From Cans to Kins: Eating as Becoming-With and Relational Cannibalism in Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

Nadège Paquette

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By: Nadège Paquette

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__________________________________Examiner
Dr. Jill Didur

__________________________________Examiner

__________________________________Supervisor
Dr. Jesse Arseneault

Approved by ____
Dr. Nathan Brown, Graduate Program Director

September 2024____
Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science

ABSTRACT

From Cans to Kins: Eating as Becoming-With and Relational Cannibalism
in Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

Nadège Paquette

"What's the worst thing you've ever done for food?" Cordova girl Myra asks protagonist Kora in Larissa Lai's novel *The Tiger Flu*. Myra's question does not simply demand an answer at the individual level within a fictional narrative, but needs to be extended to actual food systems. What is it that we do in order to consume beings as food? The novel's fictional food systems reflect the nonfictional ones where the forms of life humans eat and call food are often understood as product rather than beings with whom we are in relation. Such treatment is based on the assumption that the human body is a system with fixed boundaries separating it from other species, and that reason makes humans an exceptional species. Against these beliefs, I argue that those made into food can be understood as kin rather than product. I read this relational ontological mode throughout Lai's novel where food circulation, ingestion, and zoonosis indicate a range of ways bodies infiltrate one another despite rigid policing. I examine practices of food preservation and social control in *The Tiger Flu* as forms of containment that separate human subjects from commodified, racialized, and dehumanized others. Containment is challenged by characters' becoming-with those they eat and those with whom they share meals. When the first category bleeds into the second, consumption becomes cannibalism. I show that the novel not only denounces capitalist relations for which cannibalistic eating is a model but also proposes the alternative paradigm of relational cannibalism where eating is an act of trans-corporeal integration maintaining kinship beyond death.

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INTRODUCTION

Larissa Lai's speculative fiction novel *The Tiger Flu* (2018), set in the North American bioregion of Cascadia,[1] imagines a future beset by a global pandemic, in which the anthropogenic destruction of biodiversity has pushed many plants and animals to the brink of extinction, triggering intense food insecurity. The novel is therefore a haunting double for our own times, as we are starting to acknowledge after the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic that the spread of infectious diseases across nonhuman and human species—with human infections reaching a planetary scale—is a consequence of the devastation of biodiversity (Brema et al. 305). While the novel was published before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, its representation of biodiversity loss, disruptions to food systems, and a pandemic that is especially deadly to men—the "tiger flu"—foregrounds how these phenomena interact (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 13).

The novel explores control of relations between bodies in a post-pandemic world via norms and practices related to food, with racialized frameworks of hygienic eating signaling food's intersection with the transmission of illness. For example, when one of the novel's protagonists, Kora Ko, is placed by her poor and flu-sick parents at the Cordova Dancing School for Girls in Saltwater City[2] in the hope that she will have a better chance to survive there, one of the other girls, Myra, asks her: "What's the worst thing you've ever done for food?" (97). Another girl answers that she has seen Kora and her brother chasing a rat down an alley, killing it with a shovel, roasting it and "gobbl[ing] it down" (97). The memory makes Kora's stomach lurch, she vomits, and the girls beat her and force her to eat her own puke. Rats, like puke, are not

[1] A designation which centers the shared ecological, environmental, and cultural characteristics of the Pacific Northwest region rather than its fragmentation across the Canadian and US border.
[2] Saltwater City is the English translation of Hahm-sui-fau, the name given to the actual Vancouver by the earliest Chinese immigrants (Yee 1).

considered by the girls to be legitimate forms of food. They are abject, rejected by societal and bodily systems as dirty and potentially harmful, and marked as carriers of disease; their consumption in turn aligns Kora with these things. This example also highlights that human-animal relations in the novel are charged sites of potential interspecies transmission of illness (that is, zoonosis), as does an incident when Kora is confronted with another disease transmitted between animal and human when her hand is infected by wet gangrene after a dog bite. Kirilow Groundsel, a "groom" or healer amputates Kora's hand to prevent the bacterial infection from spreading (18).

The novel's handling of food circulation, ingestion, and zoonosis, as well as its take on transplantation indicate a range of ways bodies infiltrate and intersect with one another despite the rigid policing against such dangers present in the novel. There is more to say about each of these processes, but I will focus here on the novel's representation of food consumption and how it challenges conceptions of the human body as a system with fixed boundaries separating the human species from other living beings. While the literature on *The Tiger Flu* has already addressed questions linked to transplantation (McCormack) and critical posthumanism (Pascual), there has not yet been much attention dedicated to the role of food in the novel.[3] My reading situates food consumption amidst these other forms of bodily exchange to consider food's status as a marker of material relation on a continuum with those that have received more critical attention.

[3] Some scholars have made general observations (Batzke and Hess, Gatermann, McCormack, and Pascual), noting that climate change due to global warming has brought starvation to many human groups. Ina Batzke and Linda M. Hess have analyzed food consumption as something that illustrates the expendability of certain forms of life and not others. Literature on *The Tiger Flu* has also explored the subjects of gender (Batzke and Hess), reproduction (Gatermann), knowledge transmission (Beard; Gatermann), health and environmental care (Klimenko), trans-species kinship (Monjur), pandemics (Xausa), religion (Pedersen), diasporic subjectivities (Battisti), and nationalism (Cormier).

Building on the current reimagination of the human within critical posthumanism and Lai's fictional world, this thesis proposes that the forms of life humans consume as food can be understood as kin rather than product. This relational ontological model recognizes how multiple forms of life—not only human but also cloned, animal, and plant life—are related via routes of consumption and constituted with the environment to which they belong rather than being discrete entities fundamentally distinct from their surroundings. I first examine practices of containment related to food preservation but that extend to social forms of containment involving dehumanized and racialized others. In redefining food not as a commodity but as kin, this thesis aims to rethink practices that preserve insular notions of humanity. Reimagining humans' relations with food allows me to analyze how characters become-with (for example) durian fruit as an edible substance whose pervasive smell makes human and more-than-human bodies' "trans-corporeality" tangible (Alaimo 2). Second, applying this ontological model to forms of eating, especially illustrations of cannibalism in the novel, I explore the limits and potentials of such an application of relationality. In particular, the novel reveals two processes by which food is severed from meaningful relation with human consumers: commodification and racialization. Signaling how both processes structure relations between consumer and consumed, the novel instead encourages relations with food that make it more than resource, or consumable other. Addressing these limits and potentials through a reading of Lai's novel allows me not only to reflect on the dystopian future of the novel but also our troubled present in which the novel is produced.

RACE AND INDIGENEITY IN CRITICAL POSTHUMANIST FRAMEWORKS

If the Cordova girls were to ask me what is the worst thing I have ever done for food, I could tell them that I participate every day in our exploitative food system as a privileged individual of the Global North who never goes hungry and who can stay at a distance from the gruesome processes—exploitative working conditions, factory farming, deforestation, among others—that produce the food I eat. I am a middle-class, queer, white settler scholar living in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, on the land and waters where the Kanien'kehá:ka custodians have historically gathered with other First Nations notably to share meals and stories. In stating my position, I follow the tradition of Black feminists who foreground that declaring positionality illuminates a particular perspective on the intersectional oppression they are fighting (Collins; King), I also follow the tradition of white feminists defending that objectivity is better obtained by acknowledging one's position and the biases it might produce (Haraway; Harding), and I follow Indigenous traditions which understand knowledge as contextual, anchored in one's relations to land, water, animal and plant neighbors (Robinson; Todd).

I keep the above traditions in mind as I situate my analysis of *The Tiger Flue* within critical posthumanist discourse, given that Indigenous and Black scholarship have offered significant critiques of posthumanist scholarship produced by white feminists.[4] While posthumanist discourses have deconstructed the bounded humanist subject—a figure founded in opposition to nature and its multiple human others—Alexander Ghedi Weheliye and Cristin Ellis point out that these efforts were preceded by scholars of Black and ethnic studies (Ellis 136; Weheliye 8).[5] Moreover, like anti-racist critiques troubling the human as an ontological given

[4] Juanita Sundberg's example, in "Decolonizing posthumanist geographies," is of Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* (35).
[5] See for example the work of Tiffany Lethabo King and their reconceptualization of Black fungibility. King shows how the "human," as white humanist subject and exceptional species, has never been at the center of Black

precede that of posthumanism, several Indigenous scholars and traditions precede current rejections of human exceptionalism; as Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear explains, "there's not an animal-human divide for many Indigenous people," but rather a sense of being related to one another: a sense of sharing a certain vulnerability along with reciprocal responsibilities (65).

Larissa Lai's ostensibly posthumanist future significantly does not sidestep the contribution of Indigenous and Black epistemologies in imagining other ways of being human precisely because it writes Indigenous peoples into its vision of the future, like the Syilx and Secwepemc peoples, and their ways of maintaining reciprocal relations with the land. The novel also foregrounds the racial underpinnings of humanness and its relation to entities deemed less than human. The tiger flu's "biological targeting" of male human individuals is as specific, Lai explained in an interview, as the media's "racial targeting" of Asian individuals in the bird flu coverage that started in Hong Kong in 2003—a racial targeting that was repeated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Semel). Lai plots a reversal of those historical circumstances in her novel, where some oppressed groups have shown more resilience to the virus than dominant ones. Indigenous peoples, like the Sylix, have developed a "medicinally cultivated immunity" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 119). Moreover, the novel's Grist sisters, a community of genetically altered clones descending from a single Chinese woman and resisting the commodification of life within the novel, have also avoided the worst of the flu pandemic because of their medical practice and their relative isolation.

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conceptual worlds (119). King reconceptualizes Black fungibility beyond the imposed interchangeability of the labor and bodies of enslaved people on antebellum plantations, and instead understands it as a way of being human not in opposition to the natural world but in a state of flux and relation with nonhuman life-forms (115). Or see anthropologist Paul Nadasdy's work with the Kluane First Nation and his analysis of how the Canadian Government's wildlife management policies attempt to reframe Kluane people's relation to the land and animals as one of ownership rather than reciprocity between peoples (Nadasdy).

A significant contribution of *The Tiger Flu* to this project of recognizing and inventing other "*modes* of the human" (McKittrick 127) is its illustration of food practices—of ontologizing certain forms of life as food and of recognizing certain ways of eating—as relations through which humans become-with other life forms. Here I mobilize Donna Haraway's term "becoming-with" because it evokes, in simple terms, that existing through relating is a *doing*: something that has to be repeated again and again rather than being gained once and for all (*Staying with the Trouble* 3). "Becoming," instead of "being," implies that existence is a process rather than an ontological *fait accompli*, and "with" signals that existence is not an isolated affair, but a rather entangled one (13, 42).

By reading representations of food in the novel I apply to food a relational ontological model based on those developed by posthumanist thnkers.[6] Ontologies attempt to grasp the nature of existence and formulate "an account of a real," as phrased by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (37). Grosz's formulation implies that multiple accounts of different conceptions of what is "real" are possible and that an ontology is just *an* account of *a* real. Thus, ontologies are multiple and specific to different historical and cultural contexts. Moreover, in this model, it is not that we *have* relations that allow us to persist, but rather that we are *constituted* through relating and "intra-acting" with human and more-than-human others (Barad 178). As Karen Barad explains, the agency implied in "acting" is "*not something that someone or something has*," it is not a thing that can be possessed, it is not an object of ownership (178). Agency is a doing, a doing-*with*, by

[6] Rosi Braidotti views existence as relational (34); María Puig de la Bellacasa writes of "interdependency [as] the ontological state of humans and other beings" (5); Eva Hayward defines the nature of embodied experience as "inter-corporeal" (263) while Stacy Alaimo defines it as "trans-corporeal" (2); Karen Barad names "agential realism" their ontological model based on entanglement (33); Donna Haraway explains how existence is about "becoming-with" multiple others (Staying with the Trouble 12); Timothy Morton understands that the nature of things is not to be separate but rather to be "viscous," uncomfortably close to one another as "nothing is radically external to anything else" (32, 41).

which certain possibilities are reproduced and not others. While *having* agency—or an identity—supposes a fixed proprietary relation, becoming-with and intra-acting entail the constant renegotiating of a relation of mutual responsibility. As philosopher and feminist Judith Butler puts it, saying that I "have" relations creates in me a false sense of detachment—rather than attachment—and puts me in the position of a subject possessing objects (relations) instead of being constituted through them (12–13). Taking relating for granted facilitates the uncritical reproduction of certain power and proprietary relations.

In my reading of *The Tiger Flu,* I will show how both proprietary relations between people and food established by a capitalist food system, as well as racist tropes that mark some forms of eating as abject and undesirable, create animal and plant life as objects to be consumed rather than as kin with whom to cultivate reciprocal relations. The ontological model I take up is thus not only interested in arguing that existence is relational, but also in attending to *how* things are related and what are the *power relations* between them. The novel imagines alternative food practices where humans create alliances and reciprocal relations with human and more-than-human others through eating. Eating is not represented as an assimilationist relation where the other disappears within the bounds of the eating self, but rather a constitutive relation by which eater and eaten are becoming-with one another. I will address multiple examples from the novel where the one eaten resists smooth incorporation and creates indigestion, showing that becoming-with does not presuppose harmony but should also address conflict and account for what is discarded in the maintenance of certain lives at the cost of others.

RELATING TO FOOD: FROM CANS TO KINS

Food practices: containing the other

To think about the significance of food, this thesis shows how food is not a neutral category but one shaped by food practices. These practices function to contain those we eat and prevent us from entering in meaningful relationship with these forms of life understood as food. *Food* itself can be defined as plant or animal products eaten for their nutritional value, taste, and capacity to provide energy to the organism. While plants, fungi, animals, and humans are all edible, most animals, fungi, and plants are ontologized as food while humans are not. But, as Matthew Calarco puts it, positioning humans as edible alongside a range of other beings, "humans and animals are simultaneously both meat and more than meat" (427). Yet humans are generally positioned as ontologically different from—and indeed superior to—other forms of life. Such ontology is implemented by laws guaranteeing most—but not all—humans the status of person while animals, plants, and fungi are given the status of object (Montford 229). *The Tiger Flu* troubles this humanist understanding that posit "food" and "human" as ontologically separate categories by exploring how humans sometimes relate with forms of life consumed for food as with kin rather than property, and sometimes find themselves in the position of the ones being consumed.

Food practices, on the other hand, involve processes that shape relationships to food ranging from ways in which food is produced (in forest gardens or in animal farms), acquired (through hunting, harvesting, stealing, sharing or buying), eaten (at a diplomatic dinner or a cannibalistic one), and discarded (trashed when rotten or wasted). Food practices are never only personal, even when it comes to taste and appetite, because these processes are often normative and are always marked by beliefs about race, culture, class, and gender (LeMesurier 5). These

practices implicate institutions, industries, and infrastructures involved in producing, processing, and selling food along with the impacts these activities have on people, environments, and economic systems. The novel foregrounds how both food and food practices shape who or what counts as a relation of significance in the novel, and who or what gets discarded as an object, commodity, or other.

As I noted above of *Tiger Flu*, Myra asks Kora on her second day at the Cordova Dancing School for Girls, "What's the worst thing you've ever done for food?" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 97). The question and the answers the Cordova girls offer ontologize certain things and not others as food in addition to creating a division between those who are accepted as kin and members of the community because they have the right food practices and those who are excluded. Before Kora has a chance to respond, other girls give their best guesses: "Raid a garbage can," proposes Soraya, or "steal from us at the wet market," suggests Modesta, but it's Tanya's reply that triggers Kora's reaction of disgust: "Catch and roast a rat" (97). The first and last guesses have to do with the ontology of food. Soraya's answer illustrates that food can become trash when it spoils or bears the mark of someone else's eating. Yet, as Tanya's guess suggests, rats—while they are edible—are not considered by the Cordova girls to be food and eating them is a worse transgression than eating others' wasted leftovers. Rats and trash do not fit the Western ontology of food which is represented in the novel by the Cordova girls' diet.[7] Their favored food product, "cans recovered from the time before," is an archetype of containment in this ontology (41). If the Cordova girls seek to contain themselves from the contaminative threat of abject food, they

[7] Rats are often described in Western discourses as threatening private property not only by devouring stored crops but also by virtue of their uncontainable nature associated with their intelligence, resilience, and rapid reproduction (Arseneault and Collard 89). Trash also creates anxiety around its containment: complex municipal and national processes of displacement, treatment, and disposal are put in place to dissimulate that which was once owned, but has since been removed from the space of the property (de Coverly et al.; Morrison 80).

rely on a notion of the self-contained body, arguably the model bounded system in Western thought. This model is, however, constantly threatened by the fact that food consumption undoubtedly shows the body to be porous (Douglas 142; LeMesurier 5). Canning places food within the conceptual bounds of human property, with the container itself maintaining the imagined boundaries between the body and that which it consumes. The metal container metonymizes ideal boundedness. Food no longer becomes-with microorganisms and active enzymes, which eventually make it spoil. As something preserved, canned food is removed from the lively temporality of the now, fixed in its original state through preservation and separated from meaningful relation with human and other than human beings. It is fixed in the category of commodity and deprived of the relations accorded to kin.

While the Grist sisters are a mostly self-sufficient community living on the margins of the capitalist market—where they grow potatoes along with zucchini, kabocha, butternut, carrots, and beans, harvest mushrooms and herbs, and hunt—the Cordova girls depend on canned foods and the logic of capitalist accumulation associated with them. The cans represent the capitalist fantasy of an accumulable good which can be stored over time without losing value. The girls scavenge "cans, bottles, and jars of … peanut butter, tuna, tomatoes, soup, juice, [and] beer" from "plague house[s]" and sell them back at the wet market (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 136, 140). To survive, the girls are forced to steal from the dying, those who have locked themselves in to keep the flu out, but who get infected anyway as the name "plague houses" suggests. The Cordova girls' food practices illustrate how human exceptionalism and capitalism work to contain certain forms of life in the categories of food or disabled other to prevent those recognized as full members of the human species and society to relate to these disregarded beings as kin.

Uncontained smells of fruit, race, and gender

Food practices are also imbricated with colonial histories' efforts at containing racial others from the Western self. The girls' accusation that Kora is a "rat eater" is steeped in a long tradition of North American Sinophobic rhetoric portraying Chinese people as infesting the national body politic[8] (LeMesurier 24; Tchen and Yeats 343). Such xenophobic sentiment has long been expressed, among other things, in the suspicion that Chinese food is prepared with meats the Western subject would not eat, such as rat and dog meat. Discourses around these fears also dehumanize the Chinese body which has a history of being portrayed in racist discourse as rat-like, becoming animalized through the consumption of meats judged not fit for human consumption (LeMesurier 24). Kora's positioning in the novel as an Asian body accused of performing the wrong food practices anchors the novel in historical structures of racial oppression which shape not only this dystopic future but also our shared present.

This section attends to the novel's representation of foods that have a strong odor and thus resist containment materially and symbolically, examining their alignment with racialized identities. The Grist sisters have an affective attachment to durian and its pungent smell, with their growing of durian being a food practice that refuses containment and proliferates olfactory kinship, provoking settler patriarchal anxieties. In "Decolonizing Smell" Hsuan L. Hsu argues that modern and colonial projects have implied control over the senses, and especially "the rejection of smell as an involuntary sense incompatible with Kantian," and I would add Cartesian, ideals of autonomy and control of the mind over the body (154). While sight separates subject from object and thus reinscribe the body as separate from the environment, smell reveals bodies' trans-corporeality by traversing bodily boundaries even before any eating happens (Alaimo 2).

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[8] At the end of the 19th century, this fear was also represented through the image of a cannibalistic "Chinaman eating the Irishman who had just shared a meal devouring Uncle Sam" (Tchen and Yeats 343).

Food releases volatile molecules in the air which enter the nose and bound directly with olfactory cells (P. Lai 183). Framing human bodies as entangled with their environment rather than separate from it foregrounds their fundamental "trans-corporeality" (Alaimo 20). This, for Stacey Alaimo, "marks a profound shift in subjectivity" by which the realm of the ethical and political must now be extended to nonhuman beings and systems (20).

In *The Tiger Flu*, durian is a fruit and food whose strong smell reinscribes Saltwater City and Grist Village as spaces where ways of being other than that of the male colonial subject can flourish. The material bonding between durian fruits and human bodies is also represented in the novel as a form of constructive political alliance answering the degrading association between racialized bodies and certain foods. In Lai's earlier novel *Salt Fish Girl*, the durian's pungent smell provokes in certain characters a disgust that analogizes racist tropes of revulsion toward Asianness, foreignness, and femaleness (P. Lai 177; McCormack 403). In *The Tiger Flu*, the green spiky fruit is also associated with femininity: in Grist Village the fruits and leaves are used in rituals to celebrate doubler fertility, and in Saltwater City they are revered by groups of women while men are absent, probably kept away by the "cat shit and lilac smell" (199–200). Lai engages in a process of "self-troping" when reclaiming the racist tropes accompanying the fruit's unbounded smell to imagine generative relations between fruit and female Asian body and bear witness to ways of being human other than that of Western bounded individualism (L. Lai, "Familiarizing Grist Village"). The racialization and gendering of certain foods illustrates how dehumanization and disregard for nonhumans coevolve. Lai's Grist sisters' relation with durian harkens back to how some populations in the non-fictional world have answered their forced alignment with nonhumans by reinforcing or creating new alliances with them, and did so long

before the posthuman turn encouraged attention to other-than-humans in mainstream discourses (Luciano and Chen 186).

The smell of Saltwater City's durian trees indeed appears to be the sign of an alliance between the fruits and the sisters because they evoke a sense of belonging, and a refusal of containment and commodification. The "rich odour" of the durian makes Kirilow "homesick" and she "dream[s] of the aunties back home" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 200–01). Her homesickness is not about ownership, a place that would belong to her, but about mutual relationships and interdependency: about belonging somewhere. She remarks that "the biggest durian tree [which had] burst up through the asphalt" of the city's boulevard must have done so at the time when Chan Ling escaped the city with her sisters to found Grist Village (200). The tree remains in the city as a trace of the sisters' food practices of eating and smelling durian.

Kirilow's homesickness for Grist Village triggered by the durian odor mirrors that of her ancestor Chan Ling for Saltwater City. The smell's pervasive nature like the affect of longing hint at the complex networks necessary to maintain a sense of home providing safety, kinship, and ongoingness. When Jemini, the company founded by Kora's grandfather Lennox Ko, finds that Chan Ling had a genetic mutation that made her cloning possible, they extracted her DNA to produce clones to constitute a disposable workforce employed in HöST Industries' micro technology factories. After it was revealed that the clones had developed a way to reproduce by themselves, through parthenogenesis, they were round up and executed. Kirilow and the other Grist sisters are the descendants of Chan Ling and her sisters who were able to escape the carnage. Glorybind Groundsel, Kirilow's mother double, used to tell her that Chan Ling felt "homesick" for Saltwater City, which is hard to imagine for the young groom who sees only a dirty, violent place where "girls beat each other to make friends and there is nothing good to eat"

(162). But Kirilow will learn that the Cordova Dancing School for Girls is in fact the old Grist commune of Saltwater City, founded by the sisters who stayed behind and were able to hide there. When the commune's population declined, they adopted orphans from outside the community to transmit their knowledge and survival abilities to them (172). The school and the durian trees, providing something that once was home and something that has a taste of home, show Kirilow that alliances can be formed in unexpected company. To make it into the world to come, Kirilow abandons ideas of purity and learns to associate herself, like her ancestors did at the Cordova school, with sisters she first thought were too week to survive, humans whom she considered enemies, plants preserved by corrupt institutions, genetically modified animals, and even technologies designed by violent corporations.

The durian trees in Saltwater City act as monuments to the history of exploitation of Asian women whose cloned bodies were made into replicable commodities, a story which refuses to be buried and contained just like the durian seeds won't stay underground and will rather burst through the asphalt. The edible flesh of the fruits reminds us of capitalist histories of "eating the Other," were racial difference is commodified to make it digestible for dominant subjects and structures (hooks 366). The sisters refuse to disappear in the category of object, like the rat which makes Kora's stomach lurch, like the smell of the durian which lingers long after it was eaten: it is not because racialized subjects and foods are eaten that they "go down smoothly" and disappear through the process of incorporation (Tompkins 8). The trees' presence is a refusal of the attempted erasure of the sisters and their ability to reproduce beyond Jemini's control of their bodies as private property. The Grist sisters' opposition to property is thus remembered through and mirrored by the durian trees which burst in a public space, the street, to feed city dwellers. The trees are revered by "priestesses [who] gather the fruit," and the religious ritual positions this

food not as a commodity defined by its exchange value but as a being imbued with material and spiritual value. Similarly, in Grist Village, the sisters have a reciprocal relation with the durian trees which they feed with "droppings of elk, bear, and sometimes even revived Caspian tiger" and in return, the trees produce fruits for the sisters to eat (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 199). Durian, elk, bear, tiger, and sisters are thus becoming-with each other through alternative food practices by which they directly or indirectly eat or feed on one another.

Proliferating kinship between sisters and tigers

While rats and durians resist containment, tigers in the novel are subjected to the institution of private property because they are farmed to produce the addictive tiger wine from their bones. Their consumption is framed by dominant food practices containing the tiger in the category of product, foreclosing meaningful relationships between these animals and other beings. However, Kirilow's suggestion that some Grist sisters have chosen to align themselves with tigers because of their ontological similarities offers the possibility of their kinship. By kinship I mean a historically situated set of relations of responsibility which make beings, kin, responsible for one another. By kin I mean not only one's own relatives by genealogy or ancestry, but those to whom one is related because of reciprocal investment in each other's existence (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 103, 207n12).

A central plot of the novel involves Jemini, the cloning company, having reintroduced the extinct Caspian tiger by extracting DNA from a rug made from its hide. Tigers are farmed in factories which, because their goal is to generate animal products, exacerbate the objectification of living animals already marked as resources in the production of meat, bones, and fur (Stanescu 151). The property relations that frame animals as resources denies their capacity to be "embodied creatures that have their own interests and desires and that come to understand

themselves through meaningful relations with others of their choosing" (Montford 225). Farmed animals—like the novel's tigers and, to a certain extent, Chan Ling and her cloned sisters—are not free to develop kinship ties with other members of their species nor are they considered by humans as people with their own lifepath. Indeed, the harsh conditions of factory farming also affect the factory workers, like Kora's brother who probably got infected by the flu through his work at the tiger farm. When he gets too sick to lift the carcasses at the abattoir, he loses his job there. Lai's fictional world therefore reflects our nonfictional one where, as TallBear argues, it "is our whole system of producing and consuming [food]" which is problematic, not only the practice of meat and animal product consumption (61). She explains that "all the bodies that are used to prop up that system, whether they're human or nonhuman, are being violated and exploited" (61). That system is rooted in capitalist and imperialist extraction where land, plants, animals, Indigenous and racialized peoples are ontologized as fungible resources (Simpson 42–43).

Lai's novel, however, imagines alternatives to extractive relations when it suggests that tigers and sisters can be read as kin. Because the Grist sisters are themselves descendants from women cloned in Jemini's laboratories, some of them defend that the tiger is "no different from [them]" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 88). Rather than despising the Caspian tiger as the source of the flu, they sometimes eat it and even embrace it with empathy as a fellow creature who, like them, "would not live now except by human intervention" (88). Kinship is made possible by this ontological alignment identified by the sisters and by the novel's refusal to reduce sisters and tigers to containable objects. Like the sisters reproducing through parthenogenesis beyond Jemini's control, revived tigers are hosts for viral reproduction. The tiger flu was brought back at

the same time as its feline host, foregrounding a symbiotic animal, viral, and bacterial composite being that is reproduced through factory farming and finds new hosts in the human population.

The novel's imagination of kinship between Grist sisters and tigers further highlights the porosity of the boundary between human and nonhuman made palpable by zoonotic diseases. Discourses around diseases jumping from animals to humans and vice versa have, since the 1980s, attempted to maintain the separation between these categories while being forced to recognize the porousness of species boundaries (Shukin 205). Lai's novel instead foregrounds the "human-animal intimacy" revealed by zoonotic diseases (205) and points to how they are, like the revived tiger and the Grist sisters, caused by human extractive practices. In other words they are not *caused* by animals but by industries encroaching on animals' habitats, by factory farming and the "*lives of confinement, of deprivation, and of stress*" that it imposes on animals, by climate change due to global warming, and by growing markets for wildlife products (van Dooren). It is because tigers are treated as commodities—like inert things having no interests of their own—rather than beings toward whom humans have responsibility that the pandemic is swelling. Lai's focus on the way that zoonotic illness haunts the process of animal commodification emphasizes that, even while property relations might attempt to reduce animals to mere resource, they nonetheless remain entangled with human biology.

EATING AS BECOMING-WITH: FROM ASSIMILATIONIST TO RELATIONAL CANNIBALISM

In this section, I conceive of eating as a “naturalcultural” process, one in which physiological, social, and political processes are intermeshed (Haraway, *Companion Species* 3). Eating, a need that generally manifests itself through hunger, is a practice by which humans and nonhumans form kinship and rivalries with members of their own species and of others, and a process by which beings become-with the lifeforms they eat for food. I pay particular attention to forms of cannibalistic eating in *The Tiger Flu*, which I read, first, as a model for capitalist relations where corporate technologies deploy assimilationist eating to cannibalize marginalized populations. Second, I regard Kora and Kirilow’s cannibalistic eating as an act of trans-corporeal integration maintaining kinship beyond death.

Cannibal capitalism

In Saltwater City’s technocratic context, the sickness and hunger of the people of Saltwater Flats are part of embodied vulnerability that HöST’s technology, invented by CEO Isabelle Chow, is said to be able to cure by separating the mind from the body. In Saltwater Flats, to put it simply, the physical act of eating is replaced by corporate cannibalism consuming the bodies of a disposable population to upgrade the verisimilitude of its product for wealthier beneficiaries. The upload is itself a process that transforms bodies into fish, which are fed to the population of Saltwater Flats. I will look at cannibalism as an archetypal form of assimilationist eating, a sort of consumption where who or what is eaten disappears in the body of the one ingesting them. I argue that, in *The Tiger Flu*, capitalism makes necessary and justifies forms of cannibalism dependent on the assimilation of the other’s difference into the capitalist body. Representations of eating, such as cannibalism, act as models for larger sets of capitalist relations,

between people and systems in fictional and nonfictional worlds (Kilgour 6). In other words, particular acts of eating are instances where characters either replicate the same system or attempt other ways of relating beyond the process of eating as assimilation. In the novel, cannibalism is thus not only used to reproduce capitalism but also offers resistance to assimilationist relations when eating provokes indigestion. Cannibalistic indigestion proposes a provocative illustration of becoming-with through eating one's own kin, one that allows me to reflect on the potentials and limits of applying an ontological model of relation to food.

In the novel, capitalism is shown to be the structure ultimately leading to cannibalism, the "ultimate form of transgressive consumption" (Batzke and Hess 63).[9] While capitalism is an economic and political system reproducing a colonial way of being human dependent on an ongoing process of "violent *dispossession*" (Coulthard 7), the very concept of cannibalism emerges in colonial and capitalist relations. European settlers arriving on Turtle Island feared that their newly acquired individualist identity based on ownership would be influenced by Indigenous non-proprietary ideas (Kilgour 144, 148). Settlers thus projected onto Indigenous populations their own desire for appropriating their land and cultures by placing this cannibalistic impulse onto the colonized (5, 147). The individual/cannibal binary maintained through this projection constitutes the cannibal as one who constantly becomes other through consuming the other's flesh. The settler fears becoming plural rather than individual by being cannibalized and having one's own capacities and characteristics transferred to the cannibal, or by becoming cannibal and thus forfeiting a certain conception of individualism. I will come back to this fear

[9] Capitalism's particular form of cannibalism, where the system "devour[s] the social, political, and natural bases of its own existence—which are also the bases of ours," is defined by Nancy Fraser in her book *Cannibal Capitalism* (XIV).

later in this section to discuss an incident in the novel involving Kora's difficulty engaging in a form of cannibalism.

In *The Tiger Flu,* HöST's cannibalism of the body and upload of the mind is precipitated by hundreds of years of capitalist extraction which has seriously deteriorated the conditions for food production. The famine of dispossessed groups of people in the novel is intrinsically linked to a certain way of being human dependent on colonial and imperialist dispossession and extraction. These structures, which historically fueled Europe's Industrial Revolution, the development of the West and the consumer capitalist economy, have, in *The Tiger Flu*, long run out of oil needed to feed their industries. In the process, these industries have caused and intensified global warming and have triggered intense ecological catastrophes. Melting polar ice and rising seas have flooded the people left outside of the walls of Saltwater City (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 210). Animals and plants have gone extinct due to habitat loss and rapid climate change, remaining crops have become hard to grow because of depleted soil and acid rain.

Corporations controlling most of the food production like HöST and Jemini exacerbate the situation by cultivating scarcity to raise the market value of their food products and to starve denizens who thus must get uploaded to "survive." They are "extraction companies" that have taken advantage of the political void the climate crisis and subsequent pandemic has caused to establish themselves as technocratic powers (121). Isabelle Chow is HöST's CEO and Lennox Ko, Kora's grandfather, is the founder of the cloning company called Jemini. Chow founds the New Origins Archive (NOA) which preserves seeds and animal genetic information to reintroduce them to serve HöST's own interests. The Grist sisters are given some of NOA's privatized seeds to plant in their "forest gardens" (88). The help Chow gives to the Grist sisters is not entirely selfless; they are allowed to sustain themselves through agriculture and hunting and

reproduce so that the inventor can then harvest their bodies when she needs them for their genetic information. Their DNA is extracted to feed HöST's virtual reality technology and "improve [its] verisimilitude" (55). The process transforms the sisters into fish which are fed to the imprisoned Kora and Kirilow who are then made into "cannibal[s]" (239).

Capitalism thus makes cannibalism appear necessary: being fed to the LïFT, HöST's experimental virtual reality technology, is the only alternative to dying from lack of sustenance for the inhabitants of Saltwater Flats. While the Cordova girls can eat well because they practice organized theft, and the Grist sisters successfully cultivate their own food thanks to NOA's help, the people of Saltwater Flats are weakened by malnutrition and illness. They are forced to choose between succumbing to the tiger flu or giving away their bodymind as a consumable product to be cannibalized by corporations.[10] This is to HöST's advantage because the corporation needs more people to be sick and desperate enough to accept going through the experimental LïFT to make the technology progress. LïFT and the Dark Baths are technologies that upload people's consciousness to programs powered by servers hosted on the artificial satellites Chang and Eng. The satellites are initially launched by Chow to host most of humanity's knowledge which then becomes privatized. They also play the role of the sun and the moon by rhythming time on Earth, replacing geosynchronous with anthropogenic symbols of temporality and ownership. They thus illustrate what Jonathan Crary has called the "non-time" of late capitalism, the notion that most people are divorced from the rhythms of human and more-than-human life because there is no time outside of capitalistic production and consumption (9, 30).

Mark Traskin—CEO of the Pacific Pearl Parkade and leader of the tiger men, a small group of men who remain largely asymptomatic even though infected by the flu—steals LïFT and

[10] The portmanteau "bodymind" blends "body" and "mind" together without the conjunction "and" to point to the fact that mental and physical states arise together rather than separately (Price 269).

Chang from Chow. He thus attempts to re-establish patriarchal control over the production and storage of life and knowledge. Because Traskin took Chang from her, Chow threatens to let "the model village [she] established there" along with "the sick and the fearful [who were] uploaded" to it, "degrade, deteriorate, and vanish" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 308). In other words, Chow reveals how HöST's intention was never to offer a solution to the problems corporations have themselves created—illness and hunger—but to further profit from the exploitation of those suffering from this system, emphasizing capitalism's cannibalistic enterprise as it subsumes its own population to generate profit.

Assimilationist eating

Cannibalism is not only made necessary by capitalism but also legitimized by the othering of the denizens of Saltwater Flats who are constructed as assimilable into the dominant structure. The developers of the LïFT have used "clones to test their technology," along with "disposable denizens of Satlwater Flats," and now have recourse to captured Grist sisters (308). These people are considered as fundamentally different from the normative conception of the human and thus treated as subhuman by HöST. The Grist sisters are not only escaped clones but also descendants of a Chinese woman: they find themselves at the intersection of biopolitical, racial, gendered, and classed systems of oppression.

If the technology transforming these dehumanized people into nonhumans is fictional—part of the novel's speculative elements—these systems creating dehumanization are not. HöST's selective cannibalism illustrates how the othering of certain groups of people is not simply a mechanism of exclusion, but a form of violent incorporation, a forced integration of another into a hegemonic frame of existence. In a different context, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson makes this distinction between exclusion and inclusion within the category of the human. She reinterprets

Enlightenment's alignment of Black humans with animals "not as black 'exclusion' or 'denied humanity' but rather as the violent imposition and appropriation—inclusion and recognition—of black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that humanity," that is of making it malleable to the demands of hegemonic white subjectivity (Jackson 3). In other words, it is not that Black and other humans aligned with nonhuman animals are left outside of the category of the human, but rather that their own way of becoming-with more-than-humans is cannibalized by Western humanism. It is assimilated: their own characteristics are violently converted into those of a dominant framework.

When the men of Saltwater Flats choose the upload, it is because they believe that their consciousness can survive without their body, that this new hermeneutic—human as virtual consciousness—is good enough to guarantee humanity's survival. Their worldview does not need to be converted into something else to be integrated into the new system. Grist sisters do not, however, believe in the separation of mind and body, nor do they identify with or wish to be included in the "human" category (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 48). So, when they are uploaded, they are not integrated (i.e., allowed to preserve their own beliefs) but assimilated. Their way of being is transmogrified to correspond to HöST's standard of humanity. This assimilation emphasizes cannibal capitalism's reliance on a model of eating that denies the being of those it assimilates to sustain itself.

LïFT's developers further legitimize cannibal capitalism by presenting the consumption of the body as the continuation of life rather than as death. They do so by erasing embodiment and death as necessary conditions for life. Saltwater City's technocratic powers thus follow the cartesian body/mind split and adapt this model of the subject to the terms of what N. Katherine Hayles calls the "cybernetic posthuman" (4). According to this framework, humans are essentially

information machines and embodiment is accidental rather than vital: human intelligence is hosted in carbon-based bodies by the chance of evolution but could be hosted in many other substrates (2). LïFT's technology contributes to "the erasure of embodiment … common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman" by obscuring the process by which the body of the people uploaded is transformed into fish eaten by others (Hayles 4). The LïFT technology is "blackboxed": understood only in terms of input (people), and output (minds uploaded on a virtual reality program), without considering how the technology works and what it discards. The double cannibalistic nature of the process—the fact that it feeds on people as test subjects and that their bodies are transformed into fish fed to other people—is obscured. Embodiment does not evaporate but is transformed. What remains unchanged are the power relations and extractive practices that are necessary to build and sustain technologies like LïFT.

To sell the upload to Chang, street vendors in Saltwater Flats speak in terms of life without ever mentioning death. They sing: "*Life after life / After life after*," mirroring the three-word phrase "life after death" but omitting the last element—death—and replacing it with the repetition of the first element of the phrase (217). The notion that the phrase does not end in death, but continues "after," points to capitalism's "tautological time" by emphasizing the ongoing process of production, a process of generating capital without end (Negri 27). The words "life" and "after" are repeated by the vendors who echo one another, until the passersby don't know anymore which came first, "life" or "after." These repeated phrases evoke temporal disorientation and expectation: of something coming *after*. Yet, as the novel makes clear, the upload does not guarantee people's participation in another form of existence which would be more sustainable than the last: Chow will let the programs imitating their consciousness become obsolete until they are eventually replaced. This unending process practiced by HöST highlights capitalism's cannibalistic

proclivities: when there is nothing else to expropriate for consumption, when even death as a possible escape from capitalist time is foreclosed, it will consume materialities already within its grasp.

Individualist fasting

HöST's act of cannibalistic eating performed through the LïFT appears as the consecration of capitalist exploitation in which the other is completely consumed and assimilated by the system for profit. This form of consumption is, however, undermined first by Kora's refusal to engage in cannibalistic eating and then by her and Kirilow's engagement in another form of cannibalistic eating which resists the assimilation of those eaten.

On a bonfire night, Grist Village is raided by HöST and the Grist sisters are captured but the airship is intercepted by Traskin who has taken control of Chang and the LïFT and wants Grist DNA to perfect it. Kirilow and a few other sisters escape, and the groom decides to go to Saltwater City to free her sisters and find another starfish to ensure the survival of the community. In Saltwater Flats, Kirilow ends up at the Cordova Dancing School for Girls where she treats Kora's infected hand. When the hand shows signs of wet gangrene, Kirilow amputates it to save the girl. Hours after the operation, even though Kora is dazed by the pain, she decides to attend a celebration at the Pacific Pearl Parkade, the stronghold of the tiger men, where she believes she will find her brother K2. When Kirilow sees that her patient is missing, she heads to the Parkade, thinking that Kora might have starfish abilities and be her last hope at founding a new Grist Village. While there, Kora witnesses the tiger men forcing the captured Grist sisters into the LïFT. She sees a group of women "go up as people, come down as fish and roses" (239).

On that night, the girl and the groom are captured and imprisoned because Kora's brother K2 wants her out of the way. He has been invited to rule Jemini after Everest's death but fears that

Kora, who is the rightful heir of the company will take his place if he does not make her disappear. K2 has joined forces with Traskin so that Jemini can make clones to test the LïFT. Jemini will also continue infecting people through its tiger wine factories so that they will pay to use the LïFT "and save their precious little minds, if not their bodies" (229). Kora and Kirilow are thus detained for 83 days so as not to disturb the men putting in place their "perfect money machine" (229). During their detention, Kora and Kirilow are fed "fish," "hard bread" and "muddy water" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 235). Kora refuses to eat the fish, suspecting that they might be constituted of the flesh of the Grist sisters transformed by the upload. Yet she cannot bring herself to warn Kirilow, who eats it eagerly.

Batzke and Hess explain Kora's disgust toward the fish as coming from her association of this situation with the one she experienced when reluctantly eating her pet goat and friend Delphine. I, however, propose to reframe Kora's initial refusal and ultimate acceptance of fish as a process by which she comes to embrace relational cannibalism. I argue that Kora's refusal is marked by her fear of becoming more like the Grist sisters she is eating while her final taking of the fish as food is a way to form a bond of solidarity with Kirilow and become-with the transformed Grist sisters.

These two moments, when goat stew and fish are eaten, are the only ones in the novel where meat eating is questioned as a legitimate form of consumption, as Batzke and Hess explain (62). For them, these exceptions "highlight the cultural customs that render animals' lives expendable as a norm" (62). Taking the problem from a different angle, what makes eating animals *unacceptable* in these examples is a human's attachment to their life rather than its essential value. This framing of the question of meat consumption reinforces the position of the human at its center: the goat's death is regretted because it was Kora's pet—her family's

possession—and the fish cannot be eaten because it was once human. While I do not claim that my analysis succeeds in decentering the human, an analysis of cannibalism in the novel allows me to consider how certain human lives are aligned with those of nonhuman animals when they are both eaten as food. This alignment puts certain human lives in the position of 'prey,' a position where a subjectivity "born *both* of an awareness of dehumanization … and of a deliberate transgression of the boundaries of the human" has been embodied by people marginalized by racist, sexist, classist, and ableist systems (Luciano and Chen 186). In other words, being prey highlights alternative ways of being human, where this category is recognized as internally fractured along the lines of privilege and oppression, and where its boundaries are crossed to form alliances with nonhumans.[11]

I contend that Kora's rejection of cannibalistic eating is not simply a refusal to eat one's own species but, initially, a refusal to create such an alliance with the Grist sisters whose conception as subhuman she has inherited from dominant discourses. Her refusal thus stems from a fear of becoming more like others through the eating of their flesh. This fear comes from a particular understanding of the act of eating as something that goes beyond the satisfaction of a physiological need. For the first few days of their captivity "Kora Ko refuses to eat the fish dinners" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 235). Kirilow, "digging in," tells her: "The fish isn't bad. Why won't you eat it?" (235). For the groom, the fish is "good" to become-with, they both need the "strength" it gives "if [they are] going to survive this," so Kirilow "eat[s] and [doesn't] complain" (235). She accepts the food given to her even though "it's not beets, red mustard, or bok choy" like her late bride Peristrophe Halliana would have prepared: she eats even though the

[11] Val Plumwood's "Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey" and Matthew Calarco's "Beign toward meet" offer profound engagements with the knowledge of being prey and how it might inform our relations to other animals we consume as meat.

food does not come from love but from greed. Kirilow frames eating as a physiological need which should be met for her survival, rather than a way to honor a relation to those with whom she eats or to the fish itself.

Eating is indeed a physiological need: organisms must consume food to incorporate its nutrients to produce energy and allow for growth. Energy and growth are ways in which the body changes through incorporation, but so are kinship and rivalries which are ways in which the body becomes socially tied to certain groups and not others. Moreover, as I have shown in the previous section, when we consider those whom we eat as beings toward whom we have responsibilities—as kin—eating can be understood as a social relation between not only those eating together, but between those who eat and are eaten. I contend that eating is not simply "both" a physiological and a social process but that, in being "naturalcultural," it reveals the way that the social and physiological are irrevocably co-constituted from the start, and do not precede their relation (Haraway, *Companion Species* 3; Puig de la Bellacasa 127). Because eating with others—sharing food—is a diplomatic ritual for the Cordova Girls like for the Grist sisters, I understand Kora's avoidance of eating with Kirilow to be a way to defer a new alliance between them and attempt to escape her role as the community's new starfish.

However, Kora's initial resistance to such alliance seems to point to deeper fears: that of genetically being and of physically becoming like Kirilow, like a Grist sister. Kora's fasting comes as an ultimate attempt to preserve a sense of identity linked to genetic purity which has repeatedly been shattered throughout the novel. Kora has learned that her uncle is in fact her father with whom her mother committed adultery, that her family line is full of "kidnappers and murders" implicated in human and animal cloning and the spread of the flu, and now there is one more thing she ignores about herself and her family: that her female ancestors were clones or

descendants of clones produced by her patriarchal line's family company Jemini, and thus that she has Grist blood (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 259).

Kora dreads that she will grow to resemble her Grist cell companion by eating the same thing as her every day for the eighty-three days, but also by consuming the transformed bodies of Grist sisters. Kora does not want to become a Grist sister by eating them, just like Kirilow fears that sharing meals with the Cordova Girls will pollute her bodymind and make her more like them. Because their apprehensions stem from a belief that the qualities of foods will be transferred to the one eating them—and thus that food and food habits affect both body and mind—they reveal a conception of eating that is closer to historical notions of Galenic dietetics or analogical reasoning and contemporary trans-corporeality than it is to modern dietetics. Galenic dietetics and analogical reasoning prevailed in the West until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Shapin 379). These beliefs accompanied settlers who were eager to reproduce their European diet during the establishment of the early North American colonies to avoid becoming more like the indigenous populations (384). If beef, wheat bread, and wine would preserve the European character of the colonists, indigenous foods like maize, potatoes, and squash "would transform [them] into the flawed native body" (384). When Kora refuses to eat the fish, she echoes settler colonial fears of losing the identity which it imagined could be fixed by separating the self from unwanted external influence.

These frameworks, with their belief that foods can transfer the qualities of the animals and plants from which they were made to the people ingesting them, tell a story of early modernity where food is not completely contained by proprietary relations and where the human body might be closer to Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality than to the liberal bounded subject. I read the conception of eating portrayed by the novel as both a critique of contemporary frameworks and a

reappropriation of older ones. Revisiting Galenic dietetics and analogical reasoning shows that Western thought has not always been dependent on Cartesian binaries, but also that these binaries and their separation might better be fought through epistemic and biological diversity and recuperation rather than through isolation from certain frames of thought. In other words, Kirilow and Kora's story shows compromise to be a more apt tool for ongoingness than purity. Compromise is at the core of Grist sisters' practices: they use what they can of the knowledge and tools of the time before but they reframe it in their relational and non-cartesian worldview.

Relational cannibalism

Kora and Kirilow's imagined separation shown in the examples above—necessary for both to hold on to a sense of contained selfhood and certainty—erodes as the novel progresses, foregrounding their becoming-with in relational rather than purely individual terms. The novel's structure mirrors their stories until the 28th chapter. Shifting from a structure that alternates chapters devoted to each protagonist, the 34th chapter, "Lonely Time," shows Kora's perspective piercing through Kirilow's first-person narration. I argue that cannibalistic eating acts as a catalyst precipitating this shift in the form of the novel by which Kora and Kirilow's perspectives—and that of the reader with them—become entangled.

The girls are stuck together in a prison cell where they argue about Kora's possible Grist ancestry: like them, she has black hair, a "high forehead" and the same "curve of jawbone" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 183). But more importantly, she has starfish abilities revealed by her regrowing hand, small and pink at first but getting bigger every day regardless of Kora's fasting. Day after day, Kirilow feels Kora's gaze on her, scrutinizing her face and searching there for the features she had observed on the faces of the women pushed into the elevator. This section is narrated from Kirilow's point of view so that Kora's intentions in keeping this information from

her cellmate remain ambiguous. Whether she is motivated by cowardice, preferring to avoid conflict and the subject of death and cannibalism, or by compassion for Kirilow who might choose to starve if she discovers that she is fed her sisters, remains open to interpretation.

What pervades these days in captivity is Kirilow's constant feeling of having Kora's "eyes bor[ing] into [her]," the intensity of the girl's gaze waking her up at night (237). In other words, Kora's perspective punctures the boundaries of narration, and her anguish penetrates Kirilow's first person narrative. Because Kirilow's eating is presented not through the point of view of Kora, which would reveal its cannibalistic nature, but through her own ignorant perspective, a certain distance is created between eating and cannibalism. Yet, as readers, if we are exposed to Kirilow's perspective during this passage, we do not share her ignorance. We share Kora's knowledge and so, in a sense, her responsibility and implication in an ethical dilemma where both options, to tell her or not to tell her, cause suffering.

The readers' partial alignment with both Kora and Kirilow points to a dynamic of collective responsibility where ethical purity is impossible, where readers are invited to recognize their implication in the story and avoid a feeling of moral superiority that might come with being an external observer. As Alexis Shotwell describes, purity is too often pursued at the expense of solidarity (12). Purity depends on a conception of the self, body and mind, as bounded: able to choose being touched by certain influences and remaining uncontaminated by others (Shotwell 12). Not only can Kirilow not ignore Kora's smell and presence because of their physical proximity, she also cannot ignore Kora's knowing gaze, which pierces her ignorance. Inversely, Kora cannot ignore what she has seen and which is reflected in Kirilow's face: that the women she saw in the LïFT were Grist sisters before they were fish. Kora's own gaze is projected back at herself and she is undone and redone by her own resemblance to them. As readers, we are invited

to imagine what it would mean and feel like to cultivate entanglement and compromise rather than separation and righteousness. Because reading creates affective and intellectual engagement it allows me to get a practice at recognizing uncomfortable implications in our global capitalist system. Alternatively, because, in fiction, there is a distance between readers and text, it might constitute a safer space to explore such uncomfortable implications before doing so in the nonfictional world.

When Kora finally tells Kirilow about the fish they have been eating, she chooses, in Shotwell's words, "complicity and compromise as a starting point for action" (5). By speaking up she is forced to recognize how her own silence is complicit in Kirilow's misery, but by doing so she also aligns herself with the groom and makes a compromise on her own conception of her identity by accepting that she will have a role to play in the new Grist Village. When realizing what she has done, Kirilow "tear[s] at [her] own cannibal flesh [until her] body convulses as though it's no longer [her] own" (L. Lai, *The Tiger Flu* 239). She feels betrayed by her flesh which has absorbed the fish without revealing their true nature to her, she feels a discrepancy between her body and mind. Yet because they are inseparable, she cannot extricate her "cannibal flesh" to absolve her unknowing mind. Then Kora grabs her, not to hit her like before, but to hold her in a tight embrace, preventing Kirilow from further hurting herself.

The act of cannibalism is reframed through Kora's alignment with Kirilow: not only are they bearing its consequences and culpability together, but they also embody its potential for ongoingness and solidarity. Kora tells her: "It's fish now … So it's not them anymore" (239). What is left of the sisters in the dead fish when body and spirit have been separated through death, when mammalian body has been transformed into an oviparous one? If we take embodiment seriously, as I have attempted to do, we might say that consciousness changes when

the body changes. I might say that, because it is fish, it is not them anymore. But we might also say that since bodies are trans-corporeal, in the constant process of becoming-with other bodies and only ever "individual" in relation to their mutual entanglement, that "them"—the sisters—have never remained the same. And that fish might be "them" now. The fish are sisters like the sisters are fish and they are part of Kirilow and Kora. Kirilow surrenders to the hug even though Kora "reeks like a stale and putrid ocean with dead things floating in it" and cries (239). The dead things Kirilow imagines floating in Kora are not the Grist sisters turned fish. They are not dead, they are "many times flesh of [their] flesh and bone of [their] bone" (239). What reeks of death in Kora is her own culpability, lies and treasons. But, like Kora, Kirilow chooses compromise and leans into the girl who now wants to be accountable for her own mistakes.

This episode of *The Tiger Flu* explores ongoingness gained at the cost of one's kin. By "ongoingness" I mean not survival, which requires the continuation of life for individual beings, nor the unending consumption and production of cannibal capitalism (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 38). I mean, following Haraway (herself indebted to Deborah Rose), both the living and dying of some members while the interspecies community persists in response-ability. The novel imagines eating as an ethical rather than assimilatory process in that, while it always implies the death of certain beings, it also fosters ongoingness and reciprocal relation. Kora and Kirilow's relational cannibalism and the Grist sisters' practices of sustainable hunting and forest gardening are examples of forms of producing and consuming food that strive toward ethical relationships.

In "Being in Relation," TallBear's interview for the book *Messy Eating,* she imagines "ideal" circumstances where cannibalism could be practiced ethically in the nonfictional world. TallBear proposes that if we reject human exceptionalism, like many posthumanist thinkers do, and if we consider that we live in relation to the nonhuman animals we eat, it follows that we

could consider eating human flesh. TallBear prefaces this affirmation by situating her reflection in her Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate context: "I come from a culture in which not too long ago, we were prey, and hunting people still can be if they're out on the land" (64). In light of this deep knowledge of being prey, she explains: "I can imagine a circumstance in which if somebody offered me some human meat and it was willfully given, it would be disrespectful to turn it down" (65). These circumstances, where we would refuse human exceptionalism and understand ourselves as prey in relation with other nonhuman animal preys, and where human meat would be consensually taken and offered as a gift, however, are not the type of conditions portrayed in the novel. Cannibal-capitalist institutions function as unimputable predators, the Grist sisters do not willfully offer their flesh to be transformed into fish, and the fish is not offered as a gift maintaining and extending kinship relations between K2, Kora, and Kirilow. While TallBear's example is useful to think of cannibalism in the context of reciprocal relations, Lai's novel helps us critique assimilationist cannibalism and imagine how relational cannibalism can foster ongoingness in complicity and compromise even in the context of capitalist relations.

In our capitalist world, there is no instance of ethical eating where kinship ties are effectively maintained. Indeed, the example I previously gave of the Grist sisters' seemingly self-sufficient forest gardening cannot be used to defend ethical *purity*: the community gets its seeds from Chow's New Origins Archive and are thus implicated in the company's extractive practices. Alternative ways of becoming-with in response-ability arise in ethical complexity and complicity with exploitative systems like capitalism. Staying with the trouble of messy eating in the context of capitalism, like in the novel's representation of cannibalism, is thus particularly useful to think through ethical complexity. What is helpful in this illustration is that it shows that even when eating transgresses kinship ties, like when the sisters are killed and fed to Kora and Kirilow,

trans-corporeal integration shows that these ties are not necessarily severed. The girl's and the groom's bodymind are becoming-with that of the fish, and the sisters' discarded lives are mourned and remembered in an embodied way. When Kirilow's mourning is embraced by Kora, it also becomes an occasion to create solidarity and cultivate accountability. Friendship thus grows in unexpected company.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that it is possible to consider the life forms humans eat for food as beings with whom we become. This has led me to attend to representations in *The Tiger Flu* of human and more-than-human beings, with whom characters become, being turned into food. In the instance of LïFT's cannibal capitalism, the Grist sisters and the remaining inhabitants of Saltwater Flats are forced to take the upload and are thus violently assimilated into the capitalist body. While this process is sold as one providing eternal life, the simultaneous killing of the body and refusal of death by the encoding and uploading of the mind leads to what Deborah Rose has termed "double death" (75). Double death is "man-made mass death" which projects emptiness into the future by performing genocide or extermination, and causing extinction (68). The forced upload of the sisters is double death: it is the death of beings existing today and of their legacy of embodied and relational interspecies knowledge as a gift and responsibility that would persist in the future (Rose 73). My reading of relational ontologies in the novel moves away from the form of cannibal capitalism that envisions an unchanging future of unending consumption. It moves toward a form of cannibalism that ethically acknowledges who is lost in the process of eating. By mourning those lost, the novel fosters complex kinship ties that refuse to relegate the dead, othered, and eaten to an expired past, instead foregrounding their ongoingness.

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