FROM THE EUROPEAN SOUTH 7 (2020) 21–34

http://europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it

Feminist intersectional perspectives on pandemic narratives: Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

Chiara Xausa

University of Bologna

ABSTRACT

Socially-constructed roles affect women's experiences of and vulnerability to the broad impacts of pandemics. Although women are on the frontline of the Covid-19 response, as health-care workers and caregivers, they have less decision-making power than men in pandemic planning and post-pandemic recovery, and their voices and experiences go unheard. This article considers Larissa Lai's visionary novel, *The Tiger Flu* (2018), as an entry point for conceptualising the gendered nature of the current Coronavirus emergency. A novel about the world to come, after climate change and mass death, *The Tiger Flu* brings women's voices to the forefront of a flu pandemic that has jumped from animals to humans. By creating a world where men are vulnerable and women survive, Lai consciously writes against traditional end-of-world narratives that tend to rely on tiring gender narratives based on the tension between active male heroism and female fragility. Furthermore, *The Tiger Flu* explores the intersectional experiences of a global disease outbreak and imagines a new beginning from the viewpoint of queer voices of colour from marginalised communities. A feminist framework will be employed to shed light on the ongoing possibilities of life in the wake of patriarchy, environmental change and capitalism's consumptive force.

Keywords

gender, Covid-19, pandemic narratives, Larissa Lai, intersectionality

In late March 2020, when announcing that his brother Chris Cuomo had tested positive for Covid-19, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo called the new Coronavirus "the great equalizer" in a tweet. The same expression had been used by Madonna in a controversial bathtub video shared on her Instagram. Since then many others have referred to Covid-19 as the virus that can affect anyone and does not discriminate, and there seems to be a shared consensus that we are all in this together: poor and rich, celebrities and princes, prime ministers and asylum seekers, and men and women.

It most certainly does not discriminate against women, who are less likely to die from Covid-19. Even though globally men and women have been infected in relatively equal numbers, available data suggest that the Coronavirus hits men harder than women.[1] Several biological and behavioural factors could be involved: research has affirmed that women have a stronger immune response to infections, that they also carry two X chromosomes, which contain many immune-related genes, and that the female sex hormone oestrogen is likely to

affect the immune system. Differences in behaviour encompass unhealthy habits that increase the risk of lung diseases, such as smoking (more frequent among men than women) and personal hygiene habits (men are less likely to wash their hands frequently).2 At the time of writing, research is still at an early stage, and there is a lack of clear understanding of why women are able to tackle Covid-19 more effectively. Caroline Criado-Perez (2019) asserts that this gender data gap stems from the medical research representation of the male body as the human body, although evidence gathered so far exhibits major differences between men and women as regards disease symptoms, drug therapy and prevention.

Criado-Perez further validates that the reluctance to address gender data gaps in women's health is also due to the "still-persistent attitude that since infectious diseases affect both men and women, it's best to focus on control and treatment" (2019, 298) and to postpone the debate about gender equality to the post-outbreak stage. Arguing that gender is a side issue can have deadly consequences for women: in Sierra Leone, one of the most affected countries by the West African 2014 Ebola outbreak, maternal, neonatal and stillbirth mortality further increased after resources from sexual and reproductive health services were diverted toward the emergency response. Furthermore, women's care-taking responsibilities, such as providing care for sick relatives and preparing the body for a funeral, left them at greater risk of exposure. As Michelle Lokot and Yeva Avakyan suggest, "these 'indirect' consequences of disease outbreaks may be overlooked in the immediate need to provide 'life-saving' health services as part of the response to Covid-19" (2020, 1).

What these indirect crisis-related deaths imply is that biological sex is a major factor determining a person's vulnerability to Covid-19, but socially-constructed roles can also affect women's experiences of and vulnerability to the broad impacts of pandemics. In fact, Coronavirus is not the great equaliser. On the contrary, the current pandemic has laid bare differences and, most importantly, deepened pre-existing inequalities and forms of discrimination. Women make up the majority of health-care workers and caregivers on the frontline of the Covid-19 response. Due to the vertical gender segregation of the health system, they are at greater risk of coming into contact with the virus (see Boniol et al., 2019). School and day-care centre closures have increased women's burden of unpaid care work, the sphere of 'feminised' labour that has long been undervalued and underrecognized by the current neoliberal condition. As Helen Lewis affirms in *The Atlantic,* "across the world, women's independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic" (2020). Among the consequences of quarantine, women's research production has dropped tremendously (Fazackerley 2020). Gender-based violence and abortion restrictions are among other hidden consequences affecting the lives of women and girls. Despite the evidence that Covid-19 has exacerbated gender inequalities, neither a gender lens nor a balance between men and women in political and public decision-making can be observed in most Covid-19 responses across the world. Although women have been praised for 'taking care' of patients, the elderly and sick family members, their voices and

experiences go unheard in the current crisis.

This article considers Larissa Lai's visionary novel *The Tiger Flu* (2018) as an entry point for conceptualising the gendered nature of the current Coronavirus emergency. Diverse approaches to feminist theory are adopted to guide my close reading. An intersectional methodology is used to underscore the dichotomy between female 'innate' vulnerability and nurturing disposition on the one hand, and gender as a social structure causing inequalities on the other hand. As argued by Lokot and Avakyan, "intersectional analysis places power at the centre, analysing not what makes people vulnerable but taking a broader approach to conceptualising how power hierarchies and systemic inequalities shape their life experiences" (2020).

Furthermore, my reading of the novel endeavours to respond to the wartime imagery overused to address the challenges presented by the current Coronavirus: Lai proposes instead a relational narrative that voices a diverse group of people working collectively to restore and repair damaged 'naturalcultural' ecologies.[3] My analysis draws on feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who have powerfully argued that human exceptionalism has pushed us to the edge and determined a global landscape where infectious diseases are becoming increasingly common occurrences. Both provide a framework for understanding human/nonhuman entanglements – including human relationship with bacteria and viruses – and imagine new forms of coexistence that extend care beyond the human world.

Rewriting the end of the world

Lai is a renowned Chinese-Canadian author, best known for *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). In her fictional narratives she explores themes such as gender identity, sexual orientation, racism and cultural diversity, adopting a queer and Chinese diasporic standpoint. Lai's timely and visionary latest novel *The Tiger Flu*, winner of the 2019 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, launches us in a future version of Vancouver ravaged by a pandemic flu that is much more fatal for men: "[t]here are no men in the streets. The men are shut up in houses, covered in lesions and coughing their lungs out" (2018, 13). Set in the Gregorian year 2145 – or Time After Oil (TAO) 127 – after disease and environmental destruction have shattered the world, it is told from the perspective of two young women, Kora and Kirilow. Kora Ko is a working-class teenager from a low-income family living in Saltwater City, an urban centre overrun by patriarchal and corporate technocracy.[4] Due to the infectious disease, Kora's family experiences extreme socio-economic disadvantage. Thus, when her brother K2 gets flu symptoms, she is sent to the Cordova Dancing Schools for Girls, where she will be taught dances "that fight back" (112) and "forage dances". In other words, the school teaches young women to trade cans "from the time before" (135) stolen from buried supermarkets.

Kirilow Groundsel is a doctor apprentice living in the Grist Village, a place populated by

a community of female clones founded by genetic experiments escaped from the Jemini Group, one of the companies having control over Saltwater City. The Grist sisters are able to reproduce through parthenogenesis. They have "doublers," who give birth to new sisters, "starfish," who can regrow their organs and so donate them to the sick Grist sisters who need them, and "grooms" like Kirilow, healers-doctors skilled in surgery and naturopathy: "[w]e split, we slit, we heal, we groom, self-mutated beyond the know-how of the clone company Jemini that spawned us. […] Only our starfish can save us, by regrowing whatever grooms like me cut out of them" (20). When a woman from Saltwater City, sick with a mysterious flu, enters the Grist Village, Peristrophe Halliana, Kirilow's lover and, most importantly, the last living starfish, becomes infected and dies. This traumatic event prompts Kirilow to travel to Saltwater City, where the flu has become a pandemic, to find a way to save her sisters. Here, she joins hands with Kora, who turns out to be a starfish, but they are kidnapped by a group of men who are releasing new technology to save the world from the flu and need Grist sisters – as well as other "disposable" denizens from Saltwater City to test it.

Lai creates a forward-looking story that materialises many anxieties troubling our present, and, by sidelining to the periphery of the action all the male characters with infection, she reverses a male-dominated universe through a feminist lens. As she declares in an interview, she was "consciously writing against 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. I wanted to write a story where the men are vulnerable and the women survive" (Lai 2019b).

As noted by Susan Watkins, contemporary white male-authored post-apocalyptic fiction "tends towards conservatism" (2020, 1) and a desire and longing for the confirmation of the *status quo*. Ideas of human civilization rely on traditional patriarchal and imperialist values and gesture toward a future that is either a "restoration of what has been lost during the apocalypse" or a "nostalgic mourning for the past" (1). What is also interesting for the present discussion is that conventional post-apocalyptic imagination cannot seem to move beyond traditional gender narratives, namely the protection of the heteronormative nuclear family unit and the obsession with the father-son bond. In *Sex After Life*, Claire Colebrook uses the term "sextinction" to define such tiring gender tropes:

> It is precisely here, in the genre of the post-apocalyptic, that the most tiring gender narratives are repeated [...] One might say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world, and the end of capitalism, than it is to think outside the structuring fantasies of gender. There must always be an active male heroism driven by a feminine fragility that appears to hold the promise of the future.[5] (2014, 150)

There is a structural similarity between post-apocalyptic pandemic narratives and the climate apocalypse, which are both relevant for the present analysis. With regard to pandemic narratives, I draw on Carlen Lavigne's analysis of American end-of-world television series that appeared on international screens between 2001 and 2016, where she argues that most of

her case studies speak to the ambitions and fears of a straight white male audience. A repetitive scenario unfolds as follows: in a devastated landscape, a straight white male hero arises as a natural leader, while "women, non-white characters, queer characters, and all those whose identities cross over and between those groups are sidelined in favor of the straight white male lead" (2018, 7). This "lingering patriarchy" (7), however, goes unacknowledged: what these shattered worlds feature is a post-feminist and post-racial future where "the struggling hero claims leadership simply because he is the best person for the job" (7). In this way, gender binaries are reinforced, and those whose voices might challenge and disrupt the myth of heteronormative white patriarchy are excluded from the main narrative. Lavigne's analysis encompasses *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, the *Resident Evil* film series, *The Strain*, *The Walking Dead*, *Z Nation*, and a more thorough discussion of *Jeremiah* and *The Last Ship*. All these case studies tend toward conservative narratives that preserve the patriarchal family and maintain heterosexual white male leadership.[6]

By contrast, Watkins states that contemporary women writers engage with apocalyptic ideas in unprecedented ways that arise from their specific subject position rather than from the idea that women's writing is intrinsically different from men's. Drawing from feminist and postcolonial critiques to conservative and conventional end-of-world narratives, many women writers move beyond the self-centredness of post-apocalyptic imagination and lay bare "the relationship that exists between structural inequalities generated by patriarchy, misogyny and racism and issues such as climate change, global capitalism and techno-science" (Watkins 2020, 10).

Intersectional experiences of pandemic outbreaks

In addition to bringing women's voices to the forefront of a disease pandemic, Lai creates a platform for queer and presumably non-white female characters fighting against systemic oppression. The novel raises questions about a world where women, being more resistant than men to the flu pandemic, become powerful leaders. Isabelle Chow, CEO of the other company that governs Saltwater City – the Höst Light Industries – is a remarkable example of grotesquely powerful corporations whose owners are worshipped in shrines like deities:

> Embedded in the altar is a smiling photograph of her from when she was awarded Woman Leader of the Year, taken those few short years ago when it wasn't a given that all Höst's leaders were women. Beneath the photo on a wide shelf are neatly arranged statuettes and figurines of female deities as though they were all her avatars: the Virgin Mary, Kuan Yin, a nine-tailed fox lady, Green Tara, the Venus of Willendorf, Athena, Heng'e, and many more besides. (53)

Despite the centrality of these powerful women leaders in the novel's plot, I argue that the most interesting feature of *The Tiger Flu* is its focus on intersectional experiences of the outbreak, alongside its thought-provoking concern for gender and racial justice. Disease outbreaks affect marginalised groups and at-risk communities in multiple ways, exposing and

deepening pre-existing differences and inequalities related to gender, race and ethnicity, as suggested by the storylines of Kora and Kirilow. Belonging to vulnerable, albeit different, communities, they prove that a higher male mortality rate can, nevertheless, have indirect deadly effects on women.

In Saltwater City, the pandemic widens the gap between the wealthy corporate leaders and working-class families, increasing the severity of poverty. Kora's family lacks access to basic resources, such as medical care, supply and a decent place to live: their "broken-up furniture" comes from "abandoned apartments around them" (67). Her mother, Charlotte, is a frontline health worker, and she is also the one taking on the extra labour of caring for sick family members and providing and preparing food:

> Charlotte looks exhausted. Although she's not yet forty, her dull black hair is streaked with white, and dark pockets of loose skin sag beneath her eyes. She's the only family member who still has a job, as a night nurse at a nearby hospice, and she looks after the whole family on top of that. (26)

Being sent to the Cordova Dancing School for Girls, Kora is affected by the stigma associated with the flu pandemic. In fact, we come to know that her father was the one who brought the Caspian tiger back from extinction for consumptive purposes; the flu is its deadly side-effect. She is constantly discriminated from the other girls for coming from a low-income family – "[y]ou're a *rat eater*. Don't lie. Your mom and dad were too poor to feed you properly" (97; emphasis added) – which also happens to be the family that revitalised the Caspian tiger. Despite being abandoned by her father and having nothing to do with his genetic experiments, she emerges as the pandemic scapegoat:

> If not for you, […] all of the men – our brothers, fathers, uncles, and sons – would be alive today. […] Lady Kora of the House of Ko, re-animators of the Caspian tiger [...]. How could you not know that you and your family are the source of the tiger flu? (84-85)

It is not by chance that Lai chooses a girl from a marginalised community to be the carrier of a 'foreign' virus. Kora's constant struggle against discrimination calls into question xenophobic fears and racial stigmatisation associated with disease outbreaks. If Ebola has long been portrayed as a 'black' disease and fuelled racism against African and black communities, the current Coronavirus crisis has been tinged with anti-Asian racism and xenophobia (Aratani 2020; Timothy 2020). Racist incidents against Asian communities globally have increased after US President Donald Trump labelled Covid-19 the 'Chinese' and 'foreign' virus. There is no need to look any further than my own location, the Veneto Region, one of the areas that were hit first by the virus outbreak in Italy: its Governor Luca Zaia suggested that the Coronavirus was caused by Chinese hygiene standards and cultural habits: "we have all seen the Chinese eating live mice" ("Luca Zaia" 2020).

Like Kora's mother, all the Grist sisters are involved in several forms of care work: Kirilow

is a doctor apprentice and Peristrophe Halliana can regenerate her own organs and sacrifice herself so that others can live, like many women care workers on the frontline of the Covid-19 response. As Lai underscores, between the lines of the Grist community's struggle against its own erasure, we can read other narratives of Indigenous resistance. In addition to having been created for mere consumptive purposes – "they made us to use us. When they ran out of uses, they murdered as many of us as they could and exiled the rest" (48) – the Grist community is constantly under attack by patriarchal and corporate Saltwater City. Living in isolated communities, resisting and queering current reproductive practices, and not having embraced destructive and consumptive capitalist behaviours, they cannot be granted the status of 'fully human': "we aren't human" (48), "slit sluts, that's what they call us in Saltwater City" (20). The Grist sisters undergo the invasions of their territory, both in the form of systematic land theft to look for "some kind of animal or plant they need for some kind of technology" (163) and erasure of cultural identity. Even the infectious disease brought in by outsiders – in this case, a woman from Saltwater City – is a threat to the survival of the Grist community, as it has been for multiple Indigenous populations who had limited immunity to pathogens introduced by European colonisers. Given the impact of the intersectional forms of oppression, the Grist sisters, albeit women, do not seem to be less vulnerable than men to the flu pandemic. Furthermore, in *The Tiger Flu*, Saltwater corporations take advantage of the opportunity created by the pandemic to further increase the forms of oppression and the surveillance of the Grist community. Once again, this resonates with the ways in which Covid-19 is devastating Indigenous communities across the world. In Brazil, one of the world's worst-hit Covid-19 hotspots at the time of writing, Coronavirus has accelerated Jair Bolsonaro's aggressive devastation of indigenous territories and deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. As Laura Burocco underscores,

> [a] little more than a year after Bolsonaro's election, the Covid pandemic comes into view as an acceleration of a plan that was already underway and that seems to be in full continuity with more ancient practices, given that pathogens have historically been one of the most powerful factors in the decimation of the indigenous peoples of South America. […] The government's plan shows its aggressive intent by affecting every aspect of the preservation of the territory and the lives of its people. (2020)

A Capitalocene challenge

As the previous paragraphs have shown, *The Tiger Flu* draws the readers' attention toward various forms of structural and intersectional inequalities that are usually exposed and heightened by a disease outbreak. As philosopher Van Dooren notes with regard to the current Covid-19 crisis, these are "vital considerations. But they are not enough" (2020). Given the zoonotic nature of this disease, we must also consider human dysfunctional relationships with other animal species and the broader endangered environment, adopting a 'one health' approach that recognizes the interconnections between people, animals and their shared environment.[7] Research has corroborated that the outbreaks of zoonotic diseases like Covid-

19 are on the rise and that these animal-borne pandemics are most certainly linked to human-driven environmental change, the destruction of animal habitats all over the world, the intensification of farming practices and global biodiversity crisis.[8] In other words, "the real source of this crisis is human, not animal" (Van Dooren 2020). This is precisely where the environmental humanities can make insightful interventions. According to Jenia Mukherjee and Amrita Sen, "while natural scientists argue that animals are hosts and carriers, environmental humanities scholars trace the real source to humans" (2020); not all humans, though. As the authors suggest, a 'Capitalocene' framework provides a better understanding of the current crisis than the undifferentiated *antropos* implied by the 'Anthropocene' narrative.[9] At the foundation of the current crisis lies capitalism's consumptive force and its turning of habitats, environments and bodies, particularly women's bodies, into resources to be subjugated, transformed, and exploited (Iovino 2020).

The Tiger Flu differs from outbreak-related films in popular culture, in that it does not focus on the disease emergence and infection but urges the readers to reflect upon the causes and the uneven effects of pandemics and imagine a rupture that must be brought into existence. In this case, the flu spreads around the planet thanks to a cloning company that has reintroduced the Caspian tiger for consumptive ends, namely to make addictive "tiger-bone wine." The novel throws into relief the interconnectedness between ecological disaster and the intensive exploitation of animals. In a particularly insightful scene in which Kora gets to know in vivid detail the story of how the flu has been brought into the world, the link between the human exploitation of nature and pandemics is made clear:

> Happy revellers drink from crystal glasses at first, then later, mouth to spigot as addiction deepens. Then the same vintners 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 the room fills with the roar of another crumbling. Vast cliffs and towers of polar ice calve into the warming sea. A parade of long dead animals –wolves, mammoths, bears, and oxen – find their way into the wombs of their contemporary cousins. In white rooms, giant bellows expand and contract, to help those in the throes of the third wave breathe longer than they otherwise might. 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. The wall falls, and the people build canals instead. The ocean swells through them, recedes, then swells again. The fourth wave of tiger flu comes. Men vomit and shrivel in dirty hospital beds, their bodies refusing to hold water. (Lai 2018, 210-211)

What is also interesting for the present discussion is that the tiger flu and the Grist sisters are both "figures of mutation that erupt unexpectedly as a consequence of humankind's endless tampering with the flow of life" (Lai 2019a). Ecofeminist scholars have brought into sharp focus the analogy between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women that arise from the objectification of the 'other'. As Kirilow underscores, "the Caspian tiger is no different from us – a creature that would not live now except by human intervention" (Lai 2018, 88): as such, the Grist sisters and the tiger flu are the by-products of human exceptionalism,

capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Both created by corporate power for consumptive purposes, they are figures of vulnerability that emerge amid the pursuit of endless growth.

Their stories force the readers to imagine a rupture and address the crisis at its root causes, shifting the focus from a mere return to normality or 'business as usual' to an act of repair of damaged 'naturalcultural' ecologies:

> I feel that we're living now in a moment where our bodies have been pushed, through scientific innovation and the harnessing of the body's productive capabilities, to the absolute edge of their capacity to function. […] That's exactly the thing I'm interested in investigating – those moments when the body breaks because, in a sense, too much mind has been pushed on it. (Lai 2019a)

Envisaging a rupture

We could think of *The Tiger Flu* as a response to the wartime imagery that is being overused to address the challenges presented by the current Coronavirus. From Emmanuel Macron to Boris Johnson, let alone "wartime president" Donald Trump, male world leaders have 'waged war' against the 'invisible enemy', reinforcing harmful stereotypes of toxic masculinity and missing the chance to expose human and social responsibility and the systemic forms of inequalities.[10] Conversely, Lai's novel departs from one-against-all narratives that identify an enemy – the virus – a military strategy and (male) frontline warriors. Stories about singular heroes fighting against antagonists that are "fully evil" and must be destroyed, Lai suggests, are narratives that "belong to patriarchal forms of masculinity" (2019a). Throughout the novel, there are actually a few attempts to 'fight' the flu pandemic, and they all come from male characters, such as Marcus Traskin, who claims that he has "a cure for the flu. He is going to save Saltwater City. He is a hero, and you should want him to live" (Lai 2018, 226). Furthermore, the novel breaks away from tiring visions of the future that refuse to explore the indeterminacy of the present and point toward a recovery of the previous *status quo*, as embodied by some secondary characters portrayed "in a desperate attempt to *know* and so *fix* the broken world" (41; emphasis added).

The novel also expresses boredom with reassuring techno-fixes and with narratives ending with a cure that "anticipates the triumph of science and epidemiology and affirms the worth of humanity" (Wald 2008, 268). The new technology developed by Saltwater corporations to save the world from the flu becomes a tool of oppression and surveillance that denies the Grist sisters agency, presenting some uncanny similarities with what Naomi Klein has labelled "screen new deal" (2020), pointing to the high-tech Covid-19 dystopia that benefits private interests while implementing surveillance tracking. The questions Lai asks are of the utmost importance: what are the costs of techno-fixes? Who benefits from techno-fixes and who is left behind? What is also important is that this 'revolutionary' technology can save minds but not bodies. As the author has declared in many interviews in regard to the body-mind split, the way that it "emerges in Western culture through the Judeo-Christian inheritance, the

Enlightenment, the rise of technology, and hyper-capitalism, […] all the trouble with patriarchy, climate change, is a consequence of that split, of insufficient value placed on bodies, especially women's bodies" (Lai 2019a). Contrarily, the Gist sisters "believe that body and mind exist together in harmonious balance. When one dies the person no longer exists" (Lai 2018, 294).

Lai's novel does not function as a blueprint for the future, though. By the end of the story, Kirilow joins hands with Kora and together they roll "towards a strange and *unknown* future" (259; emphasis added). *The Tiger Flu* neither proposes a progress tale nor ends the story with ruins and decay that would force us to abandon all hope. As noted by Tsing, indeterminacy, precarity and vulnerability to others are the very conditions of our time. Learning to coexist with economic ruination, ecological disturbance and potential future global pandemics means living "without those handrails, which once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going" (2015, 2). She argues that the paradigmatic figure of this time is the *matsutake* wild mushroom: growing in daunting and human-disturbed forests, it can guide us through the ruined landscape that has become our collective home. By living a transformative relation with trees, *matsutake* makes it evident that we cannot live without collaborative survival across human and species differences.[11] She also writes that mushroom picking will not save us, but it might reopen our imaginations and shift them away from progress and one-against-all stories.

In this regard, the Grist storyline is one of these rupture narratives, in that it portrays resilience, the restoration of ancestral knowledge, resistance to cultural appropriation, decolonial practices and a thought-provoking human-plant relation: "[w]e Grist sisters feel our way to other knowings" (Lai 2018, 36). The most precious crop they harvest is called "forget-me-do," originally bred in the factories of Saltwater City together with the Grist clones but subsequently appropriated, mutated and refined by the Grist sisters themselves and seeded through mallow, agave and sage. Forget-me-do infused tea makes them feel pain as pleasure and replaces "poisonous medicines from the time before" (184). Most importantly, it comes to signify cultural resistance and survival, as "through its use, [they] cultivate what [they] remember and what [they] forget in order to make Grist history" (43). Weaving, sewing, and even suturing are performed using various organic and sustainable materials, such as plant and mushroom fibres. From tents to gauzes, everything in their village is made out of mush-rooms. As Lai notices in an interview, there is a striking similarity between Tsing's *matsutake* mushrooms and the Grist sisters, both "erupting in the wake of human-induced disaster" (2019b). The novel's idea of exploring the possibilities of life in the wake of disturbing and troubling times is also indebted to Haraway's forward-looking approach to our globally endangered environment. The urgent task is to engage with one other – "in all of our bumptious kinds" – to stir up potent responses and cultivate what she labels "response-ability" on a damaged earth (2016, 1). *Staying with the trouble* means "learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as

mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway 2016, 1)

Restoring and repairing the world require learning to live and die with one another in multispecies ways that are not prone to disasters and addressing our current state of urgency in relational rather than dialectical ways. To borrow from environmental literary scholar Kate Rigby (2015), we should learn to "dance with disaster," that is to say, developing comportments that are no longer based on the promise of stability, but rather explore the indeterminacy and unpredictability of our mixed-up times. As a key feature of this dance, Rigby posits the rejection of cultural narratives grounded in hostile attitudes toward the natural world – allegedly retaliating against human beings – "at the very time when we most need to appreciate the connectivities, both material and moral, linking human well-being with that of other living beings" (10). Although Rigby refers to eco-catastrophes, I argue that a similar approach could help us reconceptualise pandemics not as wars between humans (read: men) and viruses but rather as an opportunity to expose structural inequalities, build and sustain new alliances and intersectional relationalities, and claim a future that does acknowledge the current rupture.[12]

As Lai suggests, this is a feature of feminist fiction, which is relational in the first instance. She further claims that *The Tiger Flu* is not about one man against the world but deals with "a group of people facing a crisis and resolving it collectively, while still having their differences" (Lai 2019a). The intersectional, multispecies collective that emerges from the pandemic crisis imagines the world anew pointing toward a green and feminist future. Indeed, after exposing the dysfunctionality of narratives based on perpetual progress and growth and on human exceptionalism, and their complicity with the ongoing subordination of nature and 'others', the novel builds relationships across gender, race, species and plants and explores alternative forms of production and reproduction beyond capitalism. Through feminist, queer, anti-capitalist and anti-racist resistance, a different gaze on the crisis is cultivated, and a radical systemic change is envisaged: one that raises women's voices and experiences and proposes a new paradigm for care work, which must be considered not as unpaid and feminised domestic labour but as collective care for our human, social and environmental fragility. As Arundhati Roy writes, this crisis can be a gateway between this world and the next one:

> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (2020).

Notes

[1] See the ongoing analysis from the research group Global Health 50/50, a leading authority in gender equality and global health (The Sex, Gender and Covid-19 Project, n.d.).

[2] See Rabin 2020. For a discussion of the correlation between 'macho' stereotypes and male vulnerability to Covid-19, see Burrel and Ruxton 2020.

[3] The term 'natureculture' was coined by Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) in order to challenge the ontological divide between nature and culture.

[4] The name invokes the Cantonese appellation *Haam Sui Fauh*, 'saltwater city', used by early Chinese

immigrants to describe Vancouver (see Thom 2018).
[5] Colebrook acknowledges that she builds on the preface to *The Seeds of Time* by Fredric Jameson: ''It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism'' (2014, xii).
[6] Similarly, post-apocalyptic climate fiction tends to revolve around men: the protagonists with decision-making authorities are often the white male heroes, mainly research scientists – the paradigmatic figure of the Anthropocene (Yusoff 2015) – and government officials. Power and agency are divided along racial, ethnic and gender lines, and women are a silent backdrop and a site of innate vulnerability (Mcgreavy and Londendeld 2014; Gaard 2017). The most prominent examples are Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).
[7] Zoonotic diseases, also called zoonoses, are infectious diseases passed by non-human animals to humans. At the time of writing, DNA evidence suggests that the novel Coronavirus is likely a bat-borne infection, while it is not clear yet whether the illegal pangolins trade is also involved. For a discussion of animal-borne pandemics, see David Quammen's bestseller *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2012).
[8] See Smith et al. 2014.
[9] For an enlightening debate about the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, see Moore 2015 and Haraway 2016.
[10] See Smith 2020.
[11] "The fungus gets its carbohydrates from mutualistic relations with the roots of its host trees, for whom it also forages. Matsutake makes it possible for host trees to live in poor soils, without fertile humus. In turn, they are nourished by the trees" (Tsing 2015, 40).
[12] In this regard, immunologist Antonella Viola from the University of Padua has claimed that we should "dance" with this virus ("L'immunologa Viola smentisce i complottisti irriducibili" 2020), using a very different language from the military one we keep hearing in (mostly male) speeches and conversations about the current pandemic.

References

Aratani, Lauren. 2020. "'Coughing while Asian': Living in Fear as Racism Feeds Off Coronavirus Panic." *The Guardian*, March 24. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-us-asian-americans-racism. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Boniol, Mathieu et al. 2019. "Gender Equity in the Health Workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries. Working Paper 1." Geneva: World Health Organization. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-%20eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Burocco, Laura. 2020. "Covid-19 Accelerates Bolsonaro's Project Against the Amazon and Indigenous People." *Il Manifesto Global Edition*, May 22. https://global.ilmanifesto.it/covid-19-accelerates-bolsonaros-project-against-the-amazon-and-indigenous-people/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Burrel, Stephen, and Sandy Ruxton. 2020. "Coronavirus Reveals Just How Deep Macho Stereotypes Run Through Society." *The Conversation*, April 9. https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-reveals-just-how-deep-macho-stereotypes-run-through-society-134968. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Colebrook, Claire. 2014. *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction*. Vol. 2. University of Michigan Library: Open Humanities Press.

Criado-Perez, Caroline. 2019. *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Gaard, Greta. 2017. *Critical Ecofeminism*. London: Lexington Books.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Iovino, Serenella. 2020. “Cross-species Conversations and the Coronavirus”. Translated by Elena Past. *Seeing the Woods. A Blog by the Rachel Carson Center*, May 22. https://seeingthewoods.org/2020/05/22/cross-species-conversations-and-the-coronavirus/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Klein, Naomi. 2020. “Screen New Deal: Naomi Klein on How Companies Like Google Plan to Profit in High-Tech Covid Dystopia.” *Democracy Now!*, May 13. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/13/naomi_klein_coronavirus_tech_privacy_surveillance. Accessed June 14, 2020.

“L’immunologa Viola smentisce i complottisti irriducibili: ‘Falso che Covid-19 sia artificiale’.” 2020. Globalist Syndication, May 14. Video. https://www.globalist.it/science/2020/05/14/l-immunologa-viola-smentisce-i-complottisti-irriducibili-falso-che-covid-19-sia-artificiale-2058218.html. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Lai, Larissa. 2018. *The Tiger Flu*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press. Kindle.

——. 2019a. “Conversation: Larissa Lai.” Interviewed by Jiaqi Kang. *Sine Theta Magazine*, September 2. https://medium.com/@sinethetamag/conversation-larissa-lai-73e0a19d7196. Accessed June 14, 2020

——. 2019b. “Interview with Larissa Lai: Imagining the Critical Utopia of *The Tiger Flu*.” Interviewed by Smriti Bansal. *Midinette*, March 9. https://midinette.org/2019/03/09/interview-with-larissa-lai/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Lavigne, Carlen. 2018. *Post-apocalyptic Patriarchy: American Television and Gendered Visions of Survival*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Lewis, Helen. 2020. “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism.” *The Atlantic*, March 19. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Lokot, Michelle, and Yeva Avakyan. 2020. “Intersectionality as a Lens to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Implications for Sexual and Reproductive Health in Development and Humanitarian Contexts.” *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 28 (1): 1-4. Accessed June 14, 2020.

“Luca Zaia (president of Veneto Region): ‘We have all seen the Chinese eat live mice’.” *La Repubblica*, February 28 2020. Video, 1:00. https://video.repubblica.it/dossier/coronavirus-wuhan-2020/luca-zaia-president-of-veneto-region-we-have-all-seen-the-chinese-eat-live-mice/354888/355455. Accessed June 14, 2020.

McGrevy, Briedie, and Laura Lindenfeld. 2014. “Entertaining Our Way to Engagement? Climate Change Films and Sustainable Development Values.” *International Journal of Sustainable Development* 17 (2): 123-136.

Moore, Jason. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Verso.

Mukherjee, Jenia, and Amrita Sen. 2020. “Is Covid-19 a ‘Capitalocene’ Challenge?” *Seeing the Woods: A Blog by the Rachel Carson Center*, May 11. https://seeingthewoods.org/2020/05/11/is-covid-19-a-capitalocene-challenge/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Quammen, David. 2012. *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*. New York: WW Norton & Co.

Rabin, Roni Caryn. 2020. “Why the Coronavirus Seems to Hit Men Harder Than Women.” *The New York Times*, March 2. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/health/coronavirus-men-women.html. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Rigby, Kate. 2015. *Dancing with Disaster. Environmental Histories, Narratives and Ethics for Perilous Times*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Roy, Arundhati. 2020. “The Pandemic is a Portal.” *Financial Times*, April 3.

https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Smith, David. 2020. “Trump Talks Himself Up as ‘Wartime President’ to Lead America Through a Crisis.” *The Guardian*, March 22. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/22/trump-coronavirus-election-november-2020. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Smith, Katherine et al. 2014. “Global Rise in Human Infectious Disease Outbreaks.” *J. R. Soc. Interface* 11:1-6.

The Sex, Gender and Covid-19 Project. n.d. *Global Health 50/50, ICRW, APHRC*. https://globalhealth5050.org/covid19. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Thom, Kay Cheng. 2018. “Surviving Utopia: Finding Hope in Larissa Lai’s Piercing Novel *The Tiger Flu*.” *Autostraddle*, December 6. https://www.autostraddle.com/surviving-utopia-finding-hope-in-larissa-lais-the-tiger-flu-439136/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Timothy, Roberta K. 2020. “Coronavirus Is Not the Great Equalizer – Race Matters.” *The Conversation*, April 6. https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-is-not-the-great-equalizer-race-matters-133867. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Van Dooren, Thom. 2020. “Pangolins and Pandemics: The Real Source of This Crisis Is Human, Not Animal.” *New Matilda*, March 22. https://newmatilda.com/2020/03/22/pangolins-and-pandemics-the-real-source-of-this-crisis-is-human-not-animal/. Accessed June 14, 2020.

Wald, Priscilla. 2008. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Watkins, Susan. 2020. *Contemporary Women’s Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chiara Xausa is a PhD fellow at the University of Bologna, Italy. She has been a Visiting PhD fellow at Bath Spa University (Research Centre for the Environmental Humanities), and a Visiting Student at the University of Warwick. She earned a MA in Modern Philology from the University of Padua (2016), and a MA in Women’s and Gender Studies from the University of Bologna and the University of Utrecht (2018). She is currently writing on the representation of environmental justice in contemporary Anglophone black and indigenous women’s writing.