

“It’s Better to Hope than Mope”: Evaluating the Biopolitics of Hope in *The Year of the Flood* and *The Tiger Flu*



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Living on a Damaged Earth

The concept of a ‘margin’ has a significant resonance in speculative fiction, as the marginalization of human and sub/non-human others is closely associated with the Anthropocene discourse, which is frequently questioned by SF authors. Margaret Atwood in *The Year of the Flood* and Larissa Lai in *The Tiger Flu* portray the complex realism of the Anthropocene emphasizing techno-capitalism and petro-culture by highlighting the cultural meanings of ecological crisis in North America. Instead of presenting the apocalypse either as a future happening elsewhere or as a backdrop for the dystopian setting, both Atwood and Lai foreground it as an ongoing crisis. The marginalized community in each novel, the God’s Gardeners and the Grist Sisterhood, respectively, are placed at the forefront of the resistance against unethical use of biotechnology not only because of their exposure to the techno-capitalist society’s exclusionary practices, but also because their ethical stance is situated at the polar opposite of their respective biopolitical regimes that have unleashed the Waterless flood and the Tiger flu upon humankind. Drawing heavily on Donna Haraway’s theories, my ecofeminist reading of the selected texts scrutinizes first, how Atwood and Lai attempt to relocate agency by dissolving boundary-making practices that produce marginalized subjects and justify exclusion, systemic violence, dehumanization, and mass killing of those who are dubbed by Rita Wong as “extra-legal” (111), people who are either unregistered and undocumented (i.e., the Grist sisters are denied ‘human’ status) or structurally downtrodden (i.e., the Gardeners are labeled as religious fanatics). Secondly, since chaos has the subversive potential to challenge and destabilize the socio-political order, I will discuss how the God’s Gardeners and the Grist sisters use their marginalized status to resist the exploitation and to bring positive change for the humans as well as their planetary partners.

Addressing the importance of building kinship in turbulent times, Donna Haraway begins *Staying With the Trouble* by stating that “[w]e—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times” which is why it is required “to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (1). She further explicates:

Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than that one? What shape is this kinship, where

and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what? What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance? (2)

Following this line of thought, I argue that the aforementioned communities initiate epistemological rethinking to relocate the agency of the sub/non-human and ensure their survival on a damaged earth.

The Biopolitics of Hope

To begin with, in *The Year of the Flood*, Toby, a former Gardener and one of the protagonists, elaborately discusses how the God's Gardeners, through their eco-religious teachings, try to familiarize the anthropogenic crisis as an aspect of the human condition to the privileged Compound citizens, who are not directly affected by the crisis, and to the marginalized Pleebland dwellers, who are unaware that they are victims of it. The Gardeners intend to include everyone in their faith-based system, as the cult is based on inclusion rather than extraction, which is why Adam One questions the validity of human-centered thinking: "Ours is a fall into greed: why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality we belong to Everything" (*Year* 63). Keeping the sixth mass-extinction in mind and maintaining awareness of the corporate bioterrorism, the Gardeners believe that another ecological disaster will soon destroy the human race: "God had promised after the Noah incident that he'd never use the water method again but considering the wickedness of the world he was bound to do something" (26). Hence, their prediction of the Waterless Flood turns out to be a plague that only kills the humans but does not affect any other species: "We God's Gardeners are a plural Noah [. . .]. We must be ready for the time when those who have broken trust with the Animals—yes, wiped them from the face of the Earth where God placed them—will be swept away by the Waterless Flood" (110). Interestingly, in Adam One's proposition, Noah and the ark are amalgamated: "My body is my earthly Ark, / It's proof against the Flood; / It holds all Creatures in its heart, / [...] It's builded firm of genes and cells, / And neurons without number; / My Ark enfolds the million years" (111). It is also noteworthy that Adam One emphasizes memorizing the extinct animals as a way of saving those creatures from disappearing completely: "[W]e Gardeners will cherish within us the knowledge of the Species, and of their preciousness to God" (110). The Gardeners and their children are taught that saying the names of the species is "a way of keeping those animals alive" (376). Furthermore, Toby's recalling of the pre-Flood era reveals how the Gardeners relied heavily on nature and natural others for food, medicine, and other resources.

In contrast, the Grist sisters in *The Tiger Flu* are genetically modified parthenogenic clones, manufactured by a techno-capitalist corporation called Jemini. One of the protagonists and a Grist sister Kirilow Groundsel informs the readers that Jemini supplied these clones as factory workers to HöST Light Industries where they were used as test subjects for techno-scientific experiments. One of the clones fled the factory eighty years ago and founded the Grist Village for the 'free' sisters. Kora Ko, the other protagonist and a Saltwater City dweller, recounts that the Grist

sisterhood is believed to be a myth by the inhabitants. Despite living in a city that is governed and exploited by the HöST technocracy—a corporate monopoly that manipulates the inhabitants “in its own best interests” (*Flu* 3)—Kora and the citizens do not acknowledge the fact that their lives are not much different from the so-called factory workers. Regardless of dividing the Saltwater Flat into several quarantine rings to control the spread of the Tiger flu pandemic, people keep dying. Hence, survival plays a pivotal role in *The Tiger Flu*. Feeding on people’s desire to live, the CEO of HöST, Isabelle Chow, introduces her yet-to-be-perfected technology called LiFT and promises the flu-infected men that by uploading their consciousness to the mainframe satellite, LiFT can ensure virtual immortality. Eventually the readers learn that, on one hand, Isabelle’s beloved Marcus Traskin owns the tiger bone wine business and consumption of the wine causes the flu, while on the other, Isabelle uses the infected Tiger men, the small community of men who survived the flu and are taken care of by Marcus, as test subjects for LiFT. Moreover, Isabelle does not mind capturing and murdering the Grist sisters as she believes that Grist DNA can help improve and perfect her technology. Similar to the God’s Gardeners, the Grist sisterhood chose not to rely on contemporary technology that exploits people. As Kirilow elucidates, “[t]his strange killing and rebirthing is Salty business. We Grist sisters have no faith in such things. If the body is dead, then so is the woman, whatever these occultist Salties think they have copied” (232). Eventually, Kirilow helps Kora to understand how Isabelle has been exploiting humans and sub/non-humans alike.

Even though Kora comes from Saltwater City and Kirilow from the Grist village, they overcome their mutual hatred and decide to work together to stop Isabelle from killing huge numbers of people. Kora is fatally injured participating in their resistance movement. In a largely unexplained way, Kirilow performs a surgery to upload Kora’s mind to LiFT and ultimately her consciousness becomes a part of the batterkite—a genetically modified oceanic creature with tentacles. Kirilow plants one of the batterkite’s tentacles on the soil that transforms into a Starfish tree. As a Starfish tree, Kora is capable of reproducing vital organs. The final chapter of the novel, which takes place 156 years after the deadly incident, reveals the new beginning where Kora identifies as a Starfish and reminds the new Grist children that her transformation has been painful. Yet, she embraces her identity as the establishment of the Starfish orchard ensured the eradication of older forms of forced organ transplantation and violence. Kora Tree is therefore the epitome of revitalization of life and inclusion of sub/non-human beings, and transgresses the dualistic binaries as she is a conscious life form that is capable of communication and can provide replaceable vital organs infinitely.

Clearly, the scientists in both novels try to come up with techno-fixes for an ecosystem-destroying pandemic-ridden techno-capitalist culture. The Waterless flood was designed to make the human race go extinct and as a solution to save the earth and its non-human creatures. Similarly, instead of curing the Tiger flu, Isabelle introduces the LiFT technology as a cure because this technology is more beneficial in terms of corporate profit. As Haraway claims, a comic faith in techno-fixes, whether secular or religious, will not solve the problem (3). Evidently, none of the

techno-fixes are capable of saving the human race. What brings a light of hope in both novels is making kinship with the sub/non-human ones.

The Year of the Flood confirms that there are other survivors who might have a chance to rebuild a civilization from the ruins of the past while living harmoniously with the Crakers. In contrast, *The Tiger Flu* ends with the establishment of a new Grist Village where the Starfish tree grows replacement organs, effectively abolishing the necessity to forcefully harvest organs from the Starfish sisters; therefore, older forms of violence are non-existent. Kora Tree, thus, reminds the children of the new village what she and Kirilow had to go through to establish the compassionate society: “You must remember my pain, as I remember yours” (327).

The remaining humans of the post-apocalyptic worlds manage to build a new, less individualistic, more inclusive society that recognizes the relational interdependence of all living things—both human and sub/non-human. Despite the bleak scenarios that center on the impact of techno-capitalist discourse and exploit the marginalized sub/non-human ones, the selected speculative fictions point towards the possibilities of reconstructing a better world and providing strategies for narrating non-anthropocentric realities. Hence, I conclude that by revising and rethinking the exclusionary practices and relocating agency, a better future can come for humans and non-humans alike within and beyond a North American context.

Works Cited

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