crossroads between scholars more open to expanding the term and scholars less accepting of its capaciousness (Dufoix 2).¹ Scholars insistent upon defining legitimate diasporas remain critical of the way in which diaspora has been stretched, covering every instance of dispersion and condition of transnationalism and globalization, which has resulted in what Rogers Brubaker calls a "'diaspora' diaspora—a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space" (1). Khachig Tölölyan, an influential diaspora studies scholar and perhaps the strongest proponent of terminological correctness, has also maintained that diaspora's most persistent distinctions should be considered when determining a dispersion's status.² But what I find most useful about Tölölyan's position is his caveat against biological assumptions that presume the existence of diasporization in any form of dispersion ("Contemporary" 649). Rather than pursuing this debate in diaspora studies, this paper will take up Tölölyan's caveat productively in the following questions instead: what makes subsequent generations of a dispersion diasporic? Can adopted and assimilated descendants of a dispersion become diasporic?

In this literary analysis of Larissa Lai's two novels, *When Fox Is a Thousand* and *Salt Fish Girl*, I explore how diasporic subjectivity emerges in adopted and assimilated descendants of a Chinese dispersion. Ignored in critical theorizations of diaspora, the postgeneration adopted and assimilated descendants (like *When Fox Is a Thousand*'s Artemis Wong and *Salt Fish Girl*'s Miranda Ching)³ represent compelling figures for theorising diaspora in the way that they upend biological assumptions of racial and cultural authenticity.⁴ These figures no longer speak the language of the homeland, nor have they directly experienced a traumatic catastrophe that resulted in their dispersion from an ancestral land. They resemble William Safran's case of a non-genuine diaspora: Polish settlers who migrated to the U.S. after the 1880s for economic reasons and their descendants who intermarried and assimilated; no longer speaking their homeland tongue, no longer connected with homeland politics. These

Polish settlers, according to Safran, were never a true diaspora (85). But surely diasporization involves more than the practice of endogamy and maintaining the homeland language and culture?⁵ Furthermore, must a dispersion experience actual historical trauma and displacement to become diasporic?

In my analysis of Lai's adopted and assimilated characters, I argue that what makes them diasporic is not whether they exhibit the essential features of classical diasporas such as the Jewish and Armenian diasporas, a common argument proposed in the definition debate. I contend that diasporization entails an ongoing process of discovering and mending an always tenuous relationship to the past, past histories that subsequent generations inherit, directly or indirectly, from previous generations, past origins that the postgeneration may repress for most of their lives. Lai's adopted and assimilated characters present a fascinating case for theorising the trans-generational inheritance of diasporic consciousness. Not immigrants themselves but familiar with the immigrant experience of racial and smell-based discrimination, Lai's characters exhibit a profound sense of immigrant shame, which explains their desire to repress their ethnic and historical origins in order to pass successfully as assimilated minorities until they reach adulthood.⁶ But inexplicably tied to this sense of immigrant shame is an embodied and affective connection to past losses and historical traumas not quite theirs but theirs regardless. Therefore, not anyone can become diasporic nor would anyone so willingly choose such an identity.

In tackling these issues, I am most influenced by Lily Cho's theorisation of diaspora as a condition of subjectivity "marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession" ("Turn to Diaspora" 14). According to Cho, diaspora is a condition of being that emerges from "deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility" (15). Indeed, the memory of loss is central to the formation of diasporic consciousness. As Cho articulates in the following point via Simone de Beauvoir's famous proposition, diasporic subjects are not born diasporic; they emerge and become diasporic through temporal acts of turning backward, "turning back upon those markers of the self—homeland, memory, loss—even as they turn on or away from them" (15; 21). Building on Cho's theory, I argue that this subjective turn to diasporization, this desire to rediscover and reconstruct tenuous links to one's origins, for example, through the recuperation of language or culinary practice, actually becomes more difficult for postgeneration adopted and assimilated descendants to repress, particularly when they feel an ambivalent or absent sense of belonging due to everyday experiences of racialization and olfactory discrimination. However, diasporization is not all racial grief and melancholic loss. As Lai's characters undergo diasporization, they also experience temporary moments of belonging in queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist acts of resistance, whether through affectively

reconnecting with the past, refusing to repress ethnic origins and forget historical oppressions to uphold the status quo, or rediscovering (queer) pleasure in sharing and recuperating the source of their immigrant shame.

Lost Tongues in Migration

Language loss is a common theme in Lai's novels. When the goddess Nu Wa, reincarnated in her first human form, travels to the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness in *Salt Fish Girl* searching for opportunities to improve her living conditions in late-nineteenth-century southern China, she drinks a proffered liquid that magically extracts her Cantonese. Reincarnated as Miranda, a third-generation descendant, Nu Wa loses her Cantonese again but through a more common process of language loss—assimilation. Similarly in *When Fox Is a Thousand*, Fox and Artemis cannot speak Cantonese: Fox loses hers from her many years in migration, whereas Artemis, adopted as an infant by Anglo-speaking Euro-Canadian parents, never learns her birth parents' tongue.⁷ Language loss sets these diasporic characters adrift, leaving them searching for a sense of cultural rootedness. But as Artemis's ambivalent trip to Hong Kong demonstrates, a return trip to the homeland and learning the homeland tongue does not guarantee a sense of belonging to China, the supposed authentic source of her ethnic origins and her birth parents' homeland.⁸

Language loss for Lai's dispersed characters is a melancholic loss they cannot let go. If her characters complete mourning the loss, a psychological resolution that Freud theorised as the healthier process of mourning, then they could achieve closure and assimilation.⁹ Instead, they find creative ways to piece together the loss with what translated narrative fragments they can find. In a love letter to the Poetess, Yu Hsuan-chi, Fox describes her language loss in a dream that begins with another language flying into her mouth like a flock of familiar crows:

These are crows that understand things like time and immigration. I swim in the blood-warm ocean and they fly out of the past and sometimes the future, bringing twigs, scraps of fabric, strands of hair. They fly into my mouth, nest on my tongue, and tumble out again in the spring, unrolling tapestries of woven and embroidered stories, each silken petal and bird's eye winking in colours bright as precious stones. It is these details that make me feel wanted, as though I belong somewhere. (Fox 154-55; emphasis in original)

The crows in Fox's dream represent language loss during the process of migration and assimilation. While stories and historical records written in the homeland tongue are only accessible in translated fragments, even translated, these narrative details and stories share a history of migration with Fox. Fox and the stories may have changed; however, that Fox and the stories still originate elsewhere provides her with a temporary sense of belonging. Lai herself has also faced the issue of language loss in her approach to incorporating Chinese mythologies into her novels. Like Fox,

Lai draws upon textual fragments of her Chinese origins that she can only access in English. Unable to read Chinese, Lai draws her inspiration and knowledge of the Poetess's life, the mythology of the Fox, and the creation mythology of the snake goddess Nu Wa from books translated into English by Western historians and anthropologists—a predicament acceptable to her (Afterword 257; "Sixth" 204-05). Since Lai considers the traditional already constructed and ideological, she radically re-envisions the traditional, queering and gendering the traditional, to suit her creative project (Afterword 257).¹⁰

The Diasporic Transmission of Postmemory: Inheriting and Reworking the Past

The past remains inseparable from the present in Lai's novels. The postgeneration incorporates the memories of previous generations in ways that challenge conventional understandings of time and history. While honouring the past remains central to Lai's creative project, she refuses to faithfully abide by the official historical record. Instead she radically re-envisions the way the postgeneration can draw on and reconstruct their inherited past and thus generate a sense of belonging to their origins. For instance, the tension between artistic license and historical respect unravels wonderfully in *Salt Fish Girl*. When Miranda asks Evie how the Sonia clones were created, she learns that their genetic material could have come from various sources: one particular story suggests that they may have come from "a woman called Ai, a Chinese woman who married a Japanese man and was interned in the Rockies during the Second World War. She died of cancer right after the war ended. He died of grief. The bodies were sold to science. . . . But it's all rumour" (*Salt* 160). Another story suggests that they might also derive their source material from the Diverse Genome Project, a biogenetic archive bought out by a multinational corporation during the same time the Sonia clones were created; the archive "focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction" (160). Refusing to clarify the exact origins of the Sonia clones, Lai is more concerned with the multiple ways in which historical origins can be represented; she places little stock in neat, linear, and authentic representations of a dispersed community's past. So, whether the Sonia clones originate from an Asian Canadian history of racist exclusion or from all the colonized and exploited peoples throughout the ages around the world, the implicit lesson is this: histories are never individual containable units of the past neatly divorced from one another; histories are entangled and collectively experienced. The unclear origins of the Sonia clones invite us to imagine history as shared genetic material from various sources, inheritable genetic traits that can be passed down from one generation or dispersion to the next.

But what does it mean when subsequent generations of a dispersion inherit the legacies of past historical traumas? Must this process of transmission always be inter-generational? Does it count when the postgeneration is at least two generations removed? Adopted and assimilated characters like Lai's would suggest that the trans-generational inheritance of historical oppressions is possible, but this suggestion would require some imagination and theorisation on our part. In her groundbreaking essay, "The Generation of Memory," Marianne Hirsch offers the concept of postmemory to describe the postgeneration's haunted relationship with the traumatic knowledge and experiences of previous generations. While the postgeneration has never directly experienced the trauma and pain of previous generations, these experiences have been so deeply and affectively transmitted to them (for example, through stories, historical archives, and photographic images), the way in which they come to "remember" the past seemingly takes on the structure of memory (Hirsch 106-107). However, not the same as memory or recall, postmemory functions as an affective link with the past, an embodied "living connection" between generations (Hirsch 111). Therefore postmemory becomes a generative and at times an involuntary, compulsory exercise in reactivating and reembodying the past, in cultivating a "living connection" with the past through "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 106-111). For example, when Artemis attends a rally in Vancouver's Chinatown protesting the Tiananmen Square massacre, she imagines the massacre happening in Canada. She asks herself, "[w]as that where the melancholy she sometimes felt came from? . . . Or did it come from tapping into a collective memory of all the deaths, abandonments, and slow stresses of war that have gone unspoken through the generations? Perhaps the precise stories and politics had been lost, but the emotional memory moves from one generation to the next as surely as any genetic trait" (Fox 88-89). Here Lai revamps biogenetic discourse; she trades the problems of biological essentialism for a diasporic notion of historical inheritance. If subsequent generations inherit anything from their diasporic ancestors, it is the affective force of past historical traumas and oppressions, the compulsion to turn back and remain haunted by the subjective work of postmemory.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai employs science fiction's generic possibilities to push this notion of postmemory even further. Stretching postmemory's empathetic possibilities, she invites us to imagine embodying all the pain and suffering of the previous generations. Inflicted with the Dreaming disease, people in Lai's novel stink; they cannot expel deplorable smells or forget horrific historical events.¹¹ They feel and embody painful collective memories from the past. Lai has described the production of *Salt Fish Girl* as a desire "to point ever further back beyond the moment of birth to those moments in the past experienced by those who have gone before us"—suggesting that sometimes "we can touch those moments," even if we are touching those moments in "a sense of history that is not factual, that is not for the 'historical record,' but that is experienced in and

written on the body” (“Future Asians” 173). *Salt Fish Girl* privileges bodily inscribed memories over linguistic memories gleaned from the historical record. Consider the stories of individuals afflicted with the Dreaming disease: the “man who smelled of milk and could remember all the famines that had ever been caused by war” (101); the “girl who smelled of stainless steel and could recite the lives of everyone who had ever died of tuberculosis” (101-102); the “barefoot terminally unemployed” who smelled of steel, blood, feces, and old potatoes, sitting on street corners and spewing “memories of genocide or small pox, smart bombs and slow starvation” (230-31). History in *Salt Fish Girl* becomes collective memories imaginatively re-felt and re-experienced by the postgeneration; history lingers like a smell, exuding through the bodies of the postgeneration.¹² Odour and postmemory work together in the novel to mourn the forgotten and unwritten histories of violence and oppression, affectively reconnecting the postgeneration with the painful experiences of previous generations.

Immigrant Shame: The Smell and Taste of Diaspora

For dispersed individuals, searching for diasporic connections, a tangible sense of home, can be just as ambivalent as it is positive since the foreign aromas generally associated with diasporic cuisines bring up feelings of immigrant shame as well as nostalgia. In the scholarship on the role of taste and smell in shaping diasporic subjectivity,¹³ one particular study disarticulates smell from taste to underscore the importance of taking an olfactory approach to theorizing diasporic subjectivity. In her article on *Salt Fish Girl*, Stephanie Oliver presents a case for isolating scent in diaspora studies since scents have historically marked bodies differently from tastes and thus inform diasporic subjectivity differently (89).¹⁴ For Oliver, “[e]xamining smell’s varied functions necessitates a movement beyond frameworks that focus primarily on memory, nostalgic longing, and relationships to past homelands,” especially when a diaspora’s anxieties over smell-based discrimination in the hostland are taken into account, which “complicate any positive associations with past homelands that scents might evoke” (89; 93). Oliver rightly points out that the pleasurable memories and nostalgic feelings associated with diasporic food aromas are complicated for diasporic immigrants since their diasporic odours also mark them as foreign and become the source of their social ostracization (92-93).¹⁵ In the context of *Salt Fish Girl*, Oliver reads Miranda’s diasporic subjectivity as constituted not only by her memories of her past lifetime as Nu Wa in the homeland but also by her present-day experiences of olfactory discrimination, which alters Miranda’s feelings regarding her diasporic memories (97-98). Here, the negative experiences of being marked as an odorous alien shift diasporic orientations away from the past and towards the present-day experiences of smell-based

discrimination. According to Oliver, if characters like Miranda and Evie, a Sonia clone, share a diasporic connection, it would be based not on “a sense of belonging to an idealized homeland, [and] shared memories of a diasporic past, . . . [but rather] from similar experiences of olfactory discrimination in the place where they presently live” (102).

I contend, however, that present-day experiences of smell-based discrimination can never completely dislodge a dispersed community’s nostalgic tendencies to maintain an emotional and psychic connection with the homeland, even if maintaining these homing desires, for example, by consuming ethnic cuisines and therefore exuding foreign odours, results in their continual ostracization. In the following pages, I demonstrate that despite the immigrant shame associated with bearing racialized odours, the gustatory and olfactory source of their diasporic identification still matters to postgeneration adopted and assimilated subjects like Miranda and Evie, as well as Artemis. Pushing Oliver’s reading of Miranda and Evie’s diasporic connection further, I assert that what generates their diasporic connection is not only their shared experiences of olfactory discrimination but also the sensual pleasure in re-turning to and recuperating the source of their smell-based discrimination through taste as well as smell. Oliver proposes disarticulating smell from taste, privileging the framework of smell over the temporal frameworks usually associated with taste (for example, the diasporic gaze towards the homeland through the work of memory and nostalgia). But I would argue that any theorisation of diasporic subjectivity cannot be divorced from understanding how dispersed individuals come to cultivate or repress their relationship to their diasporic origins, especially when they lack a sense of belonging in their current homeland due to experiences of racialization and exclusion. The framework of smell and taste demonstrates how the process of diasporic identification is both a creative and ambivalent exercise in nostalgia, a subjective process that involves the present as well as the past. This turn to diaspora does not equate to being stuck in an essentialized past, harbouring nostalgic longings for a calcified notion of the homeland. Nor does it overlook present-day consequences of failing or refusing to assimilate and repress a dispersion’s origins, the source of their immigrant shame.

The source of nostalgia and immigrant shame, diasporic odours are complicated in Lai’s fiction. Not immigrants themselves, her female protagonists still understand immigrant shame intimately, spending their youth repressing their ethnic smells and origins in order to assimilate. Assimilating into white settler colonial societies like Canada requires immigrants and their descendants to move on and replace old cultural habits for new antiseptic ones: expected to remain forever grateful to their hostland society, shedding foreign odours and supposedly backward traditional values, they should also abstain from dwelling on their experiences of oppression in both the homeland and the hostland. However, assimilation is never a linear process, successively progressing from diasporic immigranthood to full citizenship and complete societal

acceptance; and the desire to assimilate is never constant. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Miranda learns through her home and school interactions that her body's durian-like scent offends everyone's olfactory nerves. She recalls the initial incorporation of her scent into her family's lives when she was born: "[m]y sour body stank up the whole house. The unpleasant cat pee odour oozed from my pores and flowed into every room. . . . There was no escape from that terrible odour. It crept into people's underwear drawers so that my intimate odour became that of all my family members as well" (15-16). Much like how immigrant cooking smells infuse an entire immigrant household, following its tenants everywhere they go, Miranda's durian scent marks her family members as immigrant even though they have lived a comfortable suburban life as assimilated model minorities in Saturna long before her birth.¹⁶ Rumours of children like Miranda, begotten from licentious co-workers consuming illegal tropical fruit, circulate at her father's workplace, sending him on an obsessive quest to seek medical treatment to exterminate her odour and conceal his transgression (32). But possibly losing his job and comfortable Saturna life over this legal infraction is not the only source of his anxieties: Miranda's durian smell evokes the repressed memories of her parents' immigrant origins. For Miranda's mother, the smell of durian growing near a beach in the Unregulated Zone summons a childhood flavour not tasted since her grandmother smuggled one from Hong Kong, thus reviving her parents' sex life when her father fulfills her mother's carnal request to smuggle one into their Serendipity home (14-15). But for Miranda's father, the sensual power of this childhood tropical fruit that has suspended the social and materialistic pressures to assimilate regains its denigrated status when a condescending neighbour condemns them for neglecting the external upkeep of their suburban home (17-18). After four years of diasporic nostalgia, a durian-induced sensual revelry, Miranda's family remembers the immigrant shame of retaining such diasporic connections.

Perhaps the desire to assimilate never remains constant since assimilated minorities do not always achieve permanent social acceptance as fellow citizens in the hostland.¹⁷ Nostalgic longings for a past origin that welcomes childhood tastes and smells are already difficult to let go, never mind the instances when forgetting and erasing traces of the homeland fail to improve a dispersion's social acceptance in the hostland. Experiences of being ostracized for refusing to maintain the status quo, like the neighbour reproaching Miranda's father for his ill-kept yard, can persuade a dispersion to efface their foreign origins. But as Miranda's parents' illicit enjoyment of durian demonstrates, the refusal to assimilate can also be a temporary source of pleasure when such acts of noncompliance are shared.

Diasporic odours in *When Fox Is a Thousand* also induce immigrant shame, pushing Artemis to repress her ethnic connections with her Chinese birth mother. All that remains of her Chinese mother is packed in a trunk that smells of mothballs:

The stink of mothballs rose from it, strong and poisonous. The odour threw her. The smell of mothballs was the smell of China, the smell of the small wooden trunk her biological mother had passed on to her adoptive mother the week after the papers were signed. There was not much inside. Two used padded jackets of no particular quality. . . . A Chinese-style quilt. They all reeked of mothballs and called to her from a distant past that she pushed away with distaste. How thankful she had been for the whitewashed walls and rose-pink carpets. The Suzuki-method violin lessons and the wardrobe of pretty clothes. (*Fox* 31-32)

But instead of becoming repulsed by an immigrant odour like Miranda and her father, Artemis disavows the smell of naphthalene, a gaseous substance used as a chemical pesticide to protect seasonal clothing and household linens from the development of mould and moth larvae. At a young age, she senses that the Chinese quilt and jackets that her biological mother bequeathed to her are somehow inferior to the privileged upper-middle-class white Anglo-Canadian lifestyle her adoptive parents provide her. Indeed, nothing else in her home smells like mothballs since her adoptive parents have no need to be frugal by stinking and extending the lifespan of their clothes and linens. Artemis gradually associates the pungent mothball smell with her Chinese ancestry, which appears odorous and unrefined when compared to her adoptive home's aesthetics and antiseptic smell, a cleaner, prettier bourgeois version of her origins than her birth mother's old, immigrant, and ghettoized trunk. Signifying Artemis's ethnic background, the mothball smell generates more immigrant shame when her adoptive mother takes her to a Chinese dry goods store to foster an ancestral connection to her Chinese roots: "[t]here were packages of grey wrinkled things that smelled like mothballs on the outside. She didn't ask when she saw what looked like insects or shrivelled fingers and dried-out eyeballs. She knew somehow that all these creepy things had something to do with her, and that she would have to eat them later" (32). Nobody teaches Artemis to disavow these olfactory and ethnic traces of her Chinese origins. After all, her adoptive parents serve in the industry of appreciating and preserving cultural origins: her father is an Asian Studies professor; her mother, a curator at the Museum of Ancient Cultures (50). But as Artemis's trip to the Chinese dry goods store with her adoptive mother demonstrates, her adoptive parents teach her to gaze at cultural objects from a safe distance, like a visitor gawking at wild zoo animals. There is no pleasure in wearing or consuming these ethnic traces of her origins since no one else in her family experiences the same process of racialization as her. Kept separate from the rest of her home, these Chinese objects are stowed away in a trunk or displayed in a Chinese dry goods store. Artemis learns to disavow her Chinese diasporic origins since they have no place in her everyday life as an assimilated upper-middle class Anglo-Canadian Chinese adoptee.

The Olfactory and Gustatory Pleasures of Queering Diasporic Connections

The desire to maintain diasporic connections may weaken when ethnic minorities experience social ostracization and exclusion from doing so, but when these connections are shared within a diaspora and involve the element of pleasure, diasporic connections can potentially assume stronger and more positive associations. That is what sustains a diaspora: diasporans finding pleasure in sharing traces of their origins with other people. In Lai's novels, her young female protagonists gradually relinquish their habituated inclinations to repress their origins through shared meals with other queer dispersed Asian women. Though Artemis resents her adoptive mother's Chinese cooking lessons, she eventually appreciates those lessons when she shares home-cooked Chinese meals with Diane and Claude, her two love interests (*Fox* 114; 151). No longer associated with immigrant shame, slurping a bowl of noodles becomes an emotional relief for Artemis: after Claude and Artemis share culinary traces of their diasporic pasts, they grow more intimate, exchanging painful secrets and exploring each other's bodies (151-53). A similar process of queer diasporic identification occurs in *Salt Fish Girl*: when Miranda helps Evie steal a car for a drive out into the woods, Evie offers Miranda *cha siew bow* and *gai bow*, Chinese pastry buns baked with pork and chicken. This shared diasporic meal, coupled with their legal transgression, leads to a turning point in their relationship. As they shed their fears and suspicions of each other, Evie begins to trust Miranda enough to tell her about her clone identity and the origins of the Sonia clones; then they make love for the first time (155-62). A common motif in Lai's fiction, it is also the intimate sharing of diasporic taste and not just olfactory discrimination that bonds her diasporic characters. In fact, queer pleasure appears to mitigate the immigrant shame generally bound up with diasporic odours. One example in *Salt Fish Girl* fully elucidates this point. When Evie and Miranda make love for the second time, Miranda describes their sexual act with gustatory and olfactory metaphors that reclaim and valorize the forgotten and repressed odours of their ethnic origins:

[w]hen she kissed me it was like both eating and drinking at the same time. The stench that poured from our bodies was overwhelming—something between rotting garbage and heavenly stew. We rode the hiss and fizzle of salt fish and durian, minor notes of sour plum, fermented tofu, boiled dong quai—all those things buried and forgotten in the years of corporate homogenization. Steam rose from us like water splashed on a hot pan of garlic greens. (225)

Combined with queer pleasure and shared with another queer diasporan, bearing olfactory odours generally denigrated alongside diasporic cuisines becomes an act of resistance, a refusal to assimilate and abide by the

cultural, class, gender, and sexual norms of white settler societies, a political stance that disavows the deodorizing dictates of modernity.¹⁸

Once traces of their immigrant shame take on a queer and feminist register, Lai's female protagonists experience a temporary sense of belonging predicated upon finding pleasure in the queer and gendered olfactory traces of their diasporic origins. The most surprising example would be the shift in Artemis's repulsion towards the smell of mothballs that she associates with her diasporic origins. When Diane, her first love interest, moves out after the unfortunate deterioration of their friendship, the only trace left of Diane is embedded in her Chinese quilt, a racialized odour and source of Artemis's origins she once reviled but now finds comforting since its naphthalene scent is mixed with Diane's scent: "[s]he tugged at the even folds and pulled the quilt around her, letting the smell of mothballs waft into her lungs. For the first time the pungent odour was comforting" (Fox 122). Associated with the inception of her queer identification and desire, Artemis's Chinese quilt no longer brings up feelings of immigrant shame but feelings of queer desire.

The eventual mitigation of immigrant shame through queer desire is central to Lai's novels. Take for instance the scent and taste of dry salted fish in *Salt Fish Girl*. What initially attracts Nu Wa to the salt fish girl, the daughter of a dry seafood merchant, is her overpowering fishy scent: "[s]he stank of that putrid, but nonetheless enticing smell that all good South Chinese children are weaned on, its flavour being the first to replace that of mother's milk. They feed it to us in a milk-coloured rice gruel, lumpier than the real thing and spiked with salt for strength" (48). Paul Lai has also noted the way in which desire erupts through the olfactory sense in *Salt Fish Girl*. In his queer and feminist psychoanalytic reading of the salt fish girl's scent, he suggests that Nu Wa's olfactory bond with the salt fish girl not only replaces and mimics the memory of southern Chinese little girls' first love and homosocial bond with their mothers; her enticing salty fish scent also revises and queers the misogynistic and homophobic associations of foul smells with women and women's sexual organs, especially during menstruation: "[r]eclaiming these strong smells from a deodorized modernity, then, Lai's heroines celebrate a feminist imagining of the future and of progress that does not banish difference to the past" ("Stinky" 184). In their eventual refusal to repress not just the ethnic but also the queer and gendered aspects of their origins, Lai's characters garner a temporary sense of belonging in recuperating the olfactory and gustatory source of their (queer and gendered) immigrant shame.

Homing Desires

According to Avtar Brah, "[t]he *concept* of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*" (192-93;

emphasis in original). Linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced, the question of home “is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of belonging” (Brah 192). Postgeneration adopted and assimilated figures like Artemis and Miranda feel an absent or ambivalent sense of belonging. They inherit not just racial bodily features but also the melancholic histories of previous generations. Not only are they haunted by ancestral memories of war and oppression in the homeland but they are also afflicted by their own present-day experiences of racialization and exclusion. It is, therefore, my understanding that homing desires shaped by experiences of exclusion and diasporic haunting initiate the diasporization of the postgeneration. Such homing desires compel the postgeneration to turn to postmemory, to radically re-envision the ways in which they can reconnect with their diasporic origins since their sense of belonging or even loyalty to the state is always under suspicion.¹⁹

Queer diasporic women also employ the narrative strategy of nostalgia, reinserting themselves into the familial and national spaces that have disowned them: their queer feminist fantasies of home challenge patriarchal and heterosexual configurations that have rendered their same-sex desires as illegible and unrepresentable in the domestic and familial spaces of both the homeland and the hostland (Gopinath 471-72; 485). Lai’s novels function, then, as a feminist diasporic project for queer Chinese women descendants of a dispersion who experience several levels of unhomeliness. Adopted and assimilated descendants of a dispersion, they feel an apparent lack in their Chineseness—not only are they supposedly inauthentic versions of the Chinese diaspora, having lost their homeland tongue, their inculcated feeling of immigrant shame compels them to repress their Chinese origins and pass successfully as model minorities in the hostland. As queer descendants of a dispersion, they have a difficult time finding a supportive community within and beyond the family home, the diasporic community, and the queer community, a painful reality that queer Asian diasporans face in the West.²⁰ There is an alternative queer Asian-Canadian community presented in *When Fox Is a Thousand*, but as Donald Goellnicht points out, “it is depicted as a tentative and fragmented community, at times divided and chaotic, which leads many of the women to feel isolated and depressed and to seek solace through reconnecting with their families” (168). But perhaps what Lai envisions will sustain them as a diasporic community are a wider range of political organizing activities than the formal institutional ones once suggested by Tölölyan.²¹ Consider the murder of Artemis’s queer Asian dyke artist friend, Ming, bringing the queer Asian Canadian women and their allies together in *When Fox Is a Thousand* (246-47). However fractured the community may be, it is the systemic violence against Asian women and queers that encourages them to put aside their tensions temporarily.²² In *Salt Fish Girl*, the Sonia clones, self-liberated factory workers, represent an idealized queer feminist diaspora organizing an

underground resistance network that liberates their fellow workers, educating and mobilizing consumers like Miranda on the exploitation of a racialized and gendered global labour force. And while a classically legitimate diaspora may seem absent in Lai's novels, a diasporic consciousness is being articulated in postgeneration adopted and assimilated figures like Artemis and Miranda: these subjects express a longing to reconnect with their diasporic origins; they engage in postmemory to subjectively connect with oppressive experiences not quite theirs but inherited experiences that haunt them nonetheless. Unfaithful to fixed origins, Lai's nostalgic turns re-envision the ways in which postgeneration queer Chinese women can create a temporary sense of belonging or homeliness, re-imagining their diasporic origins in creative ways that can potentially draw heterogeneous members of a dispersion together and sustain them as a community in their solidarity building efforts, whether their organized resistance involves labour activists resisting the exploitative flows of global capital, queer women making families with one another, or folks from different positionalities building coalitions to protest the racist, patriarchal, and homophobic violence against Asian women and queers.

Notes

1. For more on this scholarly debate over distinguishing genuine diasporas from non-genuine diasporas, see Floya Anthias, Rogers Brubaker, Lily Cho's "Turn to Diaspora," James Clifford, Robin Cohen, Walker Connor, Stéphane Dufoix, William Safran, and Khachig Tölölyan.

2. See both of his articles, "Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment" and "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies."

3. Whereas Artemis, raised by white Euro-Canadian parents, is an adopted Chinese contemporary Vancouverite who knows nothing about her birthparents, Miranda is a third-generation daughter of assimilated second-generation Chinese parents in Serendipity, a corporate-run walled city on the west coast of mid-twenty-first-century North America.

4. Throughout this paper, I use the term postgeneration to refer to any generation who has never directly experienced or witnessed a traumatic historical event on account of having been born after the passing of that event but nonetheless remain haunted by that event due to a desire to remain connected to the previous generation who has experienced those traumas. It is a form of indirect, mediated knowledge or postmemory that I draw heavily from Eva Hoffman via Marianne Hirsch in her article, "The Generation of Postmemory," which I will discuss more in detail later in this paper.

5. In their theological and historical account of Jewish diasporic formations powerfully sustained in exile, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin point out that “[d]iasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from ‘mixing’ but probably can only to continue to exist as a product of such mixing. Cultures, as well as identities, are constantly being remade” (721).

6. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai’s protagonist Miranda Ching experiences racial and olfactory discrimination as a child. Exuding the scent of durian since birth, Miranda repulses her schoolmates: they taunt her with names such as “Kitty Litter” and “Pissy Pussy” (21). Similar to immigrants who continue their traditional culinary practices in the hostland, Miranda undergoes a racialized and olfactory form of ostracization. She carries a fruity scent indigenous to Southeast Asian countries that becomes intolerable in the deodorized, homogeneous corporate-run world of Saturna.

7. Fox may appear irrelevant in this discussion of postgeneration adopted and assimilated descendants since Fox is a mythical spiritual being who reanimates and inhabits female corpses. But every time she breathes life into her new female form, she enters another historical context, removing herself even further from her origins. Hence, Fox undergoes a process of assimilation very similar to that of Artemis and Miranda/Nu Wa.

8. Artemis’s return trip to her birth parents’ homeland is curiously minimized in the novel. One would expect such return trips—seemingly a holy grail for any diaspora—to invite more reflection or impact upon Artemis’s diasporic consciousness. Instead, the trip leaves Artemis feeling like an inadequate interlocutor, a nauseous foreigner on an overcrowded train, and an estranged participant sharing a meal with strangers resembling her—leaving her just as disconnected from her origins as before (*Fox* 123-28). Unaffected, she returns to Canada never again thinking about her trip.

9. According to Freud, mourning and melancholia function like two sides of the same coin. Faced with losing a loved one or some abstraction “such as one’s country, liberty, [or] an ideal,” people react by grieving—they effectively mourn over this loss (243). Usually the normal mourning process ends after a certain lapse of time; but if it persists, then the person has entered the pathological stage of mourning—refusing to let go and resolve the loss, the person becomes melancholic (243-44). The influence of Freud’s theory of melancholia can be seen in critical race and Asian diaspora studies. For scholarship on dominant discourses inculcating marginalized and racialized groups to relinquish and get over their historical grievances, see Sarah Ahmed’s discussion of the melancholic

migrant in *The Promise of Happiness* and Anne Anlin Cheng's psychoanalytic theory of racial grievance in the context of Asian American literature and immigration history in *The Melancholy of Race*.

10. In her article on *Salt Fish Girl*, Sharlee Reimer contends that the novel's questioning of fixed origins cannot be simply read as a revision of origins: "if Enlightenment thinking is predicated upon a notion of knowable and discrete origins, then it no longer makes sense for a people whose lives are negatively affected by these discourses to engage them" (6). But there is still something to be said about the power of origin stories for alienated postgeneration queer Chinese women in dispersion. I argue that the postgeneration's diasporization emerges from reconnecting with the past: past histories, past experiences, past stories. Radically re-envisioning past origin stories but also undermining the notion of fixed, authentic origins offers postgeneration adopted and assimilated subjects like Artemis and Miranda a way to cultivate their diasporic consciousness.

11. In the secondary criticism, Paul Lai and Stephanie Oliver are the only scholars to analyse the narrative and theoretical function of smell in *Salt Fish Girl* to a substantial degree. Whereas Oliver discusses smell as a methodological framework for theorizing the diffuseness of diasporic subjectivity, Paul Lai understands smell as an embodied olfactory knowledge that challenges the modes of perception and knowledge generally linked to liberal humanist conceptions of scientific progress and Western modernity that structure the genre of science fiction. In my reading, I discuss smell as a source of immigrant shame and queer diasporic identification, a connection I explore in both of Lai's novels that is absent in the secondary criticism up to date.

12. Paul Lai also discusses smell as a marker for genetic or transgenerational memory in *Salt Fish Girl*. In his reading of the Dreaming disease, for instance, he observes that odour triggers a recall effect and instills the memories of war and trauma in subsequent generations who have never directly experienced these forgotten and suppressed histories (181-82). Building on Tara Lee's observations on odour functioning in *Salt Fish Girl* as the memorial embodiment of capitalism's oppressive track record, Paul Lai attributes the lingering persistence of foul odours to an agential force of the past, a past that refuses to be forgotten and aims to bring attention to the oppression and exploitation that resulted in capitalism's attempts to modernize and civilize western societies (182; 186). For the most part, I agree with these readings; however, my discussion is more interested in odour's capacity to both attenuate and restore the postgeneration's relationship with their past origins than with odour's ability to invoke and honour the memories and experiences of previous generations.

13. For example, see Nadia C. Seremetakis, Lily Cho's "How Taste Remembers Life," and Anita Mannur.

14. Oliver theorises a framework of diffusion linking Western anxieties over odours (odours commonly associated with women, racialized groups, and lower classes) with xenophobic attitudes towards migrant communities. According to these discourses, diasporic bodies, much like foreign smells, originate from some foreign origin only to permeate national, cultural, moral, and racial boundaries supposedly meant to preserve the civilized Western self from the uncivilized foreign other.

15. Unfortunately, immigrants and subsequent descendants of immigrants also inflict smell-based discrimination on themselves and each other. In his spoken word poem, "Immigrant," Wyclef Jean recalls his first smell-based discriminatory experience as a child in school: told by a classmate that he has HBO, Haitian Body Odour, an African American girl sitting beside him adds to the insult, "yeah, you know you Haitian, and you stink, and you got AIDS, and you need to go back to your country." The immigrant shame bound up with racialized odours divides members of ethnic communities in destructive ways.

16. Indeed, Miranda's parents must be truly exceptional model minorities to have succeeded in the predominantly white corporate homogenous Saturna society since Miranda is the only Asian child in her class and the only other similarly racialized bodies she encounters are the Sonia clones and the illegal female Janitors undergoing experimental organ observation.

17. A similar case of this reality facing assimilated minorities would be the problematic coverage in a 2010 *Maclean's* article on a perceived Asian hyper-enrollment and extreme studiousness resulting in unfair competition for white undergraduate students in Canada's top universities (see Findlay and Köhler). Apparently, when racialized minorities become academic model minorities, rather than achieving recognition as exceptional citizens, they represent a threat and drain on one of the nation's most cherished resources: higher education.

18. Paul Lai describes how modernity denigrated scent and ordered its extermination: narratives of modernity repudiated scent, for scent was too subjective, too emotional, and too transgressive of personal boundaries for modernity's abstract, objective, and rational imperatives (183). The process of deodorization that modern societies underwent, the "banishing of stench of effluvia and body odor with sewage systems, deodorants, and cleansing products," lead to the modern association of foul smells with the primitive and uncivilized ("Stinky" 183). Under modernity, it became imperative that offensive odours became a thing of the past.

19. This sense of alienation or lack of belonging in Lai's characters echoes other second-generation characters in African/Caribbean Canadian fiction. For example, in his article on second generation black Canadian literature, David Chariandy offers an empathetic reading of the alienated and disaffected youths in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*. He suggests that rather than pathologizing and fearing the difficulty that second generation visible minorities have in expressing a sense of belonging to Canada that we try to understand the oppressive societal conditions that may be pushing them to identify less with Canada. Chariandy also references a 2006 sociological study by Jeffrey Reitz and Rupa Banerjee reporting this difficulty that Canadian-born children of visible-minority immigrants have in identifying with Canada, a report published in a post 9/11 "deepening climate of uncertainty and fear regarding the place of second-generation visible minorities in Canada and, indeed, around the world" (Chariandy 818-19). It is his view that the disaffection and alienation of second generation visible minorities like the youths in Brand's novel "stem not from their 'ethnic incompatibility' with dominant society, but from their belief . . . that they eternally will be regarded, in their country of birth, as outsiders" (825).

20. David L. Eng has drawn interesting parallels between the queer post-Stonewall activist and Asian American cultural nationalist movements in their organizing efforts for a home within the US nation-state. Though queer cultural projects and social agendas demand that traditional understandings of membership in the US nation-state be undermined, "their multiple invocations of home nonetheless suggest that queers, like Asian Americans, harbor similar yearnings for the kind of contained boundaries enjoyed by mainstream society" (Eng 32).

21. In an overview of the exigent factors constitutive of diasporic formations, Tölölyan suggests that what sustains a diaspora is a collective outward focus beyond the ethnic enclave, a call to action concerned with influencing the political outcome of the homeland, for instance, by lobbying as a diasporic special interest group for state intervention on the political affairs of their homeland ("Rethinking" 23-25). Based on his intellectual, cultural, and political diasporic participation in a transnationalist Armenian socialist and nationalist party and on how past dispersions have developed into diasporas, his account of diasporic citizenship unfortunately overlooks the material barriers and social exclusions that render the participation of queer diasporic women in the organization of diasporic stateless power possible. How exactly would marginalized queer female racialized diasporic youths garner access to stateless power in the form of lobbying or gain the necessary funding to build diasporic institutions and organizations? And would the project of shaping the political outcomes of the homeland be essential to sustain them as a diaspora?

22. Near the end of the novel, Fox tells Artemis about her trip to the Underworld where Fox witnesses the spirits of five murdered Asian women stating their case to a Judge (*Fox* 226-29). Evidently the murders are race, sexual, class, and gender-based; and the murderers include strangers as well as family members who disapprove of their sexual orientation. Despite Artemis's tenuous relations with her allies and ex-lovers, the five dead women's stories express an urgent need for marginalized Asian Canadian women and their allies to mobilize as a community despite their political differences, especially since the women's murderers and the Judge, the people in charge of their fates, are all men.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sarah. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Anthias, Floya. "Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity?" *Sociology* 32 (1998): 557-80. Print.
- Boyarin, Daniel and Jonathan. "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity." *Critical Inquiry* 19.4 (1993): 693-725. Print.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Brubaker, Rogers. "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28.1 (2005): 1-19. Print.
- Chariandy, David. "'The Fiction of Belonging': On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada." *Callaloo* 30.3 (2007): 818-29. Print.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Cho, Lily. "'How Taste Remembers Life': Diaspora and the Memories that Bind." *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2010. 131-56. Print.
- . "The Turn to Diaspora." *Topia* 17 (2007): 11-30. Print.
- Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. 244-77. Print.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1997. Print.
- Connor, Walker. "The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas." *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. 16-46. Print.
- Dufoix, Stéphane. *Diasporas*. Trans. William Rodarmor. Berkeley: U of California P, 2008. Print.
- Eng, David L. "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies." *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 31-52. Print.
- Findlay, Stephanie and Köhler, Nicholas. "Too Asian?" *Maclean's* 123.45 (2010): 76-81.

- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." Vol. 3 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P, 1953. 243-58. Print.
- Goellnicht, Donald C. "'Forays into Acts of Transformation': Queering Chinese-Canadian Diasporic Fictions." *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*. Eds. Tseen Khoo and Kam Louie. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2005. 153-82. Print.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion." *positions* 5.2 (1997): 467-89. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 103-28.
- Jean, Wyclef. "Immigrant." *Def Jam Poetry* (Season 5, Episode 6). Dir. Stan Lathan. DVD. HBO Home Video, 2007.
- Lai, Larissa. Afterword. *When Fox Is a Thousand*. By Lai. 2nd Edition. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp P, 2004. 253-59. Print.
- . "Future Asians: Migrant Speculations, Repressed History, and Cyborg Hope." *West Coast Line* 38.2 (2004). 168-75. Print.
- . *Salt Fish Girl*. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2002. Print.
- . "The Sixth Sensory Organ." *Bringing It Home: Women Talk about Feminism in their Lives*. Ed. Brenda Lea Brown. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1996. 199-218. Print.
- . *When Fox Is a Thousand*. 2nd Edition. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp P, 2004. Print.
- Lai, Paul. "Stinky Bodies: Mythological Futures and the Olfactory Sense in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*." *MELUS* 33.4 (2008): 167-87. Print.
- Lee, Tara. "Mutant Bodies in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*: Challenging the Alliance between Science and Capital." *West Coast Line* 38.2 (2004): 94-108. Print.
- Mannur, Anita. "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora." *MELUS* 32.4 (2007): 11-31. Print.
- Oliver, Stephanie. "Diffuse Connections: Smell and Diasporic Subjectivity in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*." *Canadian Literature* 208 (2011): 85-107. Print.
- Reimer, Sharlee. "Troubling Origins: Cyborg Politics in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*." *Atlantis* 35.1 (2010): 4-14. Print.
- Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 83-99. Print.
- Seremetakis, Nadia C. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*. Boulder: Westview P, 1994. Print.
- Tölöyan, Khachig. "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007): 647-55. Print.
- . "Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora* 5.1 (1996): 3-36. Print.