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Freedom Footprints. Multiculturalism from the Chinese Canadian Literary Perspective in Larissa Lai's "Salt Fish Girl"

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**FREEDOM FOOTPRINTS. MULTICULTURALISM FROM
THE CHINESE CANADIAN LITERARY PERSPECTIVE IN
LARISSA LAI'S *SALT FISH GIRL***

Résumé : Le présent article examine l'intrigue autour de l'usine de chaussures Pallas dans le roman *Salt Fish Girl* de Larissa Lai, en proposant de la traiter comme une métaphore complexe des problèmes de la minorité chinoise au Canada. L'auteure y explore le fonctionnement dans le récit de la symbolique des chaussures et de la philosophie de la marche participant au processus de la création de la critique postcoloniale de l'idéal canadien du multiculturalisme, ainsi que de leur rôle dans l'expression de l'identité hybride et instable des immigrants. Focalisé sur les thèmes de la liminalité et du déplacement, qui dominent dans le discours concernant les chaussures, l'article analyse : l'image de la main-d'œuvre de l'usine composée des ouvriers de couleur, tels des clones hybrides ; la rébellion qui consiste à laisser des empreintes par des salariés révoltés ; les stratégies publicitaires de l'usine. Ces thèmes contribuent à représenter les Canadiens chinois en tant que travailleurs demeurant dans la condition d'une dépendance inhumaine et hybride à l'égard des tout-puissants propriétaires blancs de l'usine. La conclusion de l'article révèle la vérité sur l'usine de chaussures où derrière une image idéalisée se manifeste la double nature du multiculturalisme avec, d'un côté, ses idéaux et, de l'autre, sa réalité passée sous silence.

“Ironic really that my life this time around should revolve so intimately
around shoes.”
(SFG 2004: 227)

Through a meta-remark from Miranda's lips, Larissa Lai establishes shoes as one of the key recurring themes of her second novel, *Salt Fish Girl*. The text features numerous references to footwear, walking, and footprints, the great majority centring on the Pallas Shoe Factory, a sinister corporation making profit on capitalist commodities through the work of racialized clone workers. The elaborate metaphor of the Pallas Shoes Factory can be examined from two

opposing angles: how it represents Lai's criticism of Canadian multiculturalism, and how it expresses the author's position on postcolonial forms of negotiating with the dominant culture. On the one hand, the hypocritical circle of oppression practiced by the corporation under the guise of protection represents the hidden dangers of the Canadian well-meaning policy of multiculturalism, while on the other hand, the plight and actions of the Sonias, former Pallas clone workers, explore the possibilities and realities of writing back towards the oppressor while using elements of the dominant culture. The two sides of the plot form a coherent, fictional shoe discourse mirroring the group of pro- and counter-ideas making up the Canadian policy of multiculturalism.

First, it is necessary to establish the connection between the Pallas metaphor and multiculturalism. The link is mediated through Chinese mythology, marking the theme of shoes with ethnic connotations against the North American origins of the corporation. The Pallas storyline might essentially be divided into two opposing axes: that of the oppressive, dominant management, corresponding with Miranda's story; and that of the Sonias' campaign against the company, embodied in the character of Evie. The two characters are incarnations of the sister-brother (in the novel sister-sister) divine couple of Nüwa and Fuxi, humankind's founding couple in Chinese mythology, Miranda taking the identity of the goddess Nüwa, and Evie that of her brother, Fuxi. Both deities, despite their most usual representation as serpent-tailed humanoids, have distinct relations to footwear and walking. According to Yang and An, who describe the various myths centring around Nüwa and Fuxi in their *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, one of the elements of Nüwa's cult, practiced at the Renzu Temple in Huaiyang County, Hunan Province, China, is the sacrifice of beautifully embroidered shoes, which are either left at the temple or burned with incense. The act of sacrifice links Nüwa, and by extension Miranda, to the idea of shoes as commodities, but also as liminal portals to the divine plane of reality, which is ensured through their transformation by fire. Fuxi, on the other hand, is most commonly linked to the action of walking, or rather its most visible physical manifestation, as Yang and An report that the deity was born after his mother stepped into a giant footprint and became pregnant. The relation to walking serves to connect Fuxi and his representation in the novel, Evie, to the discourse of displacement, but also to the idea of leaving traces of oneself as a form of communication. The mythology suggests a fairly straightforward distribution of ideas surrounding the Pallas Shoe Factory into two distinct chains of association: Nüwa, Miranda, Pallas, and shoes with their liminality as expression of multiculturalism; and Fuxi, Evie, the clone workers, and the language of footprints as an exploration of forms of negotiating with the dominant culture. This is the division that I choose to apply in my analysis of the novel.

Expressed through the first group of connotations, that is Miranda's part of the Pallas plot, Lai's criticism of the Canadian philosophy of multiculturalism lies in the theory that multiculturalism is indeed a façade for covert racism. Lai addresses the topic on two separate occasions, both times conveying her dissatisfaction with the way multiculturalism creates an artificial appearance of idyllic tolerance based on flattened sense of equality while at the same time forcefully negating histories of discrimination and bleaching racist attitudes. In her first essay on the topic, she describes the peculiar state of a child of immigrant parents, who lives in an artificial present born from an idealized past and future, "[a] present that denies history, one that at its surface claims equality for all, even as it uses the notion of equality to perpetuate the injustices of the past (...)" (*Corrupted Lineage* n. pag.). The notions of repression and subsequent enabling of racism pervade in her later essay, where she describes the official policy of multiculturalism as "(...) polite repressed Canadian liberalism that declared itself colour-blind while continuing to support systemic racisms that are historically entrenched and highly normalized" (*Future Asians* n. pag.). This greatly capitalized, manufactured, and synthetic multiculturalism, festering with hidden racisms, is what Lai criticises through Miranda's side of the Pallas plot, showing the character's journey of discovery from oblivious faith in the rightness of the system to uncovering the repressed truth about the company's oppression of the clone workers.

The trope of repression is represented in the novel through the dreaming disease, a mysterious affliction prevalent in Miranda's narrative, its symptoms including strange body odours, disturbing dreams of topic-oriented memories, which only subside in contact with water, and suicidal tendencies, with the victims always choosing to die by drowning. Its origins lie in chemicals polluting the soil (some of them released by Pallas), and it is believed to be passed through the most vulnerable part of the body, the soles of the feet:

'On the streets of Painted Horse 3000, they say never to walk barefoot on the beaches where the victims have walked into the sea and drowned. They say it spreads through the soles of the feet' (101).

'Don't you know? That's how it spreads. It comes up through the soil. (...) It comes up through the skin of your feet and gets into your bloodstream' (164).

The dreams prompted by the disease are recollections of wars, suffering, and acts of cruelty, which makes the disease a symbol of a forceful, physical return of a repressed, violent past, which in this case might be equalled with the historical systemic racism against non-white Canadians. Liu remarks: "(...) some of its 'symptoms' seem to be the 'return' of either the repressed or of those discriminated against. (...) [The symptoms] seem to be psychosomatic

responses to the excessive repressiveness of this highly rationalized society” (325). This suggests that repressed memories always inevitably rise back to the surface, shattering the artificial peace. The Pallas Shoe Factory acts in the novel as a guard against this ever present threat, offering a thematic form of protection, the idea being that since the disease is passed through the soles of the feet, the best way to avoid it is to wear sturdy, protective footwear. It is Miranda’s idea to advertise the Pallas sports shoes as protection against the disease: “I was thinking, suppose Pallas were to advertise shoes as protection against the dreaming disease. Memory-proof soles. I think they would sell really well” (*SFG* 244). It is a purely marketing manoeuvre, as there is no scientific proof that the Pallas shoes have any effect on the spread of the disease, but in this case the strength of the idea lies in the fabricated myth of functionality now attached to the shoes, which become a symbol of capitalist power: if one can afford the shoes, one will live a long and healthy life safe from the filthy dreaming disease.

The problem with this form of protection is that it is almost by definition flawed and ineffective. If one delves into the symbolism of shoes, one quickly discovers that the most ubiquitous characteristic of footwear lore is the shoe’s liminality. Riello and McNeil describe shoes as “the principal intersection between body and physical space” (3), stressing that a shoe is the one object which comes into direct contact with both the body (the foot) and the outside world (the ground), creating simultaneously a barrier and a link between the domestic and the public spheres. Davidson adds a transformative dimension to the shoe’s liminality, naming it “a symbol of transaction and transference from one state to another” (631). The shoe, therefore, occupies an in-between space of connection and transformation, sharing traits of both spheres in one entity. However, when the shoe’s liminality is confronted with the discourse of purity and pollution, as is the case in Japanese footwear culture, it necessarily becomes a polluted object: “[f]ootwear was unclean both from its contact with the ground, and with the feet” (Chaiklin 175). If a shoe is always-already unclean, then it is impossible for it to act as a genuine form of protection against the pollutant it is immersed in. Miranda’s advertising idea is therefore inherently useless, not only because it is fake and untested, but also because it is intrinsically self-contradictory.

Given that Pallas is ironically responsible for the disease and its extension, the protective sports shoes, are always-already polluted by its contagion, then Lai’s criticism of multiculturalism is clear. She suggests that the artificially created, capitalist policy of equality is in fact a smokescreen for systemic racism in First World countries such as Canada; racism which is no longer open, but hidden under the guise of commodified protection. Lai underlines the reliance of capitalism on “a certain kind of liberalism and a certain drive towards hybridity, fragmentation and adaptation” (*Future Asians* n. pag.),

stressing that in order to economically appeal to a wider range of consumers, capitalism needs to embrace the ideas of multiculturalism. Jeffrey J. Santa Ana, who analyses the artificial hybridity present in American advertising, elaborates on that thought, highlighting the dangers of such an approach. He posits that: “racially mixed people in commercials epitomize the corporate multicultural trend of eliding material and historical structures of racist exploitation to turn ethnicity into an asset for ethnic-identified consumers” (19). Santa Ana's statement supports Lai's warning about multiculturalism obscuring a racist reality, as well as validates the author's use of advertising in the novel. In *Salt Fish Girl*, the covert racism, symbolically presented through Pallas commercials, becomes a dangerous threat, as it offers an idyllic, peaceful untruth and uses it to seduce those it acts against. Miranda is a case in point, as her identity is marked as other by her Durian smell, a characteristic reminiscent of the dreaming disease, but she is also manipulated by Pallas into betraying everything Evie and the Sonias stand for.

The second side of the Pallas plot containing the story of the novel's oppressed characters is expressed through the act of walking, an activity innately suited to represent the ideas of homelessness, displacement, and uprootedness. Following Michel de Certeau's words: “to walk is to lack a place” (103), to be in constant motion, in-between states. Kinga Araya, a Polish Canadian conceptual artist, uses de Certeau's theories about walking in her art in order to explore the realities of im- and emigration as both literal and figurative displacement, creating a metaphorical discourse helpful in addressing the issues of ethnic and national minorities in Canada and other multicultural countries. Araya's theoretical work is particularly applicable in *Salt Fish Girl*, where the theme of walking becomes central to the clone workers' narrative.

Even though the act of walking is by definition always caught in the in-between space of motion, it can be inferred through the traces it leaves: footprints. A footprint contains a great amount of information about the walker: his or her height, weight, gait, and manner of movement. In fact, de Certeau sees “(...) walking as a space of enunciation” (98), a form of expression and communication. Amato goes a step further, declaring: “[w]alking is talking. It can be understood as a language, having its own vernacular, dialects and idioms” (4). Therefore, if walking is talking, then the footprints are the written message. A footprint, then, becomes the perfect weapon in the hands of Evie and her sisters, the Sonias, who use rubber soles with embedded messages as a form of sabotage against Pallas, a shoe factory:

The soles of the shoes functioned like rubber stamps, the wed mud like ink.
The footprints said:
What does it mean to be human?
How old is history?

The shoemakers have no elves.
 One set of footprints was just a price list:
 materials: 10 units
 labour: 3 units
 retail price: 169 units
 profit: 156 units
 Do you care? (SFG 237-238).

In fact, what the Sonias are doing is writing a poem with their own displacement, as well as with the motion of each of their sympathisers who put on the rubber soles on their Pallas sports shoes. They are writing back, expressing their stories against the dominant message of the Pallas advertising campaign, doing so by employing the products of their oppressor.

However, writing back is never straightforward. Lai's concern is to write back in such a way so as not to inadvertently fuel the dominant voice. She warns: "[t]he question becomes how the racialized writer can break the silence of the past without empowering the media machine to replicate the same trope in a new, more virulent (because sanctioned by the stamp of authenticity) form" (*Corrupted Lineage* n. pag.) Her answer is not, in fact, to write back, but to re-write: "I like to think of my writing as revision, as a conscious corruption of an existing text or texts, or even as corruptions of corruptions" (*Corrupted Lineage* n. pag.) Lai's position on the subject is visible in the novel through the Sonias' footprint poems. The messages, although remaining within the broad discourse of shoes produced by Pallas, both physically (the rubber soles attached to Pallas sports shoes) and ideologically (footprints being a result of walking in the factory sanctioned shoes), re-appropriate both the shoes and the discourse as their own, simultaneously adding to and undermining it with the physicality of the Sonias' eloquent walking. The poem soles are an addition which changes the whole structure of the shoe from the cause of oppression into a tool of freedom, completely re-writing its message. The Sonias, even though seemingly trapped within the discourse of shoes, are winners: they seize the only currency they own, their displacement, and use it both as a weapon against oppression and as a tool to form their own space within the dominant culture, regaining their agency through the very object that stripped them of it.

Through extensive use of the theme of shoes, Lai links the two opposing sides of the Pallas plot in order to form a complete, coherent, and cleverly-engineered fictional discourse of oppression and reclaiming, which serves to mirror the existing mechanisms of the Canadian multiculturalism policy, highlighting the systemic racism hidden under the guise of colour-blind equality, as well as the trappings of expressing one's alternate story while using the dominant language. The shoe discourse is ubiquitous in the novel, underlying all of the actions of the two main characters, Miranda and Evie, and shaping their

choices. However, the story ends on a positive note, with the two protagonists escaping the discourse by shedding their shoes in exchange for serpent tails, which coil together underwater, beyond the need for footwear.

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