

Diffuse Connections: Smell and Diasporic Subjectivity in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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ABSTRACT

Visual paradigms have been the predominant mode of conceptualizing the politics of representation, regimes of racialization, the power of the gaze, and the dynamics of visibility and invisibility that are key to processes of social marginalization.¹ Other critics, in turn, have adopted auditory approaches to investigate questions of who can and cannot speak, and the problem of speaking for others.² As a field that has emerged in relation to postcolonial theory, diaspora studies has also adopted these approaches.³ The prevalence of vision- and audition-centric critiques attests to the dominant role that sight and, to a lesser extent, hearing play in Western constructions of racialized "others." By emphasizing the intermingling of contingent experiences associated with different times and spaces, a theory of diffusion potentially moves beyond the limitations not only of vision- and audition-centric approaches to diasporic subjectivity, but also of smell-taste frameworks that focus predominantly on diasporic subjects' relationships to memory, and more specifically, nostalgic longing for past homelands.

FULL TEXT

This paper marks a conceptual shift from the visual and auditory frameworks that tend to characterize postcolonial studies. Visual paradigms have been the predominant mode of conceptualizing the politics of representation, regimes of racialization, the power of the gaze, and the dynamics of visibility and invisibility that are key to processes of social marginalization.¹ Other critics, in turn, have adopted auditory approaches to investigate questions of who can and cannot speak, and the problem of speaking for others.² As a field that has emerged in relation to postcolonial theory, diaspora studies has also adopted these approaches.³ The prevalence of vision- and audition-centric critiques attests to the dominant role that sight and, to a lesser extent, hearing play in Western constructions of racialized "others." While these critiques have been, and continue to be, invaluable to postcolonial and diaspora theory, the critical focus upon sight and hearing has led to the reinscription of the same sensory hierarchies privileged by Western thought. These studies thus overlook the important ways that alternative sensory modalities, such as touch, taste, and smell, inflect diasporic experience.

Recent theorizations of diaspora as a form of embodied subjectivity have led to considerations of how "lower order" senses influence diasporic experiences. Critics suggest that diasporic dislocation is shaped by the sensory dimensions of everyday life's contingent material conditions. A number of studies have recently explored the importance of food tastes and smells for diasporic subjects, as these sensations have the ability to evoke memories of past "homelands." This paper extends these studies by strategically disarticulating smell from taste in order to consider smell in its specificity. Smells mark bodies differently than tastes, as diasporic subjects are often constructed as carrying the olfactory traces of past homelands on their bodies. Smell, with its diffuse material processes and metaphorical dimensions, offers a framework for articulating a range of experiences connected to past and present places of habitation. The first part of my paper theorizes "diffusion" as an olfactory process that has the ability to both evoke diasporic memories of past homelands, and mark diasporic bodies as "foreign" in the places they live in the present. I read discourses of diffusion as embedding the West's epistemological desire to authenticate origins and construct rigid boundaries. At the same time, however, I argue

that smell's diffuseness also has the potential to challenge Eurocentric desires to fix origins and impose borders. I reconceptualize diffusion as a process of movement and mixing that involves intimate intersubjective encounters. I also suggest that diasporic subjectivity itself may be thought of as subversively diffuse, as it involves a blending of experiences in different times and places. Diasporic subjectivity is shaped by memories of past homelands that emerge through evocative aromas and inflect diasporic life in the present. It is also shaped by olfactory experiences in present living places - including encounters with smell-based discrimination - that may complicate relationships to past homelands. By emphasizing the intermingling of contingent experiences associated with different times and spaces, a theory of diffusion potentially moves beyond the limitations not only of vision- and audition-centric approaches to diasporic subjectivity, but also of smell-taste frameworks that focus predominantly on diasporic subjects' relationships to memory, and more specifically, nostalgic longing for past homelands.

Literature is a critical site for thinking through the diffuseness of smell and diasporic subjectivity. Olfaction is often constructed as a purely visceral, unmediated sense (Drobnick, "Introduction" i). This view is reinforced by the lack of a vocabulary for clearly describing and classifying odours (Rindisbacher 15). Yet it is precisely this seeming impasse of language that makes it important to interrogate the metaphors used to describe olfactory experiences. Larissa Lai's 2002 novel *Salt Fish Girl* is permeated by representations of scent that challenge and rewrite conventional olfactory metaphors. The second part of this paper turns to Lai's novel for a preliminary reading of the dynamics of diffusion in contemporary diasporic writing in Canada. The text suggests that protagonist Miranda Ching's diasporic subjectivity is shaped by smell-based discrimination in the Eurocentric urban space she presently inhabits. I focus on how these experiences intermingle with, and thereby inflect, her relationship to memories of past "origins." The novel also explores how Eurocentric discourses attempt to control the diffuseness of odours and diasporic subjectivity by emphasizing authentic origins and essentializing racial differences. By examining how Lai's novel defamiliarizes histories of olfactory discrimination against Chinese immigrants in Canada, while also suggesting that non-essentialist approaches to scent and diasporic experience may produce alternate forms of diffuse connections in the present, this paper underscores the importance of taking an olfactory approach to diasporic subjectivity.

The Dynamics of Diffusion: Theorizing Smell and Diaspora

My theorization of diffusion emerges from recent critiques that challenge the notion of diaspora as a static object of empirical analysis and instead emphasize diaspora's subjective dimensions. Although most critics agree that "diaspora" describes "a scattering of peoples who are nonetheless connected by a sense of homeland, imaginary or otherwise," Lily Cho argues that "[b]eyond that, things get murkier" ("Turn" 12). Cho and David Chariandy recognize diaspora's historically specific relationship to Judaism, yet they argue against scholars who attempt to define diaspora's major historical and geographical features in order to delimit its conceptual and ontological boundaries. Cho considers this definitional tendency reductive because it "understands diasporas as objects whose major features and characteristics can be catalogued and classified" ("Turn" 14). Chariandy contends that this approach also privileges certain diasporas, and thus threatens to "make all other conceptualizations of diaspora derivative or secondary, or illegitimate" (n. pag.). He argues that it is necessary to move beyond a "traditional social scientific preoccupation with ontology (what is a diaspora?) and its concomitant positivistic methodologies and biases" (n. pag.). Taking up this call, Cho theorizes diaspora as "first and foremost a subjective condition" (14). According to Cho, this condition is "marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession," which are linked to histories of colonialism and imperialism, processes of racialization, and the dynamics of globalization, transnationalism, and postcolonialism (14). As a form of subjectivity, diaspora encompasses "the subjective conditions of demography and longings connected to geographical displacement," "the deeply subjective processes of racial memory," and the feelings connected to "homeland, memory, [and] loss" (14-5). Chariandy similarly argues that diasporic subjectivity is shaped by

"irrepressible desires, imagined pasts, [and] projected futures" that result in complex and heterogeneous relationships to notions of home and homeland (n. pag.). While both critics draw attention to the subjective experiences of diaspora, they only briefly gesture towards the material conditions of everyday life that shape these experiences.⁴ Building upon and extending the work of Chariandy, Cho, and others, I want to focus more closely on the sensory dimensions of everyday material practices that inform diasporic subjectivity.

By considering how the contingent material conditions of everyday life shape diasporic subjects in a particular time, place, and body, my theorization seeks to negotiate a balance between the shared experiences of diasporic communities, and the specific experiences of particular diasporic subjects. As Avtar Brah notes, home is often figured as "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory" - or homeland - "that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (192). Studies of diasporic subjectivity that focus primarily on the psychic and somatic dynamics of longing for home may risk essentializing a "diasporic psyche" preoccupied with loss and nostalgia.⁵ Yet Brah also gestures towards the contingencies of diasporic experiences by suggesting that home is not only a geographical locale or a mythic place of desire in a collective diasporic imaginary. She suggests that home is also the "lived experience of a locality," including "[i]ts sounds and smells" (192). Brah accounts for the contingent material conditions of daily life by suggesting that these lived sensory experiences are "mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations," including "the varying experience of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture" (192). Expanding on Brah's suggestion that the lived experience of a locality includes its smells, I want to focus on how scents affect diasporic subjects. According to Sara Ahmed, "[t]he immersion of a self in a locality" involves that locality "intruding] into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers" (89). Scents are thus an integral part of the "lived experience of being-at-home" (89). This embodied experience "involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them . . . the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other" (89, original emphasis). While Ahmed goes on to consider the unfamiliar sensory experiences involved in migrating to a new, unhomely location (90), other critics explore how diasporic subjects reconnect with feelings of "being-at-home" through familiar sensory experiences when they migrate to a new location.

Studies that explore scent and diasporic subjectivity tend to focus on how the tastes and smells of foods evoke feelings and memories of "being-at-home" for diasporic subjects, while also situating them within diasporic communities. As Wenying Xu argues, "a community's cuisine [is] a daily and visceral experience through which people imagine themselves as belonging to a unified and homogenous community, be it a nation, village, ethnicity, class, or religion" (3). A number of critics, including C. Nadia Seremetakis, Lily Cho, and Anita Mannur, provide valuable studies of the role of taste and smell in evoking feelings and memories of past homelands and situating subjects within diasporic communities, yet their work often combines the two senses. In "'How Taste Remembers Life': Diasporic Memory and Community in Fred Wah's Poetry," for example, Cho argues that the transmission of diasporic memories and the formation of diasporic communities occur through a "smell-taste experience" (98). Although Cho discusses olfaction's connection to memory,⁶ she focuses predominantly on theorizing taste, arguing that "taste can evoke a memory that is not specific to an individual body but a memory that taps into a transpacific archive of experience. Taste can carry within it the sense of a particular location" (99). Invoking smell to theorize taste is understandable, for these senses are in many ways interconnected,⁷ and olfaction is considered crucial to the production of taste.⁸ Indeed, no senses operate autonomously, yet there is strategic value in isolating scent to consider its particularity (Drobnick, "Introduction" 3). Since smells mark bodies differently than tastes, they inform diasporic subjectivity differently. Thus while studies of taste and smell provide an important background for my work, I argue that it is crucial to theorize smell in its specificity, as it opens up thinking about the range of experiences that shape diasporic subjectivity. Examining smells' varied functions necessitates a movement beyond frameworks that focus primarily on memory, nostalgic longing, and relationships

to past homelands, and involves a consideration of how experiences in the present place of habitation also shape diasporic subjectivity in ways that may complicate diasporic connections to the past.

Odours are invisible, intangible substances that seem immaterial, but paradoxically mark bodies in material ways. Whereas tastes are usually linked to localized substances directly touching the tongue, smells are more difficult to locate and identify. Scents are considered diffuse, pervasive, and often invisible (Miller 342). As diffuse entities, smells are characterized by their ability to "spread . . . through a space or region" ("Diffuse, v."). Yet scents are also constructed as "pour[ing] or send[ing] forth as from a centre of dispersion" ("Diffuse, v."). This definition highlights the desire to attribute odours to an origin point, and thereby contain their ability to invisibly permeate space and blend with their surroundings. The term "diffusion" also has a specific resonance in scientific discourse, which describes it as "[t]he permeation of a gas or liquid between the molecules of another . . . placed in contact with it," or "the spontaneous molecular mixing or interpénétration" of gases or liquids "without chemical combination" ("Diffusion, «.") This definition suggests that diffusion involves spontaneous encounters that enable entities to intermingle without combining. Entrenched etymological and scientific conceptions of diffusion inscribe a desire to retain essential differences, and thus obscure what I theorize as the contingent and uncontainable politics of diffuse interactions.

I want to appropriate diffusion from its genealogies in order to theorize its potential for challenging notions of pure origins and discrete boundaries, and to highlight the desires and anxieties underlying attempts to delimit smells' diffuseness. Drawing on Ahmed's theory of inhabiting space, I want to suggest that diffusion does not involve a neutral encounter of two distinct, pure entities that remain the same despite coming into contact. Rather, diffusion involves subjects and spaces intermixing, or leaking into each other, in a way that changes the entities involved. According to Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, scents "cannot be readily contained" because "they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes" (4). Since smells' very existence depends on mixing and blending, odours cannot be attributed to a clear source. Scents' materiality thus has the potential to subvert Eurocentric notions of pure origins and rigid boundaries. The West's "modern, linear worldview," embodied by the sense of vision, emphasizes "privacy, discrete divisions, and superficial interactions" and understands the subject as a coherent, unified self invested in notions of surface, distance, and detachment (4-5). The ideal body is figured as an impermeable entity (Grosz 201), and the nation, which is often "imagined as a body" (Ahmed 99), works according to a similar logic.⁹ Smell, however, disrupts this illusion. As Classen, Howes, and Synnott argue, scent "threaten[s] the abstract and impersonal regime of modernity by virtue of its radical interiority, its boundary-transgressing propensities and its emotional potency" (5). Since odours enter bodies when air passes through the nose or mouth (Mennella and Beauchamp 201), smelling is an inherent part of breathing. Odours thus constantly threaten to subvert notions of inside and outside, often without visual warning. From a Western perspective, then, smells are "especially contaminating and much more dangerous than localized substances one may or may not put in the mouth" (Miller 342). The West's construction of diffuse processes as potentially contaminating underscores Eurocentric anxieties about scents' ability to undermine notions of purity and boundaries.

While the West may seem to repress smell, dominant discourses indicate that scent plays a key role in organizing Western society. Classen, Howes, and Synnott contend that historically, the Western tradition has marginalized scent precisely because of its subversive potential (5). During the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, philosophers and scientists solidified smell's status as an insignificant sense by elevating vision as the sense of reason and civilization and associating smell with savagery and madness (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 3-4). Darwin and Freud argued that when humans evolved to be bipedal, sight took priority and scent, like instinct, became obsolete (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 4). Smell was therefore constructed as the antithesis of that which was physically - and by extension, intellectually and morally - "upright." Anyone who emphasized

scent's importance was considered "insufficiently evolved" (4), and anyone deemed odorous - including women, racialized groups, and the lower classes (161) - was considered "uncivilized." Smells, "whether real or alleged," also became "indicants of moral purity" (Largey and Watson 30). Removing socially unacceptable body odours was considered necessary for "health" and "cleanliness," and applying fragrances indicated a desire to be "fresh and pleasing to others" (35). Failure to adhere to these standards of physical hygiene resulted in moral stigmatization (35). The West's very repression of scent inscribes a set of olfactory norms that inform its constructions of physical, intellectual, and moral "others."

The purported viscosity of smells must also be interpreted within the context of Eurocentric cultural values. While scents seem to incite polarized responses almost instantaneously,¹⁰ the fear of odours exists "whether they can be actually smelled or not" (Drobnick, "Preface" 13-14). Germ theory may have disproved the notion that odours carry diseases, but scents are still considered "the very vehicles of contagion" because they are diffuse, pervasive, and invisible (Miller 342). The West's fear of smell is therefore more about the symbolic threat posed by diffuseness than it is about any "real" health hazard. The West governs from a position of "olfactory neutrality," whereby those in power construct themselves as the pure, scentless centre and classify "peripheral" groups as odorous threats (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 161). Yet those at the centre must preserve their supposed lack of smell from the scents that seem to emanate from peripheral groups pressing in towards the centre (161). Smells are thus "the means by which the boundary between self and other is demarcated, as well as the supposed basis of prejudicial extensions of such demarcation" (Drobnick, Preface 14). The West thus mobilizes scent to discriminate against those who embody the threat of diffusion.

Diasporic subjects are often figured according to the same logic of diffusion that informs Western approaches to smell. The term "diaspora," which derives from the Greek *dia*, "through," and *speirein*, "to scatter," "embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs" (Brah 181). Eurocentric discourses construct diasporic subjects as racialized "others" who spread from a "foreign" origin point, permeate national boundaries, and threaten to "contaminate" the supposedly pure populations that imagine themselves as "native" to the spaces they inhabit. By suggesting that diasporic subjects are essentially linked to "foreign" sources, the West conceals its own implication in the complex histories and practices that contribute to diasporic displacement. As Stuart Hall argues, the practice of constructing fixed origins and essential cultural identities "impos[es] an imaginary coherence" on diasporic subjects (235) and obscures the multiple journeys, divergent points of departure, and blended "origins" from which these subjects emerge. Diffusion thus provides a framework for considering the mixing and movement involved in diasporic experience, while also accounting for the Eurocentric desire to authenticate origins and maintain rigid physical and national boundaries.

Dominant discourses mobilize smell's diffuseness to construct diasporic subjects as odorous foreign "others." In anthropology, the term "diffusion" refers to "[t]he spread of elements of a culture or language from one region or people to another" ("Diffusion, n." def. 3b). Like other definitions of diffusion, this conceptualization obscures the politics that inform the spread of "cultural elements" from one place to another. Whether diasporic subjects bring "cultural elements" such as food practices to their new place of habitation or not, Eurocentric narratives often construct them as carrying the olfactory traces of "foreign" homelands on their bodies. In his study of immigrant experiences in New York City, Martin E Manalansan acknowledges that food aromas associated with past homelands may evoke pleasant memories and nostalgic feelings for diasporic subjects (45). Yet he asserts that these feelings are often complicated by the fear that odours will "[adhere] to clothes, to walls and to bodies" and index diasporic subjects as "immigrant" (45-6). Manalansan contends that the "smelly immigrant" is constructed as "the natural carrier and source of undesirable sensory experiences and is popularly perceived to be the site of polluting and negative olfactory signs" (41). Manalansan's study draws attention to scents' ability to create anxieties not only for Western populations, but for diasporic subjects who want to avoid being ostracized as

odorous others in their new place of habitation.

I want to suggest, then, that diasporic subjectivity itself may be thought of as diffuse in the sense that a diasporic subject's sense of self may be shaped by an intermingling of experiences in past homelands and present living places. As studies of taste and smell suggest, scents' ability to evoke memories and feelings associated with past homelands underscores how the past shapes the present. Yet it is also crucial to consider how odours - whether real or imagined - function in diasporic subjects' new places of habitation, particularly if these locations are predominantly populated by Western subjects invested in notions of discrete boundaries and pure origins. Diasporic subjects' own anxieties about olfactory discrimination may therefore complicate any positive associations with past homelands that scents might evoke. Smell thus provides a metaphor for, and acts as the material site of, a range of intersecting spatial and temporal experiences that inflect diasporic subjectivity. I now want to turn to Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* to provide a preliminary reading of how the novel takes up smell's metaphorical and material resonances to develop a diffuse framework for understanding diasporic subjectivity, while also drawing attention to histories of olfactory discrimination in Canada.

"[A] story about stink": Smell and Diasporic Subjectivity in *Salt Fish Girl*

Salt Fish Girl, as narrator Miranda Ching self-reflexively remarks, is "a story about stink" (268). Larissa Lai argues that smell, as "the most evocative of the senses," has an "emotional, intimate" connection that is useful for "min[ing]" the histories that diasporic subjects repress upon migrating to Western cultures ("Future" 172). In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai uses smell to write a "founding myth about travel and dislocation" that "denies racial purity and . . . the primacy of the citizen tied to the land" ("Future" 173). Lai suggests that diasporic subjects have multiple "origins," which she describes as "pitstops" on multi-generational journeys that may span many parts of the world (171). A number of critics focus on the connections between scent and the persistence of diasporic histories in *Salt Fish Girl*. Joanna Mansbridge argues that the novel uses scent to signal how "traumatic memories of the past . . . leak into the present" (124), while Tara Lee contends that smells in the text confront dominant subjects with histories of violence involving the racialized subjects upon which capitalism depends (97-8). Yet Lai is not only concerned with diasporic subjects' relationships to history and memory. She also recognizes that smell is "a powerful means by which the mainstream denigrates its others, particularly racialized and sexualized others" ("Future" 172). I want to focus on how Miranda's durian odour marks her as a racialized, feminized "other," and how experiences of olfactory discrimination affect Miranda's sense of self by altering her relationship to her diasporic memories and multiple "origins." *Salt Fish Girl* illustrates how Miranda's diasporic subjectivity may be thought of as subversively diffuse, in the sense that it involves an intermingling of contingent psychic and somatic experiences connected to specific experiences in past and present places of habitation, while also challenging Eurocentric attempts to inscribe pure origins and essential differences.

Serendipity, a walled city situated on the west coast of North America in the mid-twenty-first century, represents a futuristic Vancouver invested in a rigid olfactory order. On a visual level, the city seems idyllic: its lawns are "meticulously trimmed" (Lai, *Salt* 18), its "storefront windows gleamed with cleanliness, behind which beautiful things were displayed" (30), and its genetically-modified food is "always vibrant bright and regular in shape and colour" (31). Visual signs of cleanliness and health "translate an olfactory condition into a visual experience: to be shiny is to be odourless" (el-Khoury 26). The city's visual appearance thus contributes to Serendipity's construction as a space of olfactory neutrality. Although Serendipity's name denotes "happy and unexpected discoveries [made] by accident" ("Serendipity"), there is nothing serendipitous about this highly ordered space. The city is run by Saturna, one of the "Big Six" corporations that maintain "absolute power" over the world (14). Its "surface of sanitized efficiency" entices consumers and removes evidence of the clones that assemble consumer products outside the city's walls in the post-apocalyptic Unregulated Zone (Lee 96). The Chings, one of the few

"Asian"¹¹ families living in Serendipity, were "fortunately installed" in the city before the corporations imposed strict immigration regulations (14). The Chings live in "a house full of secrets" (15), for they must repress their diasporic connections in order to assimilate. The novel suggests that keeping silent about diasporic histories also involves olfactory silence. Since "good" diasporic subjects must "let go" of diasporic connections to the past (Cho, "Taste" 93), the Chings must not engage with "foreign" aromas that would allow memories of the past to seep into the present. They must also police themselves by eradicating any offending odorous traces that might mark them as different from Serendipity's mainstream olfactory order.

Miranda Ching's subjective experience of smell-based discrimination in Serendipity underscores how scents mark diasporic subjects as "foreign" in their current places of habitation. When the smell of durian aggressively permeates Serendipity's walls one day, Aimee Ching is seduced by the "pepper and cat pee" scent (15). The smell reminds Aimee of eating a durian that "her grandmother smuggled ... in from Hong Kong, once upon a time" before Serendipity restricted its borders (14). The durian's pungent odour not only represents "capitalism's inability to suppress disruptive presences" (Lee 104); it also underscores scents' ability to bring memories and emotional associations associated with the past into the present. While durian's scent may productively insist on the past's ability to leak into, and thereby shape, the present, it also marks Miranda's body as a "foreign" subject in Serendipity. Aimee's husband Stewart brings her a durian from the Unregulated Zone to satisfy her newly-awakened desire for the fruit, and they have sex in its juices; nine months later, Miranda is born reeking of the durian's signature scent (15). Grown primarily in Southeast Asia and consumed widely in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, the durian often appears in Western writing as "a figure of the exotic, the primitive, or the inexplicably alien" (Paul Lai 177-8). As Paul Lai argues, Miranda's smell "displaces visible racial difference" in the novel (180); her durian odour thus becomes the primary sign of her "Asianness."¹² Yet it is not only the smell's connection to an "Asian" "source" that produces anxieties for Serendipity's citizens; the scent's permeating abilities also threaten to contaminate residents by radically transgressing their bodily boundaries. Miranda's "allpermeating" smell "seep[s] into the skin" of those around her, "rush[es] up their nostrils and in through their ears," and "pours[es] down their throats when they [open] their mouths to speak" (Lai, Salt 17). Neighbours demand that the Chings take out the garbage and clean up their property (18), and Miranda's classmates tease her by calling her "Cat Box," "Kitty Litter," and "Pissy Pussy" (21). These nicknames associate Miranda with animals and female genitalia, making her "alien" status resonate on multiple levels (Paul Lai 180). The Western tradition expects women to smell fragrant, not foul (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 162), and "feminine odours" associated with women's genitals are "signs of a contaminating . . . woman who rudely affronts others" (Largey and Watson 31). Since Miranda is unable to prevent her durian odour, which smells like "unwashed underwear" (Lai, Salt 13), from spreading through space and confronting Serendipity's citizens, she embodies a figure that transgresses both gender and racial olfactory norms.

The treatment of Miranda's odour signals both Eurocentric fears about "foreign" subjects "polluting" supposedly pure, scentless Western spaces, and diasporic anxieties about being constructed as contaminating threats. Stewart internalizes Serendipity's olfactory values and becomes obsessed with "curing" Miranda's odour. After years of failed treatments, Miranda discovers letters revealing that her father has committed her to a fifteen-year medical experiment with Dr. Flowers, a man whose name connotes his superior status as a sweet-smelling symbol of Serendipity's dominant olfactory order. The text later reveals that Dr. Flowers helped create the clones working in the Unregulated Zone's factories (252). Dr. Flowers' pathologization of Miranda's odour is "a result of capital's alliance with science to monitor and control the body" (Lee 98). By claiming that Miranda has a "new and undocumented disease" (Lai, Salt 71) and demanding that she participate in treatment outside Serendipity, Dr. Flowers essentially works with the municipal powers in eliminating her from the city's olfactory order. The drug trials and minor surgery he proposes (71) echo the cleansing process that durians undergo when they are imported to Canada. Paul Lai states that when durians cross Canada's borders, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and

Canada's Department of Justice subject them to a "regime of purification" that involves treatment with sulphiting agents and radiation (178). The process attempts to "cleanse" durians of pests or pathogens that might infiltrate North American crops (178). The regulation of durians resonates with the notion of the "Asian" as alien in North America, and provides an analogy to the regulation of immigrants in North America for over a century (178). By identifying offensive odours with specific "foreign" sources that can be subjected to processes of decontamination, Eurocentric discourses and practices both inside and outside the text reveal a desire to contain the potential "infiltration" of both scents and diasporic subjects.

Dr. Flowers' construction of Miranda as diseased significantly affects her sense of self and reflects the damaging psychic effects produced by smell-based discrimination in Serendipity. Miranda knows that her smell marks her as different from Serendipity's other residents, but she does not initially consider it a problem and does not want to be "helped" (Lai, Salt 36). Being labelled as diseased, however, alters Miranda's relationship to her body: "Suddenly, and for the first time, I felt dirty. I felt . . . shame" (72). Miranda tries to wash away her smell, scrubbing her skin "until it hurt" and she "felt blood rise to the surface. But the whole time, that foul pepper and catpee odour lingered through the scents of soap and shampoo" (73). Soap has historically been used as a "technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and class denigration" (McClintock 212). Miranda accepts soap's "magical" promise to "[wash] from the skin the very stigma of racial and class degeneration" (McClintock 214), and self-inflicts the "violence and constraint" of purification rituals (McClintock 226). Yet Miranda cannot remove her stench because she realizes: "It wasn't dirt. It came from the inside" (Lai, Salt 73). Miranda internalizes the belief that she is inherently contaminated, and potentially contaminating.¹³ She does not recognize that her scent's polluting connotations are produced by Serendipity's dominant olfactory order, which identifies her as an inherent source of contagion and disease. Miranda's understanding of herself as contaminated is intensified by her first menstrual period, which she immediately accepts as a sign that those in power "are right to send [her] away" (73). By illustrating how Miranda internalizes her body's leakiness as a sign of inherently contaminated status as a feminized, racialized "other," the novel gestures towards the contingent material conditions of daily, lived experiences that shape Miranda's diasporic subjectivity in Serendipity.

Miranda's experience of olfactory discrimination alters her feelings toward her diasporic memories. The experiences of Nu Wa,¹⁴ a mythical half-snake, half-woman creature who emerges in human form at different times and places throughout history, enter into Miranda's present experiences through memory. Nu Wa moves from nineteenth-century rural South China to industrial Canton, where she is enticed into migrating to the mythical, Western "City of Hope" on the "Island of Mist and Forgetfulness." After years of labour exploitation, Nu Wa returns to South China without having aged.¹⁵ Miranda feels that it is "natural" to remember things that happened before her birth, even though the memories are highly subjective and sometimes frightening: "[t]hey happened to me; I was there, and the memories are continuous. Why should they be anything but?" (70). The text suggests that it is normal for diasporic subjectivity to be inflected by memories, and indicates that these memories are not necessarily nostalgic, but may encompass a range of feelings. Yet Miranda's diasporic subjectivity is not only constituted by memories of Nu Wa's diasporic past; it is also shaped by experiences of smell-based discrimination in Serendipity that alter her relationship to the past. After Dr. Flowers' diagnosis, Miranda no longer considers her memories a "natural" part of her subjectivity; instead, she understands them as a symptom of her disease. She begins to think of herself as "a child afflicted by history, unable to escape its delights or its torments" (70). Miranda's specific encounters with scent in Serendipity blend with and affect her experiences of the past. The text thus suggests that Miranda experiences her diasporic subjectivity as diffuse, in the sense that it subverts notions of linear time, discrete space, and bounded bodies.

Miranda's eventual exile from Serendipity reflects the Eurocentric desire to send her "back" to her supposed "point of origin" in order to protect the city's purported purity and olfactory neutrality. Miranda is relegated to the

Unregulated Zone, which is understood as the supposed source of her odorous problem.¹⁶ The Unregulated Zone represents a peripheral threat to Serendipity's olfactory neutrality and symbolic purity. Like Miranda, the space is characterized by a "foul" odour: the air is "thick with the smell of old petrol, sulphur, urine and rotten food" (37), and the "terminally unemployed" living there smell like "steel," "blood," "shit," and "old potatoes - mingled with the smell of uncollected garbage and open sewers" (231). The mainstream media's construction of the stinking Unregulated Zone as "very dangerous" (20) reflects the fear that Serendipity's abjected social problems will infiltrate, and thereby disrupt, the city's ideal existence. The stench of the Unregulated Zone and its social problems are also linked to "Asianness." Durians grow wild in the Unregulated Zone (14), and the Chinese shopkeepers there sell herbal concoctions that "stink" (40). Hordes of clone workers created using the DNA of "so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction" and freshwater carp are also kept in the Unregulated Zone's factories (160). The text suggests that a Chinese woman may have been a "source" for Evie Xin, an escaped clone with a salt fish scent (160). The corporations conceal the clones in the Unregulated Zone not only because they must hide capitalism's workings (Lee 96), but also because they must suppress the odours, such as Evie's fishy scent, that bear the traces of the contaminating processes in which the Big Six are implicated.¹⁷ The odours associated with the Unregulated Zone thus gesture towards the role that Dr. Flowers and the corporations play in producing Miranda, the Unregulated Zone, and its inhabitants as odorous, racialized "others."¹⁸

Salt Fish Girl implicitly invokes histories of smell-based discrimination against Chinese immigrants that have often been repressed in Canadian public consciousness. In her critical work, Lai argues that "[b]y extrapolating from things that are happening now and projecting into the future, we get a vantage point of sorts" ("Future" 172). A number of critics, including Rita Wong, Tara Lee, and Joanna Mansbridge, read the novels' futuristic setting as a commentary on the capitalist exploitation of racialized, feminized labour. For instance, Wong reads the Unregulated Zone as a "rational extension" of contemporary Free Trade Zones, whose policies "exploit and discard labour for the sake of momentary profit" (119). While these are valuable interpretations, I read the text's juxtaposition of the scentless Serendipity and the odorous Unregulated Zone as a futuristic version of the relationship between Vancouver's Eurocentric population and the city's emerging Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I thus argue that Salt Fish Girl's futuristic setting engages with issues surrounding the historically racialized enclaves of Vancouver's Chinatown, rather than "moving beyond" them, as Glenn Deer suggests ("Remapping" 119).¹⁹ As Lai herself argues in "Corrupted Lineage: Narrative in the Gaps of History," immigrants have been historically treated as "different" because of the "odd habits and foul smells" they "carried" to their new places of habitation (48). She further notes that odours "make it difficult still to rent an apartment or buy a condo or otherwise enter any kind of shared living space" (48). Salt Fish Girl thus underscores how Vancouver historically demarcated space according to discriminatory olfactory codes that persist in the present, and may continue to inform the racialization of diasporic subjects in the future.

Beyond what Constance Backhouse calls the "colour-coded" dimension of racist discourse in Canada, there is a recurring discourse of smell as a way of marking Chinese immigrants in Canada during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Although Chinese immigrants played a key role in building the country's infrastructure (Con et al. 49), many Eurocentric voices decried their presence, particularly on the west coast. As Kay Anderson argues, "[f]rom the late 1880s, the enclave of Chinese settlement at Vancouver's Pender Street was an important site through which white society's concepts about the Chinese were constituted and reproduced" (4). A number of public debates about Chinatowns were figured according to the logic of diffusion, including one of the first proposals for a Chinese head tax. At the British Columbia Legislative Council in 1871, MP Arthur Bunster proposed "a poll tax of \$50 per head per annum on all Chinese engaged in any occupation in this colony" (qtd. in Con et al. 45). Bunster argued: "I want to see Chinamen kept to himself [sic] and foul diseases kept away from white people. . . Why when I drive . . . past the hovels, the stench is enough to knock me off my seat" (qtd. in Con et al. 45). He also claimed that "their smelly baskets" pushed white people off the sidewalk (qtd. in Con et al. 45). Bunster explicitly

attributes a "stench" to Chinese immigrants and locates its origin in Chinatown. He suggests that this olfactory threat threatens to permeate, and potentially infect, the supposedly pure spaces and bodies of Vancouver's white population. Commissioner Chapleau echoes these anxieties in his report to the 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration. He claimed that the air in Chinatown is "polluted by disgusting offal" that is "apt to spread fever and sickness in the neighbourhood" and "may affect extensive districts" beyond Chinatown (qtd. in Anderson 81). Similarly, in 1896, Medical Health Officer Thomas labelled Vancouver's Chinatown a "cesspool," arguing that with "the continued deposition of refuse and filth . . . the atmosphere of the neighbourhood is saturated with evil odours" (qtd. in Anderson 84). These official discourses highlight the fear that illnesses might spread through scent and contaminate the "superior white race" if not closely monitored (Anderson 81). Although anxieties about Chinese immigrants "infiltrating" Canada were often framed in colourcoded terms of "yellow peril," anxiety also arose from the invisibility and diffuseness of "evil" odours that threatened the white population's supposed purity and superiority²⁰

Although Vancouver's Eurocentric residents did not want Chinatowns "stench" to spread among them, they paradoxically criticized Chinese immigrants for living together. Dominant discourses framed Chinese immigrants' cohabitation as a "herding instinct" and judged it as "directly opposed to our conceptions of civilized progress, morality and hygiene" (qtd. in Anderson 81). Vancouver's Chinese population was consistently constructed as part of a "degraded" civilization that could "live in places that a hog would die in stench of" (qtd. in Anderson 84). Narratives also suggested that Chinese immigrants did "not live like rats from force of circumstance," but "preferred] the stench and filth of their vile surroundings" (qtd. in Anderson 81-2). Essentializing discourses allowed Vancouver's white population to ignore the socio-economic factors contributing to Chinatown's material conditions.²¹ As Monica Chiù argues, the historical association of the Chinese with dirt and disease "speaks more clearly to the nation's own preoccupation with moral and medical selfhygiene than to that of the Chinese or other immigrants" (7). The dominant population's commitment to preserving their supposed purity produced a sense of moral panic. As Sean Hier and Joshua Greenberg argue, moral panic describes a group's consolidated response to a perceived threat to the social body and moral order (140). The threat, which may be real or imagined, is considered so dangerous that regulatory processes must be mobilized (140). These processes ultimately serve to reaffirm the dominant group's sense of moral and physical superiority. Thus Bunster and Chapleau indicated the need to regulate Chinese immigration more closely, health inspectors argued for "constant vigilance" in enforcing by-laws regarding Chinatowns population density and sanitation (qtd. in Anderson 85), and moral reformers lobbied for the medical and moral inspection of immigrants (Valverde 32). Vancouver's dominant population thus submitted Chinese immigrants to "regimes of purification" that extended racist surveillance beyond the realm of the visual to encompass the olfactory.

While *Salt Fish Girl's* futuristic setting draws attention to how scents have historically been mobilized to discriminate against Chinese immigrants in Canada, the novel also suggests that olfaction may provide the basis for new forms of diasporic connection in the present, and ostensibly, in the future. When Miranda moves to the Unregulated Zone, she encounters the fishscented Evie. The first two times they meet, Miranda falls into a "reverie" and murmurs, "[i]t's you" (105, 150). The text suggests that Miranda recognizes Evie as the future embodiment of Nu Was lover, the Salt Fish Girl, who also has a fishy scent (51). Evie's smell awakens in Miranda "a hunger without a name" that "had always been there" but "had suddenly become material" (105-6). The hunger evoked by Evie's odour represents Miranda's desire for an embodied sense of diasporic connection in the present. Yet the text does not idealize Miranda's "recognition" of Evie; rather, their encounters are riddled with suspicion and fear. Both times Miranda unconsciously claims to "know" Evie through her scent, Evie challenges her, asserting, "You're full of shit. How can you know anything?" (105) and "You don't know what you're talking about" (151). Evie's responses suggest that Miranda's "recognitions" are predicated on essentializing assumptions about Evie based on her fishy odour. Lai's novel thus problematizes the notion that one can presume to "know" another through smell, even if

subjects seem to share a diasporic connection to the past. Miranda and Evie both emerge from multiple "sources"; yet unlike Miranda, Evie embraces her complex origins and thus challenges the notion of contamination as a negative process.²² Evie has created a community with other escaped Sonias, her clone "sisters," which "goes beyond the biological bond and involves the ties brought about by the same kind of suffering and exploitation" (Cuder-Dominguez 123). Evie does not adhere to the biological or genealogical ties that often define diasporic connections. Rather, she bonds with those who share her purpose of challenging the dominant capitalist order that constructs her scent as a sign of her status as a racialized, feminized, and dehumanized "other."

Evie and Miranda's diasporic connection is therefore not based on a sense of belonging to an idealized homeland, shared memories of a diasporic past, or an essentialist approach to odours; rather, it emerges from similar experiences of olfactory discrimination in the place where they presently live. Miranda and Evie form a strategic connection in order to challenge Dr. Flowers and the Big Six in their attempt to suppress rebellious workers and continue exploiting clones for capitalist purposes. Miranda eventually learns from Evie to embrace her own "putrid origins" (258) when she realizes that contamination is necessary for the production of life. After having sex with Evie "in the rot stink of decaying leaves and needles" (162), Miranda becomes pregnant with a baby she fertilizes by eating a mutated durian (258). She gives birth to a baby girl in a hot spring (269) that recalls the "dark and sulphurous" smell of Nu Was riverbank at the novel's beginning. Miranda and Evie's baby represents the agential possibilities of forming diffuse connections that are not based on a single origin point in the past, but converge through a common purpose in the present and produce new, necessarily contaminated - and productively contaminating - entities. As Miranda states: "[t]his is a story about stink, after all, a story about rot, about how life grows out of the most fetid-smelling places" (268).

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Footnote

NOTES

1 See, for example, Frantz Fanon (1967), Chandra Mohanty (1984), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), Mary Louise Pratt (1992), and Anne E. Kaplan (1997).

2 See, for example, Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Linda Alcoff (1991).

3 See, for example, Smaro Kamboureli (2000).

4 Chariandy argues that rethinking approaches to diaspora "lead[s] us sharply back to everyday practices of diasporic life" (n. pag.), while Cho concludes that approaching diaspora as a subjective condition involves considering "the secret of memories embedded within the intimacies of the everyday" ("Turn" 28). Cho's other work focuses more on the sensory dimensions and material practices connected to diasporic experience, which I discuss below.

5 See, for example, Anne Anlin Cheng (2001).

6 Cho cites theories that suggest that the hippocampus, or "seat of memory," is connected to recognizing and processing scents ("Taste" 99).

7 There are a number of reasons why smell and taste are considered "two of the most linked senses": they are both understood as "chemical" senses that "ingest" and engage with sensory phenomena on a molecular level; they are usually perceived as one sensory experience during eating; they have been denigrated as mere survival mechanisms, too animalistic and subjective for reason and knowledge; and they have been aesthetically

marginalized (Drobnick "Eating" 342).

8 As head colds demonstrate, interrupting air flow to the nose eliminates many of the subtleties of food flavour often attributed to taste (Mennella and Beauchamp 201).

9 David Chariandy contends that while power may also thrive on fluidity and fragmentation, "old-fashioned racial essentialisms and absolutist nationalisms" invested in rigid borders still exist (n. pag.).

10 Since there is no clear classificatory model for odours, they are often simply described as "good" or "bad" (Rindisbacher 10-11). This binary framework reinforces scents moral resonances.

11 Mirandas mother Aimee describes Miranda as "the only Asian child in her class" (23).

12 Paul Lai's article, which also explores smell in *Salt Fish Girl*, primarily focuses on how scent informs the novel's revisioning of genres such as myth, history, fairy tale, and science fiction. While I take up his discussion of Miranda's durian smell, I do so to theorize specifically how Miranda's experiences of smell-based discrimination inform her relationship to her memories of the past, and thus play a role in her diffuse diasporic subjectivity.

13 Durian-growing countries may have also internalized the view that the fruits smell signals its contaminated status. In Thailand, durian has been banned from public transportation and enclosed public spaces, and a Thai scientist has cultivated a scentless durian for international export (Paul Lai 177).

14 The text suggests that Miranda is a future embodiment of Nu Wa, who is coiled inside the durian involved in Mirandas "conception" (209). Yet the novel does not endorse the notion of linear, pure origins. The durian of Mirandas conception is also linked to corporate experiments that genetically modified fruit to help women conceive (258). Scientists could not contain the pollen from blowing away and mutating other fruits (258). This aspect of Miranda's "contaminated origins" draws attention to the dominant order's role in producing her scent - a role that they want to deny. Joanna Mansbridge suggests that "[b]y locating origins in divergent places," the novel "subverts both the notion of a pure, singular point of origin while challenging the abjection of feminine elements in the construction of cultural identity" (125).

15 Rita Wong explores the gap between the City of Hope's false promises and Nu Was exploitation while living there (116). She contends that Nu Was experiences reflect myths of upward mobility that draw immigrants to Canada (121), and the realities of economic exploitation that racialized, feminized subjects often experience (109-10).

16 Officially, Saturna expels the Chings because Miranda returns the tax dollars her father collected to the public (80). The text later suggests, however, that the Chings are forced to relocate because of Miranda's "disease" (89).

17 Evie's fishy scent draws attention to histories of Chinese immigrant labourers in the west coast fisheries in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. She represents a future embodiment of the "Iron Chink," a fish-butcher machine whose pejorative informal name, as Glenn Deer points out, bears the traces of the Chinese immigrant labourers who initially performed the deskilled, mechanized work of the machine ("Yellow" 27). She is literally produced as "a tool without an identity," like the Chinese immigrant labourers (27).

18 The Big Six's domain of control is called the "PEU," or Pacific Economic Union (160). "PEU" is a homonym for "pee-yew," a colloquial phrase that expresses disgust for an odour. The name thus points to the corporations' covert role in the very processes of mixing racialized identities that dominant discourses construct as contaminated.

19 My reading also differs from Deer's in that it explores the olfactory while his focuses on the visual. Deer explores how the novel's futuristic setting interrogates Vancouver as a "city of glass" that promotes an illusion of "transparency, freedom, fusion, and mobility" ("Remapping" 138).

20 Mariana Valverde notes that Canada's social purity movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century sought to "sanitize" racialized others not only physically, but spiritually and sexually. The "darker" - and I would argue, "smelly" - "races" were supposedly "lower," and were therefore "not in control of their sexual desires" (32). Since they had not received "proper Christian" training, they had "not produced the right kind of self" (32). The mostly male Chinese immigrant population was considered particularly threatening to the spirituality and sexuality of Canada's "pure" young, white women (111).

21 White landlords refused to sell or lease properties to Chinese immigrants unless it was on the fringe of town in undesirable locations (David Chuenyan Lai 34). The Chinese community was therefore confined to a swampy section of Dupont Street that was covered by water at high tide (Anderson 68). Dominant discourses also ignored that Dupont Street had not been connected with public sewers (Anderson 84), and failed to consider "the constraints on Chinese family settlement, jobs and pay discrimination" (85). As Maria Noëlle Ng notes, Chinese immigrants may have also lived together to form community support systems "in order to survive in a hostile society" (160).

22 Evie's acceptance of her fishy odour and contaminated "origins" resonates on a gendered level. The smell offish is linked to vaginas, and is often interpreted as a sign that women's genitals are inherently unclean (Mills 89-90). Evie refuses to internalize the patriarchal view that her fishy scent is inherently bad: her odour is constructed as a symptom of the same disease Miranda has, but she believes that if she does not "feel unwell," then "what's the problem?" (164). Evie subverts the notion that women's allegedly fish-scented genitals - and women themselves - are inherently unclean.

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