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## A Journey to the City of Hope: Immigration, Diaspora and Identity in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

Podróż do Miasta Nadziei – imigracja, diaspora i tożsamość  
w powieści Larissy Lai *Salt Fish Girl*

**Abstract:** The motif of journey constitutes one of the most important cornerstones of both postcolonial literatures and science fiction narratives, the latter of which owe a significant debt to the essentially colonial origins of the genre, thus inviting postcolonial practices of reimagining and writing back. For that reason, the following article aims at an examination of the peculiar ties between the postcolonial theory and science fiction, in order to discuss how speculative fiction allows for an in-depth analysis of the contemporary diasporic condition and the issues of memory and cultural identity, in the context of a dialogue with contemporary diaspora studies and postcolonial studies.

The motif of the journey, then, understood both in literal and metaphoric terms, becomes the point of departure for a discussion concerning the ways in which the experiences of migration and diasporic existence influence the subject's identity as well as their relationship with the culture and language of the country of their ancestors.

To this end, the paper aims at a thorough analysis of the ways in which Larissa Lai, in her novel *Salt Fish Girl*, engages in a discussion regarding the contemporary condition of diasporic communities, proposing a new perspective on the complicated relationship between diasporas, their past and ancestral heritage as well as their language, and the motif of journey, understood both spatially (as a journey from one place to another) and temporally (as a journey back to the roots or the impossibility of going back). Employing postcolonial theory as well as the theory of science fiction as the methodological framework, the paper argues that for Lai, the journey of one of the incarnations of the protagonist, Nu Wa, to the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness constitutes an extended metaphor for the experience of Chinese immigrants in Canada. The motif of journey is inextricably tied here with the practices of remembering and forgetting, crucial for diasporic communities, as well as the constant search for a new, hyphenated identity in the new reality. Moreover, Lai suggests that such a journey constitutes a traumatic experience for the individual, which results in the loss of access to ancestral heritage as well as the language and the necessity of accepting one's liminal condition, which contributes to the feeling of alienation and rootlessness.

**Keywords:** *Salt Fish Girl*, Larissa Lai, science fiction, journey, diaspora, immigration

**Abstrakt:** Motyw podróży stanowi jeden z najważniejszych tropów literatury postkolonialnej, jak również literatury science fiction, której korzenie są niezaprzeczalnie zanurzone w dyskursie kolonialnym. Zależność ta prowadzi do rozrachunków z kolo-

niałą przeszłością i przepisywaniem (*writing back*) na nowo narracji charakterystycznych dla science fiction. Autorka artykułu bada osobliwe związki między teorią postkolonialną a literaturą science fiction. Omawia, w jaki sposób fikcja spekulatywna pozwala na dogłębną analizę współczesnej kondycji diasporycznej oraz kwestii pamięci i tożsamości kulturowej w kontekście dialogu ze współczesnymi studiami nad diasporą i studiami postkolonialnymi.

Motyw podróży, rozumiany zarówno w sensie dosłownym, jak i metaforycznym, staje się punktem wyjścia do dyskusji na temat tego, jak doświadczenia migracji i diasporycznej egzystencji wpływają na tożsamość podmiotu, a także na jego relację z kulturą i językiem kraju przodków.

W artykule ukazano sposoby zaangażowania Larissy Lai w dyskusję na temat aktualnego stanu społeczności diasporycznych. Zaproponowano także nowe spojrzenie na skomplikowaną relację między diasporami, ich przeszłością i dziedzictwem przodków oraz językiem, a motywem podróży rozumianej zarówno przestrzennie (jako podróż z jednego miejsca do drugiego), jak i czasowo (jako powrót do korzeni lub niemożność powrotu). Wykorzystując teorię postkolonialną oraz teorię science fiction jako ramy teoretyczne, autorka dowodzi, że dla Lai podróż jednego z wcieleni głównej bohaterki, Nu Wa, na Wyspę Mgieł i Zapomnienia stanowi rozbudowaną metaforę doświadczenia chińskich imigrantów w Kanadzie. Motyw podróży jest tu nierozdzielnie związany z kluczowymi dla społeczności diasporycznych praktykami pamiętania i zapomniania, a także z ciągłym poszukiwaniem nowej, granicznej tożsamości w poznawanej rzeczywistości. Co więcej, Lai sugeruje, że taka podróż stanowi dla jednostki traumatyczne doświadczenie, którego efektem jest utrata dostępu do dziedzictwa i języka przodków oraz konieczność zaakceptowania swojej liminalnej kondycji, co przyczynia się do poczucia wyobcowania i braku zakorzenienia.

Słowa kluczowe: *Salt Fish Girl*, Larissa Lai, science fiction, podróż, diaspora, imigracja

## Traversing the theory: between the science fictional and the postcolonial

For all that science fiction and postcolonial studies might seem to remain at odds with each other, the two, in fact, share more similarities than it might appear at the first glance. For one, science fiction occupies the peculiar niche of a genre which, while being about the future on the surface of it, is actually to a large extent about the present and the past. Even though it is impossible to point to a singular, uncontested definition of science fiction, the majority of science fiction theorists, such as Darko Suvin, Robert Scholes, or Damien Broderick, agree that science fiction produces a twofold effect, in which the genre simultaneously estranges us from the literary verisimilitude of the quotidian life in a process which Suvin calls “estrangement,” and anchors us in reality through a mechanism which Suvin refers to as “cognition.” Together, as Suvin argues, the interplay between the two produces an effect of cognitive estrangement, which, in his understanding, is the neces-

sary condition for science fiction to appear (Suvin 1988, 37). Following Suvin's thought, the element of cognition present in science fiction remains grounded in the present or in the past, drawing on the struggles or moral dilemmas of humanity and providing cultural context, which echoes the words of Alan Clarke, who argues that the works of science fiction "can tell us more about the times in which they were produced than they can about any future they depict" (2000, 70). Similarly, Suvin himself comments on the historical engagement of science fiction, specifying that "the novum is a mediating category whose explicative potency springs from its rare bridging of literary and extraliterary, fictional and empirical, formal and ideological domains, in brief from its unalienable historicity" (1979, 64).

This, in turn, marks the first point of convergence between science fiction and postcolonial studies: while they look towards the future, they remain inextricably tied to the present and the past. The second point I would like to touch upon is much more straightforward. That is to say, despite the fact that in the recent decades, science fiction has seen the development of counter-discursive practices (Tiffin 2002, 96) in the form of postcolonial science fiction, which critically addresses the origins of the genre, science fiction is a genre deeply rooted in the colonial discourse, and one which originated in its modern incarnation from the colonial fantasy of expansion and conquest. John Rieder further investigates this connection, arguing that, in fact, science fiction "appeared predominantly in those countries that were involved in colonial and imperialist projects" (2005, 375), and that, at its most basic level, the genre "addresses itself to the fantastic basis of colonial practice" (2005, 376), reflecting the expansionist attitudes expressed by the colonial enterprise. Moreover, he points out that

repetitive motifs that coalesced into the genre of science fiction represent ideological ways of grasping the social consequences of colonialism, including the fantastic appropriation and rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth in the homeland and in the colonies, the racist ideologies that enabled colonialist exploitation, and the cognitive impact

of radical cultural differences on the home culture. These range from triumphal fantasies of appropriating land, power, sex, and treasure in tales of exploration and adventure, to nightmarish reversals of the positions of colonizer and colonized in tales of invasion and apocalypse (Rieder 2008, 20–21).

Nonetheless, despite the clear colonial heritage of the genre, Jenny Wolmark claims that “SF is increasingly recognized for its ability to articulate complex and multifaceted responses to contemporary uncertainties and anxieties, and metaphors drawn from SF have acquired considerable cultural resonance” (2005, 156). For that reason, then, the genre lends itself particularly well to textual strategies of re-presentation and symbolic reimagining, and, by extension, opens itself to counter-discursive practices, which, according to Helen Tiffin, “evolve textual strategies which continually ‘consume’ their ‘own biases’ at the same time as they expose and erode those of the dominant discourse (...)” (2002, 96). For many postcolonial authors, then, speculative fiction – and science fiction in particular – constitutes a vehicle through which to replay the colonial scenarios and reexamine lingering traumas in a futuristic scenario, writing back to the imperial history of the genre that has for centuries perpetuated the narratives of colonial expansion and conquest, facilitating further Othering of the colonial subject.

Journey, movement, conquest:  
postcolonial and speculative approaches to travel

The notion of going from one place to another is by no means a neutral concept in postcolonial studies and science fiction alike. On the contrary, it denotes practices of invasion and conquest of land, of displacement and diasporic exodus, of being uprooted from one’s own place of

origin as well as, by extension, one's ancestral heritage. Sara Upstone, in her book *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*, engages with these aspects of travel as she remarks:

If the colonial enterprise is founded on the desire for an absolute space, then at the heart of this endeavour is the sense of an absolute journey. Movement is not only a way for the colonised to escape the confines of the nation through migration; it is also a necessary feature of the coloniser's practice of conquering territory: it is by its very nature a transferral of bodies and resources from one space to the other. Violent travel such as indentured labour or slavery exposes the very unequal ways in which postcolonial citizens themselves experience movement (Upstone 2009, 58).

Further, she goes on to say:

In many ways the act of movement can be read as a metaphor for the entire colonial practice. It is a journey that relies upon an assumption of chaos, of the exotic, in order to facilitate free, boundless movement, only to then conceal this with (...) a need for order that is required to justify colonial control which is embodied in the colonial preoccupation with frontiers and map-making (Upstone 2009, 58).

For that reason, the act of movement and journey in the colonial and postcolonial spaces has always been pregnant with meaning, emphasizing the Western domination and privilege over the territory of the colony as well as a certain kind of discursive ownership of the notion of travel. It is, as Sara Upstone puts it, with reference to the writings of Mary Louise Pratt, "a mental capture of territory" (2009, 58), which on the one hand reasserts the colonial order within and outside of the colony through delineating the guidelines of permitted movement, and on the other hand forces the colonized people into particular forms of colonial and postcolonial travel, which result, among others, in the emergence of diasporic communities.

Similarly, speculative fiction, and science fiction in particular, has been to a large extent preoccupied with the idea of movement. Some of the earliest works of what scholars refer to as proto-science fiction, such as Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1634), Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638), Cyrano de Bergerac's *Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon* (1656) or Voltaire's *Micromégas* (1752), feature the motif of the journey rather prominently, heralding the emergence of modern science fiction narratives which, similarly, have remained deeply preoccupied with the idea of extending the frontier of the colonial enterprise beyond the boundaries of Earth. Much of the contemporary mainstream science fiction, then, until this day perpetuates the colonial heritage of the genre, creating countless narratives of exploration, expansion and invasion, disregarding the fact that, as Nalo Hopkinson states in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, an anthology of postcolonial speculative fiction:

[a]rguably, one of the most familiar memes of science fiction is that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives, and as I've said elsewhere, for many of us, that's not a thrilling adventure story; it's non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere (2004, 7).

For that reason, the subgenre of postcolonial speculative fiction actively engages in subversion and deconstruction of those mainstream narratives, rethinking the notions of travel and movement from intersection between the speculative and the postcolonial. The motif of the journey, then, understood both in literal and metaphoric terms, becomes the point of departure for a discussion concerning the ways in which the experiences of migration and diasporic existence influence the subject's identity as well as their relationship with the culture and language of the country of their ancestors.

To this end, the article proposes to explore the ways in which Larissa Lai, in her novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), engages in a discussion regarding the contemporary condition of diasporic communities, proposing

a new perspective on the complicated relationship between diasporas, their past, ancestral heritage and language, as well as the motif of journey, understood both spatially (as a journey from one place to another) and temporally (as a journey back to the familial roots or, perhaps, the gradual understanding of the impossibility of going back). Employing postcolonial theory as well as the theory of science fiction as the methodological framework, the article argues that for Lai, the journey of one of the incarnations of the protagonist, Nu Wa, to the City of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness constitutes an extended metaphor for the experience of Chinese immigrants in Canada. The novel, which follows two narrative strands – that of Nu Wa, a Chinese aquatic deity who chooses to become a human woman and is then reincarnated in 19<sup>th</sup>-century China, and that of Miranda Ching, a futuristic incarnation of Nu Wa who lives in the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in what is today's British Columbia – touches upon the liminal spaces of diasporic existence and issues such as heritage, displacement, memory, and alienation, insisting upon drawing parallels between the experience of Chinese immigrants in Canada and that of the two protagonists.

Journeying between places and times:  
temporality, spatiality, identity

*Salt Fish Girl* is a novel which abounds in journeys through liminal spaces – such as the initial journey of Nu Wa from her aquatic dominion to the dry land, her further journeys through the waters of a water tank and through the womb of the woman who gives birth to her in her human form, or Miranda's journey from the futuristic city of Serendipity to the periphery of the Unregulated Zone. All of those journeys tell stories of shifting, changing, and simultaneous uprooting, which results in the loss of home and uninhibited access to ancestral heritage. The most

striking of those journeys, though, and one which is most evocative of the Chinese immigrant experience in Canada, is the journey of Nu Wa to the City of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, a mass of land suspended in the sky. Nu Wa travels to the city following her separation from her lover, the titular Salt Fish Girl, tempted by a woman named Edwina, who is described by Nu Wa in the following way: “She was a foreigner, and an outlandish-looking one at that, dressed in white from top to toe, with long unpinned hair the colour of sunlight and eyes so pale they seemed to be gazing inward instead of out” (Lai 2002, 122). Edwina, who comes in the novel to embody the spirit of the imperial enterprise, leads Nu Wa on a strange journey through liminal spaces, evoking the images of uncertainty, and reflecting the act of passing from one place to another, becoming displaced in the process.

The first moments of Nu Wa’s arrival on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness are therefore marked by the liminality of her passage, expressed in the imagery of the fog:

We walked through the fog. The ground was spongy, like moss. I felt increasingly sleepy. Then my heel clicked against solid wood, which snapped me awake. The fog thinned and through the drifting wisps I could see we had stepped onto a long pier. Water surged gently against the sides. We followed the pier towards land and stepped finally onto a dock. Above us towered an astonishing city, glinting pink and gold (Lai 2002, 125).

The city, foreign and imposing but also seemingly brimming with promise, has, as Nu Wa learns, two gates, one on the eastern and one on the western side; the former of which is inscribed with the word “Progress,” while the latter displays the word “Democracy,” which Patterson and Troeung regard, after Mansbridge, as “signs symbolic of the ideological promises of economic prosperity and freedom made to Asian migrants in Canada” (2016, 79). This, in turn, reflects the claims of Kate Chiwen Liu, who argues that “Wong and Mansbridge see the novel more as a critique of contemporary Canada (...) or the notion of Canada as a ‘homely nation’” (2009, 313).



Indeed, the utopian image of the significantly named City of Hope is shattered soon after Nu Wa's arrival, echoing the words of Sara Upstone, who claims that "even in the case of voluntary migration, travel is often undercut by the stark difference between the hopes and ideals embodied in such movement and the reality, which is often cast in terms of disappointment, poverty, and prejudice" (2009, 58). Unable to pay for her stay at a luxurious hotel, into which she had been tricked by Edwina, Nu Wa is forced to become a source of cheap migrant labor, first at the hotel, where she agrees to clean rooms as a way of paying off her debt, and then at a telemarketing firm. Gradually, the descriptions of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness change as well, to reflect the shift between the promise of a new, better life and the reality of it. The city, instead of shining and golden, becomes rainy and drab:

In my home village I had heard stories of men who invented South Sea islands, and sold gullible dreamers citizenships in places that did not exist, for outrageous sums. Perhaps the wanting of so many desperate and hopeful people had made one of those islands real. But then why was it like this, so cold and damp, and where were the others like me? A thick mist wafted through the window (Lai 2002, 135–136).

With the dream of economic prosperity crushed, the City of Hope reveals its uncaring face hidden behind its gilded façade. Thus, the journey into the unknown in search of a better life, undertaken by Nu Wa under Edwina's influence, becomes, in fact, a source of significant hardship and further disappointment. Moreover, after crossing her paths with Edwina once more, Nu Wa's dream of a better life in the foreign land is further destroyed as she becomes her scapegoat once they are caught smuggling brown heroin, for which Edwina promptly places all blame on Nu Wa (Lai 2002, 140). In the end, her hope for a better future ends in prison, where she spends five years before she returns to China, having traded the only possession she had brought with her, a golden coin, for a map (Lai 2002, 141–146).

In this significant moment, I would like to argue, Nu Wa symbolically – and paradoxically – relinquishes her last link with her place of origin for the promise of a return to the roots. Before departing, Edwina warns her, “‘You will never remember your old language.’ She said this not as a mere statement, but more like a curse” (Lai 2002, 145). What follows Nu Wa’s return to Canton is a realization that not only is she incapable of speaking Cantonese anymore, but also she is not truly at home. In fact, initially Nu Wa does not realize that she is not speaking Cantonese, but rather Forgetfullian (i.e. English), or that a temporal disruption has occurred, in which more time has passed in China than it has on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness. She eventually comes to realize both of those facts in her confrontation with the Salt Fish Girl:

“Speak Cantonese. I don’t understand that foreign tongue.”

I understood her perfectly and I tried in vain to get my mouth to form the familiar words. My throat could not push them out. The language of the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness rolled off my tongue in rapid-fire explanation, but she only scowled at me. I said her name – that much I could manage – and she nodded and asked how I knew her. I said my own name and vigorously jabbed my chest with my index finger, but she shook her head.

“How can that be?” she said. “You’re young enough to be my daughter.”

I nodded and thumped my chest insistently, feeling stupid and desperate and alien (Lai 2002, 171).

In this way, Lai constructs Nu Wa’s journey to the City of Hope as a traumatic experience which results in the painful loss of ties and access to ancestral heritage as well as language, revealing the points of convergence with the contemporary diasporic communities, whose members struggle with approaching their own personal and collective histories and legacies. Thus, Nu Wa’s journey comes to stand for the metaphor of immigration, resulting in the emergence of a new hyphenated identity and signaling the impossibility of fully going back to one’s roots. Nu Wa, after returning home from her travels, feels alien and desperate for

acceptance in her old community, but the novel insists on claiming that such a return to the familiar past is impossible, that once you leave, you can never fully go back home.

Her inability to speak Cantonese, therefore, marks her as alien and Other even within her own community, further estranging her from her ancestral heritage and facilitating further alienation. It is the journey, then, the liminal passing from one place to another, which contributes in the novel to the feeling of isolation and Othering, setting Nu Wa apart from her own people. Cursed by Edwina – who stands in for the tempting but false promise of the Western civilization – to never remember her language, Nu Wa becomes rootless and displaced, entering a liminal state of being which, as the novel suggests, she shares with Asian diasporic communities in Canada. Moreover, her loss of access to language becomes significant in more than one way: not only does it alienate her from her community, but also effectively silences her as a subject. Unable to communicate, she loses the access to discourse and the possibility of speaking for herself, residing on the periphery of the community, misunderstood and shunned, alienated by her language.

Here, once again, Lai seems to be returning to the reference to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," which appears for the first time at the beginning of the novel, when Nu Wa visits a sea witch who gives her the ability to bifurcate her tail and join the world of Nu Wa's own creation – people (Lai 2002, 8). Now, following the narrative threads of the fairytale, Nu Wa becomes silenced as well, incapable of articulating her own experience as a liminal, hybrid being, doubly alienated by her marks of difference. Thus, the space of the loss of language becomes for Nu Wa, now unhappily married to a man who can never understand her (Lai 2002, 179–180), a space of confinement and longing – not only for the Salt Fish Girl, but also for a sense of belonging. In the novel, this acute yearning is only stopped by drowning, symbolically returning to Nu Wa's origins in the water. Here, too, Nu Wa remains an image of a double, but a different one this time:

The slow motion of the river distorted the reflection slightly so that I imagined I saw, not myself, but the Salt Fish Girl staring sadly back at me. She was safe down there. I reached my hand to the surface, as though to touch her face. Dark human shapes appeared behind her. I looked over my shoulder once and then leaned into the water, merging with my reflection and obliterating it at the same time (Lai 2002, 183).

This imagery of simultaneous reunion and destruction, in which Nu Wa sees her own reflection in the Salt Fish Girl but cannot become one with her except by destroying her own image completely, plunging into the water, becomes therefore a metaphor for the insatiable longing for recognizable and accessible origins.

In this way, Lai engages in a discussion concerning the contemporary diasporic experience of the Chinese minority in Canada, problematizing the issues of home, belonging and language. By constructing her extended metaphor shaped around the notion of journey understood both as a spatial movement from one place to another and as a temporal movement away from one's ancestral heritage, which remains partially obscured and irrecoverable by the diaspora, Lai comments on the ways in which diasporic communities engage with their own past and the language of their ancestors, but, as the novel suggests, that engagement always involves a degree of loss. As Patterson and Troeung argue, "[t]he migrant's dream of reaching a space of progress is only made accessible through acts of complicity, betrayal and cultural containment" (2016, 80). However, as Albert Memmi notes, that dream of assimilation is, in fact, impossible to realize, since the hegemonic center can never allow the Other to fully assimilate (1993, 124). This, in turn, is reflected in Nu Wa's experience in the City of Hope, in which the journey to the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness and back to China emerges as the site of a traumatic experience for the subject, contributing to the emergence of hybrid, liminal identities and the feeling of displacement and alienation, which echoes the struggles of modern-day diasporic communities in Canada. All in all, then, the novel stresses the impossibility

of reconciling the diasporic existence with the desire to return to the roots, insisting on the partial loss of identity which accompanies the emergence of such liminal subjectivity, complicating the matters of language, memory and belonging.

## Travelling forward, travelling back: final remarks

Much of the postcolonial speculative fiction genre remains preoccupied with the notions of movement and journey, interrogating the practices of travel and the subsequent transformations in the types and shapes of communities which emerge as a result of those practices. Writing back to the colonial roots of the genre and drawing from their diasporic experience, authors such as Nalo Hopkinson (*Midnight Robber*), Elaine Cuyegkeng (“These Constellations Will Be Yours”), Nnedi Okorafor (*Binti*) or Rivers Solomon (*An Unkindness of Ghosts*), among others, examine the ways in which women navigate the worlds which they inhabit both spatially and – in some cases – temporally, journeying between places and times in order to make sense of their identities, negotiating belonging and access to ancestral heritage.

Thus, it is precisely the liminal nature of travel, the state of being in-between (between one place and another, between one identity and another), which comes to the fore in postcolonial speculative approaches to travelling. This liminality, in turn, emerges as a simultaneous agent of liberation and alienation – alienation from communities, customs, language, and heritage – further underlining the impossibility of a complete return to one’s ancestral roots, signifying the profound ways in which the existence of the colonial discourse has systemically affected structures of memory and belonging and mirroring the experiences of contemporary diasporic communities.

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Anglistka, literaturoznawczyni. Ukończyła pracę doktorską na temat ciała w postkolonialnej fikcji spekulatywnej. Jej obecne badania nadal koncentrują się na różnych aspektach fikcji spekulatywnej (szczególnie północnoamerykańskiej) w kontekście studiów postkolonialnych. Jej zainteresowania naukowe obejmują studia postkolonialne, gender studies i teorię science fiction.

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