

# Oral History and Cultural Preservation in Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

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**Abstract:** Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018) explores a potential future of environmental devastation and biologically innovative magical realism. This essay focuses on Lai's preoccupation with forms of cultural preservation and the ways in which the changeable nature of language in oral histories ensures the dissemination and preservation of the most important parts of culture. By examining how Lai contrasts female-dominated oral history with corporate monopoly, rampant militarism, and questionable biological experimentation, this essay will navigate the ways in which Lai proposes that our current attempts toward cultural preservation are lacking.

*The Tiger Flu* (2018) is a futuristic, dystopic sci-fi novel that is based heavily on themes of corporate entitlement, environmental destruction, and feminist community-building. In this novel, set 127 years into the future, those in power have discontinued the use of oil, and the world has become rife with conflict, pseudo-magical biological experimentation, and slightly-skewed pop-culture phenomena. Lai's main characters, Kora Ko and Kirilow "Kiri" Groundsel, are examples of the two most extreme ways in which a woman can exist within this world. Kora represents life in the city, where militaristic corporate monopoly and diseased desperation dictate life and well-being, while Kiri represents the isolated and insular land-based experience of the Grist Sisters. Though the combination of these two disparate narratives does not follow a traditional dystopic narrative structure of "chosen ones" coming together and creating a moment that saves the world, it is Kora and Kiri's shared

heritage that binds them together and eventually saves them from that dystopia. Though there is no resolution for the larger outer world, Kora and Kiri survive. The fact that they survive gives the reader a sense of far-flung hope: the world may fall prey to a horrible and debilitating sickness, the military state might abduct and repurpose your entire culture, or a personal vendetta may spark the launch of several nuclear bombs, but somehow, somewhere, someone will probably survive to pass on the culture we have spent so long creating.

Thus, it is the intention of this paper to examine the female voices of cultural continuance that are so prevalent in *The Tiger Flu*. By considering how Larissa Lai has integrated pop-culture and current environmental concerns into a distinctly matriarchal and eco-feminist voice, this paper will examine the ways in which Lai views oral histories—and the women that disseminate them—as the continuers of culture. An examination of the ways in which Kiri and the Grist Sisters, Kora and the Cordova Dancing School for Girls, and various corporate entities navigate the end of the world will demonstrate a particular attention to the preservation of culture. Overall, this paper will prove that, in Lai's version of the apocalypse, it does not matter how humanity physically survives, so long as the right parts of our culture survive. Eventually our world will morph into something that is completely irreconcilable with the culture we inhabit today, but if culture persists, we can survive everything up to and including environmental devastation.

The various factions in *The Tiger Flu* all have different ideas about the best way to preserve and continue culture. Those associated with the creation of the tiger flu (a sickness that comes from ingesting tiger-bone wine that disproportionately affects men, who have thus been almost entirely wiped out) are representative of the forms of culture that, in the interim of our present and Lai's "Time After Oil," have either been corrupted or simply no longer function to preserve the past (Lai 11). These cultural forms represent current social structures: specifically, corporate monopoly over environmental and consumer structures. Lai shows us that

corporatization does not facilitate effective preservation of culture through a close look at Jemini, one of three companies that has ironclad control over the Saltwater City area. Their biological experiments created the Grist Sisters and revived the Caspian tigers from a “tiger-skin rug,” allowing them to mass-produce and harvest both the Grist Sisters and the tigers for their various body parts. While the Grist Sisters became living donors for those wealthy enough to pay for their organs, the tigers were slaughtered for their bones and made into wine so addictive that it caused four waves of a sickness so intense that most of the world’s men died out, and four separate quarantine rings were built to hold back the worst of the sick (9–10; 210–11). While the “revellers [drank] from crystal glasses, then later, mouth to spigot as addiction deepen[ed]” (210), outside the walls of Saltwater City the entire world fell into a chaos of “vast cliffs and towers of polar ice calv[ing] into the warming sea” and “oceans swell[ing] and ris[ing] to engulf whole cities” (210–11). The novel is unclear whether the tiger-bone wine was a way for society to collectively ignore the environmental devastation happening around it or if widespread and acute addiction and death was the cause of a breakdown of civilization that resulted in huge environmental backlash. Regardless, everyone in the narrative has been affected by the Jemini-made tiger flu and its various effects. Men are affected by the disease the most and are thus mostly dead, with the few survivors hiding isolated in the Pacific Pearl Parkade, where they can stay safe as contagious but non-symptomatic survivors. Women are also affected, to a lesser degree, and function as caretakers and breadwinners, but by the time Kora and Kiri are functioning members of the world, most everyone is dead and everything except for the highest echelons of society has collapsed into borderline anarchy. Still, Jemini continues to produce tiger-bone wine in “factories, hidden all through Saltwater City and the quarantine rings,” and even plans to export to the United Middle Kingdom (226).

This action of hiding factories in plain sight is reminiscent of current practices of disguising oil rigs as buildings.

Los Angeles is the most famous for this practice, with its rigs disguised on islands, near high schools, and even among office buildings (Taylor n.p.). Yet the biological experimentation that started this entire mess may, in its very beginning stages, have begun as a way to preserve humanity's past and present. Though creating people for the express purpose of using their organs for transplants with no thought to their autonomy or consent is morally reprehensible, creating the parthenogenic women makes theoretical sense in terms of increasing the longevity of true humans. Because this method allows women to regenerate their body parts, the transplantation process does not endanger them. These women, dubbed "starfish," are able to regrow their lost body parts within days; Kiri's starfish and wife, Peristrophe Halliana, regrows her eyes in approximately a week (33). The only true health concerns are the risk of a mistake or infection introduced in the surgery itself; taking too much from a starfish while they are still healing from a previous procedure; or any pre-existing immuno-compromising sickness, such as the tiger flu (22; 35; 73). Moreover, cloning the extinct Caspian tigers could have been a way to preserve or re-introduce that species to Earth's environments, suggesting the possibility of saving every extinct animal of which there are extant samples. Unfortunately, this idealistic way of thinking is all too corruptible, and that is exactly what happened: at some point in the process, ethics were pushed aside to make room for growth and capital.

Similar conclusions can be drawn about current corporate monopolies over resources and institutional reluctance to change policies and plans, even in the face of widespread ethical violations and environmental disasters. Water and oil, while occupying "starkly divergent political economies," have the potential for misuse that will spur—and has spurred—violent outbursts over access and irreversible environmental damage (Selby 200). No public action—including but not limited to academic and literary criticism, grassroots efforts, organized protests, and direct action—seems to be enough to hamper this government-sanctioned corporate insistence on infringing on traditional and occu-

ped lands and irreversibly damaging the world's climate and environment. This, as Lai suggests through her own examinations of cultural and corporate catastrophe, is not the way to ensure our survival. If we continue to feed these social structures and allow them to dictate the ways in which we are allowed to interact with each other and the environment, eventually there will be nothing left.

That said, Lai does not leave us with a sense of overwhelming despair. Even while she shows us the wrong ways to go about preserving humanity, she shows us alternatives that function both in our reality and in that of Saltwater City, 127 years after oil. Namely, she demonstrates how the Grist Sisters use an oral history that is based heavily on the personal cultural experiences of Grandma Chan Ling (the founder and late matriarch of Grist Village and an escapee of Jemini's labs) and how the Cordova Dancing School for Girls (a disguised contingent of Grist Sisters who never escaped Saltwater City) have used a similar oral history that has since been influenced by their Saltwater City experiences. These histories continue to support the women's cultures because they are not dependent on overarching corporate or governmental structures that will eventually degrade. Oral histories, unlike business models, adapt and change over time, molding morals from the past to the present, and providing a context for the past and the future.

For instance, the Grist Sisters have built their culture around the oral histories they received from Grandma Chan Ling, and they use the past as it was told to them to help them remember lessons about the present. Their pop-culture references are three steps removed from their original contexts but are still recognizable: "don't you know that diamonds are a girl's best friend" helps Kiri to remember that her whetstone is made from diamonds stolen off the fingers of dead married women while remembering to double-disinfect her scalpels so that they "shimmer clean, a lean mean clean ... like the lemon muscle man from time before" (19; 22). Kiri's mother-double, Glorybind Groundsel, taught Kiri everything she knew about "where we came from [and] what we're here for" in the form of chants, using mnemon-

ics to ensure that Kiri knew that they “hold all that remains of the old world’s knowledge in our raw brains” (19–20). It was paramount that Glorybind, the guardian of a dying culture, should explicitly teach Kiri as much as she could about “the time before” (22). A similar kind of cultural dissemination is happening in the present almost without our knowledge. Phrases such as “hanging up the phone” or “rolling up the car window” are etymological holdovers from the nineties and before, which tend to confuse younger generations, who have no proper context for the expressions. It is entirely possible—even likely—that these phrases will continue to move further and further from their original contexts, but will retain their original meaning, just like Kiri’s “lemon muscle man” (22).

In contrast to the heavily linguistic cultural transmission we see with the Grist Sisters that have been isolated in Grist Village, the Cordova Dancing School for Girls conveys a much more physical type of cultural transmission. The Cordova Girls, taught by Madame Dearborne, are what is left of the Grist Sister Commune that was trapped in Saltwater City. To escape their reputation as Grist Sisters they needed to edit their oral histories, forcibly forgetting their Grist heritage, and take in orphans off the street to feed their numbers. When Kora Ko joins their ranks, only a scant few know about their Grist heritage, but all of them know the lessons of the Grist Sisters. Instead of specialized mnemonics from almost-200-year-old pop culture, the Cordova Girls’ factual knowledge comes from hardware called “scales,” which can be bought by anyone who has the money. Scales connect the user via an implant to a specific piece of information from Chang and Eng—two satellites that orbit the Earth, containing the entirety of Earth’s information on any given subject. Kora’s Uncle Wai frames the scales in much the same way as Glorybind framed oral history, saying “[Kora] needs memory scales to understand the world that was” (29). While these memory scales are eventually corrupted in much the same way that the Grist Sisters and the Caspian tigers were, this formal and factual education is supplemented by the Cordova Girls’ version of the Grist Sisters’ mnemonics.

Kora refers to them as “all the old dances, mambo, tango, cha-cha-cha,” and they teach her how to thief and become invisible just as well as her cat-coat does (217). She uses the dances when she has to steal and fight in the Second Quarantine Ring and then again when she makes the deal with Isabelle in the Pacific Pearl Parkade (138–40; 217).

We see another evolution of oral history in the Cordova Girls’ preferred style of dress. They prefer “clothes from the time before: jeans and t-shirts, miniskirts with fishnet stockings, hoodies and jeans” that are overlaid with clothes from their contemporary experiences, such as jackets from the recently disbanded and militaristic “Arm-A-Gideon” movement (52). These girls, however unconsciously, seem to recognize that preservation of the past and past culture is important, and try to do so however possible. In considering the differences between the Grist Sisters’ clear ties to the language of the past and the Cordova Girls’ clear preference towards more physical reminders, we can see the ways in which oral histories mould themselves to the ways a culture might evolve. Unlike physically creating something that will hold your past and preserve it perfectly for the future—such as a time capsule or, conveniently, a clone—oral histories allow growth and connection without ever having to fear being irreparably isolated from your past. So long as there is more than one person on the earth, even widespread environmental disaster could not stop the dissemination of oral histories.

Lai’s world supports this thesis, even in the final chapters of the novel. Isabelle sends an atom bomb up to Chang, destroying the massive satellite, murdering everyone whose consciousness had been uploaded to it, and endangering everyone in its crash zone. It is then that Kiri draws upon her traditional and memory scale-given knowledge of surgery to save Kora by somehow combining her with a nearby batterkite—a genetically modified flying squid whose primary purpose is as a military abduction and destruction unit—allowing them to escape and create New Grist Village. This New Grist Village is entirely separated from the corporate corruption of Saltwater City as well as

from the time in which Grandmother Chan Ling grew up. Kora Ko has become the Kora Tree at the heart of the Starfish Orchard: hearts, lungs, and limbs grow on her branches, ready to be plucked by the citizens of her New Grist Village. The history she gives is one that remembers when “the possibility of doublers, starfish, and grooms did not even touch [her] consciousness,” where there were “men and women” that could only have one child at a time, rather than litters (326). There are no more mnemonics and no more dances, and there doesn’t have to be, because this is no longer a time of “information blackout” (328). Still, the oral history must adapt to the circumstances and account for the fallibilities of memory and an unwillingness to relive the traumas of the past (327–28).

In light of this, we must decide—how will we try to preserve our culture? Will we follow a path of governmentally sanctioned, corporatized attempts at creating time-capsules out of the past so that we may bring them to the future, even if they become nonsensical with their lack of cultural context? Or will we fall back on a tried-and-true tradition of oral history that, while fallible, allows for adaptation as a culture waxes and wanes and is receptive to an emphasis on keeping established morals and experiences close at hand? The feminine, feminist oral histories of Grist Village and the Cordova Dancing School for Girls show us that only such tried-and-true traditions of oral history will allow us to not only survive but thrive in the face of catastrophe.

### Works Cited

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