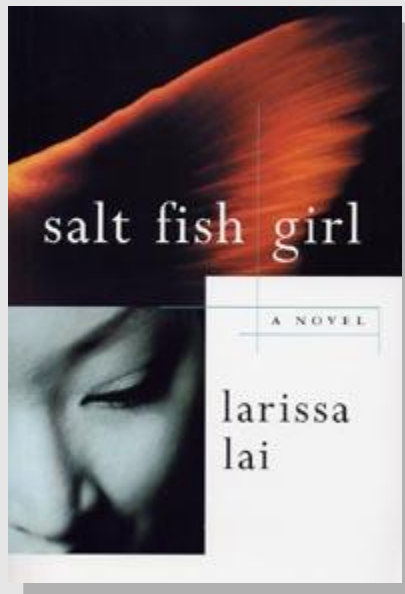


# Traumatic Origins & Future Shocks

Biopolitics &

*Salt Fish Girl*

By Larissa Lai



# Outline

- [Introduction](#): Trauma and Biopolitics
- [Larissa Lai](#)
- Questions re. [chap 1](#);
- Chap 1: [Nu Wa and her Creation](#); her Views of [Procreation](#);  
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- Questions re. [chap 2](#)
- Chap 2: [Miranda's Parents](#); [her Birth and the Smell](#);  
[Serendipity vs. the Unregulated Zone](#); [the Business Suit](#);
- Implications of [the First Two Chapters](#)
- Chap 3
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# Mainstream Sci-Fi films on Origins and Identities

- e.g. *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report* and *The Island*
- **Origin Myths** – Sons rebelling against the Father figures; Mother missing or marginalized.
- **Ethnic Minorities** – on the margins, or in the slums and underworld.
- **Cyborg Identity**: Cloned, disassembled and re-assembled.

# Feminist Sci-fi Fictions on

## Regeneration

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman: *Herland* (feminist utopia where men are not needed for procreation.)
- Marge Piercy: *Woman on the Edge of Time* – distopia vs. utopia (where both genders can be mothers & nuclear family no longer a basic unit)
- Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin* – challenge patriarchal/capitalist control –still within the patriarchal and national system.
- Octavia Butler: *Dawn* – post-human; five genders in the extraterrestrials , cross-breeding of two extraterrestrials, an intermediary (called ooloi), a black woman and an Asian man.

# Feminist Sci-fi Fictions (2)

- *The Island*
- *Clones made to extend human lives or for organ transplants, etc.*
- *What will they do after being liberated?*



- *Salt Fish Girl –*
  - *Sonias – cyborgs made with minorities' & fish genes; Miyakos, mixed with cat genes.*
  - All sent to serve as factory workers.
  - Liberated Sonias try to resist and maintain their autonomy.
  - *ends with Miranda's mating with Evie (a liberated Sonia)*

# Traumatic Origins

## Freudian

- Birth for Freud: the "first experience of anxiety and thus the source and prototype of ... anxiety" for the rest of the individual's life
- Otto Rank: early separation from the mother becomes the foundation for all anxieties experienced later in the individual's life ([ref](#))

## SFG: Birth and Trauma

- Nu Wa: Loneliness
- Miranda: the mother's failed romance
- Followed by a sequence of **betrayals**

# Trauma & Biopolitics

- Trauma leading to violence: The juncture of trauma and violence... is always undergirded by multiple acts of '**framing**' [ref. Butler ] (Vermeulen 141) see below
- A Shift in 21<sup>st</sup> century: Butler's emphasis on 'precarious' or 'grievable' life suggests one reason why trauma studies' ethico-political agenda has proven harder to substantiate in the new millennium than Caruth could have anticipated in 1995. It testifies to a widespread shift in the analysis of **power from the domain of culture to the problematic of life, or from a politics of recognition to a discourse of biopolitics.** (P. Vermeulen 142)

# From disciplinary power to biopolitics

- Biopolitics names the processes and apparatuses through which life itself has increasingly become a target of power since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (142)
- Foucault: while disciplinary power (which emerged from the seventeenth century on) already differed from sovereign power in that it did not presuppose 'the physical existence of a sovereign' but rather 'a closely
- **meshed grid of material coercions'** (Foucault 2003: 36), **biopolitics**, rather than replacing disciplinary power, instead 'dovetails into [disciplinary power], integrate[s]
- it, **modifies it to some extent, use[s] it by sort of infiltrating it'** (242), (143)



# Agamben: biopolitics as sovereignty

re-territorialized biopolitics: 3 limitations

- 1) connected to sovereignty
- 2) centrality of Holocaust, obscuring the ubiquity of tortures and suffering
- 3) assumption of a solid & stable sense of self

# Trauma & Biopolitics

- Luckhurst:
- When Roger Luckhurst notes that trauma is a concept that emerged 'as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of **the technological and statistical society** that can generate, multiply and quantify the “shocks” of modern life' (19), he underlines the concept's involvement **in the infrastructures of biopolitics.**

# Trauma & Biopolitics (2)

- Modernity: trauma positioned in biopolitics  
Or biopolitics as bureaucratic and statistical codification of trauma) trauma
- **1) statistical society:** trauma as part of the vocabulary to map, predict and regulate the proliferation of physical accidents and psychological damage
- **2) wound culture:** pastoral culture, eliciting confessions (147)

# Esposito: biopolitics, **community, immunity**

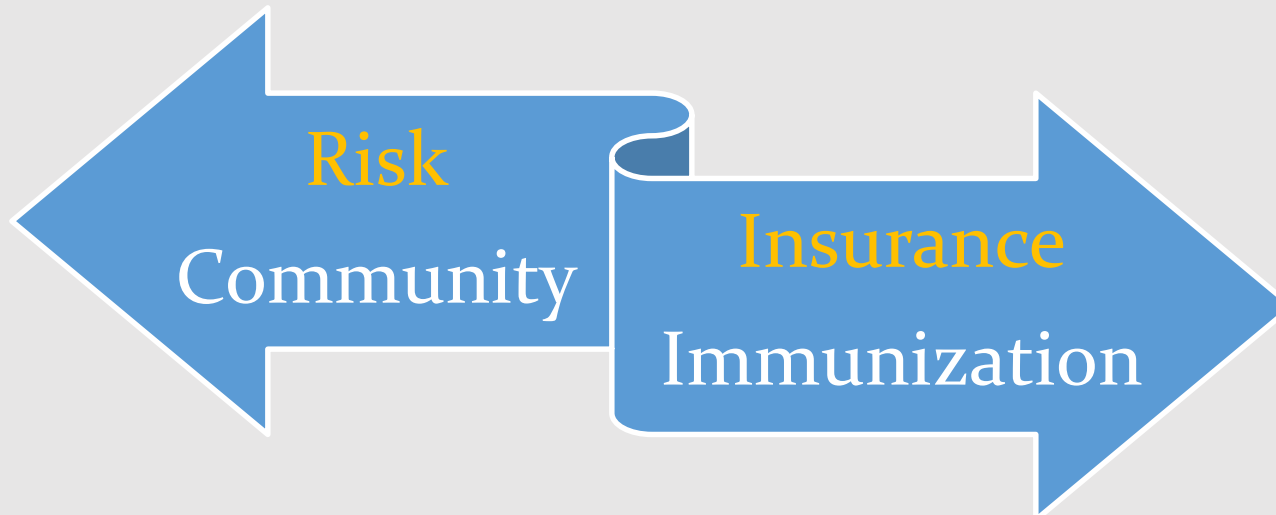
- The notions of **community and immunity** are properly inseparable, yet it is only in modernity that immunization begins to constitute society's "most intimate essence" (Esposito 2008: 55) . (149)
- Reading Esposito from the perspective of trauma studies, we can see that he grafts his account of biopolitics ... onto **a dynamic (the relation between *communitas* and *immunitas*) that is structured very much like the scenario of traumatic encounter.**

# Esposito: biopolitics,

## community, immunity (2)

- This interconnectedness of the expansive power of community and the limiting operations of immunization also accounts for Esposito's response to the unresolved hesitation in Foucault between affirmative and productive' notion of biopolitics, on the one hand, and a 'negative and lethal' one on the other (Esposito 2008: 46)
- **repetition compulsion** = the homeopathic strategy through which life manages to contain but not deny the its self-defeating drive towards excess and expansion, even as it depends on this drive.

# Risk and Insurance



- 'It is no longer the presence of risk that demands protection. but the demand for protection that artificially generates the sensation of risk' (Esposito 2009: 14).

# trauma studies as an

## immunitary technology

- a denial of the need for security and defense is the surest way to provoke an inflation of immunitary violence.
- The immune system can be an 'open system of self-definition'
- immune system is a strategy for managing the destructive *and* productive aspects of the self's relation to its world. From this biopolitical perspective, trauma studies can be considered as an immunitary technology—a technology that can manage the self's relation to the world and that aims to provide a position of sustainable exposure. (152)

# Future Shocks: Trauma in the very near future

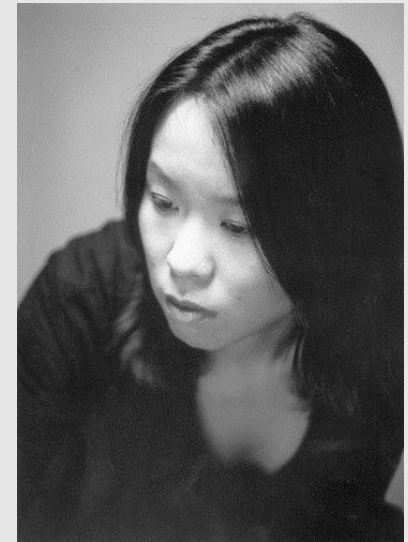
- Lockhurst 160
- Fictions of future shock on such a cataclysmic scale allegorize the felt traumas of dis-possession, the techno-cultural recasting of the boundaries of body and self under the relentless acceleration of neoliberal economics (see William, Zizek). Contemporary horror in particular, as is often noted, **is held together by the syntax of trauma** (see, for instance, Lowenstein) .
- As Fredric Jameson has argued, SF futures are limited by the horizon of their present: it is impossible to imagine the complete alterity of the future . (162)



# Larissa Lai & Chinese history & myth

- Beyond the debate over authenticity and exoticism
- Her genealogy (\*) of Chinese-Canadian women:
  - History **re-visioned** for different causes and connected with contemporary or future Chinese-Canadians
  - **History embodied**: (1) history of gender exploitation told through the stories of fox, 魚玄機, Nu Wa and Salt Fish Girl.
- (2) the fox's animating human corpses; Nu Wa's human-fish body—and the smell.

Born in La Jolla, California,  
Grew up in Newfoundland,  
Joined the Chinese-Canadian  
movements in the 80's in  
Vancouver;  
currently working on a PhD at  
the University of Calgary.



## When Fox Is a Thousand --

1. thematic concerns: connections and betrayals of friends and lovers; fluidity of gender and cultural identities, through which the protagonist learns to establish her identity.
2. centers around the murder of a Chinese-Canadian woman;
3. Historical re-interpretation:
  - -- of the fox (no longer 狐狸精 but one who animates women's bodies and moves to the West), **the one to be connected with many women in history** (--like Nu-Wa)
  - 魚玄機 (not just a beautiful courtesan dependent on men; the killing of her waitress 綠翹 interpreted) and the fluid gender & ethnic boundaries of the Chinese-Canadians

# *Salt Fish Girl*

Two Time-lines: Genealogy of Lesbian/Cyborg Identities

- (1) **Traumatic and Enabling Origins:** (ancient China 商 →) nineteenth-century China (1800—1900): Nu Wa and Salt Fish Girl
- (2) **Future Shocks:** Pacific Northwest in 2044 —“the absolute power of the Big Six” (14);  
places -- the walled city of Serendipity (multinational companies Saturna and Nextcorp), the Unregulated Zone (Pellas Shoes)—Miranda and Evie

# (\* ) Genealogy for Foucault

- Foucault “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” (ref. source: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>)
  1. **Against linear history starting from a fixed origin:** Genealogy “opposes itself to the search for ‘origins’. . . What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (Foucault 1977, 142).
  2. **Against totality and Truth:** Foucault deploys genealogy to create what he calls a “counter-memory” or “a transformation of history into a totally different form of time” (Foucault 1977, 160).
  3. **Moment of transition:** “Foucault focuses upon the moment of transition, as modern reason begins to take shape in a confluence of concepts, institutions, and practices, or, as he would say, of knowledge and power. In its nascency, reason is a power that defines itself against an other, an other whose truth and identity is also assigned by reason, thus giving reason the sense of originating from itself. For Foucault, the issue is that madness is not allowed to speak for itself and is at the disposal of a power that dictates the terms of their relationship. As he remarks: ‘*What is originative is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point*’ (Foucault 1965, x). “
  4. To discover the past’s conditioning of the present.

# Salt Fish Girl

## Connections between the two time-lines

- 1) Salt Fish Girl is a **factory worker** in the late 19th century, like Evie (the female clone) in 2000.
- 2) Nu Wa once **betrays** Salt Fish Girl and migrate to the Land of Mist and Forgetfulness, just as Miranda later also betrays his father by selling the mother's song.
- 3) Nu Wa, after returning to Canton, is involved in marital problems (of the husband's infertility and forced sexual relations with a fisherman) and then forced to commit **suicide**. (A "No Name Woman" story)
- 4) (pp. 208-209) Inside the water, **Nu Wa** becomes a durian fruit, to later impregnate **Miranda's** mother.
- 5) Both Miranda and Evie are of "putrid" origins (of fish and durian). What does this mean? More later.

# The Post-National World of Biopolitics in *SFG*

1. **Corporate control of Life** through “consent and coercion”:
  - **Ritualization of tax collection** (business suit → heroism and torture in virtual reality 26-29; 30-31; 66-67; 78-79)
  - **Zoning** (30-31): Serendipity (the walled city) run by Saturna; Painted Horse run by Nextcorp (spies: Ian – his parents as spies for Saturna, or for NextCorp p. 64)
  - **Food** (the father on Durian 32) 31-32: foods in the Unregulated Zone and Serendipity; herbs and roots vs. apple; foods without Saturna stickers eaten by barbarians p. 32

# Business Suit → virtual reality –intersecting with the other world

- Turning tax collecting into adventures
- The father is not always heroic; collecting tax by swallowing “long streams of razor disc birds” which turn into numbers.
- → in the following chapter, Miranda returns all the tax and kills Receiver General → the family exiled to the Unregulated zone

# Cloning & Cyborg

- Ian's mother with prosthetic eyes 63-64; blue drink
- The Janitors at school 75
- Rudy Flowers—rearranges the organs, the language of God 76 → the Janitor, Dr. Seto
- “The body is the language of the Third Testament.” 76
- Forbidden Tales Miranda plays 35 Pallas 35



# Dreaming Disease

- Mentioned in the letter to Dr. Flowers 68-69
- The dreaming disease is found in people “whose bodies reeked of oranges, or tobacco, or rotten eggs, or cabbage. Or else of silk, of cotton, of coffee, of blood and carnage, or coal, of freshly baked bread, of machine oil, of dust and rain and mud” (70)
- --a girl: cooking oil--**dreaming of wars** 85; 100 (symptoms)

# The Post-National World of Biopolitics in *SFG*

2. Resisting unity and control through transgressing borders
  - The Unregulated Zone 84-85
  - Images of boundary-crossing: [pickpocket p. 121], embryonic chickens in their egg 59 (liminal state between the two--horrifying)
  - Transgression of Borders: Miranda's smell permeating the house of secrets (15-17) → third gender? Saltiness, the source of tension, why she falls in love with the girl 48-49
  - Nu Wa, Miranda and Evie (later)

# Summary:

## Serendipity vs. the Unregulated Zone

- CD-Rom, laptop old p. 19; TV dated; p. 24
  - thought control -- Running dog TV 21 --; Forbidden Tales p.34
  - No mixture with the other world; Business Suit for tax collecting p. 25; 27;
  - Interactive Electronic Books with Spy Goggles (24--)
  - Miranda --the only Asian in her school
  - Food -- bright and regular in shape 31
- Several pirate TV's 84
  - More ethnic minorities
  - Food -- strange, twisted and misshaped
  - More poor people and violence

# The First Chapter—Questions

- Bifurcation – How is Nu-Wa as a creator of humans presented? How is the story of *The Little Mermaid* revised? (You can compare it with the creation myth of the Bible or the following version-- [source](#))
- 女媧是中國歷史神話傳說中的一位女神。與伏羲為兄妹。人首蛇身，相傳曾煉五色石以補天，並搏土造人，制嫁娶之禮 ([set up marriage ritual](#))，延續人類生命，造化世上生靈萬物。女媧是中華民族偉大的母親，她慈祥地創造了我們，又勇敢的照顧我們免受天災 ([She kindly created us and courageously guarded us against natural disaster](#))。是被民間廣泛而又長久崇拜的創世神和始祖神。她神通廣大化生萬物，每天至少能創造出七十樣東西。

# Human Origin:

## Her Sense of Loneliness & Need for Communication

- Not “a philosophical, mountain-top sort of loneliness” p. 1
- Not omnipotent as Goddess; Speaks to “you,” who may eat her up as fish. p. 2
- Creates humans out of loneliness, though the humans laugh at her.
- → Human Identity begins with splitting of one’s tail. (out of anger)

# Human Origin Hybridized:

## Creation and Procreation

- Creation— neither kind or gentle p. 2;
- Legs created out of anger p.3
- Products –disgusting, rude, insolent, brutal, p. 4
- Humans start the sacrificial ritual → Nu Wa worries about their mortality
- Sexual act – for pleasure as well as procreation p. 5 (Confucius mentioned—anachronism.)
- Impregnation –p. 48

# Hybrid Origin: Nu Wa becomes Little Mermaid

- Lonely and envying humans' having passion
- River → pool → waterfall → a cold green lake → a young man's face p. 7
- p. 9 The young man's face → In the third chapter, the man's face becomes a woman's (the Salt Fish Girl's) and Nu Wa impregnates a woman through water.
- → Miranda's mixture of origins; a feminist revision of both Nu Wa and The Little Mermaid; immaculate conception of the mother (Virgin Mary); origins in Durian, Nancy Kwan and Clary Cruise (The Red Shoes); *Forbidden Tale*. (34)

# Constructed Origins: The Photo and Videos

- Miranda → born into a house full of “secrets” (15)
- The mother’s picture (taken the week before her conception) 11-13
- The mother’s CD-Rom video 19-20



# Chapter Two: Questions

- Miranda's Birth: How are Miranda's parents related to each other? What happens to Miranda's mother before M's birth?
- What can be the symbolic meanings of Miranda's smell? (ref. Teresa's report)
- How is Serendipity different from the Unregulated Zone?
- How does the Business Suit and "The Real World" reflect our society?
- Can you find any connections between Nu Wa and Miranda?

# Miranda's Parents –uneasy relationship

- The mother's image: before the vanity table. (pp. 11-13)
  - Interpreted through a photograph – M sees a squiggle in his father's eye
  - On the day of M's conception (age 65)
  - After the parents' argument (18-23)
- **At 65, mother falls in love with the father for the first time. P. 17;**
- The smell → immaculate conception → love seat → garden unattended → bliss interrupted by a neighbor p. 18
- The mother's "ancient sigh" → pp. 12; 19-20; p. 41 her career made and broke in **The New Kubla Khan** → a young man who jilted her (a doctor at Painted House) → estranged from her husband until his getting a durian for her.

# Durian:

## The Stinky, Pepper-Pissy Smell

- Chap 1: p. 2 the stink of “the beginnings and endings”
- Chap 2: first unpleasant, then “vaguely familiar”; of “something forbidden smuggled on board. . .mingled with the smell of unwashed underwear”(13) → Durian p. 15
- p. 16 boundary-transgressing, it pervades everything in her house.
- P. 37—the smell of the Unregulated Zone
- → smell of the minorities or underclass;
- → later Miranda is suspected to have a dreaming disease (a disease that causes memories of the traumatic past to leak into the present) 70-71, 85, 101-102

# The Durian Tree and Salt Fish

Durian—

- suggestive of Asian foreignness;
- The seeds of Miranda;
- Selling Durians at the Unregulated zone → the mother's death 86
- (later) The DNA for a subversive society of free clones

Salt Fish –

- A sign of love-hate relations (49)
- NW – hooked to SFG

# Implications of the first two chapters

- Miranda—fish scale → Nu Wa
- The past can inhabit our bodies – but there are multiple sordid origins;
- The past the mother misses & the Song for Clara Cruise — **sexist and racist**, too, just as the future and the novel's ending is not a solution once and for all.
  - Miranda will later tried many different medicine without success, until later she is sent to Dr. Flower, who produces clones, and works for him.
  - Resistance group will fail.

# Chap 3: Tricks Out of Arranged Marriage

1. Another immaculate conception at the beginning – transgression of physical boundaries and lack of biological origin
2. Different Positions: Nu Wa can choose spinsterhood, but not SFG
  - NW – decides to be a spinster 53; love and survival instinct stimulated by salt fish 56
  - Escape and the father's accused because of the bloody clothes (betrayal)

# Chap 4: Laborers in Social Hierarchy --

- Future:
- The Painted Horse over Serendipity over the Unregulated Zone, but at the Painted House
  - People are afflicted with the Dreaming Disease
  - Religion is dominant. (e.g. Ian p. 61; Contagion 76)
- Currency and the Position of Vancouver p. 111
- The Father's work: virtual heroism and actual exploitation 60, 66, 78
- Janitor 76-77
- Evie as a clone p. 160-