Gender and Violence in Pandemic Futures in Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

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Abstract

This article engages with the speculative future of Larissa Lai's 2018 novel *The Tiger Flu* and its exploration of utopian possibilities via alternative forms of female survival. In contrast to prototypical depictions of survival in classic dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives, such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), where straight white male heroes are the ones who take charge, Lai changes some central premises: the novel is alternately told from the first-person perspective of Kirilow Groundsel and from a third-person perspective that uses a second protagonist, Kora Ko, as a focalizer. Issues pertaining to gender and sex as material-discursive formations that shape social relations are thus foregrounded in *The Tiger Flu* not only by the fact that the eponymous flu itself has "a taste for men," but also through its two female queer protagonists of color, who are, moreover, not contained by the contours of lone hero/ine tropes. As we will show, however, the novel is likewise careful to not conjure feminist utopianism as a *dea ex machina* via its two protagonists and the worlds they inhabit: Lai's narrative also traces continuities from "the world before," showcasing that patriarchal structures, and particularly gendered violence, are not as far off as it would seem. Quite to the contrary, they are now frequently perpetuated and perpetrated by women and even by the protagonists themselves, and for that very reason might appear less conspicuous. *The Tiger Flu* hence simultaneously explores, celebrates, and criticizes utopian possibilities while emphasizing the continued parallel exploitation of both the environment and women – and by doing so the narrative teases readers with the possibility of utopian closure that it, however, ultimately denies in favor of interrogating ways of working towards utopia.

1. Introduction

Larissa Lai has been recognized for the ways in which her first two novels, *When Fox Was A Thousand* (1995) and *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), as well as her poetry volume, *Automaton Biographies* (2009), fuse cyborgs, technology, mythology, pop-culture, history, and science fiction elements, "foregrounding the politics of racialization, animality, and sexuality" and "build[ing] on the rich tradition of women of color writing in sf/speculative fiction" (Ho 2012). Lai herself has stated that she is drawn to speculative fiction for the possibilities it offers without "having to wade through the swathes of mainstream life and heteronormativity before we get to the place where we actually want to tell the story" ("Interview"). The narrative of her newest novel, *The Tiger Flu* (2018), is set over 120 years in the future, in the Gregorian year 2145 or Time After Oil (TAO) 127. The latter designation marks the fact that the world presented in the text is not only post-pandemic but also post-fossil fuel. Indeed, the future world Lai imagines is one in which petro-culture devices and machines only exist as leftover artifacts from the past. Environmental destruction has shattered the planet, and most people are struggling to survive under highly precarious living conditions: Movement is forcefully restricted and controlled by the military, knowledge is almost entirely privatized, and ordinary citizens do not even have access to the official currency.

At first sight, *The Tiger Flu* seems to meet all the characteristics of a prototypical or even classic dystopian or post-apocalyptic narrative. However, in an interview that Lai gave in 2019, she affirmed that she was consciously writing against prevalent examples of these genres. Pointing to "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in which the woman kills herself at the start of the novel, ceding the story to the man and the boy," she instead "wanted to write a story where the men are vulnerable, and the women survive" ("Interview"). Survival, perhaps the most prominent theme in post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, is also at the heart of *The Tiger Flu.* Yet, Lai changes some central premises in contrast to the prominent post-apocalyptic scenarios in which straight white male heroes are the ones who take charge (Lavigne 7): the novel is alternately told from the first-person perspective of Kirilow Groundsel and from a third-person perspective that uses a second protagonist, Kora Ko, as a focalizer. Kora is a teenager from a low-income family living in Saltwater City, an urban center overrun by patriarchal and corporate technocracy; Kirilow, by contrast, is a doctor living in the rural Grist Village, a community of genetically modified, parthenogenic women who have been exiled from Saltwater City three generations ago. Even though the cooperation between the two protagonists is sometimes reluctant, their stories gradually become entwined, and the novel's resolution highlights rationality and community instead of heroic individualism.

Imagining a future world in which the struggle for survival requires not only highly individualistic and self-serving capabilities, but rather collaborative endeavors that successfully navigate diverse cultures, large parts of the narrative of *The Tiger Flu* are set in a thoroughly hybridized Vancouver (Saltwater City), characterized by a confluence of Chinese and Canadian cultures. Moreover, the eponymous flu that caused the devastation with which the novel confronts its readers is one that disproportionately targets men, making them vulnerable and dependent: "[t]here are no men in the streets. The men are shut up in houses, covered in lesions and coughing their lungs out […] or else, they are already dead" (13). But even though, at first glance, this illness seems to reinforce a gender binary between men and women based on biological difference, such a binary is complicated by Lai: while her female-presenting protagonists challenge clear-cut assumptions about "woman" as an identity category, Kirilow, all the Grist sisters, and even Kora, as it turns out later, are posthuman mutants who simultaneously represent "women" and negate the category as one that can be biologically essentialized.

Issues of gender and sex as material-discursive formations that shape social relations are thus foregrounded in *The Tiger Flu* not only by the fact that the eponymous flu itself has "a taste for men" (Lai 13). Rather, such issues are also highlighted by the novel's two queer protagonists of color,[1] who are, moreover, not contained by the contours of *lone hero/ine* tropes: skills that ensure survival are explicitly presented as taught and passed on within communities and intergenerationally, and risky situations are rarely resolved by individual heroic feats but rather by cooperation and negotiation. In this way, the novel juxtaposes relational existence and shared knowledge within all-female communities, not only with prevalent post-apocalyptic story-arches but also, on the plot level, with the radical privatization of almost all aspects of life, from police to education, in the post-pandemic society at large. *The Tiger Flu* presents both the communitarian and the liberal(ist) logic as outgrowths of a profound absence of state-run social institutions. Even though Lai invites readers to draw their own comparisons, she does not offer any unequivocal solutions.

The novel is careful not to conjure feminist utopianism as a *dea ex machina* via its two protagonists and their worlds. In contrast to the ruined landscape of Saltwater City, Grist Village is evaluated positively, particularly because "[t]he Grist women are in tune with their physical bodies, ancestry, and earth" (Dunston). However, Lai's narrative also traces continuities from "the world before" in both Saltwater City and Grist

[1] They are all of Chinese ancestry. This will be explained in further detail in section three.

Village, showcasing that patriarchal structures, and particularly gendered violence, are not as far off as it would seem. Quite to the contrary, they are now sometimes perpetuated and perpetrated by women and even by the protagonists themselves, a fact that might make them appear less conspicuous even though they are no less destructive. As we will argue, then, *The Tiger Flu* presents a speculative future that explores utopian possibilities via alternative forms of female survival. Such survival has to be secured in the context of continued parallel exploitation of both the environment and women by patriarchal and colonial structures, predicated on—in Judith Butler's terms—"lives that are cast as destructible" and "ungrievable" (31), within and by technocratic capitalism. In the following, we will first outline how these persistent forms of (gendered) violence are narrated within each of the two storylines (Kirilow's and Kora's) of the post-pandemic and post-petroleum world of *The Tiger Flu*, and then turn to the ending of the novel to offer a close reading of its queer, posthuman reimagination of survival as a challenge to sexist and racist logics of expendability.

2. The Persistence of Gendered Violence and the Creation of Expendable Bodies in Saltwater City

While the world in year 127 TAO at first glance seems unfamiliar and disorienting to readers, recognizable structures are soon revealed in Saltwater City, where Kora Ko lives. Lai's narrative here traces subsistence during the *long apocalypse* of living in a polluted world in which a technocratic corporation—by the name of HöST Light Industries—has taken over former state functions. By replacing the state with a corporation, the narrative is attentive to the oppressive structures of class, sketching out the ways in which people in Saltwater City suffer as a consequence of being dispensable to its corporate elite. HöST, the "family company," which Drew Marie Beard describes as a "militaristic corporate monopoly" (76), rules the city "in its own best interests" (3): its governing has taken on totalitarian forms, as all fundamental aspects of daily life, from food (HöST supermarkets) to education (so-called "scales" sold by the HöST companies) are in the hand of this one super-corporation.

The corporation's monopoly on all areas of life engenders a society in which the general population does not have access to the city's official currency. Moreover, HöST also commands the city's police force (52), and the corporation's CEO, Isabelle Chow, is revered as a quasi-religious idol (53). The eerie worship of a business leader as a deity emphasizes the transgressiveness of Chow's power, which is further highlighted by the fact that HöST and Chow willingly accept that their operations create what Vivian G. Shinall has described as "expendable bodies," a term that

"delineat[es] those who are [deemed] nonessential to society" (17). While a small, rich percentage of the population lives "walled in" in the comfort and safety of Saltwater City's glass towers, venturing into the streets only "to do things they wouldn't be allowed to do in the glass towers" (Lai 153), the general population is progressively decimated, not only by the flu but also by precarious living conditions. Clearly belonging to this latter group, Kora's family lives without secure access to such necessities as potable water and sufficient food, surviving mostly through subsistence farming on their rooftop garden, which is also limited since the soil is almost completely depleted. While harvesting potatoes with her uncle, Kora must face the realization that new, fertile earth is unobtainable to them because "[t]he wet market farmers want renminbi, a currency no one in the Ko family earns" (23). Moreover, most of the potatoes are "gnarled and slimy" and infested with "wireworms" (23), so that subsistence seems to move slowly but steadily towards starvation. In addition to material goods, knowledge has also been privatized in Saltwater City and is only available to those who can access the satellites Chang and Eng, where common knowledge and historical information is stored.[2] Inhabitants of Saltwater City get piecemeal access by buying and trading "memory scales" (23), which are fish-scale sized microchips that connect directly to the brain and deliver knowledge on specific subjects, such as the phases of the moon (23), "medicine" (207), historical events, and other pieces of information about "the world that was" (29).

The lives of ordinary people in Saltwater City are thus continuously subjected to the less tangible but no less pernicious forms of violence connected to their "expendability." Building on Shinall's concept, the notion of "expendability" as we use it here relates to concepts such as Zygmund Bauman's notion of "wasted lives," that is to say, the lives of populations rendered superfluous in modern societies. It is also connected to Achille Mbembe's understanding of "necropolitics" as the state's power under colonialism (and similarly oppressive regimes) "to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not"

[2] The fact that Lai chose to name the pair of satellites after the conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, born in 1811 in Thailand (then Siam), points to the complex legacies of colonial, racialized, and class oppressions. The twins were frequently "exhibited" as curiosities in the so-called freak shows when they moved to the United States in 1829. However, they also became rich while touring the US and Canada, adopted American citizenship, and became slave-owners. It is also a point in the narrative, like many others, that emphasizes the long durée of oppressive legacies which will not disappear unless they are actively acknowledged, addressed, and changed. That their names now endure in the form of satellites also illustrates the ways in which historical knowledge in the narrative world has become severed from its origins and morphed into new forms, similarly to the mutated endurance of pop-songs in the teachings of the Grist sisters (also see Section three of this article).

(27), and to Judith Butler's discussions of "grievable" versus "ungrievable" life. In *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), she explains that "a life has to be grievable—that is, its loss has to be conceptualizable *as a loss*" (59, italics in original) to safeguard that life from violence and destruction. She adds that frequently, however, lives are framed as "ungrievable, not only by those responsible for taking the life, but also by those that live in a world where the presumption is that such lives are always vanishing, that this is simply the way things go" (74). Shinall, who critically examines *ecoracism* and the normalization of *embodied toxicity* of "racial minorities and impoverished communities" (17) in Indigenous contexts, moreover, draws on Rob Nixon's concept of *slow violence* and Julia Sze's writing on environmental racism to examine the notion of disposability of lives that are not registered as worth safeguarding. She observes the close connection between the "increasing environmental degradation of the spaces in which expendable bodies reside, and how these bodies have ultimately suffered from embodied toxicity due to the toxic conditions of their environments" (17-18). This interconnection between environmental degradation, toxicity, and expandability is also apparent in *The Tiger Flu*.

While there are few concrete explanations as to how exactly society reached TAO (time after oil), it becomes clear just how polluted this world is when Kora notes that the rain is so acidic it burns holes into clothing (Lai 26) and that a "heavy layer of pollution" (28) pushes down on the city at almost all times. One of the rare moments when readers do receive a glimpse into the history that brought about the precarious conditions of 2145 occurs when Kora shares a collective drug-induced memory-vision which illustrates connections of tiger bone wine production (which turns out to be the origin of the flu) to climate change and to the precarious and toxic living conditions of the novel's present:

> Happy revellers drink from crystal glasses at first, mouth to spigot as addiction deepens. Then the same vinterers and revellers waste away in overstuffed hospitals and clinics from Albuquerque to Seoul to Kinshasa to New York City. The tigers pad softly into the night and then the room fills with the roar of another crumbling. Vast cliffs and towers of the polar ice calve into the warming sea […] Oceans swell and rise to engulf whole cities. The denizens of Saltwater City construct a massive wall of earth to protect themselves. The earth's angry maw gapes to swallow those outside […] (210-211).

Not only do consumerism, climate change, and the flu itself become closely connected in these brief "history lessons," the vision also once again exposes how the lives of those left outside the city walls to die in the floods have been rendered expendable to those trying to save themselves within the city.

Constantly underlining, in this way, the persistent links of the past to the future, even in this seemingly radically altered world, the narrative

makes clear that patriarchal structures still pervade society, despite the increasing absence of men. While women are largely the only ones left to keep society going due to the pandemic flu, Isabelle Chow only inherits HöST's corporate empire once all her male relatives have succumbed to the disease (14). Once in charge, she simply keeps extending the company's power through the same gatekeeping mechanisms (privatized knowledge) and exploitation of labor that her father and her uncle employed before her. This can be seen, for example, in HöST's newest project, LïFT, which offers the possibility of "uploading" one's consciousness onto the mainframe satellite of Eng. The option of leaving one's body behind to "live" eternally in a virtual utopia is highly tempting, especially to those most likely to die of the flu. But even this allegedly new form of life reproduces patriarchal structures of oppression and fosters toxic forms of masculinity. Kora first learns about the "upload" when her brother's friend Stash, whom she intensely dislikes, insists on giving her a glimpse of the *Quay d'Espoir*, the virtual reality created by HöST. Via a small disk, he establishes contact with his uploaded friend Oscar, who immediately dives into a speech about all the new world has to offer, gushing, "You're going to love it up here. We're strong the way we were before. There are cars like the old days. And steak and beer, and girls, man, thousands of chiquitas like you would not believe," which he follows by "drop[ping] his pants and shak[ing] his floppy wang at Stash" (126). The virtual world of LïFT thus presents a nostalgic return to "the old days" which seems to be structured around heterosexual male fantasies and stereotypical notions of patriarchal masculinity.

When Oscar exposes himself, Stash hastily apologizes to Kora for his friend's sexism, saying, "I'm sorry Oscar is such a pig. We aren't all, you know" (127). Yet his behavior toward Kora calls this statement into question. Only a few weeks prior, as readers already know, Stash "surprised" Kora on the rooftop garden by hugging her hard from behind and then "lick[ing] her face with his white tongue" (15) as she tries to push him away. Much like his friend and perhaps worse than him, Stash thus embodies toxic masculinity and shows sexual aggression toward Kora, which in his case is not only virtual but physical.

The fact that the men of Saltwater City still engage in the same sexist behaviors as before the flu is also confirmed through an outsider's perspective. When Kirilow, who is utterly unfamiliar with the company of men because she has spent all her life in Grist Village, arrives in the city (in search of hidden Grist sisters), she must negotiate being exposed to the male gaze for the first time. When a man falls into step next to her, Kirilow considers the implications of the situation for what the city may do to her understanding of herself: "I never thought about my looks until this

particular man looked. Is that how it's done in this decaying city?" (201). She immediately dislikes it:

> Old Glorybind taught me what women are. I know how humans doubled in the time before, how they still do in Saltwater City. Technically speaking, we Grist sisters have the same bodies they do. He touches my arm and an unexpected electricity runs through me. 'Go away, or I'll hurt you.' I walk faster. He follows me. (201)

Kirilow establishes here that no matter her self-identification, she is treated like a woman of the city because she looks like one. Her experience on the city's streets also confirms that even in a world in which almost all men are sick or dead, they still expect their power over women to remain intact.

Because she is unused to the male gaze and any form of interaction with men, an uncomfortable overlap between flirting and harassment becomes apparent through her eyes. Chloe Dunston observes that in Lai's narrative, "the situation of frailty and viral toxicity in the physical masculine body also more profoundly signals men's historical toxicity, to humans and to earth, which they have achieved repeatedly through hegemonic masculinity" (n. p.). She concludes that "Stash and other men embody toxicity literally through disease and figuratively through masculinity—both of which are, in fact, escapable" (n. p.). In alignment with Duston's perspective, Chiara Xausa argues via Susan Watkins that Lai's novel is one of several recent feminist sci-fi works that turn away from nostalgia for past societal structures to highlight instead critically "the relationship that exists between structural inequalities generated by patriarchy, misogyny and racism and issues such as climate change, global capitalism, and technoscience" (25). The significance of this connection is confirmed when towards the end of the novel, Kora finds out more about Isabelle Chow's plans for LïFT, which promises those who complete the upload "*life after life*" (203), an eternal virtual life after they have given up their physical existence: to make this virtual world "feel real" (73), it needs Grist sister clone DNA, because without it, the experiment has stalled at "eighty-five percent verisimilitude" (114). In this way, the LïFT project relies on further bodily exploitation of the Grist sisters' bodies. Kora observes how six men

> […] usher a group of [Grist] women into an empty elevator. Docile as sheep, eyes emitting green vapour, the women step unquestioning past the sliding doors. The doors reel shut behind them. The numbers of the little dial begin to ascend. Then the doors of the elevator beside it slide open. The foul odour of ammonia, sweat, and rotten onions fills the room, and water gushes out the elevator doors. There is something in it. A writhing, flapping mass of fish, interspersed with clots of red. Blood? The water floods away into a deep gutter at the elevators' edge. (213)

The bodies of the Grist women and others are literally "fed" into the elevator—their minds are uploaded, and their bodies turned into fish, which are subsequently eaten by the remaining population of Saltwater City (239, 248). At the same time, and in contrast to others that freely choose the upload, the Grist sisters do not believe in virtual existence. For them, "[t]his strange killing and rebirthing is [Saltwater City] business. We Grist sisters have no faith in such things. If the body is dead, then so is the woman, whatever these occultists [inhabitants of Saltwater City] think they have copied" (232). With the forced upload of the Grist sisters, the kind of capitalist exploitation that occurs everywhere in the novel turns into cannibalism, the ultimate form of transgressive consumption.

The lives of the Grist women are made expendable for no other reason than the fact that those in power thrive off of the flu. To make matters even worse, Kora's brother, K2, reveals to Kora that the epidemic continues because it is actively kept alive by the corporation. He explains that the tiger-bone wine factories are still "operating smooth as silk. […] Why do you think the flu epidemic keeps getting worse? They are making it worse and trying to export it to the UMK [United Middle Kingdom]. It's not just hangover trauma from some time long past. It's happening over and over again, right now" (226-227). To make Lïft more profitable, HöST keeps infecting people on purpose (229). Consequently, a huge number of sick men are uploaded in the hope of being able to cheat certain death. The Grist sisters are thus not the only ones who become victims of corporate "progress." Unlike the men, however, the Grist sisters do not get to choose or to refuse the upload. After all their DNA is needed to render the virtual environment more realistic. Their role as a useful commodity to HöST highlights how the intersections of gender, race, and class render some bodies more "expendable" than others.

Via the transgression of cannibalism, the narrative also raises questions about the ramifications of expendability beyond the realm of humans (or humanoid clones). The consumption of human flesh, "disguised" as or transformed into fish, and Kora's absolute revulsion once she realizes just what she is offered for food recalls an event from earlier in the novel when Kora experienced a bout of violent vomiting after she gave in to her hunger and ate a bowl of stew made of her pet goat (and friend) Delphine (Lai 67). Yet, in the rest of the narrative, animals are consumed at various points with enjoyment. Those isolated counterpoints serve to highlight the cultural customs that render animals' lives expendable as a norm, be it because they are turned into food or clothing. When Kora's family urges her to join the Cordova Dancing School because it could presumably secure her continued survival and access to enough food, Kora, for example, also learns about "catcoats" that render its wearers invisible. Made by the headmistress out of kittens,

which are pounded to fit the human form, catcoats are still "alive" to the extent that they can feel pain, and they purr when they feel human body heat (153). *The Tiger Flu* here not only evokes fantastic stories about magical objects, but it is also reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's famous science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*,[3] which questions cultural attitudes towards animals. Like Dick's novel, *The Tiger Flu* raises questions about what behavior toward other sentient beings is acceptable and what is considered cruel, repulsive, or taboo. *The Tiger Flu* here moreover links the ways in which humans are reduced to their consumable bodies to how non-human animals are treated as expendable all the time. Lai thus draws attention not only to cultural attitudes, but also to ethical questions, and to material inequalities which complicate any simple answers to those ethical questions.

At the school, Kora also quickly learns that her own survival is predicated on killing others, or at least on not caring if they die. As part of her "training" she is more or less coerced by two other girls to shoot an old man while the group is raiding a so-called "plague house" for food (140). Terrified at having pulled the trigger when the man tried to stop her, Kora "runs out, over the heap of decaying bodies, and into the sunlight. Modesta and Soraya are there on the black lawn, laughing their heads off" (140). Testing how hardened new recruits already are seems to be a firm part of being initiated into the group of dance students. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of Kora's first experiences after arriving at the Cordova Dancing School is a small group of girls hazing her while repeatedly taunting her with the question, "what's the worst thing you've done for food?" before forcing her to eat her own vomit (98). Although her family advertised the school to Kora as a "safe space" from the perils of Saltwater City, it turns out that even within the school community, violence is used to keep individuals in line. This example shows that even presumed "safe havens" like the dancing school are pervaded by the structures of violence that organize survival in Saltwater City.

The fact that neither of the two narrative perspectives in the novel is omniscient limits the readers' perspective on the larger political structures of the world depicted, structures that remain very difficult to discern throughout the novel. Travel between quarantine rings (i.e., different zones) is strictly controlled and frequently prevented by armed militias. When Kirilow and Kora contemplate how they might escape Saltwater City towards the end of the narrative, a friend warns them that the border

[3] In Dick's novel almost all real animals are extinct. Therefore, to possess a real animal is an enormous luxury; most people only own mechanical animals. However, owning an animal of some kind is deemed essential because taking care of an animal is seen as a moral necessity for humans in the narrative's post-apocalyptic world.

to the second quarantine ring is only open "to a lucky few. Lots of people are dying or disappearing on that border. The UMK doesn't want Cosmopolitan Earth to take in too many refugees from Saltwater Flats. They've sent in military police" (242). The people of the UMK are the only ones who still possess nuclear arms—and thus they are feared by others. Still it is unclear whether any of the regions mentioned in the narrative have democratically elected governments or whether they are all in the hands of corporate family dynasties, such as the one of Isabelle Chow. What becomes clear in this part of the novel is that poor inhabitants like Kora, the Cordova girls, and many others who struggle to subsist in the city are subject to violence on the part of state-like technocratic powers that have replaced former national structures. The inhabitants' vulnerability is exacerbated because they do not have access to reliable information about the larger power struggles and political conflicts between governing authorities.

Here, as elsewhere in the novel, the present condition of the world is not portrayed as unique or disconnected from previous history but as a continuation of what came before. Having been drugged during her escape from Saltwater City, Kora is overtaken by overwhelming anxiety. She begins to scream until "she becomes the scream, the howl of the lost dog at night, the scream of a decade past, and the decade prior to that, the trail of tiger flu in reverse" (274). As she screams, her vision reaches backward from "the emergence of the quarantine rings, the first epidemic, the tiger wine craze, the end of oil, the launch of Chang and Eng, the expulsion of the Grist sisters, their legalization for labour on Pacific Gyre Island […]" (274) all the way back to

> the consolidation of the United Middle Kingdom from China and all the little Asian countries that surround it, the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, the birth of Chan Ling's great-grandmother to a young Hakka woman in the village of Happy Valley in the early days of the British colonial administration, the Opium Wars, the fall of the Ming dynasty […] screaming the scream of her long history. (274-275)

Via the physicality of her scream, this history is presented as an embodied—and also as a gendered and racialized—inheritance. She "becomes the scream," which illustrates the persistence of past violence and oppression in the present. In this way, Lai once again subtly depicts how the present world emerged out of the past, by emphasizing connections between colonial occupation, the destruction of nature, consumerist greed, and the existence of the tiger flu.

3. Construction & Doubting Utopia in an All-Female Society: The Grist Sisterhood

The world Lai has created in *The Tiger Flu* is one where—instead of taking the poor, the racialized, and disenfranchised—the virus primarily affects the white, the rich, the men, the ones in power, and those who associate

with them. In other words, it would appear that the conditions in the novel are such that they enable the creation of a non-white, all-female or female-dominated society as the basis for a feminist utopia. As the previous section has outlined, however, the environments that Kora encounters in the novel (Saltwater City, Saltwater Flats, the Cordova Dancing School) are anything but utopian or marked by gender equality: patriarchal structures have survived, and violence is persistent. The potential for a utopian all-female society is still arguably present in the Grist village and its inhabitants, the Grist sisters, which serve as an oppositional alternative to the post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic world of Saltwater City and the quarantine rings.

The Grist sisters are introduced to the readers by the second protagonist Kirilow in Chapter 2, directly following the exposition of the Saltwater City storyline in Chapter 1. The Grist sisters originated from the genetically modified parthenogenic clones of a group of Asian women, who were exiled from Saltwater City three generations earlier. They fled to a region in the fourth quarantine ring, and set up an all-female community. Historically, another form of expendability is thus embodied by the Grist sisters. Since they were originally clones manufactured by the Jemini Group as workers for the HöST factories, their lives were never registered as lives worth safeguarding. They were brought into the world as useful but expendable bodies to exploit their workforce; their individual lives are not valued, and the possibility of their untimely deaths is considered as a calculated risk. Alexander Pedersen reads "the Grist sisters […] as a critique of global capitalism's exploitation of 'disposable'" cheap labor, but also, specifically, of "dehumanised Asian workers" (23), a link established via the Grist sisters' Chinese lineage.[4] In parallel to how the expendability of Grist sisters is explored in the passages set in Saltwater City that deal with the Lïft project, the history of the Grist sisters presents their disposability from the very beginning as gendered.

In the novel's present, however, the focus is on the make-up of the (all-female) community the Grist sisters established after they escaped from the company. In stark contrast to Saltwater City, the Grist village and its inhabitants are posthuman and live in close touch with nature. Not only have they developed a mode of reproduction that is based on the physical re-growth of organs, their lifeworld is also characterized by states of complex embodied selfhood, natural environments in which human and

[4] Lai's focus here is also specifically anchored in British Columbia's and Vancouver's history of xenophobia and specifically anti-Chinese-racism, which does not lie in the past, as anti-Asian hate crimes have again been surging since the Covid-19 pandemic (Canadian Human Rights Commission). This specific connection adds another way in which *The Tiger Flu* exposes enduring ties between the past and the present (and the future) that trouble clean-slate fantasies of utopian thinking.

non-human agents interact and coexist in harmony, and organic detritus that becomes material for repurposed clothing or homes: tents, pillows, blankets, and gauzes are made from mushroom fibers, and instead of a net to catch prey, the Grist sister use a "womb bomb" (45). Moreover, they have intentionally detached themselves from all kinds of technology from "the time before" (201), and they follow a religious mythology, the Religion of the Mother, which puts a particular emphasis on "maintenance and oral transmission of knowledge," but also on an "inevitable imbrication and inseparability of the human body and mind" (Pascual 101), thus establishing a strict opposition to the upload of knowledge and consciousnesses the satellites Chang and Eng enable in Saltwater City.

Taken together, these innovative and posthuman features of the Grist sisterhood—and thus their continuous positioning as an opposition to the inhabitants of Saltwater City throughout the novel—have often led to the interpretation that *The Tiger Flu* "celebrat[es] the Grist sisterhood's guiding principles" (Murray 13). Arguably, the Grist sisterhood presents a female apocalyptic alternative that stands in contrast to narratives such as *The Road,* because it replaces "colonial and patriarchal narratives of paternity and conquest with metaphors of mother-daughter relationships" (Watkins 13, also see Murray). Yet, identifying the Grist sisterhood as the female utopian alternative to still existing patriarchal structures in Saltwater City also erases some of the problematic aspects of this community. This holds true in particular when focusing on the use of violence and the newly established (gender) hierarchies in Grist village.

A first problematic aspect to be addressed is reproduction and the violent social relations it produces: the community of the Grist sisters consists of a queen, Radix Bupleuri, and three types of regular grist sisters: "grooms," "starfishes," and "doublers." Because only the "doublers" can reproduce parthenogenically and thus see to the survival of the community, it is the "grooms'" responsibility to cut organs from the so-called "starfish"-members of the community. Starfishes have the ability to regrow bodyparts and are expected to give them to the "doublers" to prolong their lives. When Kirilow introduces readers to her community, she points out that the Grist village where she lives only has one doubler left, Auntie Radix. Being a groom herself, Kirilow has to harvest organs from her beloved starfish Peristrophe Halliana to then provide them to Auntie Radix:

> Even if she is our last doubler, I don't want Auntie Radix to have Peristrophe Halliana's eyes. Auntie Radix already took Peristrophe Halliana's liver a week ago, and one of her kidneys four weeks before that. Auntie Radix says that it is the duty and nature of a starfish to give. I tell her it is the duty and nature of a doubler to know when to stop asking. (Lai 18)

This statement, which opens Chapter 2, makes clear from the very beginning that the new reproductive structures of the Grist village do not represent what Xausa in her discussion of the novel identifies as a "new paradigm for care work, which must be considered not as unpaid and feminized domestic labour but as collective care" (31). While the Grist sisters work as a collective, Kirilow nevertheless showcases the costs and pain the reproductive mechanisms entail for individual members of the collective. For example, when Kirilow cuts Peristrophe Halliana's eyes, this procedure is assisted both by the heavy usage of drugs, the so-called "forget-me-do" (Lai 21), and religious chanting, which is meant "to push down the dread that roils in my [Kirilow's] belly" (20). When kept in perspective, the hierarchy in the Grist sisterhood is thus one that resembles—in uncanny ways—that of their origin as female clones to be exploited for their productive labor to the point of death. In Grist village, starfishes, such as Peristrophe Halliana, essentially serve as living biobanks for the other Grist member, and doublers take on the roles of surrogates, who are separated from their offspring soon after birth and only kept alive to produce further offspring.

At first, the loving relationship that groom Kirilow has with her starfish partner Peristrophe Halliana might mask the painful reality that the Grist sisters are bound to repeat the exploitative structures from which they have tried to flee by escaping the company. Eventually, the question of the "expendability" of Grist sisters' bodies surfaces again, however, this time in their community rather than in the corporate world of HöST. In Chapter 8, Auntie Radix needs a new heart and Kirilow is asked to take Peristrophe Halliana's and, thus, to kill her:

> Glorybind Groundsel told me, if the Grist is dying down to the last doubler, her word is flesh, her word is god. You can't say no.
>
> But all my fibres scream it. (34)

According to the Grist reproduction hierarchy, when doublers are at risk of dying, the starfishes' lives become expendable, and personal relationships to that doubler, such in the case of Peristrophe Halliana and Kirilow, are not allowed to matter. When Kirilow cannot force herself to take Peristrophe Halliana's heart, and Auntie Radix dies, she is, therefore, cast out by other Grist sisters as a "traitor" (62).[5] With Kirilow, *The Tiger Flu* thus introduces a protagonist who, from the beginning of the novel, deviates from her own society's norms and raises questions about the apparent utopian structures of the Grist sisterhood.

[5] Notably, this development has haunting parallels to the body economy of the Jemini Group and HöST, where the (virtual) lives of some are priced over the physical lives of others.

While the sisterhood at first glance is in stark positive contrast with the unsustainable top-down capitalist ways of Saltwater City, Kirilow's pain illustrates the cost of this "utopia." By foregrounding her story and perspective, the novel hence calls into question the familiar "good" vs. "evil," or "utopian" vs. "dystopian" narrative form that is particularly common in patriarchal "end of the world" narratives. While the Grist sisterhood certainly imagines various innovative procedures and "technologies" that showcase how they "co-habit with the animal and vegetable worlds in egalitarian and harmonious ways" (Xausa 29), when it comes to survival, their community structures are exposed as being anything but egalitarian and harmonious. This observation is valid not only for structures within the Grist sisterhood but also for its relationship to outsiders, as exposed by the following scene where Kirilow encounters a "Salty," an inhabitant of Saltwater City:

> There's a red flash of hair. It's a biped, like us. One of those sneaky creeps from Saltwater City? But unlike us, tall, pale, and gangly. Our genes don't express like that. We manifest crow-black hair, autumn-leaf skin, and short legs. […] It stumbles into a clearing. Gotcha! I throw a knife at it, neatly severing its left hand. (Lai 36-37)

While Kirilow initially considers a certain similarity between herself and the stranger, she eventually uses the physical difference between them as her justification for denying the humanity of the stranger. Consequently, in her view, violence is warranted. When she tries to throw a knife at the Salty in order to kill it, she however only injures the stranger's hand, and the Salty is able to run away. When Kirilow sees the Salty again a couple of days later and manages to capture it, hatred and the wish to hurt the stranger once again overcomes her ("I yank the womb bomb tighter", "Whenever I want you, all I have to do is preen" [44], "At least let me bleed it a little" [45]). It is only when Kirilow and her "mother double," Glorybind Groundsel, realize that the Salty's hand has grown back, potentially making it a starfish, that Kirilow begins to acknowledge the humanity of the Salty. This value however depends on the Salty's immediate reproductive worth for the community.

While Kirilow has been taught all her life that inhabitants from Saltwater City pose a threat, the fact that the intruder might be a starfish could increase the chances of survival for the Grist community, who at this point of the narrative have not only just lost their last doubler, Auntie Radix, but also only have one starfish left. Notably, Kirilow's taught hatred against Salties still eventually gains the upper hand: "But you can't stop me from hating. You yourself told me the stories—of how they rounded our grandmothers up by the thousands […] Why should you care if I hurt it or not?" (45). She eventually convinces the other Grist sisters that the Salty "came to infect" (72) the Grist sisterhood, drugs it with forgetting

tea, and takes it back to the forest to "dump it unceremoniously into the dirt" (72). The hatred, which is mostly based on a historical hostility against Salties and hence knowledge Kirilow has not experienced first-hand, thus eventually prevents her from considering the stranger as someone whose starfish capabilities could help the Grist community. In a plot twist, only hours after the Salty was released back into the forest, Peristrophe Halliana, the Grist village's last starfish, dies.

In parallel to other scenes in the novel, the encounter between Kirilow and the stranger exemplifies that when the Grist sisters say that they "hold all that remains of the old world's knowledge in our raw brains" (20), this also applies, at least in part, to problematic hierarchies and prejudices against outsiders. In some uncanny ways, the Grist sisterhood is still linked to its Saltwater origins—and thus also to the world of the past. While the linkages are only in some cases made explicit, such as in the examples above, the Grist sisters also sometimes point them out themselves ("The Grist may have evolved beyond its former masters, but we are not immune to their illnesses" [48]). It is striking in this context that the first chapters narrated through Kirilow's voice also contain numerous (pop-)cultural references to the "time before," many of which point to old power hierarchies and systems of exploitation. The references the Grist sisters use are, however, always several steps removed from their original contexts. While the phrase "diamonds are a girl's best friend," the famous line from Carol Channing's eponymous 1949 song, helps Kirilow to remember that her whetstone is made from diamonds stolen off the fingers of dead married women, a reference to a popular commercial reminds her that her scalpels must be disinfected at least twice so that they "shimmer clean, a lean mean clean […] like the lemon muscle man from time before'" (22). Other "chants" Kirilow uses during the procedure of cleaning her knife and cutting out Peristrophe Halliana's eyes include "The first cut is the sleekest" (22, cf. Rod Stewart's "The First Cut is the Deepest") and "Those are pearls that were her eyes" (22, cf. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*).[6] As much as these veiled and repurposed pop-cultural references are still recognizable if one is familiar with them, all the phrases Kirilow was taught in the Grist sisterhood now belong to the so-called Religion of the Mother, an ideology which is a powerful guide for Kirilow that also keeps her from scrutinizing her life and her role in the community. Drawing on the personal experiences of Grandma Chan Ling (the founder and late matriarch of Grist Village and an escapee of Jemini's labs) in addition to pop-cultural "wisdom" of the past, the Grist sisters thus use a partly imaginary, but certainly selective and distorted version of the past to help them remember lessons that will in turn help them to survive

[6] Note how these references also perpetuate traditional patriarchal and heterosexual notions of gender relations.

in the present—a process that is problematized through the protagonist Kirilow and her actions.

One of the epigraphs of *The Tiger Flu* that further underscores such a critical reading of the intertextual references is from Monique Wittig's 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*, another radical feminist utopia featuring an all-female community:

> They say that at the point they have reached they must examine the principle that has guided them […]. They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture. (epigraph)

What Lai emphasizes here is that communities such as Wittig's Guérillères or the Grist sisters, which are pitted against highly patriarchal dystopian societies, are not per se completely oppositional, non-patriarchal, and/or utopian. Instead, such societies, too, are at risk of perpetuating knowledge structures and behaviors from "a dead culture" (epigraph), that is to say, from the patriarchal society from which they evolved. Simply reading the Grist sisterhood as the oppositional and thus prototypical all-female utopian alternative to Saltwater City thus obscures that violence, harmful hierarchies, and prejudices still exist even in the Grist sisterhood and that all three are woven into the very religion that guides this community. In turn, these aspects complicate any unilateral understanding of the Grist sisterhood as a utopian alternative to Saltwater City.

4. Conclusion: A Queer Posthuman Utopia?

Apart from writing against male-dominated post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, *The Tiger Flu* also draws on familiar strategies by feminist authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge Piercy, and Monica Wittig. Not only does the novel feature two non-white female-presenting protagonists, whose individual quest narratives are resolved in a commitment to relationality, it also features the all-female posthuman community of Grist Village as a potential alternative to Saltwater City, where patriarchal structures and violence have outlasted large-scale social upheaval. But while *The Tiger Flu* adapts and innovates such traditional dystopian and feminist utopian elements, it ultimately challenges the original paradox of dystopia/utopia and thoroughly complicates the notion of a new and different post-pandemic world as a necessarily worse *or* better world: emphasizing the continuance of violent and oppressive structures in *both* Saltwater City and Grist Village, the novel highlights the necessity, even in this seemingly radically altered world, to reckon with the lasting ties of the present to patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures of the past. Instead of emphasizing the simplistic utopianism of one solution for all, *The Tiger Flu* works to interrogate several older utopian and dystopian models and the traditional

ideologies on which they rely. By showing how such traditional ideologies are recycled, modified, and reused in post-pandemic knowledge structures, the plot emphasizes utopian possibilities as a continual aspiration for communities rather than as an endpoint at which one can arrive once and for all.

Particularly the ways in which the individual quest narratives of the protagonists ultimately become entwined are indicative of *The Tiger Flu*'s own quest of probing different models of dystopian/utopian traditions without necessarily settling on one. After both the last doubler and the last starfish have died and HöST attacked Grist Village, Kirilow eventually decides to travel to Saltwater City to find a new starfish, as the Grist sisterhood otherwise faces extinction. She meets Kora at the Cordova Dancing School and learns that the school, like Grist Village, was founded by a group of clones who escaped the Jemini factories. When Kirilow amputates Kora's hand after it becomes infected, it grows back, revealing that Kora is a Grist sister as well and a starfish. However, Kora at first is anything but willing to join Kirilow and rather accepts an invitation from her brother K2 to a "tiger party" held at the Pacific Pearl Parkade hoping to be reunited with her family. It is there that Kora learns that even her own brother has betrayed her and realizes she must flee from Saltwater City. In the end, it is thus neither Kora's nor Kirilow's world, or rather worldviews, that succeed or supersede the other; only through eventual compromise and collaboration, the two protagonists manage to survive and escape. When Kora gets hit and injured fatally during their flight, Kirilow uses both her skills as a groom *and* instructions from one of Isabelle Chow's chip-like knowledge scales to reprogram the LïFT and upload Kora's mind to save her consciousness, since she cannot save her body:

> The wormy scale teaches my fingers something they didn't know before. At last, I pull my bloody hands out from the meat of the LïFT. 'Here goes nothing!'
>
> […] I kneel and stroke the dying girl's hair. 'It's going to be okay,' I tell her. 'In just a few minutes, you will see.' (255)

While Kora and Kirilow start off in the novel as two protagonists from opposing worlds, the resolution of *The Tiger Flu* presents them in a cautious care relationship with each other, thus connecting the two worlds.

Notably, these notions of collaboration and care are also upheld in the last chapter, entitled "The Kora Tree," which presents the reader with an outlook to the future: after her upload, Kora's mind was downloaded again and transferred into a so-called starfish tree: "*Bombyx Mori and Kirilow Groundsel worked for many years to make me what I am and to seed the entire Starfish Orchard that nurtures the Grist Garden"* (328,

italics in original). In a truly posthuman fashion, the conscious Kora Tree ends up serving the newly established New Grist Village as an organ donor, thus securing the survival of the Grist sisterhood. That this development is understood as a truly new form of existence is also marked by a change in narration: most of the last chapter is narrated through the Kora Tree, which "vibrates language" (327) to a group of young Grist sisters who sit underneath her branches (this vibrating is marked in italics). Notably, the Kora Tree not only explains her function to the young members of the Grist community but also once again points out "the ills of a hetero-patriarchal society that used to exert violence of every kind upon its female members" (Pascual 109), ills that can perhaps finally be left behind by the next generation of Grist women.

In contrast to "old" Grist Village before the planting of Kora Tree, the establishment of New Grist Village is narrated almost like a return to Eden: "the little doublers turn to admire the Starfish Orchard that surrounds them in a leafy, comforting dance of light and shadow" (Lai 262). Seemingly, the closing chapter of *The Tiger Flu* offers up a pastoral refuge, as contrasted to the "dirty garden" of Saltwater City (325). Unlike the many "betrayed Edens" (Buell 647) which nature writing, environmental literature, and climate fiction frequently offer, this ending appears truly utopian in some ways: an all-female, post-patriarchal world in which the "starfish tree" grows replacement organs, effectively abolishing the necessity to harvest organs from Grist sisters and thus older forms of reproductive/restorative violence. In the new and isolated Grist Village, old structures of corporate exploitation, patriarchal norms, and heterosexual reproduction finally seem to lie outside the sisters' realm of concern.

The ending thus offers a glimpse into a queer, posthuman future that raises the question of whether *The Tiger Flu* settles on a final utopian vision, after all. And yet, even in this presumably utopian world, Lai includes space for ambivalence, as the former world still has not entirely disappeared. Both Kora and Kirilow are still marked by what they have lost. While Kirilow dreams of reuniting with her beloved Peristrophe Halliana, the Kora Tree likewise betrays a yearning for the past. Just as Kora gets ready to resume her teaching of the young Grist sisters, "[a]t the very top of her branches a little tendril lights up momentarily, calling out to no one. She wills it to dim" (329). The utopian present is not free of history, at least not yet. This impression is further reinforced by the last sentence of the final chapter, which reads: "[F]ar beyond the earth, in the deepest reaches of space, the old communications satellite Eng lurches along her still-deepening orbit, a long ellipsis that will take her a thousand years to complete" (329-330). Eng's ever-expanding orbit has been a reminder since the beginning of the novel that humanity's technoscientific

projects are frequently deeply flawed, because when Eng moves too far away from Earth, the knowledge and consciousnesses it stores will no longer be accessible. At the same time, the suggestion that the satellite will reappear in the distant future is also a reminder that the new Grist Village in all its radical new existence might rely on ignoring the outside world and the potential return of patriarchal and other exploitative structures at its own risk. Saltwater City, Cosmopolitan Earth, and other political entities continue to exist and operate at a distance from the localized utopian community of the Grist sisters, even if Kora narrates them as a thing of the past. By insisting on these ambiguities, Lai teases readers with the possibility of utopian closure that *The Tiger Flu*, however, ultimately denies. If at all possible, utopia is definitely not envisioned as a place, though maybe as an ongoing process. In this sense, possibly the most utopian quality of the new Grist Village is the sincere acknowledgment of existence as not only necessarily relational but also ideally compassionate, when Kora states, almost like a new maxim for the community, "You must remember my pain, as I remember yours" (327).

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