

# *The Tiger Flu: A Critical Posthumanist Response to the Illusion of Transhumanism*



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**Abstract:** Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018) is an example of speculative fiction set in a dystopian context of climate devastation marked by a struggle for the global control of knowledge and the economy on the part of two opposed technological corporations in a futuristic North American region dominated by Old China. This article analyzes how the novel builds a critique upon the excesses and potential risks of current transhumanist philosophy, engaged in the technological enhancement of human beings, and the concurrent social exclusion and exploitation of the underprivileged minorities barred from access to it. My aim is to demonstrate that the ethical alternative proposed by the novel embraces the postulates of critical posthumanism defended by leading theorists like N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, who put forth a post-anthropocentric position of embodied embeddedness as opposed to other posthumanist approaches, like cybernetic posthumanism, which vindicated the transcendence of the human mind by dislodging it from the body.

**Keywords:** Larissa Lai, *The Tiger Flu*, transhumanism, critical posthumanism, embodiment.

## 1. Introduction

Published in 2018 by the Canadian-American author and academic of Chinese ascent Larissa Lai, *The Tiger Flu* is a speculative fiction novel set in the period 2145-2301 (Gregorian calendar) or 127-269 TAO (Time After Oil, 127 years after the complete exhaustion of oil and its derivatives in 2018). The plot takes

place in Cascadia,<sup>2</sup> more specifically in Saltwater City<sup>3</sup> and in the four quarantine rings that surround it, with their respective militarized borders. These quarantine rings are meant to hinder the expansion of a pandemic—the so-called “tiger flu”—that affects male

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<sup>2</sup> Cascadia is a North American bioregion comprising the current U.S. states of Oregon and Washington, and the Canadian province of British Columbia.

<sup>3</sup> This name pays homage to the Cantonese name Haam Sui Fauh, “salt water city”, used by the earliest Chinese immigrants in Canada to allude to Vancouver (Cheng, 2018: n.p.).

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humans on a massive scale though not exclusively. Different territories fight for the military and political control of Cascadia: especially the United Middle Kingdom, which includes most of the Asian continent dominated by “Old China”, and the Cosmopolitan Earth Country, the nuclear power that controls the second quarantine ring. This dystopian context is marked by climate devastation: six great earthquakes have destroyed the world as we know it today; intense pollution has brought about acid rain that burns human skin and textiles; tropical trees grow spontaneously in traditionally cold cities owing to climate change; and food scarcity is one of the sharpest concerns and conditioning forces for the majority of the population.

In turn, Saltwater City is a highly technologized place where a bloody war is fought between two corporations for the control of the economy, technology, and information repositories. Two huge satellite computers, Chang and Eng,<sup>4</sup> orbit around the Earth, playing the astrophysical roles of the sun and the moon respectively while storing all the knowledge about “the time before” (Lai, 2018: 19). When the novel opens, Chang has become so old and obsolete that it is starting to fail, and Eng’s orbit is progressively expanding, thereby altering the tides and threatening to collide

against the Earth. The information gathered in both satellites can only be accessed through “tendrils of information scales” (12) that people can buy and insert in their own bodies so that they can connect with the satellites. As a consequence, important chunks or clusters of information are reserved to the exclusive access of the economic elites that can afford the most expensive and sophisticated implants.

The city is controlled by the Light Industry HöST Company, led by inventor and CEO Isabelle Chow, who designed and launched both satellites and also devised a method to separate the human body from the mind—discarding the former by uploading the latter to one of the huge satellite-computers where the people’s minds could keep on living as virtual entities. One of these two mechanisms is LiFT, an elevator that allows individuals to be uploaded to Chang, where their minds can inhabit a virtual city. Marcus Traskin stole LiFT and control over Chang from Chow before the system had been perfected. Therefore, Traskin is swindling his customers as their virtual lives are doomed to deteriorate and vanish in a short lapse of time. When Traskin took LiFT, Chow devised another method with the same purpose: minds are downloaded to Eng by means of a site of dark subterranean waters (the Dark Baths) that function as an interface. Access to the Dark Baths is located in a building known as the Archive of New Origins—“a place of memory. It holds the blueprints for everything animal, vegetable, and mineral that lived in the time before” (Lai, 2018: 276)—which is destroyed by a rocket towards the end of the novel. In the case of both LiFT and the Dark Baths, the process of transcending the mind is

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<sup>4</sup> Chang and Eng Bunker (1811- 1874) were two Siamese (Thai) conjoined twin brothers of Chinese ascent who moved to the United States in 1829 and became widely known to American and European audiences by their touring on freak shows. Their fame was such that the expression ‘Siamese twins’ became synonymous for conjoined twins in general. They made a fortune as slave-owners and had their own separate wives and families, fathering twenty-one children in all.



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carried out with the help of a drug called N-Lite (read *Enlight*, in a clearly ironic reference to the ideology of the Enlightenment and its privileging of Man's Reason) that dissolves human willpower.

The lucrative potential of both inventions rockets owing to the lethal threat the population is confronted with: the tiger flu, a virus spread by an addictive wine made of bones from the Caspian tiger, a species rescued from extinction by genetic manipulation of DNA extracted from a tiger rug. This act of genetic engineering was performed by Jemini, a company that brings back to life extinct animals and vegetables and propagates the virus through tiger farming and the production of the wine. Jemini also manufactures thousands of Asian women clones from the DNA of one single woman for the double purpose of exploiting them as labor force in Chow's implant factories and using them as subjects of techno-scientific experimentation by HöST and LiFT: hundreds of them are forced to take the lift, which returns their bodies transformed into heaps of dead fish and roses. However, as Jemini speculates with the price of these clones, which are essential for perfecting the upload and download systems, Traskin's and Chow's armies destroy a clandestine village in the fourth quarantine ring in order to kidnap its inhabitants and use them instead of the increasingly expensive clones. This is Grist Village, a community of "sisters" all descending from one clone that, three generations before, managed to lead the flight of a group of clones from the HöST factories and devised the way to reproduce by means of parthenogenesis. They set up then an all-female community, detached from the

technological developments of Saltwater City, and devoted to the maintenance and oral transmission of knowledge of the time before, given their lack of access to and rejection of the technology that connects to Chang and Eng. The Grist sisters also make use of elaborate natural medicines to guarantee their survival as a species, which is also ensured by the existence of starfish sisters, whose organs grow back in their bodies every time they are taken out and transplanted in the "doublers"—the reproductive sisters—that need them.

Taking into account all these details in the intricate plot of the novel, this article intends to analyze how *The Tiger Flu* builds up a critique of the excesses and potential dangers of present day transhumanist philosophy, engaged as it is in the enhancement of the human being through technological developments, a process which carries with it social exclusion and exploitation of the minorities that lack access to those alleged improvements. My aim is to show how the ethical alternative that the novel offers in the figure of the Grist Sisters embraces the postulates of critical posthumanism put forth by theorists like N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Sherryl Vint, who propose a post-anthropocentric position, embodied and embedded in a nature-culture continuum, as opposed to other approaches like cybernetic posthumanism—which aims at dislodging body from mind and the possibility of transferring and storing the latter into another (non-corporeal) medium.

In narratological terms, the novel is structured into five parts and forty-three chapters. Odd-numbered chapters are narrated by an omniscient external narrator, with a clear predominance of



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internal focalization by co-protagonist Kora Ko, a fifteen-year-old citizen of Asian ethnicity from Saltwater City, who does not know that she partly descends from a Grist sister on the maternal side, and, on the paternal one, from the man (her grandfather) who brought the Caspian tiger back from extinction and created the tiger flu. In contrast, even-numbered chapters are narrated autodiegetically by Kirilow Groundsel, co-protagonist and member of Grist Village, a nineteen-year-old “groom” whose role is to perform organ transplant surgery on the last starfish and the last doubler of the community: her wife Peristrophe Halliana and Radix Blupeuri, respectively. Radix dies because Kirilow refuses to take Peristrophe’s heart out when Radix needs it, and Peristrophe dies of the tiger flu, which reaches the village through a starfish arrived from the City. When the other Gristies are kidnapped in a military raid, Kirilow reluctantly goes to Saltwater City with the purpose of finding a clandestine Grist Commune: the Cordova Dancing School for Girls. There she gets acquainted with Kora Ko, who eventually proves to be a starfish.

### **2. Transhuman illusions in Saltwater City**

The term transhumanism was coined by Julian Huxley in 1957 and first defined in its current sense by Max More in 1990. Nick Bostrom, one of its leading figures and founders, describes it as “a loosely defined movement that [...] promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of

technology” (2005: 3). In line with European Enlightenment ideals like reason, progress, and rationality (Ferrando, 2020: 2), the fundamental aim of transhumanism as a cultural and philosophical movement is the “enhancement” of human beings, making up for their physical and intellectual limitations through science and technology. In this allegedly utopian project, technologically enhanced humans are considered transhuman beings immersed in a process aimed at the (unreachable) ideal of a post-human being that would leave behind every kind of human “imperfection” through technological, genetic, and biological modifications with the goal of prolonging the life span, improving physical and mental abilities, and increasing control over one’s own mind (Bostrom, 2005: 3). The means for transhuman enhancement include current developments like genetic engineering and IT, but also “anticipated future ones, such as molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence” (3). Therefore, rather than question what defines humanity, transhumanism can be considered an intensification of Humanist ideology (Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014: 17), embracing the old duality inherent to the human being in which, even though imperfect, the rational mind defines the person and their humanity, while the body becomes something to be enhanced or even transcended—and it is here that the concept of disembodiment comes into play.

In Lai’s novel, the enhancement of human beings through technology centers on control over knowledge or intellectual enhancement. The inhabitants of Saltwater City no longer cultivate their minds and memories by means of reading or studying; instead, they purchase



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implants of different prices that they can insert in their skulls and other body parts in order to remotely access the information stored in Chang and Eng. Depending on their relative wealth, the population can afford different types of information tendrils and scales; many of these, like the ones worn by protagonist Kora Ko, are so poorly made that they cause infections and lice, and are exchanged for others in a kind of black market, “in a desperate attempt to know and so fix the broken world” (Lai, 2018: 41).

The close connection between technology and extreme capitalism in *The Tiger Flu* has two sides. On the one hand, when HöST privatizes access to Chang and Eng there is an information blackout, making access to knowledge available only to the economic elites. As a reaction to this, Markus Traskin takes Chang away from Isabelle Chow and covers his whole body with scales, becoming “the largest public mainframe in Saltwater City” (209). On the other hand, it is for the assembly-line manufacturing of HöST microchips, scales, and implants that thousands of women clones are created by Jemini and sold as labor force, deprived of any human right as, technically speaking, they are not human since they are the product of lab creation rather than human procreation.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned above, the exploitation of these clones reaches

further, as they are also used for testing the technical improvements of the technological procedures to dislodge body from mind for the sake of the latter.

It is here that transhumanism and its goal of transcending the body echoes cybernetic posthumanism, which envisages humans primarily as information processors or intelligent machines, as intelligence that can be transferred to another (disembodied) medium (Hayles, 1999: 7). In the context of the life-threatening virus that gives the novel its title, Traskin and his successor K2 Ko (Kora’s half-brother, who controls the tiger farms and wine factories, infecting more and more people, and also owns Jemini, speculating with the production and price of clones) make a fortune by playing with the yearning for immortality of not only the sick but also of healthy people terrified of the virus. Traskin and K2 Ko offer the sick and the frightened the possibility of leaving behind their vulnerable bodies and transcending or ‘upgrading’ to a better life in an idyllic virtual location in Chang. However, as mentioned above, the paying, dying citizens do not know that Chang is becoming obsolete and running out of space to accommodate everyone who is buying a ticket, so their virtual existence will be indeed rather precarious and limited in time. As K2 says,

We can clone as many test subjects as Marcus wants for the LiFT upload. And we control the wine factories. That means we can infect as many desperate flu birds as we want. And Marcus Traskin controls the cure. So we can make those suckers pay and pay some more to save their precious little minds, if not their bodies. We have built the perfect money machine. (229)

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<sup>5</sup> The paradoxical and hypocritical use of the notion of humanity by this transhumanist technologized society serves their capitalist purposes, based on a speciesist approach to what it means to be human (and therefore human rights), while they have no respect whatsoever for the ‘human’ lives that they purportedly try to save by rescuing their minds from physical death.



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Furthermore, once K2 gets Traskin killed, he forces everyone in the city to take the LiFT with the final goal of eventually getting rid of all human beings and replacing them with Jemini clones under his control (254). This radical stance clearly resounds of Crake's attempted extermination of humanity in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013)—carried out by means of the mass consumption of a pill that promised a better and happier life—for the sake of the Crakers, the lab-created new, innocent, and pacifist post-human species which Crake directly controls through the code in their DNA. Like Crake's, K2's attempt at replacing humanity with a different, technologically created species, can also be read as a parodic reversal of Patricia MacCormack's particular posthuman ethical stance that argues for human self-extinction as the only way to guarantee the survival of planet Earth from Anthropogenic devastation (2012).

Indeed, the destructive influence of human agency and progress upon the Earth can be noticed not only in the catastrophic effects of climate change as described above, but also in the speculative manner in which natural resources are exploited and manipulated for economic aims. As Braidotti argues, contemporary capitalism is a form of "bio-piracy" that "exploits the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells" (2013: 95) in the bio-genetic age of the Anthropocene: "[t]he fact that our geological era is known as the 'anthropocene' stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by *anthropos* and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else" (66). In Lai's fictional world, the unlimited, exploitative ambition of rampant capitalism is epitomized by Jemini and its

absolute control of the means of production of basic needs like food: the company enforces scarcity to speculate with the prices of extinct products and increase its economic profit, such as the "precious-because-extinct tuna tins" (41), bananas (82), or cocoa beans, which "have been extinct for eighty years, wiped out in a single cocoa plague. Jemini has been promising for more than a year to bring them back, but they're holding off to increase their value" (178). In turn, this unnatural circumstance triggers the development of illegal activities, like the Cordova School girls' 'foraging' for food in supermarkets and private houses they break into to steal whatever they can find, or the black market where tinned food is the most coveted good.

### **3. The critical posthumanism of Grist Village**

In clear contrast to this technologized, money-driven scenario, Grist Village emerges as the fictional materialization of the postulates of critical posthumanism as proposed by N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, beginning with the inevitable imbrication and inseparability of the human body and mind. As Hayles points out in her groundbreaking work *How We Became Posthuman*, the cybernetic construction of the posthuman means the devaluation and erasure of corporeality. Although different in their premises, the outcome is the same as in liberal humanism, which identifies the subject with its rational mind rather than with its body, and thus allows the movement to disregard and make invisible identity markers such as gender and ethnicity, thereby endowing the liberal subject with its alleged universal character (Hayles,



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1999: 4-5): the Vitruvian Man that Braidotti signals as the model that erases every trait of difference. In Hayles's words,

I see the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject as an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects. [...] [M]y dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technology without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (5)

Critical posthumanism denounces this fantasy of human dematerialization, while defending the notion of embedded embodiment, or corporeality as embedded in an environment that includes and considers vegetable, animal, human, and mechanic lives at the same level (Braidotti, 2013: 51; Nayar, 2014: 9). Critical posthumanism is, therefore, an ethical project that explores humanity from an inclusive viewpoint where machine, organic body and other forms of life co-evolve and are interdependent. As Braidotti points out, human beings are interconnected, but also internally fractured. Access to the category of normative humanity is still marked by identity axes like social class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and (dis)ability (2018: 23). As a corollary, we can argue that critical posthumanism offers a broader vision of the human in which the other of what is considered 'normal' and the non-human alike are

integral parts of the (post)human, making the condition of our species hybrid, inclusive, non-unitary, and with porous limits with the world, other species, and other forms of life.

Thus, critical posthumanism is firmly grounded on two principles: on the one hand, what Hayles and Braidotti call the nature-culture continuum, or continuity between body and mind as integral and inseparable parts of the human subject; and, on the other, a post-anthropocentric approach to humanity, that is, continuity between the human and the non-human (be it machine, animal, the environment), as opposed to the humanist and transhumanist belief in human exceptionalism. Sherryl Vint follows the same line of thought when she aptly argues that "Western culture remains attached to a concept of self as disembodied, a concept of self that has important consequences for how we understand the relationship between humans and the rest of the material world" (2007: 6-7). To borrow Braidotti's words yet again:

The posthuman dimension of post-anthropocentrism [...] deconstructs [...] species supremacy, but it also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature, *anthropos* and *bios*, as categorically distinct from the life of animals and non-humans, or *zoe*. What comes to the fore instead is a nature-culture continuum in the very embodied structure of the extended self [...]. *Zoe* as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself [...] stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. *Zoe*-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a



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materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. (2013: 60, 65)

This post-anthropocentric move must be located within the context of scientific and literary awareness of the price that the environment is paying for the so-called “human progress” of late capitalist cultures, that is to say, what in recent years has generally come to be known as the Anthropocene. In this scenario, Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality is also worth mentioning. Focusing on the ethics of human-nonhuman relations, Alaimo describes human corporeality as being “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2010: 2) and illustrates her theoretical point of departure by means of graphic examples, like the processes of eating and digesting, whereby nutrients from vegetables and/or animals become part of the human organism (12). This is significant in the context of a post-anthropocentric posthuman ethics since, as she remarks, “understanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity” (20), thereby impeding the sense of separation between the human and “the interconnected, mutually constitutive actions of material reality” (24). Similarly, Manuela Rossini defends a version of critical posthumanism that entails “a radically democratic future in which [...] the experience of embodiment in all its richness and variety marks post/humanity and in which the lived body remains the ground not only of individual subjectivity but also of the interaction and connection with the world and with others” (2005: 33).

As anticipated above, the all-female community of Grist Village is composed by the descendants of the cloned women that escaped from the HöST factories and were later expelled from Saltwater City in 2065. There are two generative types of Grists: “doublers”, who reproduce by means of parthenogenesis and give birth to “litters” of up to ten sister “puppies”; and “starfish”, whose bodies have the capacity to re-produce their organs after extraction for “the loving transplant” (Lai, 2018: 21) into doublers when these fall ill and need to have some organ replaced. As happens to starfish in the animal world, Grist starfish organs spontaneously grow again in the places left vacant after extraction. All the technology and medical resources that the Grists use are homemade and it is the starfishes’ wives, known as “grooms” (like Kirilow Groundsel), that are trained to perform the surgery and apply any other form of natural medical treatments to their population.

Grist sisters live in the countryside, use only natural drugs and remedies, and are ruled by principles that resound of critical posthumanism. For a start, they understand their minds as being inseparable from their bodies; as Kirilow puts it when she is told that her wife Peristrophe has come back from the dead through the Dark Baths:

In mind only, without her body. I can hardly bear to think of it. I’d rather think of her as dead. This strange killing and rebirthing is Salty business. We Grist sisters have no faith in such things. If the body is dead, then so is the woman, whatever these occultist Salties think they have copied. (232)

Secondly, they hold a non-





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anthropocentric view of existence in which they co-habit with the animal and vegetable worlds in egalitarian and harmonious ways, as Kirilow's awareness demonstrates when she helps a sister give birth to her first litter of sister puppies: "They both bawl and scream like the animals they are. I guess we are all animals" (94). This is so to the extent that they address their prayers to "Our Mother in all her forms—human, animal, and vegetable" (186), "Our Mother of fish and roses" (232), "Our Mother of flesh and fur" (235), who is also a symbol of the female principle as the origin of life, which they celebrate and exalt with various expressions focusing on the worship of female genitalia—which Kirilow calls "holy hole" (232)—and their creative power: "By Our Mother's hairy crotch" (118).

Grist sisters do not only reject the technology for separating body and mind, calling Salties "occultist" and rejecting their synthetic drugs and biochemical medicine, but they also strive to keep alive knowledge and history without the transhuman aids that Salties struggle to buy or exchange. Grist sisters pass on their knowledge of the time before to the younger sisters by oral means as they also reject "the Salty technology of text" (200): "We hold all that remains of the old world's knowledge in our raw brains. That means we need to be extra smart" (20). When the last doubler and the last starfish in Grist Village die, Kirilow goes to Saltwater City in search for the clandestine Grist Commune, the Cordova Dancing School for Girls, where she meets Madame Dearborn, the last groom in her own community, whose last starfish has also died. Madame Dearborn created the school and adopted a group of human girls, orphaned by the impact of the tiger

flu, with the purpose of passing her Grist knowledge on to them, which she saw at the verge of extinction. As she herself explains to Kirilow:

The Cordova School was the Grist Commune. It's where Grandma Wun Ling came after the purge, and after her sister, Chan Ling, fled with many others to the quarantine rings. The school was a cover for it, so we could hide and survive. As our numbers dwindled, we brought in orphans so we could pass our history and survival techniques on to them. But it was to no avail. We lost our last doubler three years ago. (172)

One of Madame Dearborn's main surgical activities now is the making of hooded "catcoats" that allow the girls to be invisible at night when they go foraging for food. Catcoats are alive, they purr and protest and adapt perfectly to the girls' bodies (153). However, the imbalance of power and ambivalence of the interspecies relation is manifest when she eventually gets killed by the cats in her lab (170-174) in what we can consider an act of revenge on the part of nature for exploiting it rather than supporting an egalitarian relation—or, rather, an act of self-defense: "The kittens yowl, dismayed at the violence they've wreaked upon their beloved caretaker and tormenter" (170).

As is the case with Crakers in *MaddAddam*, it is the Grist sisters' pacifism that puts them in a vulnerable position when their village is raided and most of them are kidnapped by HöST. As a Cordova Girl states, "I heard that HöST has been doing raids all through the third and fourth rings. Looking for some kind of animal or plant they need for some kind of technology" (163). Grist sisters, in



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fusion with the natural world, yet of technological rather than of organic descent, are considered natural resources, raw material, by the Company leaders, who feel entitled to put them to death for their own profit. As Madame Dearborn explains to Kirilow, what she calls Isabelle Chow's "death machine" "needs Grist sister DNA to feel real. It is why the Saltwater Grist was destroyed—through her relentless kidnappings and experiments" (174). To put it in Braidottian terms, Grists hold the status of less-than-human and therefore disposable bodies as part of "the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others" (2013: 15): they are not only clones fused with their natural environment and embodied features shared with the animal realm, but also female and Asian.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion: Embodied History and the Kora Tree**

The notion of embodiment is quintessential in the Grists' understanding of knowledge, memory, and history as connected with one's identity. Saltwater citizens are described as "N-lite junkies stoned on history" (40): they take the drug to "see" virtual projections of history in their minds,

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<sup>6</sup> This vision of the less-than-human is already present in Lai's 2002 novel *Salt Fish Girl*, in which two series of Asian female clones are created by the thousands for slave workforce in assembly line factories. In this case, to Sonias' and Miyakos' gender, ethnic, and technological otherness, an animal (or natural) component is added since their DNA sequences were made to include a tiny portion of carp and cat DNA respectively, with the purpose of further depriving them of any type of human rights. As in *The Tiger Flu*, a group of Sonias escape and create their own clandestine all-female community.

thereby metaphorizing the notion of disembodied information put forth by cybernetic posthumanism. By contrast, for Grists history is, like knowledge, an embodied experience: the first time Kirilow listens to music from the time before, her body starts moving, physically dancing the past that involuntarily comes to her sentient being:

I dance the dance of the grannies' expulsion. I dance the dance of Chang and Eng and their mythic launch. [...] I dance the dance of nuclear fission, of oil, of coal, of wood and straw. I dance for wheels and automobiles, when they were like living creatures drunk on the rotted bodies of species long dead. I dance for the tiger flu, for Ebola, for AIDS, smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, Black Plague, and death. I dance for stem cells, devilled eggs, cloning, and mutation. All the long path of chance and science, money and murder that Old Glorybind taught me was my messy legacy. Although I can't say I understand it, I know its songs, its oranges and lemons, its ring around the rosy. My body knows something that my mind can't refuse. (70-71)

As happened in Lai's previous novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), where the world history of war, colonialism, suffering, and oppression was dreamt of, unconsciously reenacted, and felt by people who developed physical symptoms and, more often than not, ended up drowning, in *The Tiger Flu* history and transgenerational memory seem to be inscribed in the body. Remarkably enough, when Kirilow endeavors to save the Grist sisters from extermination, it is their knowledge that she also intends to save. She explicitly says that Kora, as the last starfish, could save the sisters "and everything we hold in our bald brains from the time before" (219).



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However, the novel aptly avoids a Manichean approach to the body/mind, nature/culture, natural/technological divides of Western thought by not endorsing radical rejection of technological aids in what may at first sight appear to be an unexpected twist by the end of the novel. Myra, one of the leading Cordova girls, affirms the following:

In order to survive in the world that is coming, we need to know our history. [...] Knowledge, my sisters, is the most important tool we have. We must learn everything Madame Dearborn has to teach us. [...] And what we don't have, we will get from the marvelous memory scales that the great inventor Isabelle Chow has deigned to send us. Make use of the technologies you've been given, sisters. (86)

When Kora Ko's body is accidentally smashed in the destruction of the New Origins Archive, the LiFT transforms it into a giant fish and her consciousness is uploaded to a batterkite—a squid-shaped techno-animal aircraft—that takes her home to New Grist Village. Myra sticks “a twig” into Kirilow's skull to enable her to fly the batterkite without getting lost on the way (322), which she cannot refuse to do if she is to save Kora's life. Part V thus takes us to New Grist Village 156 years later, where Kora has become an “ancient starfish tree” (326), also known as the Kora Tree, who “fruits” new organs for the Grist sisters. As the Kora Tree herself explains to the younger sisters:

*I nearly died. I had to be uploaded to a batterkite and become its consciousness. And then we discovered that the tentacles of the kite doctored carefully and left to lie long enough atop fertile soil could become roots.*

*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)*

Even more significantly, the Kora Tree “vibrates language” (327) and tells the new generations of Grist sisters the stories (in italics, still framed by the external narration) of the time before, with a special focus on the ills of a heteropatriarchal society that used to exert violence of every kind upon its female members. The Grist girls' amazement clearly suggests that such an oppressive society has been left far behind and brings back to focus the gender concerns that underlie most of the text, thereby echoing the kind of posthuman subjectivity that Braidotti advocates: “rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere, according to the feminist ‘politics of location’” (2013: 51), and de-centering not only man, but also human beings—*anthropoi*—in their relation with the natural environment.

Furthermore, the omniscient narrator concludes by saying that “[a]t the very top of her [Kora's] branches a little tendril lights up momentarily, calling out to no one. She wills it to dim” (Lai, 2018: 329). Technology played a vital role in saving Kora's consciousness and, consequently, in saving the Grist species and their history and knowledge in an ultimate embrace of critical posthumanist tenets on the nature-culture continuum. Yet, Kora's “little tendril” finds no response above as (male) Chang is gone and (female) Eng, though still orbiting, is now too far from the Earth. Knowledge, then, resides in the natural Grists alone. Together with their Kora Tree, the Grists seem to have transcended finitude



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through her earthly rooted and embodied organ fruiting, endorsing a Braidottian “affirmative posthuman position” (2013: 38) that transcends the centrality of the humanist model of Man, the privilege of the rational mind over the body, and anthropocentrism through the celebration of embodied and embedded difference.

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