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## TRANSGRESSIVE AUTOMATONS. RE-VISIONING THE CYBORG IN LARISSA LAI'S *RACHEL*

**Abstract:** The article aims to analyze the ways in which Larissa Lai, in her short story *Rachel*, appropriates and racializes the figure of the cyborg by re-visioning and retelling the story of one of the most iconic characters in the history of cinema, the android Rachael from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (and, by extension, her literary predecessor).

Using postcolonial theory as well as theory of science fiction as the primary methodological frameworks, the article demonstrates how – by infusing the character of Rachael/Rachel with a hybrid identity – Lai engages in a discussion concerning race, belonging, and the power struggle between the central and the peripheral. This struggle, in turn, is embodied by the liminality of the cyborg, who may be interpreted as a metaphor for all that eludes (and actively rejects) the colonial Self–Other binary. This, in turn, highlights the tensions accompanying the intrusion of the peripheral into the hegemonic and allows for a more in-depth discussion of the processes concerning negotiation of identity.

Moreover, the paper focuses on the way in which Lai constructs the metaphor of the Othered, racialized cyborg in order to deconstruct the notion of the cyborg perceived as a neutral (i.e. white) entity, writing against the hegemonic canon. In this way, the racialized cyborg stands as the symbol of transgression, rebellion and rejection of the center/periphery dichotomy, one which eschews the (neo)colonial binaries and becomes a source of anxiety for the hegemonic discourse.

**Keywords:** postcolonial science fiction, cyborg, Larissa Lai, *Blade Runner*

### Introduction: Complicating the Cyborg

Over the decades, the cyborg has remained one of the most recognizable and creatively fertile figures of the science fiction idiom. From literature and film to video games and graphic novels, the cyborg has come to symbolize the rapidly changing modes of being, questioning the ontological truths taken for granted. The cyborg – theorized in the seminal text by Donna Haraway – has been, therefore, conceived as a liminal,

transgressive figure from the beginning, and its boundary-blurring properties have been broadly utilized to comment on the postmodern and posthuman condition.

While Haraway considers the cyborg predominantly in the context of feminist theory, other fields of study have since engaged with the subversive potential of the concept, including posthumanist or transhumanist theory, as well as postcolonial studies. It is the latter that remains of particular interest for this analysis, as the article seeks to illuminate the ways in which Larissa Lai, in her short story *Rachel*, appropriates and racializes the figure of the cyborg by re-visioning and retelling the story of the android Rachael from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (and, by extension, her literary predecessor).

Using postcolonial theory as well as theory of science fiction as the primary methodological frameworks, the article demonstrates how – by infusing the character of Rachael/Rachel with a double hybrid identity – Lai engages in a discussion concerning race, belonging and the power struggle between the central and the peripheral. This struggle, in turn, is embodied by the liminality of the cyborg, conceived as a metaphor for all that eludes (and actively rejects) the colonial Self–Other binary, highlighting the tensions accompanying the intrusion of the peripheral into the hegemonic and allowing for a more in-depth discussion of the processes concerning negotiation of identity. Ultimately, then, the article posits that Lai constructs the metaphor of the Othered, racialized cyborg in order to deconstruct the notion of the cyborg perceived as a neutral (i.e. white) entity, writing against the hegemonic canon. In this way, as the article argues, the racialized cyborg stands as the symbol of transgression, rebellion and rejection of the center/periphery dichotomy, while at the same time this transgressive process contributes to the destabilization of the subject's sense of self and emergence of fractured identities.

## The Ambivalence of Flesh: Theoretical Approaches

Upon initial examination, it might appear that science fiction – and the cyberpunk subgenre in particular – demonstrates a particular contempt for the matters of the body, which, in turn, reflects the postmodern ambivalent approach toward corporeality. In his chapter *Meat Puppets or Robopaths?*, Thomas Foster argues that “[c]yberpunk writers offer a model for reading science-fiction as a commentary on the present rather than the future, a model that marks a shift toward a postmodern conception of both contemporary social life and science-fiction's project of representing imaginary futures.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his article *The Erotic Life of Machines*, while remarking on the radical changes in contemporary modes of conceptualizing the corporeal, Steven Shaviro claims that “the dominant narratives of the new technological culture are cy-

<sup>1</sup> T. Foster, *Meat Puppets or Robopaths?* [in:] J. Wolmark (ed.), *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1999, p. 210.

berfictions of disembodiment.”<sup>2</sup> As he clarifies later on in the same article, “[i]n line with this, imaginative cyberfictions – science fiction novels and films – have often expressed an extreme ambivalence regarding the body.”<sup>3</sup> Classic cyberpunk texts such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) or the Wachowski sisters’ *Matrix* (1999) seem to corroborate this apparent ambivalence or even outright hostility towards the matters of embodiment, with *Neuromancer* going so far as to suggest that corporeality equals imprisonment, remarking that the novel’s protagonist, cut off from the cyberspace, has fallen “into the prison of his own flesh.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, as Sherryl Vint remarks in *Bodies of Tomorrow*, cyberpunk is “a genre best known for its rejection of embodiment and embrace of an existence in cyberspace.”<sup>5</sup>

However, upon closer analysis, it becomes evident that science fiction – including cyberpunk – is, at its core, a genre intensely preoccupied with the matters of embodiment. Even the apparent disinterest in or rejection of the corporeal reveals, in actuality, a curious engagement with the very *matter* of bodies (or its notable absence). The characters who long for a disembodied existence are, then, no less fixated on the categories of their embodiment than those who embrace the significance of the corporeal – the difference here lies only in the fact that, as a result, this preoccupation is merely expressed in those texts in different terms.

On the other hand, explicit engagement with the matters of the corporeal (and the constitutive role it plays in the formation of identity) emerges even more conspicuously in the more peripheral subgenres of science fiction, such as postcolonial science fiction, which participates in a nuanced discussion concerning what it means to possess a body in the realities of speculative narratives. However, as Kaye Mitchell remarks in her essay *Bodies That Matter: Science Fiction, Technoculture, and the Gendered Body*, “this is not [...] a return to the body in any naïve or essentialist sense, but rather an examination of the ways in which the «matter» of the body is socially and culturally constructed.”<sup>6</sup> This, in turn, echoes the words of feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz, who posits that “[t]he body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product.”<sup>7</sup> It could be argued, then, that subgenres such as postcolonial science fiction interrogate the ways in which corporeality intersects with the hegemonic discourses of power, facilitating the constitution of subjects in neo-colonial realities.

<sup>2</sup> S. Shaviro, *The Erotic Life of Machines*, “Parallax” 2002, vol. 8 (4), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace Science Fiction, New York 1984, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> S. Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2019, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> K. Mitchell, *Bodies That Matter: Science Fiction, Technoculture, and the Gendered Body*, “Science Fiction Studies” 2006, vol. 33 (1), p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994, p. 23.

## Writing Back: Postcolonial Science Fiction and the Mainstream

The subgenre of postcolonial science fiction<sup>8</sup> has emerged as a direct response to the colonial roots of science fiction, which, according to John Rieder, “appeared predominantly in those countries that were involved in colonial and imperialist projects.”<sup>9</sup> In Rieder’s opinion, that is by no means coincidental, since, as he argues, the mainstream science fiction idiom “addresses itself to the fantastic basis of colonial practice”<sup>10</sup> and perpetuates “the persistent traces of a stubbornly visible colonial scenario beneath its fantastic script.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, for postcolonial science fiction to engage with the issues of the corporeal means to accept that, as Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths observe:

[t]he “fact” of the body is a central feature of the post-colonial, standing as it does metonymically for all the “visible” signs of difference, and their varied forms of cultural and social inscription, forms often either undervalued, overdetermined or even totally invisible to the dominant colonial discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Following from this, postcolonial studies scholar Donna McCormack comments on the inseparable connection between the bodily and the postcolonial, arguing that “[f]lesh is woven into history as both the bloody deaths necessary to achieve the desired goals and the skin on which it has become possible to write these new foundational narratives.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The question of genology remains a particularly contested one in the case of science fiction and its subgenres. Despite the ongoing debate, no conclusive definition of the genre overall has emerged. Nonetheless, in an effort to produce a definition which would encapsulate the many forms and shapes that science fiction has taken over the decades, critics and scholars have proposed numerous, often contradictory approaches – from the conceptual (or formalist) theories of Edward James or Damon Knight, who define science fiction in a circular manner as all cultural production which is recognized as science fiction by the publishers as well as the consumers (see: E. James, *Science Fiction in the 20th Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 1994, p. 3), to the historicist approaches, which emphasize the cultural contexts in which science fiction has developed throughout the years, as well as the results of that development and its impact on the genre as a whole (see: A. Roberts, *Defining Science Fiction* [in:] idem, *Science Fiction: The New Critical Idiom*, Routledge, London–New York 2000, p. 2). Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I will consider both cyberpunk and postcolonial science fictions to be subgenres of the science fiction genre, considering the shared characteristics as well as ongoing dialogue with the science fiction mega-text.

<sup>9</sup> J. Rieder, *Science Fiction, Colonialism, and the Plot of Invasion*, “Extrapolation” 2005, vol. 46 (3), p. 375.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 376.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> B. Ashcroft, H. Tiffin, G. Griffiths (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London–New York 2006, p. 321.

<sup>13</sup> D. McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2014, p. 2.

On the other hand, addressing the aforementioned ambiguity towards the corporeal, Sherryl Vint remarks that “[t]here is a tendency in some postmodern theory to speak of the body as an obsolete relic, no longer necessary in a world of virtual communication and technological augmentation.”<sup>14</sup> However, as she argues further on:

[t]he ability to construct the body as passé is a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. [...] The body remains relevant to critical work and “real” life, both because “real” people continue to suffer or prosper in their material bodies, and because the discourses that structure these material bodies continue to construct and constrain our possible selves.<sup>15</sup>

For that reason, then, much of postcolonial science fiction actively engages in questioning the dominant modes of conceptualizing the corporeal in the genre, bringing the bodily element back to prominence as it addresses the realities of material embodiment which is already marked as Other from the outset, bearing the signs of difference and colonial ambiguity.

To further this reconceptualization of the bodily, certain works of postcolonial science fiction engage in active dialogue with what Damien Broderick calls the mega-text,<sup>16</sup> in an act which Helen Tiffin conceptualizes under the notion of canonical counter-discourse, a practice “in which a post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a [...] canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes.”<sup>17</sup> Following in the footsteps of works such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* or J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, science fiction texts such as *Rachel* employ this strategy to engage directly with the science fiction mega-text, questioning the hegemonic images of the Other and extant symbolism.

## Interrogating the Replicant: Rachel and the Work of Canonical Counter-Discourse

In *Rachel*, a short story anthologized in *So Long Been Dreaming*,<sup>18</sup> a volume of post-colonial speculative fiction, Larissa Lai engages in the work of canonical counter-discourse, which consists in re-visioning the figure of the most iconic characters in the history of the genre, the android Rachael from Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (and, by extension, her literary predecessor from Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*). In the short story, by racializing the figure of the cyborg, Lai com-

<sup>14</sup> S. Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 8–9.

<sup>16</sup> D. Broderick, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*, Routledge, New York–London 1995, p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> H. Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse* [in:] B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London–New York 2002, p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> L. Lai, *Rachel* [in:] N. Hopkinson, U. Mehan (eds.), *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver 2004, pp. 53–60.

ments on the issues of race, belonging, and the liminality of the hybrid subject, which facilitates a discussion of the processes concerning the creation of identity as well as the accompanying tensions which occur at the meeting point of two intersecting binaries. The story, centered around the theme of negotiation of identity, addresses the issues of hybridity and mimicry, as well as other kinds of liminality at the intersection between the human and the machine, the Self and the Other, and challenges the fixed binary notions which govern the colonial paradigm. Rachel/Rachael, who occupies the central position in the story, becomes therefore the locus of ambiguity, exposing – in her own literal constructedness – the constructedness of the colonial Other, who is, according to Said, nothing more than a distorted image, a myth created on the basis of false assumptions and prejudices perpetuated by the colonial center.<sup>19</sup>

It would be possible to claim, then, that Lai uses the figure of the cyborg in order to construct a metaphor for all that eludes the colonial Self/Other binary, and in doing so, ultimately challenges the preconceptions concerning identity and humanity imposed onto the cyborg/Other by the hegemonic discourse. Moreover, Lai constructs the metaphor of the Othered, racialized cyborg in order to analyze the processes which shape the hybrid colonial subject as well as deconstruct the notion of the cyborg perceived as a neutral (that is: white) entity. This, in turn, serves to further complicate the hegemonic colonial paradigm, which lies at the foundation of the science fiction genre and against which she writes back.

Lai is not, by any means, the first to address the issues of hybridity in science fiction. Rather, she follows in the footsteps of writers such as Octavia Butler and her *Xenogenesis* trilogy and engages in dialogue with other contemporary postcolonial science fiction writers such as Nisi Shawl (*Deep End*), Suzette Mayr (*Toot Sweet Matricia*), or Nnedi Okorafor (*Who Fears Death*), whose fiction employs the themes of hybridity and liminality that work to challenge the genre status quo. Lai's other works, such as her sophomore novel *Salt Fish Girl*, also betray a preoccupation with that motif. However, what differentiates *Rachel* from all the other mentioned texts is its engagement in Tiffin's canonical counter-discourse, which remains of particular importance to the proposed argument. Thus, by situating her short story in direct dialogue with a canonical text within the mega-text, Lai explicitly confronts science fiction with its own biases and proposes a recontextualization of the seminal figure of the genre. *Rachel*, then, reveals an interest in exploring the hybrid, liminal spaces and bodies that explode the fixed categories of human and non-human, Self and Other, fracturing meanings and fixed categories to demonstrate the transgressive, destabilizing potential of such liminal subjects.

It becomes evident that Lai sees the subversive potential of the cyborg precisely in their hybridity, their liminality (and, by extension, their embodiment), which positions them on the threshold between two worlds, bridging the gap between them and simultaneously opening new gaps in meanings, fracturing the existing homogenous

<sup>19</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York 1979, p. 4.

narratives of binary realities. The nature of the cyborg has always been transgressive, since, as N. Katherine Hayles remarks, “cyborgs are simultaneously entities and metaphors, living beings and narrative constructions.”<sup>20</sup> In turn, their inherent liminality, accompanied by the inevitable blurring of boundaries between the human and the machine, is seen as a source of anxiety. That is no different in the case of Rachel. This unease of the hegemonic power structure, caused by the apparent permeability of the otherwise strictly enforced boundaries between the human and the machine, is demonstrated from the very first scene of the short story, in which Rachel, accompanied by her scientist father, undergoes the Voight-Kampff test under Deckard’s (here referred to only as “the policeman”) supervision. The test, designed to differentiate replicants from humans, reveals the implicit anxiety of the hegemonic system, which cannot allow any degree of uncertainty with regard to the ontological classification of its subjects. This anxiety-inducing ambiguity and category seepage on the part of the hegemony is juxtaposed with the protagonist’s initially unfractured sense of self. In the opening scene, Rachel candidly recalls events from her childhood with no issue or confusion, speaking of her figure skating accident and an apparent change in personality that occurred afterwards.<sup>21</sup> The exchange is followed by the admission:

I don’t want to take the test, but my father and I had agreed beforehand that I should. [...] And that I should volunteer before the policeman asked, so there would be no question of coercion. [...] There is nothing to be nervous about. My father is here. I know who I am. There is no question of failing.<sup>22</sup>

This initial confidence in Rachel’s sense of self, however, becomes soon disturbed as she learns the truth of her origins and her artificial embodiment, bringing about a gradual disintegration of her subjectivity, mirroring the anxiety of the hegemonic discourse and reflecting the fraught processes of identity negotiation in liminal spaces.

In contrast, although Rachael’s ontological condition is similarly questioned in the novella, the reader remains distanced from her point of view as well as emotional response. Filtered through Deckard’s perspective, Rachael remains detached and mostly unemotional, her voice effectively silenced. In their first meeting, he remarks: “Black-haired and slender [...], she approached his car, her hands deep in the pockets of her brightly striped long coat. She had, on her sharply defined small face, an expression of sullen distaste.”<sup>23</sup> Even more conspicuously, throughout the rest of the scene (and, arguably, the entire novella), Rachael remains an object rather than a subject, defined in Deckard’s narrative perspective through her corporeality that lacks actual engagement with the material circumstances of her embodiment. Deckard can

<sup>20</sup> N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999, p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> L. Lai, *Rachel*, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> P.K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Del Rey/Ballantine Books, New York 1996, p. 39.

“smell a mild perfume about her,”<sup>24</sup> and consistently remarks on her appearance, but her body is regarded primarily as a tool – including a tool of seduction. She is, then, doubly estranged from her own cyborg embodiment: both discursively and narratively. Here, the feminist nature of Haraway’s cyborg comes into play, as Lai, by endowing Rachel with narrative voice and the kind of subjectivity which precludes objectification and fetishization by the male gaze, contests the widespread image of the “sexy robot” which permeates much of the mega-text. As Thomas Foster argues, “in this representational framework, the analogy between technology and female sexuality confirms that both represent a threat to masculine power, while the conflation of the two in the form of the female robot allows for a specifically fetishistic disavowal of both threats.”<sup>25</sup> In Lai’s short story, however, the narrative control over Rachel’s embodiment is returned to her, instead of remaining filtered by the male perspective, and allows her to question the dominant discourse of female techno-embodiment. This, in turn, aligns more with Haraway’s conception of the female cyborg as “committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity.”<sup>26</sup>

Lai, however, further complicates the issues of hybrid identities and negotiation of boundaries by racializing Rachel and thus questioning one of the most iconic figures of science fiction – the cyborg. Here, the replicant Rachel becomes a hybrid in yet another sense – she not only occupies the space between the human and the machine, but also between the Self and the colonial Other, a doubly liminal figure who challenges the fixed binaries of the hegemonic systems she inhabits. By placing Rachel in the space of difference, Lai aims to exploit the uncertainty of the colonial paradigm she writes against, echoing the claims of Homi Bhabha, who regards hybridity as a subversive phenomenon which becomes the source of anxiety or even paranoia for the colonial center and thus serves to destabilize the system, exposing its inadequacies. In *Signs Taken for Wonders*, he writes that “[h]ybridity represents that ambivalent «turn» of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority.”<sup>27</sup> This, in turn, echoes Haraway’s observations concerning the link between the liminality of the cyborg and the unsettling effect they have on the dominant system:

It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices. [...] There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism,

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> T. Foster, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Posthuman Narratives and the Construction of Desire* [in:] idem, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> D. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* [in:] eadem, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1990, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> H. Bhabha, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817* [in:] idem, *Location of Culture*, Routledge, London–New York 1994, p. 113.



of technical and organic. The replicant Rachel in Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* stands as the image of cyborg culture's fear, love, and confusion.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, the character of Rachel, by being re-visioned as the locus of colonial difference, highlights the tensions that arise at the meeting point of the central and the peripheral. This, in turns, responds to Haraway's understanding of the cyborg's place within the discourse. As Cary Wolfe remarks, Haraway "engages science-fictional thematics of hybridity, perversity, and irony (her terms) that are [...] radically ambivalent in their rejection of both utopian and dystopian visions of a cyborg future."<sup>29</sup> Lai, similarly, positions Rachel as a locus of ambiguity, underscoring both her subversive potential as a source of anxiety for the hegemonic system as well as the alienation and fracturing of identity she experiences, resulting from her liminal position and embodiment.

Moreover, in her retelling, Lai challenges the notion of the cyborg as a neutral – that is, white – entity and exposes the implications behind the portrayals of cyborgs in mainstream science fiction literature and cinema. What is particularly interesting here from the postcolonial perspective – and what Lai engages in challenging – is the fact that in the science fiction idiom, there remains a widespread practice – reflected in both the novella and the film – to code cyborgs as white. That is why in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Rachael is described as based on the Celtic type of appearance<sup>30</sup> and in *Blade Runner*, in a setting which openly appropriates East Asian neo-noir aesthetics, she is unambiguously white as well. The other replicants portrayed in the film are also subject to such coding, which, in turn, serves to highlight the fact that, since the cyborg is regarded as a hybrid form of embodiment and consciousness that bridges the gap between the human and the machine, when the discourse univocally frames it in such a manner and resorts to particular visual coding practices, it inadvertently implies that human irrevocably equals white. Lai, however, rejects that notion and, by rewriting Rachel as half-Chinese, reclaims for the postcolonial discourse the figure which is already liminal by nature, emphasizing her uncomfortable Otherness and thus entering a dialogue with the source material – a dialogue which insists on a re-examination of the most basic assumptions behind the creation of the cyborg's identity.

At the same time, Rachel's embodied existence in the short story could be debated in terms of (unconscious) mimicry, a concept which Homi Bhabha defines as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*."<sup>31</sup> Mimicry, as Bill Ashcroft remarks, "disturbs the normality of the dominant discourse itself. The threat inherent in mimicry, then, comes not

<sup>28</sup> D. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, op. cit., pp. 177–178.

<sup>29</sup> C. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2010, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> P.K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>31</sup> H. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man* [in:] idem, *Location of Culture*, Routledge, London–New York 1994, p. 86.

from an overt resistance but from the way in which it continually suggests an identity not quite like the colonizer.<sup>32</sup> This concept could already be broadly applied to the novella, in which the androids, who are becoming increasingly impossible to distinguish from humans in their appearance, emerge as the mimic men, introducing anxiety connected with the seeming permeability of the ontological categories of human/non-human. While their non-human origins designate them as acceptable sources of slave labor and objects of colonial violence, the lack of apparent visual distinction prompts a radical response from the state in cases of perceived attempts at assimilation, which can never be permitted under a colonial system.<sup>33</sup> In the short story, in turn, the racialization of Rachel further calls into question the binaries of the hegemonic system and confronts the colonial undertones of the original text, while, significantly, exposing the detrimental effects of mimicry on the Othered subject. Interestingly, it could be argued that Rachel's unconscious mimicry arises initially from the continued influence of the hegemonic system, facilitated by her father's deception, who stands for the colonial, patriarchal, technocratic order, preventing her from understanding the truth of her existence and simultaneously fulfilling the colonial desire for the recognizable Other. The moment in which the truth is revealed, then, results in further fracturing of Rachel's hyphenated identity, forcing her to renegotiate her identity and place of belonging along the human/machine and Self/Other axes. In a sense, once she becomes aware of her own status as a mimic, she is rendered incapable of reconciling the multifaceted, contradictory perception of her own self.

The ambiguity of Rachel's racial identity is closely tied to her experience of her own physicality. Lai's writing accentuates the bodily element as well as the awareness of Rachel's corporeality throughout the story, constructing the imagery and metaphors which emphasize that ambiguity on the textual level. At one point in the story, Rachel's parents discuss a photo of one of Rachel's relatives, a young girl captured on a sepia photograph, and find that it is impossible for them to determine whether the person in the blurry photograph belongs to the Chinese part or Rachel's family (on her mother's side) or if she belongs to the white part of Rachel's family (on her father's side). As Lai writes:

It was one of those strange photographs where you can't tell what race the person is. I was sure there was something important about that young girl, though I didn't know what. Either that, or there was a subtext to the argument I didn't understand.<sup>34</sup>

It is no coincidence that the photographed girl resembles Rachel in her appearance – they are both young, dark-haired, and their ethnic ambiguity constitutes a source of uncertainty and anxiety (for the binary of the hegemonic discourse and Rachel's parents alike). Thus, on the narrative level, the girl in the picture is meant to reflect

<sup>32</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, London 2013, p. 155.

<sup>33</sup> A. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Beacon Press, Boston 1993, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> L. Lai, *Rachel*, op. cit., p. 59.

Rachel's own racial ambiguity back at her, making the implicit tension present in the process of identity negotiation in hybrid subjects explicit. It seems, then, that Lai sees this process of identity negotiation through the bodily experience as fraught with uncertainty and anxiety not only on the part of the hegemonic system (an Othered subject which eludes containment within the strict boundaries of ontological classification), but on the part of the cyborg/hybrid as well. This understanding of the process, in turn, echoes the categories of seepage already present in the original text, reinforcing the ongoing dialogue with the science fiction canon that Lai maintains in the short story. "*Blade Runner*," W.A. Senior argues, "like most cyberpunk fiction, establishes no apodictic criteria for humanity. Rather, it insinuates a wide range of constantly metamorphosing humanities from the regressive street rats to the super-human replicants."<sup>35</sup> Lai, however, in her interrogation of the identity-forming (and identity-fracturing) processes that engage the cyborg's corporeality, moves beyond the consideration of the human/machine axis, proposing alternative readings.

The process of gaining awareness of one's own ontological status, in turn, is presented as gradual, as it is the self-awareness of her precarious liminal position which further complicates Rachel's perception of herself with regard to her humanity. When Rachel reflects on her condition at the beginning of the story, the primary emotion that she experiences is certainty. It is only after she gains full knowledge of who she is – as well as how that situates her in the society, which marginalizes the replicants as Bhabha's mimic men, dangerous in their subversiveness and reflecting their distorted gaze back at their creators – that she begins to question her own subjectivity. The awareness of the artificiality of her own body, which she has come to view as her own and unique due to its racial ambiguity, distinguishing her from other representatives of the same model, further contributes to the feeling of confusion and alienation she experiences. The way in which she negotiates her identity between human and machine, Chinese and white, is, therefore, fraught with tensions which mirror the tensions that accompany the emergence of postcolonial hybrid subjects. Even though, following the revelations of her nature, she attempts to rebuild herself on the basis of her relationship with her body as well as her heritage and memory, both of them ultimately remain ambiguous and disjointed.

Moreover, her inability to reconcile her implanted memories with what she perceives as her own memories opens up further gaps and rifts that reflect the fragmented realities of the hybrid condition. Towards the opening of the short story, Rachel remarks, "My childhood memories are extraordinarily vivid."<sup>36</sup> However, once she learns the truth of her replicant origins, she begins to recognize the apparent gaps in her recollection of the events of her adolescence, which directly contradict her earlier certainty. Lai writes:

<sup>35</sup> W.A. Senior, *Blade Runner and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity*, "Film Criticism" 1996, vol. 21 (1), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> L. Lai, *Rachel*, op. cit., p. 54.

My brother died at the same time as my mother. I think it's strange that I don't remember what happened. My father says that the memories will return in time [...]. But it's been five years and I still don't remember a thing.<sup>37</sup>

This contradiction in Rachel's perception of her own memory, in turn, exemplifies the fractured, fragmented state of her subjectivity at the same time as it signals her complicated origins. If Rachel's memories are implanted – as her replicant nature seems to imply – why, then, do those gaps exist at all? One possible answer to this question lies in her double liminality, as it signifies Rachel's transgression of boundaries and refusal of containment within the ontological classification she is initially inscribed into by the hegemonic system. On the subject of memory in fiction, Birgit Neumann remarks that “the constitutive character of all fictions of memory is [...] their operating with co-present time perspectives,”<sup>38</sup> and argues that in such works of fiction, “multi-temporal levels of the past and the present intermingle in manifold and complex ways.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Rachel consistently attempts to make sense of her own existence in the present by organizing and reorganizing her memories of the past, demonstrating the fact that memory (here tied directly to her corporeality due to her replicant nature) is a constitutive factor in the processes of identity formation. Interestingly, Rachel's literary predecessor seems to lack similar uncertainty. Despite her cyborg nature, she accepts her origins much easier and does not seem overtly conflicted about her own existence. This can, on the one hand, result from the choice of the narrative voice, which estranges the reader from Rachael's own perception of her situation, but on the other hand, she seems to reinforce this reading of the text when she states plainly, “We are machines, stamped out like bottle caps. It's an illusion that I – I personally – really exist; I'm just representative of a type.”<sup>40</sup> Her clinical assessment of her own existence, therefore, suggests that Rachael's peculiar sense of self remains fairly intact and serves here as a point of juxtaposition with the ruptures in Rachel's memory and identity that emphasize her alienation and anxiety.

In the process of writing back, the narrative of hybrid identities and fragmentary narratives in the story progresses further, beyond the question of body and memories, as Lai addresses the language itself, making it bear the burden of the colonial tensions and utilizing it in order to emphasize the multiplicity of meanings. Both in the novella and in the film, the replicant that Deckard interrogates is called Rachael, but she becomes Rachel in Lai's story – “almost the same but not quite”<sup>41</sup> – while her name becomes the locus of colonial ambiguity, reflecting the fractured narratives produced by the presence of the colonial hybrid as well as the multiplicity of meanings and the challenge to the univocal forms of authority. This, in turn, seems to be

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> B. Neumann, *The Literary Representations of Memory* [in:] A. Erll, A. Nünning (eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2010, p. 336.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>40</sup> P.K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, op. cit., p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> H. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, op. cit., p. 86.

partially related to the issue of the authenticity of the hybrid/Othered experience, in more than one sense. First of all, the change of Rachael's/Rachel's name opens up questions of her own authenticity, almost ironic in the face of realization that she is one of countless copies of the same model, much like the colonial Other is, for the hegemonic discourse, a homogenous entity with no individuality nor autonomy. The novella appears to reinforce Rachael's lack of autonomy: when she states that she is "just a representative of a type,"<sup>42</sup> she sacrifices a part of her subjectivity and agency. Similarly, Deckard, in a conversation with Roy Batty, comments that "There is no Pris [...]. Only Rachael Rosen, over and over again."<sup>43</sup> Lai, however, writes against those assumptions and infuses Rachel with a form of identity that is entirely her own, grounded in her body and the ambiguity of her parentage. Therefore, by differentiating her from the other copies of her model, Lai allows her to speak for herself, giving the voice back to the previously silenced Othered subject. Secondly, with the change of her name, which mirrors the changes in her cultural background, Lai engages in a discussion concerning the so-called authenticity of Rachel's ethnic experience. Though in both the novella and the film Rachael is portrayed as white and described/depicted extensively, there is no detailed description of her in the short story, except for the fact that her hair is black. This seems to be a conscious effort on Lai's part, as she attempts to further destabilize the notion of fixed boundaries and binary oppositions between the Self and the Other. In her story, the hybrid Rachel, although she may look like the other models of her type, remains nonetheless a locus of colonial ambiguity which constitutes a source of anxiety for the dominant discourse, even more so because she is not the easily recognizable image of the Other that the discourse produces.

## Conclusion: The Cyborg and Corporeal Technofutures

It does not seem that the figure of the cyborg will be retired from the public consciousness in the near future. On the contrary, the resurgence of interest in cyberpunk themes, coupled with advancements in robotics, computer science and artificial intelligence, ensure its longevity and continued place in the science fiction idiom. Recent titles released across a variety of media formats, such as *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) or, most notably, the sequel to *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) – which contests the extant images of the replicant, questioning and complicating the issues of the reproductive processes in cyborg bodies – reveal a consistent preoccupation with cyborg identities and demand revisions of the science fiction mega-text. As such, then, they follow in the footsteps of Lai's short story, continuing the dialogue with the cyberpunk canon.

<sup>42</sup> P.K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, op. cit., p. 162.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

But whereas P.K. Dick's novella, while presenting an undoubtedly colonial scenario, is notably absent any discussion concerning race, echoing Elizabeth Anne Leonard's assertion that "[b]y far the majority of sf deals with racial tension by ignoring it,"<sup>44</sup> Lai's revision tackles the thematic undercurrents directly. Unlike some of the seminal texts of the genre, though, such as the aforementioned *Neuromancer* or *Matrix*, Lai embraces the questions of embodiment and techno-corporeality. The short story, therefore, emphasizes the simultaneous liberating and alienating nature of hybrid bodies, which on the one hand defy the colonial narrative and introduce ruptures in meaning that destabilize the univocal forms of authority through their resistance towards containment and rejection of the colonial binary, but which at the same time contribute to the feeling of alienation on the part of the subject and facilitate further fracturing of the already destabilized subjectivity. This, in turn, manifests in psychological disorders and physical ailments, which make the implicit condition of the Othered, liminal subject in colonial and postcolonial realities explicit. Thus, the short story ultimately posits that Rachel cannot fully reconcile her identity and her body at the intersection between white and Asian, the human and the machine, as she negotiates her fraught position in the discourse, remaining a locus of ambiguity.

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<sup>44</sup> E.A. Leonard, *Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction* [in:] E. James, F. Mendlesohn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 254.

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