

eISSN: 2254-1179

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14201/candb.v11i167-182>

# Emergent Critical Strategies Against the Nation-Trap: The Digitization of Literary Apocalyptic Affects and Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

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**Submitted:** October 30, 2021

**Accepted:** March 2, 2022

## ABSTRACT

Focused on interrogating the ways in which twenty-first century writing in Canada is currently approached critically and theoretically, this article proposes new reading methods that expose the influence of nation-state powers over literary productions. In particular, this article takes up Larissa Lai's dynamic, post-apocalyptic novel, *The Tiger Flu*, as a case study to examine these ideas by using digital tools. It studies the novel's reflections on gender, sexuality, and technology within re-imagined patriarchal structures that recall those upon which nationalist ideals thrive today.

## Keywords

Post-apocalypse; English-Canadian fiction; nationalism; Larissa Lai; digital humanities.

While scholarship on literary productions in Canada has significantly evolved as well as diversified and expanded its lines of critical inquiry since the inception of the concept of “Canadian literature,” it has consistently returned to self-reflexive questions pertaining to its purposes, methods, and values. These recurring questions, in some form or another and seemingly at each turn, tend to arise from various interactions with the nation-state and its pervasive frameworks and from diverse perspectives; therefore, as much as scholars have progressed in their varied endeavours, seeking to move beyond the trappings of national constructs in their investigative approaches to literary and cultural works produced in Canada, such a task remains daunting. The call for papers for this special issue of *Canada and Beyond*, for instance, asks, “what is the present role of Canada’s literary and cultural production? How will the development of new critical perspectives further our understanding of what we think of as *Canada*?” (1). The possessive form in this provocation, “*Canada’s* literary and cultural production,” in and of itself betrays the colonial intrusiveness of national structures and the challenges that these networks present to critics working vigorously to transcend them. At least for now—and of important note, here, at least to *me*, since I certainly do not want to speak for others—the idea of having surpassed national frameworks in our studies seems premature.

That being said, this assessment should in no way diminish the tremendous work currently being done in vital areas such as Indigenous and environmental studies in building on the critical leaps and bounds which scholars have taken since the inception of the nationalist, Canadian literature initiative to challenge the latter’s stakes and ambitions. Indeed, this significant effort did and continues to disrupt determined efforts to instill a cohesive cultural nationalism in Canada and to expose its problems, particularly during and since the latter half of the twentieth century when postmodernism took hold of literary productions in Canada. As I have argued elsewhere, this period thrived in its embrace as well as in its critical and creative exploration of the ambiguity of what being or writing “Canadian” meant.<sup>1</sup> In any case, although cultural and literary thinkers have made much progress thus far, I suggest in this article that we slow down as critics, that we postpone our perhaps at times myopic mission to transcend national frameworks in our research and instead turn our attention more diligently to recognizing exactly *how* these systems function currently because, while they are perhaps not as overt and transparent as they once were in their causes, they maintain great power, and we would do well to understand their

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1. See my work, “The Destruction of Nationalism in Twenty-First-Century Canadian Apocalyptic Fiction” and “Theorizing the Apocalyptic Turn in the Literatures of Canada: Un/Veiling the Apocalyptic Direction in Affect Studies” for further reading on this topic.

adapting *modus operandi*. This work, now and as it will progress in the future, will be up to current emerging scholars across disciplines and critical interests, a number of whom appear in this special issue. The opportunity at hand is one for self-reflection on our research, on our objectives, and on potential networks of collaboration in the future across diverse perspectives.

This article puts into dialogue several critical perspectives on the structure and influence of the nation in literary Canada at present, focussing on the apocalyptic genre in particular. It reflects on the challenges involved with this topic and proposes a reading lens that employs digital humanities methods to analyze Larissa Lai's dynamic novel, *The Tiger Flu*, as an example of the recent rise in apocalyptic fiction in Canada. This Lambda Literary Award-winning novel speculates a post-apocalyptic future—from the year 2145 onward—in which environmental destruction and a pandemic that is particularly deadly to men have ravaged the world as we know it today. In particular, I study Lai's reflections on gender, sexuality, and technology within re-imagined patriarchal structures that recall those upon which nationalist ideals thrive today.

### Reflecting on the Influence of National Structures; Digitizing Literary Apocalypse

My own scholarship on literary works produced in Canada—no doubt influenced by my interest in postmodernism along with the self-reflection and uncertainty that this formally challenging period championed—has chiefly concerned itself with existential questions similar to those mentioned in the introduction that centre identity and representation. In this respect, I have been especially invested in innovating reading methodologies or approaches since the beginning of my graduate studies, upon reading an article by renowned Canadian scholar and writer, E.D. Blodgett, in which he argued that “one of the reasons the Canadian literatures are looked upon with a kind of benign diffidence by those unacquainted with them derives from our failure of imagination as critics” (63). The question of what preoccupies writers in Canada, specifically their *Canadianness*, has been addressed numerous times over the past mid-century: by the likes of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood earlier on, and more recently by scholars such as Smaro Kamboureli in works like *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* that include and consider a more diverse range of voices that persist in and around literatures in Canada. Yet observations like Blodgett's—and, of course, the diversification of critical topics on writing in Canada—suggest that our focus would perhaps benefit from a shift to self-reflection on our criticism and the composition of our reading methodologies.

Doing so requires acknowledging two important, at times conflicting, realities. Acknowledgments: first, that the *Canadian* needs to be broken up, apart, to see the many fragments that identify with it in a variety of ways; second, meanwhile, that each of these fragments still operates under this Canadian, nationalist system of power. More nuanced, less totalizing critical conceptualizations of collective identities than those of the nation are thus helpful, here: Homi K. Bhabha's fluid notion of a "locality of culture" (292), for instance, building upon Benedict Anderson's watershed work, *Imagined Communities*, is one such flexible and sophisticated theoretical avenue, even if a bit dated. Another lies with the field of cultural memory studies, due to its dynamism in engaging the competing systemic hierarchies, cultural perspectives, and historical events that define localized collectives and beyond. Theorist Astrid Erll succinctly outlines cultural memory as the "interplay of the present and past in sociocultural contexts" (2) that comprise "social (people, social relations, institutions), material (artifacts and media), and mental aspects (culturally defined ways of thinking, mentalities)" (4). In other words, memory mediates these aspects and the ways in which they interact at the personal and collective levels, the major and minor centricities, and the higher and lower hierarchies.

In "Insurgent Utopias," Larissa Lai expounds on such situated, cultural collectives that function related to but underneath the nation-state of Canada –those that, precisely, "interplay...the present and past in sociocultural contexts." Interestingly, Lai here conceptualizes these types of relationship to the Canadian nation-state, namely in the form of citizenship, as "utopic": "In a Canadian/Turtle Island context, we might consider the full range of Indigenous refusals of Canadian citizenship. For Indigenous people, Canadian citizenship constitutes assimilation, and thus complete colonization. If Canadian citizenship is a kind of utopian form, its prior outside, or better, beneath, is Indigenous claim to the land, and by corollary, an imperative to attend to Indigenous epistemologies" (99-100). Lai's thoughts on Canadian citizenship as this misleading utopia for which to strive recalls the false utopia put forth in the United States of America during the Obama administration onwards, according to filmmaker Jordan Peele, director of the films criticizing racial and class issues, *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019). Peele's articulation of what he calls the "post-racial lie" in the United States interestingly appears to coincide in compelling ways with the "post-national lie" that gripes Canada and that seems to infiltrate our scholarship at times. "When I was writing [*Get Out*]," Peele explains in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, "people were saying, 'Racism is done'" (n.p.). Speaking to *Vanity Fair*, Peele elucidates: "We were in this era where the calling out of racism was almost viewed as a step back... Trump was saying that the first black president wasn't a citizen... There was this feeling like, 'You know what, there's a black president. Maybe if we

just step back, [Trump] can say his bullshit. No one cares. And racism will be gone.' That's the era I imagined this movie would come out in" (n.p.). Nationalist systems of power have accordingly been adjusting how they operate; they continue to carry great influence, yet work in much more indirect, subtle, and often sinister ways, exploiting the complacency that our new theoretical and critical advances might sometimes enable as an unfortunate consequence of their lofty aim to surpass them.

In what appears to be a response to the evolving pervasiveness and subtleties of nationalist structures, a diverse range of fiction in twenty-first-century Canada has taken on a speculative, often apocalyptic or dystopian turn. Other than Lai's *The Tiger Flu*, other recent titles in this genre include Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, Nicolas Dickner's *Tarmac*, Nancy Lee's *The Age*, Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*, Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, Wayne Compton's *The Outer Harbour*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, Christiane Vadnais' *Faunes*, and numerous others. Literary apocalypse has also been a staple in Canada since before Confederation, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Apocalyptic imagery features prominently in settler-colonial work such as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* in 1852. A century later, striving to develop a Canadian literary canon, Northrop Frye understands the apocalyptic narrative as mythic temporality, arguing that Canadian literature has to transcend history, or time and space, and accept myth to find a national, cohesive sense of continuity (Lecker 289). Frye's work and the apocalypse then underscored much of Margaret Atwood's canonically-influential, though often-criticized, *Survival*, published in 1972 as part of an ongoing national project. Finally, Marlene Goldman diversifies literary apocalypse and complicates "Canada" by studying stories from the disenfranchised in her book of criticism, *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*, in 2005. Now, apocalyptic writing is in the midst of another resurgence in Canada, supported by scholarship such as *Writing Beyond the End Times?*, for instance, a 2019 collection of essays edited by Ursula Mathis-Moser and Marie Carrière.

Varying speculative apocalypses, the respective cultural memories in which they are situated, which themselves bear different nationalist constraints, and the affects that generate and then emanate from them comprise numerous variables orbiting within a highly complex and delicate constellation. As a potential solution, I propose adopting approaches and tools from the digital humanities to proceed with what I have conceptualized as the "sieve reading" method,

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which balances close and distant reading, helps to locate targeted data and recognize patterns within it, and facilitates the articulation of these findings in new, revealing visualizations that inform our analysis. First, one establishes distant reading parameters before digitally organizing the texts according to them, thereby empowering their querying for the data of choice; next, one studies the results alongside close readings of the texts to support, contest, or contribute to the representations garnered from the distant readings. As a result, this methodology entails the sifting of select literary-cultural artifacts as itemized data through two critical sieves specified by the scholar, with the first being a distant reading relying on digital tools to illustrate various aesthetics and narrative elements as a network of data, and the second consisting of a close reading from applicable critical perspectives as a means to engage both sets of information in relation to one another, gaining a fuller view of the objects of study. This way, critics have much more tangible evidence to engage while maintaining their ability to practice specialized hermeneutics.

Lai's *The Tiger Flu* is particularly ripe for a study using this method due to its rigorous structure, which facilitates localized data and its analysis. With each chapter of the novel sectioned off into parts while featuring an explicit narrator and setting, the novel inspires situated examinations and comparisons of relationships of various natures within it that speak to broader, sociocultural and structural issues.

### **Sieve Reading *The Tiger Flu*: The Post-Apocalyptic Nation**

I have previously written on the ways in which recent apocalyptic fiction in Canada attempts to destroy or at the very least undermine national structures. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, for example, imagines a pandemic that erases national borders and orders of government altogether. Meanwhile, Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* emphasizes the fact that the environmental crisis is a global one that does not care about differences between and within nations, but rather demands humanity's collective greater care and attention. Nicolas Dickner's *Tarmac*, for its part, ridicules the apocalyptic, Cold War justification for national defence systems and self-serving, "bunker" mentalities in general with postmodernist fragmentation and irony. Yet, some apocalyptic fictions, instead of merely imagining futures that dismantle nationalist frameworks, also work towards demonstrating the ways in which they operate at present by contrast to speculative representations that circulate affects of anxiety and uneasiness among readers. While women become the majority with the advantage of a greater immunity to the eponymous Tiger Flu in Lai's universe, the author imagines and cleverly inserts futuristic technologies into the narrative

that, combined with the other mitigating factors crippling humanity, generate new intersectional threats for women, threats that are especially revealing of the inner workings of current patriarchal systems. In particular, Lai makes highly effective use of the feminist cyborg figure famously theorized by Donna Haraway—as she has before, even explicitly so in her collection of poetry, *Automaton Biographies*—to complicate and expose issues of race, gender, sexuality, and technology under speculative, reflective structures and conditions of patriarchal oppression that so often support nationalist ideologies.

Speculative fiction, in all of its intricacies, is most often effective at the situating and facing of “ends,” of temporal markers, which are of utmost importance—and so are those of “beginnings.” The apocalyptic genre is especially instructive in understanding this concept of temporal markers, of pivotal points in narrative or discourse: the biblical apocalypse, for example, is a prophesied event that is supposed to bring about the end of the world to make way for a new one—yet the time of arrival of the apocalypse is unknown, sealed away. In “Insurgent Utopias,” Lai makes the poignant and similar argument that speculative fiction

has something to show us in relation to the work of eruption, or what John Rajchman (via Deleuze) has called the “knock at the door” (1999: 47), a moment of contingent arrival, not a teleological end, but a double-edged sword that crystallizes hope for an instant, or offers a sign of wonder. Such a knock, or sign, or figure, or eruption is open to co-optation, destruction, bastardization, incorporation, death, or defusal, and yet, when it bursts through, it offers the powerful possibility of critique—narratively or discursively, in its very materiality. The materiality of the rupture is important because it is attached to embodied history. (94)

Evidently, the cyclical nature of apocalypse has much in common with the “knock at the door” that Lai focuses on; however, both concepts demand a great deal of complex and challenging, though necessary, work. As Lai goes on to explain, using the calls of the Idle No More and Black Lives Matter movements as examples, social justice activism “demands an attention to the body and calls for forms of social, sexual and racialized arrangement that have not yet been thought, and have not yet emerged in the eruptive sense I have been attempting to articulate, and yet that also recognizes the injustices of the past and present” (100). In *The Tiger Flu*, one of Lai’s goals appears to be precisely a prioritization of embodied experience that has not yet been imagined but that also recognizes past and present injustices.

As a prime example, the opening chapter of *The Tiger Flu* frames fragile masculinity and the consequential threat of violence, elevated in a post-apocalyptic future world in which men consist of a physically weakened minority that

nonetheless sustain lingering patriarchal ideals. In this chapter, Kora, one of the novel's woman protagonists, has a vicious encounter on a rooftop with Stash, a Tiger Flu-ridden friend of her brother's. In a tightly-wound scene, Lai interlaces the misconception propagated by popular rape myths—that most rapists are strangers that attack at random by jumping out from behind bushes—with the more accurate representation of sexual violence against women, in that women overwhelmingly know their attackers:

Something rustles behind the shed. She drops her feet back to the ground.

"Who's there?"

No answer. She goes to look, but before she's taken half a step, a young man leaps out and grabs her from behind. "Boo!"

"Mother fuck! Get off me! Who the hell are you?"

Actually, she recognizes him. He's a friend of her brother's—Stash Sacks. He looks awful. His face is covered in weeping sores. His eyes ooze pus. (14-5)

While Stash's diseased body literally and figuratively signals fragile masculinity, becoming all the more "toxic" in this context, the assault itself shows the desperate, unpredictable, imminent, angry, and most of all violent potential of a threatened masculinity. Just as Kora appears to have escaped harm, these traits manifest with renewed vigour in Stash: "Gripped by jealousy and desire, he won't let go [...] Rage grips him, makes him superhuman for a moment [...] 'It isn't fair!' He pushes on top of her again. Rolls her over towards the brink [...] The sick boy clings to her waist. 'I don't want to die!'" (16). Even with her life in danger, Kora saves Stash from plummeting to his death from the rooftop, and thus, in this brief, but dangerous struggle, the pervasiveness of a patriarchal, masculinist society, sharpened under the apocalyptic threat of complete extinction, appears to frame the novel. In this sense, *The Tiger Flu* acknowledges past and present injustices, all the while imagining them in a speculative future setting.

Yet Lai's future also allows for the emergence—the *eruption*—of collectives that, although not immune to these recurring patriarchal threats, adapt to them in new ways. These collectives include the Cordova girls that Kora eventually joins as well as the Grist sisters, from where Kirilow, the novel's other protagonist, hails. Critic Chiara Xausa astutely points out that "[d]isease 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." Furthermore, Xausa goes on to observe "intersectional experiences of the outbreak, alongside its thought-provoking concern for gender and racial justice" (25) in



the novel: "Being sent to the Cordova Dancing School for Girls, Kora is affected by the stigma associated with the flu pandemic," Xausa explains. "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" (26).

Interestingly enough, in her essay, "Familiarizing Grist Village: Why I Write Speculative Fiction," Lai, herself a "a second-generation Hong Kong Chinese person" (240), relates Hong Kong and questions regarding nationalism—among numerous other intersectional identifiers, of course—to her work in *The Tiger Flu*: "Now, as a triumphal China rises and populist movements around the globe turn also to vicious forms of nationalism, what will happen to Hong Kong," she asks, "a city without a national origin, one whose legal status has shifted radically over the course of the past 150 years, but one that nonetheless understands itself as peopled and as inhabited?" (n.p.). As Lai explains, "the Grist sisters are not exactly a community of feminists, lesbians, Asian women, or queers. They are not exactly Asian diaspora, or people of colour. They are a community of clones with capacities for self-reproduction, without the assistance of men. And yet there is something of all of those things in them. Sometimes they might appear as metaphorical for feminist community. Sometimes they might appear as analogical for Asian Canadians or queer women of colour" (n.p.). Of note, here, is Lai's dismissal of a "national origin" in her intricate conceptualization of a collective in the Grist sisterhood, which implies that nationalism is a systemic force that depends upon other, more foundational societal structures, ones that in turn begin with more intimate relationships that play roles in aforementioned construction of hierarchical organizations. *The Tiger Flu*, in this sense, introduces and delves into specific, complex, and developing relationships between characters within the context of the societal pillars of nationalism without invoking the latter, effectively mapping out the interior designs and sustenance of national projects. The apocalyptic cycle of creation and destruction, in particular, or "the knock at the door" allows the imagination of universes that can play with sociocultural and historical variables.

In terms of relationships that speak to wider-ranging insights, some fairly basic data visualizations are helpful in their demonstration of the protagonists' interactions within the broader, structural direction of *The Tiger Flu*, the latter of which is of immediate significance, though it might initially seem trivial. Figure 1, for example, shows clearly that the number of chapters per part in the novel consistently decreases throughout, beginning with 16 chapters in Part I and ending with a single chapter in Part V:

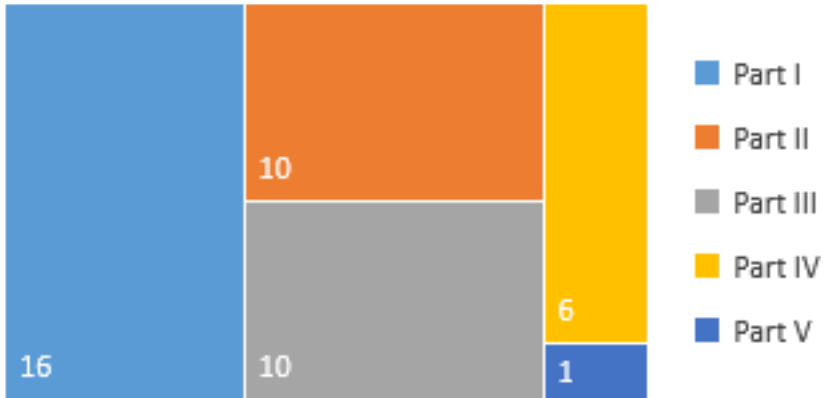


Figure 1: Chapters per Part: *The Tiger Flu*

Speaking affectively, the narrative thus has a certain pace, a gradual acceleration towards an inevitable proposed “eruption.” A reading of the novel’s two protagonists, Kora and Kirilow, and their appearances in these chapters and parts suggests that this climax is one of convergence—the story of, precisely, a particular relationship as it forms. Kirilow is a “groom” from the recently raided Grist village who lost her coupled “starfish,” Peristrophe. Grooms act as doctors, surgeons who cut out organs from their starfish, who can regenerate them, to sustain the life of “doublers,” who in turn can birth cloned daughters. Kora, a teenager from the Saltwater Flats, joins a group of thieves known as the Cordova girls before eventually learning that she is a starfish and that her father’s side of her family is responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of the tiger wine responsible for the tiger flu.

Figures 2 and 3 reinforce the idea of a fated meeting of the two; the figures display the near exactness of number of appearances in terms of quantity and location within the narrative:

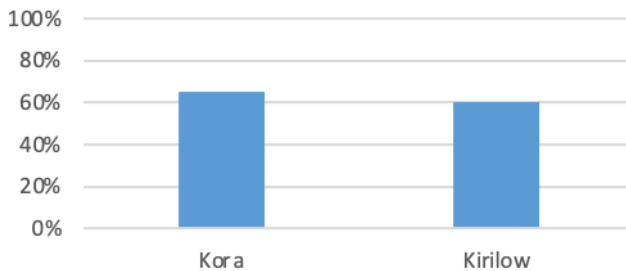


Figure 2: Percentage of Total Chapter Appearances

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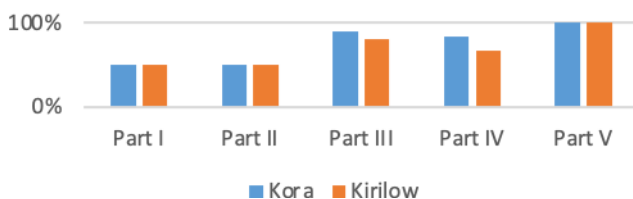


Figure 3: Percentage of Chapter Appearances per Part

These figures illustrate a certain balance or symmetry between Kora and Kirilow throughout the novel: while Kora appears in slightly more chapters, both women feature in roughly half of the total chapters in the novel, even per part, while occupying more and more of the total chapters per part as the narrative progresses and culminates. Lastly, Figure 4 visualizes the percentage of chapters in which both characters appear together, tracking the development of their relationship; their narrative connection begins in Part III, with 70% (7/10) of chapters together, continues in Part IV, with 50% (3/6) of chapters together, and concludes with 100% (1/1) chapters together:

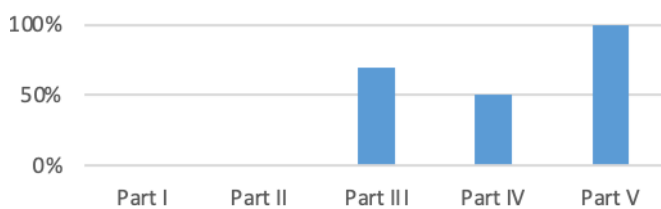


Figure 4: Percentage of Chapter Appearances per Part

Together, these quantitative representations show the almost metronomic, individual evolutions of Kora and Kirilow and the subsequent emergence and significance of their relationship as a core tenet of *The Tiger Flu*.

Together, this data represents the abstract development of the stories of these central characters, stories that, according to Xausa, “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” (29). “Furthermore,” Xausa explains, “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*” (29; emphasis in original). The structural work of the novel, therefore, in its careful, balanced fulfillment of Kora and Kirilow’s narrative of supporting one another through threats brought on by lingering patriarchal and capitalist ideologies and to its restorative conclusion, in which Kora becomes the

"Starfish Tree" 156 years after the main events of the novel, and who passes on knowledge and experiences to a new generation of young Grist sisters. This future is one of recovery, yet, significantly, it also does not seek to erase the past: "You must remember my pain, as I remember yours," Kora tells her young audience (326; emphasis in original). Worth reiterating, too, as critic Mónica Calvo Pascual does, echoing Xausa, is that "history and transgenerational memory seem to be inscribed in the body" in the case of Kora Tree.

Of course, this data can also be read alongside close readings of individual chapters themselves, particularly those in which both women begin to appear together in Part III and which are at the heart of the eruption that comes later. In Part III, Kora and Kirilow feature together in Chapters 28, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, and 36. In Chapter 28, which also holds their very first encounter in the novel, Kirilow amputates Kora's infected hand, an act that fittingly leads to the eventual discovery that Kora is a starfish. This initial incident thus, in a way, ensures their narrative fate. One of the most compelling chapters in the sequence that follows, structurally, is Chapter 34, in which Kirilow and Kora are captives of the latter's brother, K2, and the Tiger men: the chapter contains eleven fragments that document their confinement at patriarchal hands over a certain period of time—for Kora, especially, she comes to terms with the true role of the men in her family in producing the narrative's titular pandemic and all the while being imprisoned by her brother. This relationship between brother and sister is another that speaks to a broader social system in the patriarchy, one that is a legacy even from a past that lingers in the narrative present—especially upon learning of this horrific family lineage—and that persists in collective ideologies that in reality build but end up outlasting nationalism in the aftermath of a speculative apocalyptic event. Chapter 34 is also an affective exercise in remembering, documenting, and narrativizing—the acknowledgment of past and present systemic injustices. Interestingly enough, as Figure 5 shows, Kirilow is diligent and regular in this exercise by way of her mental journal to which readers are privy; even though she does not always document which day of captivity it has been, we have enough clues based on the number of fragments, or "entries," and the total number of days revealed in the final entry:

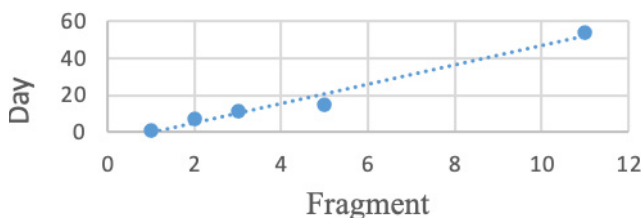


Figure 5: Chapter 34 Narrative Breakdown

This sequence is significant: it documents the trials and solidification of Kora and Kirilow's relationship, as recounted by the latter with as much dedication as difficulty. It also marks—or attempts to mark—the passing of time without the tell-tale orbits of Eng and Chang, which hold important roles as temporal markers throughout the rest of the narrative. What is also curious for such a meaningful chapter is that it opens and closes with important references to and discoveries about the satellites Eng, controlled by the great inventor, Isabelle Chow, and Chang, taken over by the leader of the Tiger men, Marcus Traskin. In the opening fragment of the chapter, Kirilow wonders whether her "Old Glorybind [is] alive and well at Quay D'Espoir on Eng with Kora's mother and father," eventually concluding that "[i]t's more likely she's a captive on Marcus Traskin's Chang" (232). The implication in Kirilow's thinking is that of a gendered threat, where Traskin's Chang holds "captives"—of course, at the end of the chapter, her premonition is proven correct when Kora deduces that, once the Grist sisters are uploaded to Chang, their bodies become the fish that the two prisoners had been eating while captives themselves.

The satellites are crucial for a number of reasons. Because of the powerful figures that own them respectively, they are inherently gendered—celestial bodies that represent the ongoing conflict on Earth, reinforcing the patriarchal struggle framed by the flu. But the satellites are also constants, reminders of these social systems that endure beyond the apocalypse; their orbit measures the passing of time in an ongoing cycle. In fact, Eng is mentioned a grand total of 72 times in the novel, while Chang is invoked a whopping 92 times. As Kirilow even mentions during their captivity, with a hint of unwitting irony: [w]ithout the light of Chang or Eng, it's hard to understand the passing of time. We mark the days by the fish dinners that come through the grate, two each per day" (235). Ironic because, as readers learn, consciousnesses can be uploaded and downloaded to and from Eng and Chang, and the fish that Kora and Kirilow are eating are what becomes of the Grist sisters as they are being uploaded to Chang.

The satellites symbolize a legacy persisting—a kind of continuance of patriarchal cultural memory and influence—from pre- to post-apocalypse, the survival of people, certainly, but moreover of the constructs of power that were rebuilt out from relationships to social collectives. The following figure demonstrates the distribution of Eng and Chang mentions over the course of the novel, in which Chang, the satellite that Traskin has overtaken, that is controlled by the Tiger Men, and that painfully transforms the Grist sisters into fish that Kirilow and Kora eat, clearly and steadily looms as a threatening presence, even if not overwhelmingly:

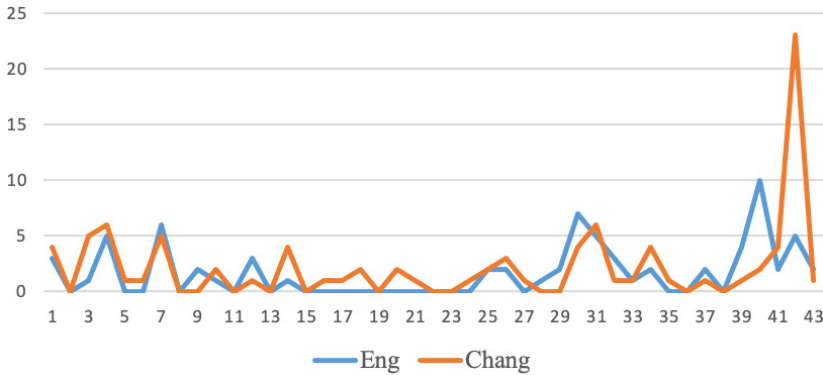


Figure 6: Eng versus Chang Mentions per Chapter

Even with the majority of the men dead or sickly from the flu, in a world in which women can clone themselves, the patriarchal struggle for power thus continues and causes chaos and new types of threats to women, once again revealing the ways in which western, social, hierarchichal constructs are the real power underlying nationalist agendas since they survive beyond the collapse of nations in this speculative future.

These technological endeavours speak to other issues that already preoccupy humanity, as well. “In Lai’s novel,” Mónica Calvo Pascual argues, “the enhancement of human beings through technology centers on control over knowledge or intellectual enhancement. The inhabitants of Saltwater City no longer cultivate their minds and memories by means of reading or studying; instead, they purchase implants of different prices that they can insert in their skulls and other body parts in order to remotely access the information stored in Chang and Eng” (103). One of the key problems, here, is that the race for the dominance over technology, of transhumanism or the cybernetic-transcendence of the human—the body, in particular—is merely a continuation of the current pursuit, one that also breeds social hierarchies based on exploitation and accessibility. Meanwhile, Calvo Pascual sees the Grist Village as a collective form of critical posthumanism that stands in “clear contrast to this technologized, money-driven scenario” (104). “Critical posthumanism,” for Calvo Pascual, and based chiefly on Braidotti’s work, “denounces this fantasy of human dematerialization, while defending the notion of embedded embodiment, or corporeality as embedded in an environment that includes and considers vegetable, animal, human, and mechanic lives at the same level” (105). This focus on embodiment, as I have argued, is a recurring theme in Lai’s novel and critical writing—one that she seems to believe can perturb social power systems that underscore nationalist power structures.

## Emergent Critical Strategies Against the Nation-Trap: The Digitization of Literary Apocalyptic Affects and Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

In any case, what *The Tiger Flu* illustrates is that we can imagine devastating apocalyptic futures which wipe out nation-states and governments, but also that to erode the pillars that support them—in this case, patriarchal, white supremacist systems, especially—in this imagination is nearly impossible to do. They live on, replicate through memory and relationships. In turn, such representation reflects back on our current realities with respect to the influence of the nation: national and governmental platitudes have the potential to deceive and distract us so that the actual systems of power remain in place and in control. Yet, as Lai's novel and criticism also inform us, speculative fiction, and perhaps especially apocalyptic works, have the ability to cause eruptions that can interrupt these systems and our understanding of our place within them.

### Conclusion

While this paper has merely traced a particular trajectory in dealing with the current "nation-trap" that continues to threaten to lull us into complacency so that systems of power may persist, in addition to a brief demonstration of new ways to break down and visualize texts, it offers potential in terms of innovative research approaches. The speculative, apocalyptic genre and its temporal paradigm, in particular, empower writers to imagine futures that have altered or been stripped of present geopolitical systems, "unveiling"—almost in a Book of Revelations sense—inner power dynamics, how deeply rooted they can be, and how nation states can thrive on them. Digital tools, combined with our expertise as humanists, is simply one means of identifying these dynamics and better understanding how they operate at present, especially at a time when technology is growing rapidly to include its own hierarchies that exploit and influence society and national operations of surveillance and oppression while promoting accessibility and connection.

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