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Familiarizing Grist Village

Why I Write Speculative Fiction[1]

Born in California and raised in Newfoundland, I am a second-generation Hong Kong Chinese person living on Treaty 7 Territory, having spent most of my adult life on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories. It is an honour to be part of a special issue on decolonization and speculative fiction emerging from these spaces. As a person whose family left the British colony of Hong Kong in the early 1960s, and decided to emigrate permanently in the wake of the 1967 riots, fearing the ideological spread of forces driving the Cultural Revolution and the possibility of violence like that of the Vietnam War emerging in other parts of Asia, and partly in search of a better life, I am still trying to understand what it means to be a good un/settler and build better relations both through and beyond the Canadian state. I am particularly interested in Black, Indigenous, and Asian understandings of land beyond property and of time beyond the linear time of Western progress.[2] I am interested in histories of Asian movement—especially movements via indentureship and movements of Asian capital, and how those relate to histories of Black and Indigenous movement. I am also interested in the relationships among story, history, and sense of being in the world. My work since the early 1990s has been about re-centring my own experience, though it has taken quite a different trajectory from that of my elders and peers.

Figured in the popular imagination as a crossroad between East and West, Hong Kong is a place in which concepts of the political left and the political right don't hold, or at least don't work in the same way that they do in North America and Europe. It was invaded by the Japanese (as an Axis power)

during World War II because it was a British colony (and thus affiliated with Allied forces). The invasion was also part of the Japanese imperial agenda to unify Asia under the so-called Great East Asia Co-Prosperity sphere, an anti-colonial ideal that devolved into genocidal practice. Hong Kong was embargoed by the US (1950-1957)[3] during the Korean War for being too close to the People's Republic of China (or more specifically, to choke off the PRC economy). These embargoes caused widespread poverty, starvation, and hardship among people who were not the target of the embargo, but were British colonial subjects, and thus not of interest to the targeted PRC either. Canada also closed off relations with the PRC in 1951 because of its commitments to the United Nations during the Korean War.[4] While many of Hong Kong's subjects, including my parents, were educated in the British colonial system and democratic ideals, Hong Kong is not, and never has been, a democracy. Largely abandoned by Britain after the so-called "return" to China in 1997, the notion of "one country, two systems" is now under threat, most recently through the fallout from a proposed extradition law that would enable the PRC to extradite whomever they wish from Hong Kong on real or trumped-up charges to the PRC for arbitrary detainment and unjust trial.[5] Though there were people living in Hong Kong at the time of British occupation, including my great-grandmother, a Hakka woman[6] from Wong Nei Chung Village in Happy Valley, most Hong Kong people are descended from people who migrated there after the start of British occupation (1841) and its ninety-nine-year lease on the New Territories (which began in 1898), including many of my other predecessors. In the terms of this special issue, we are thus neither "alien-abductees" nor exactly subjects of "alien invasion."[7] Psycho-socially we are perhaps best described as subjects of abandonment. (I remember once my grandmother carrying a particularly heavy purse on a hot day in Hong Kong's Central District. I asked her if she'd like me to carry it for her. "No way," she said. I said, "Why not? It looks so heavy." She said, "I'm afraid you'll abandon me and leave me with nothing." When I read the story of Quy (about a young boy who is accidentally lost while boarding a crowded boat, as his family flees war-torn Vietnam) in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*, I am reminded of a similar story my mother told me, about a time as a child when her father took her to Central for an outing. He ran into an old friend and they started talking, and somehow he let go of her hand. She was swept up in the crowd and lost. He spent hours and hours looking for her. Finally, he found her and took her home, but those hours of being lost and abandoned are retained to

this day as a traumatic memory. Unlike Quy, she was lost for hours rather than years. But beneath these related stories lies a related fear. I wonder how many Hong Kong people have stories like this? Or Southeast Asian people more generally?)

Set up by a treaty demanded by the British after they won the Opium War for the express purpose of trade, punished by Japan and China for its Western affiliations, starved by the West for its communist affiliations, and generally abandoned by its father and master figures, is it any wonder that Hong Kong embraced capital as its source of power? It has played a major part in the neoliberal shift of the millennium's turn. Now, as a triumphal China[8] rises and populist movements around the globe turn also to vicious forms of nationalism, what will happen to Hong Kong, 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?

Within contemporary configurations of what we used to call cultural race politics,[9] to be that kind of Asian called Hong Kong Chinese is fraught. There are two representational tasks that need to be accomplished. The first is to undo the racist stereotypes that have been made of us in colonial and imperial contexts. The second is to make better representations from our own subject locations. Here, I want to make a distinction between the kinds of self-troping that BIPOC writers do on their own behalves in order to self-represent, and the kinds of racist troping that mainstream speculative fiction does to mark us as other. In terms of racist troping, though the opium trade was something enforced by the colonial British, the associations of vice, infiltration, disease, and perverse sexuality have stuck to Hong Kong Chinese and Asians more broadly as a consequence of this history, and been played out in such figures as Fu Manchu or (tongue-in-cheek) The Mandarin in *Iron Man 3*, as noted by David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu in *Techno-Orientalism*. More broadly, Asians continue to be figured as all alike, as irredeemably collective, and as a horde, if one thinks, for instance, of the Borg in *Star Trek*. (Interestingly, the word "horde" is Turkic/Uighur in origin, appearing first in 1555 according to the *OED*, which specifies a horde as "[a] tribe or troop of Tartar or kindred Asiatic nomads, dwelling in tents or wagons, and migrating from place to place for pasturage, or for war or plunder." The notion thus rises long before the communist liberation, and may be associated with Mongol rule and expansion through Asia and Europe in the thirteenth century).

Through a range of developments in cyberpunk from the 1980s onward, Asians have been figured as machines, insects, robots, cyborgs—differently depending on nationality, but nonetheless generally nonhuman. I distinguish the racist figurations of Asians in speculative fiction from the work of re-subjectivation in which racialized people reclaim or remake racist stereotypes for the purposes of self-empowerment. The latter is a project that's been important to me since I started writing, along with a project of making my own "insurgent genealogy"[10] by reclaiming those aspects of Chinese culture that empower women, support good relationships with others, embrace earth and the forces of life, and hold up the imagination. My speculative fiction practice combines the work of re-subjectivation with the work of insurgent genealogy. As such, the work is not so much purely oppositional as it is a kind of hybrid genealogical/oppositional/imaginative outward petalling, full of possibilities for rupture or emergence.

In this regard, I'm interested in self-troping as a form of empowerment, albeit empowerment that is always fraught in historically-specific and embodied ways. For surely we want to do more than self-represent; we want to engage those self-representations to talk about relationships, complications, and contradictions in our lives. I'm also interested in that moment in my own speculative fictions when the speculative fiction metaphor I've set up breaks down, and the story has to address the problems attached to the representation rather than the represented.

With regards to productive self-tropings, I learned much, for instance, from Octavia Butler writing Lilith Iyapo in *Dawn* as an alien abductee as her way (in that book at least) of addressing the history of Black abductions into slavery. The three-part *Xenogenesis* series, of which *Dawn* is the first, is an exploration of this metaphor.[11] I think too of Ndedi Okorafor figuring the people of Lagos as subjects of alien invasion, where the aliens are a metaphor for European colonizers. This is a trope that Indigenous speculative fiction writers take up as well, to address the long, genocidal history of European colonization in the Americas. In this regard, I think of the title story in Drew Hayden Taylor's *Take Us to Your Chief. Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*, edited by Isiah Lavender III, offers a set of critiques on "how racial identity inflects or challenges conventional narrative expectations" (6).

If brand new representations are never really possible linear history (because we are all subjects of it), then the project is always one of reclamation—of refiguring the tropes to serve other purposes: centring

one's people, silence-breaking, hero-making, or articulating the complexities and ambivalences of one's place in the world. But if we can break the hold of "History as a virus" then newness is moot, and we can keep coming back—for better or worse. Recognizing, obviously, that racial designations and refigurations, reclaimed or not, are complex, unstable, contradictory, imperfect, multiple, and ever-changing, I ask how might so-called Asians—Hong Kong Chinese in particular—be figured? As time travellers, perhaps, since we have never been the protagonists of capital "H" history? As astronauts jettisoned to the vacuum of space? Certainly, Hong Kong people have also been subjected to alien invasion. Insofar as Hong Kong has remained staunchly, or some might say rabidly, capitalist in the wake of being denied democracy, we might be figured as zombie or vampire, but if so, we were born bitten. As I said above, the city comes into being as a consequence of the Opium War, expressly for the purposes of trade. Could Hong Kong be figured a spaceport for denizens of the Mos Eisley Cantina (*Star Wars*) type?

To be clear, however, I did not think of the denizens of Saltwater City or Grist Village as Hong Kong Chinese when I began *The Tiger Flu*, since that identity is only one of many I carry, only one of many that interest me. (For readers who are interested, *The Tiger Flu* is a novel about a disease that affects men more acutely than women, a technology that cures the mind of the body, and two young women who have lost their families and are seeking ways to survive and rebuild the world in the aftermath of devastation. The world they rebuild, needless to say, is a radically different world from the one that was devastated.) Rather, I offer these thoughts on possible tropings of Hong Kong Chinese and Asians more generally as a way to connect my own preoccupations with the important work of this special issue. For indeed, my identities are multiple (as, I'm sure, are those of many contributors): I also identify as Asian, Chinese, Hakka, Canadian, American, Newfoundlander, British Columbian, Albertan, queer, lesbian, straight, woman, middle-class, intellectual, creative, human, animal, bacterial/cyborg assemblage, and many other things besides. But I came of age as a writer in the 1980s and 1990s and thus carry a poststructural inheritance that is generally suspicious of identity as essence. I understand identity, rather, as a sedimentation of historical practices and performances with real material consequences, but nevertheless as always in flux and thus open to difference within itself as well as to change through further practice and/or performance over time. Those real material consequences mean that I don't discard nationalist or sovereigntist movements out of hand—they remain

extremely important to me, though often in fraught ways. In this moment of intense political polarization, however, it is less fashionable to claim fluid or contradictory identities. Nevertheless, I must assert my own as always multiple and watery.[12] It is all the more important to do so, perhaps, *because* it is unfashionable.

Further, my relations with others are not caught up in a purely Asian/White binary. I've been committed from the start of my writing life to the making, building, and inhabiting of community across a broad and ever-evolving set of national, cultural, reclaimed-racial, gendered, classed, and sexuality divides. For certain, these have shifted with the time, in conversation with friends, colleagues, students, and other interlocutors, and in relation to turns in my own intellectual and creative work.

This is one set of reasons why the malleability of metaphor is interesting to me, and why novels are (for me) better than identity cards. It is also why speculative fiction novels are (for me) better, or at least more productive, than realist novels. One of the reasons I write speculative fiction is to slip the noose of a single identification or a single set of relationships, and through the work of allegory, metaphor, and analogy comment on and play through the intersections, interactions, constant alterations, and layerings of multiple ways of being with others in the world and out of it. However, as much as I embrace those moments when figure and identity coincide, I embrace more deeply those moments when the correspondence collapses and the figure takes on manifestations all its own, beyond the bounds of identity altogether. That, for me, is when speculative fiction really takes off. In such instances, it might show us routes out of the histories of oppression we inherit. Or it might offer not a linear pathway, but a rupture into another time and space where we can be if not free then at least different.

In this essay, I'll explain why I write speculative as opposed to realist fiction, what I think it does culturally and politically, and its relationship to the community-based work that I am also committed to. Along the way, I will discuss a few other things of interest to our contemporary moment: silence-breaking, metaphor, analogy, utopia, relationality, and literary experiments.

Let me start by saying that the impulse to write speculatively precedes my thinking on why it's productive or interesting. It might be because of all the science fiction I read as a nerdy Asian kid growing up in St. John's, Newfoundland. It might be because my mother, like her father before her, is a whimsical and playful person who gave me all manner of folk and fairy tales to read from a very young age. My parents were scholarship kids from

struggling families who left Hong Kong, before it got rich, to go to school in England and America, and decided in the thick of the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution in China, and the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, having already survived the Japanese Occupation and the American embargoes during the Korean war, to try to make a life abroad. I'm not, as many allies imagine me, a *lo wah kiu*[13] descendent, though I still understand myself as an inheritor of the histories of the Head Tax and the Exclusion Act, and of Chinese labour on the railways and in mining, as well as in laundries, corner stores, and restaurants. I feel a strong connection and responsibility to and for those histories.

But as a young child, I hadn't yet figured any of this out. I was drawn to what I was drawn to, from amongst the things I was given. The writers I loved as a kid were Andrew Lang, Oscar Wilde, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Madeleine L'Engle. While other kids at my high school were reading *Sweet Valley High* and *Flowers in the Attic*, I kept reading folk and fairy tales, until I discovered Frank Herbert (*Dune*), Ray Bradbury (*The Martian Chronicles*), and Ursula Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*). A little later I discovered Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*, *Nights at the Circus*), Jeanette Winterson (*The Passion*), and Monique Wittig (*Les Guérillères*).

In my twenties, the cultural race politics of the late 1980s and 1990s sent me in other directions—towards some of the writers you might expect: Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Lee Maracle, Maxine Hong Kingston, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, of course, but also to weird forms of nineteenth-century anthropology and folklore to try to find my roots and routes. The two great discoveries of that moment for me were an obscure Dutch sinologist named Robert van Gulik who wrote sinological sexology—and thus wrote about women and "sexual minorities"—and Pu Songling, a seventeenth-century Chinese collector of tales. My grandmother, who spent most of her life in Hong Kong, was by then living in Victoria, BC. She wasn't interested in telling stories of the past. When I asked her she would say: "I was so unhappy then, I happy now—now that I have you. Why would I want to remember?" My desires to know were then, and probably still are, very second-generation desires, having not lived through the bloodiest horrors of the past. Because the older generation did not want to talk, I dug, and made my history from a very disparate archive and the work of a lot of imagination. My first novel, *When Fox Is a Thousand*, published by Press Gang in 1995, was the messy, but, I hope, interesting, result of this activity. It seemed, at the time, a natural place to start.

After its publication—more successful than I'd ever dreamt—I very much felt the pressure to produce a second book. I felt this acutely and painfully. I was subject to a lot of interest, both wanted and unwanted, which sometimes felt more like scrutiny. Advice from many mainstream publishing quarters, including agents and publishing houses, was that a memoir would be a great thing, but if not a memoir, at least realist fiction with a single protagonist and one continuous storyline. This was the requisite form for a young writer hoping for fame and fortune.

The desire for memoir on the part of the industry makes me antsy. I feel commodified and coerced by it, as though I'm being told that my body and the safe, and thus relatively dull, life that my immigrant parents struggled so hard to create for me are more interesting than my storytelling ability, my interests, my facility with language, my creativity, or my imagination—the things they fought for me to have. China and Chinese people have long been objects of Western curiosity. It's not a curiosity I'm interested in satisfying. Though I turn to the anthropologists for knowledge of my past, I retain a healthy suspicion of them. I dread the thought that audiences might not hear language as made, and instead might see memoir as some kind of proof of my being. Further, I didn't—and don't—wish for that kind of attention. I recall very clearly a day in the early 1990s, walking down Pender Street in Vancouver after one of my first literary readings at the Chinese Cultural Centre, being approached on the street by an audience member who couldn't tell me apart from another Chinese Canadian woman writer who had read from her work in the same group reading. This person came up, patted me on the back, and said, "Poor dear, that you should have had to endure such things." While the other Chinese Canadian woman writer had indeed endured some terrible things in her life, it troubled me first of all that she—a smart, creative person—should be the object of pity like that, and secondly, that I should be mistaken for her as though two Chinese women couldn't have led two very different lives. (My interest in clones stems from this problem in part—it is my uptake and working through of the racist notion that all Asians look alike.) There's a fine line, clearly, between respecting another Chinese Canadian woman writer for engaging a practice that she chooses, and not choosing it for myself. If David Mitchell can exist in the same world as Joan Didion, why can't I exist in the same world as Wayson Choy? To be clear, I do respect writers who wish to write the self in a realist vein, who need to break silence for important reasons—social, political, or creative. What I would like is to be valued as deeply by the culture at

large for choosing a different path. For the record, this is not the way the global publishing industry worked thirty years ago, and for the most part is still not the way it works, the hard-earned success of Liu Cixin and Ken Liu notwithstanding. This is something that, in the second half of my first century alive, I have accepted and agree to work with.

Because, of course, the flip side may be my own overweening sense of pride. I come from a culture in which the question of face matters a great deal. Even as a multiply displaced post post modern queer asian jook sing female writer, I carry that. I don't want to shame my family by telling intimate stories of their lives in ways that can be identified. Especially if they don't want their stories told. My family loves me, did their best to raise me well, and are essentially good, kind, hardworking people. Why would I want to put them in positions they don't wish to be placed in? Particularly as I come from a culture that—broadly and stereotypically speaking—values family at least as much as the individual. Further, I recognize that this valuing of the individual that drives so much of our progressive culture emerges from a European Enlightenment tradition that was and continues to be deployed in the colonies and neocolonies to claim European superiority. Which, again to be clear, does not make individualism bad, it just makes it historically and politically specific in ways we need to be cognizant of.

I know the late Wayson Choy grappled with this, recognizing his own work as "telling the secrets of Chinatown." Of course, the idea of Chinatown as a place of secrets is a racist construction in the first place, as I know he was aware. I know he had his tongue firmly planted in his cheek when he spoke of the secrets of Chinatown. One bears a certain responsibility to one's community: to break with that responsibility might be an act of bravery—or it might not. It might simply be a betrayal of those who have loved and nurtured you in the best ways they know how. Where the line lies in practice, and how to tell where it lies, is a matter of art, of risk, of communication, of balance, and perhaps ultimately of failure. The value of silence-breaking has become complicated. It depends on what kind of silence, when, and how. Sometimes silence must be broken and sometimes it must be kept. The important questions seem to be: Who is protected? Who is exposed? Who is shamed? Is the risk or inevitability of one's own shame worth the social gains that are possible? How can you know 'til you've done it? There are many acts of judgment that must be engaged, and it's in the complicated weighing of judgment that the "poethics" lies. We must embrace a certain "poethical wager," to quote the poet/critic Joan Retallack, and "do our utmost

to understand our contemporary position and then act on the chance that our work may be at least as effective . . . [as any intervention in] . . . the intertwining trajectories of pattern and chance" (46).

As we are discovering anew in the #MeToo moment: to break the silence about an act of violence against one's body by someone more powerful than you can be an act of bravery, but the cost can be tremendous. We hope that a collective breaking of silence will bring about justice and a safer world. That would be ideal. But in fact, this is not an outcome that is guaranteed. We are so steeped, even as a secular society, in a Judeo-Christian calculus that says the good should be rewarded and the bad should be punished. There's nothing wrong with thinking this, except that sometimes it prevents us from fully seeing the messy ways in which life flows and ideals and actions interact, producing unexpected results. Again, to be very clear, of course it makes sense to judge sexual abuse as bad. That's a no-brainer. But we see that perpetrators are not always punished. And even if punishment does come about, the question of what punishments are ideal remains a matter of much debate. We might even ask whether punishment is the thing to want in the first instance? And there are even messier questions: What exactly happened in any particular case? How can we find out? What is a good process? Whose story should we believe? What has transpired in the space between the thing that happened and the stories that were told? How should we understand the gender of the teller? How should we understand the power relations that are unfolding in the tellings? Who is listening? Who is receiving example and what example is being received?

Of course, if we choose to do so, we can tell our stories about it, as many people have been doing. I do think this is productive and necessary. I also worry about what will happen to already vulnerable people. I worry about ongoing injustice for those who disclose because I witness it daily. My own minor disclosures have largely resulted in shutdown, slander, and a deepening of already existing racial marking. All stories have consequences.

Here's where I think there is power and possibility in speculative fiction if only readers and industries can trust the storytelling abilities of marginalized people. Ursula Le Guin calls speculative fiction "thought experiment." She likes to set up whole worlds, often not so unlike our own, but always with a twist that comes from her imagination. She plays the twist out in the story to see what transpires. This is an incredibly useful tactic, I would argue, for those writing from marginalized positions. I too engage in speculative fiction world-alteration of the kind Le Guin describes. For me, there is also the

work of certain figures of speech, sometimes metaphor, sometimes conceit, sometimes analogy—the figures get a little loose or they overlap and dovetail one another. The thought experiment allows us to get at real-world problems and their interactions without having to live through the messy pain of them. The thought experiment can keep us if not *safe*, then at least *safer* from attack while still giving us the opportunity to work out and think or dream through what we need to think or dream through.

Another really hard thing to talk about in my world is lateral violence. I hope I've never actively perpetrated it. There are structural ways in which I can't avoid it, and must take responsibility for it. I know I've been the object of it. But to break that silence could do massive damage to communities I love and care about profoundly. When the personal gets conflated through racial mechanisms with the collective, no hand laundry has the labour power vast enough to clean off the dirt, especially when we are already carrying the vast burdens we carry. Here, the thought experiment is a productive way of bringing the discussion to the table without pointing fingers and without exposing the human flaws of the already vulnerable to the powers that be.

In the world of my most recent novel, *The Tiger Flu*, 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. Something of the work of estrangement, or what the speculative fiction critic Darko Suvin calls "defamiliarization," is possible through them, in the sense that the philosopher Ernst Bloch describes: "[I]nsight into what is closest to the beholder grows out of his [*sic*] amazement at being confronted with what is farthest away" (124). I would suggest that this way of communicating is particularly productive for marginalized people carrying both double-consciousness and traumatic repression. If we have ways of knowing that carry the knowledge of the colonizer and its reverse, and if we carry secrets with or without express content, sometimes the only way to get at the story is through estrangement. Estrangement is a positive form that can draw out whatever it is that has been encrypted in the psyche—buried experience without articulation—though only ever in part. Unlike the Blochian kind of estrangement, my kind of estrangement doesn't always present itself as analogy or metaphor. Metaphor cannot directly

reference known historical truth if the truth is not known. My grandmother's not wanting to talk is my grandmother's not wanting to talk. There are no secrets in Chinatown. And yet, the work of estrangement can draw up buried truths we might not access any other way. Though it should not be overemphasized, there may be something of a culturally specific habit at work here as well—that is a habit of indirection.

There are so many stories in the historical record of Chinese generals or concubines tortured and executed for the smallest of slights, like wearing clothes of the wrong colour and getting read by the emperor as disloyal. Traditionally speaking, to be too direct—to make one's meaning too clear—can cause offence. If one speaks in such a way that multiple meanings are possible, one leaves one's interlocutor free to choose the interpretation that will least offend them. And if they, in turn, are gracious, they will choose the most inoffensive as opposed to the most offensive interpretation, or somewhere in between according to context and affective flow. Alternately, they might choose the most offensive interpretation as an assertion of power. Or they might choose the interpretation that truly fits their own sense of what they have done as a matter of honour. The conclusion is drawn relationally and collaboratively. So there is something of a cultural habit at work in my translation of the literary experiment to serve my own cultural and material needs.

The Grist sisters (in other words, the clone sisters of *The Tiger Flu*) are, after all that, partially metaphorical for progressive communities in the world as it is. Like many of us, they hold co-operation as an ideal but they struggle to practise it. They must co-operate in order to survive, but it is hard because they have egos and desires. (If I were really speculative, I might dream the ego away, but that's a project for later, when I'm really wise! Also, I feel it's important for Asian women to assert ego, in the first place to counter the stereotype of Asian women as passive and compliant, in the second to counter the stereotype of Asians generally as a horde, and in the third because many of us have exciting thoughts, ideas, and stories to share that come from our imaginations in their specificity.) One of my two protagonists, Kirilow Groundsel, is cranky and proud. Worse than that, she favours her lover Peristrophe Halliana over the other sisters in the Grist, especially over Auntie Radix Bupleuri, in spite of the fact that Auntie Radix holds the key to the sisterhood's survival—that is, the capacity to reproduce. The reason the Grist sisters do not provide a seamless analogy to any actually existing community is that the embodied forms my Grist

sisters take are very particular. Because their bodies are not exactly like ours, the needs and desires that proceed from them are different. Auntie Radix is a parthenogene, that is, capable of self-reproduction. It's no mistake that the word "parthenogenic" references the Greek goddess Athena, born in a fit of inspiration from the head of her father Zeus. She's the goddess of thought—or one might argue the "thought experiment" in precisely the way Le Guin means. As a self-reproducing woman, Auntie Radix does not have the same kinds of needs that ordinary heterosexual women in our world have. She has no need for men. And in the world of Grist Village, there are no men, so there is no point desiring them either. It would be possible to reintroduce them, though this would be a major disruption of the village as all Grist sisters are clones of the same woman. The analogies of Grist sisters to progressive communities, Asian women, or lesbian separatists go only so far. I suggest that these are at their most interesting precisely when they break down.

Though the analogies break down, they do still exist. Through the analogy to lesbian separatists, there's a nod to Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*, a novel about four versions of the same woman inhabiting four different worlds. Through the figure of the clone, there's also a nod to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and the Michael Bay film *The Island*. Further, the novel is a continuation of my own interest in the figure of the clone begun in my second novel, *Salt Fish Girl*.

The Grist sisters have things in common with other speculative societies too. Like the Amazons of Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, they are isolated and a little strange (an analogical nod to lesbian separatism, again). Like the Oankali of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, they have their own biology and so are in need of their own medicine. (Butler's work is extraordinary for its analogical thought on racial mixing. I don't presume to even touch her hem in this regard. I am, however, interested in Traditional Chinese Medicine, its ways of thinking about the body/mind, and how it differs from Western medical and philosophical thought on the body and mind.) There's a nod too to Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which proposes a society without the sexes except in times of reproduction. (If we are all women in Grist Village, do we have a sex at all? Or is sex, even at the biological level, always already relational?) Through these connections, *The Tiger Flu* enters a conversation with those who have gone before.

As in the work of these predecessors, identification is still the point. If readers didn't identify with the characters in the novel at some level, why

would they read it at all? Identification is still the power and challenge of the novel as a form—it partakes of the production of the self. Our historical moment seems to need this more than ever, which is another reason why I do it. However, rather than starting with familiar forms like Asian Canadian or feminist or queer as the industry seems to want, I start with unfamiliar ones in order to get out of the traps of overdetermination—in other words, to get out of the trap of all the cultural expectation and overloading that accompanies such terms. In not contending with them at the outset, I get to shunt aside at least for a moment the dialectical push and pull they carry with them—I don't have to break stereotypes in order to remake them according to some perception of the truth of Asian Canadian being; rather, I can start at depth, in the midst of a complexity with its own logic to work through. And if identification happens along the way, which it always does, then that's—well—fabulous.

I want to suggest that speculative fiction can also be relationally productive. I need to be very clear that it is not so by definition. Our Mother only knows the long history of exoticization as well as colonial and neocolonial objectification that has occurred under the speculative fiction umbrella.[14] And yet, imagined the right way, it allows the writer to play out relationships as literary experiment without making representations of "real world" others whom one might, poethically speaking, not wish which to speak for. I can think about my relationship across a divide without claiming a masterful knowledge of the other. If that other is not "real world" historically determined, then I'm not wading through stereotypes and misapprehensions in order to reach them. There are further problems here, though, insofar as one doesn't want to be so completely ahistorical as to lift oneself entirely from the world as it is. It is, in fact, important for me to retain connection to communities in the "real world." So the Grist sisters are descended from a fictional Asian woman rooted in real Asian histories. Within the world of the novel, this great-grandmother's DNA was appropriated by the clone company Jemini in approximately our historical present imagined as such. In the novel there is also a location called "the Coast Salish Timeplace," a site that acknowledges contemporary Indigenous sovereignty movements. There is also a place called "Cosmopolitan Earth," a slightly fraught location nominally run by Secwepemc leaders but impinged upon by a newly imperial China. This is, I hope, a respectful nod to political conditions of the present as they actually are, an acknowledgement that they exist and that they don't resolve easily.[15]

Here, I want to say something about utopianism, recognizing the word "utopia," coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 and borrowing from two Greek roots, to mean both "good place" and "no place." Readers have probably recognized by now a certain utopian impulse in my work, but also a twisting of that impulse. Over the past few years, I have been developing a concept I call "Insurgent Utopia"[16] which builds upon the concept of critical utopia offered by the British SF critic Tom Moylan, in which he describes the intentionally flawed utopias of second-wave feminist writers like Le Guin, Marge Piercy, and Doris Lessing that start, as *The Tiger Flu* does, with a utopian ideal (no sexism!) but quickly kick a hole in it (lateral violence instead!). Moylan speaks of preserving our ideals as dreams but not blueprints, in order to steer clear of that race-to-the-bottom phenomenon that Rey Chow has called "the fascist longings in our midst."

In an essay published in *Exploring the Fantastic* entitled "Insurgent Utopias: How to Recognize the Knock at the Door," I meditated on the impasses of the present moment and made a proposal for how to think of the present and so create the future differently. I argued for directed action according to our best understanding of what the moment calls for, followed by active and imaginative attention to what emerges from the combined directed action of other community-minded writers, artists, critics, and cultural organizers. What emerges is never what was planned; this is a good thing because twentieth-century experiments in planned societies and planned economies have already taught us the totalitarian dangers of over-planning. To surrender to the interactions of forces and the flows of history attentively is not easy and nor does it provide any guarantees. Through the concept of insurgent utopias I suggest placing worlds in interaction with one another to seek eruptions of the unexpected. For me this is where both hope and danger lie. Something of our present world is also reflected in this thinking.[17]

The Tiger Flu puts into play a utopian ideal: that of a society dominated by women instead of men. It is a response to our long, patriarchal moment, as all utopias are responses to the historical moment in which they are written. However, rather than playing out a traditional utopian form in the style of Thomas More, Edward Bellamy, or Ernest Callenbach (all of whom sought to illustrate the perfection of the utopian societies they dreamt of), *The Tiger Flu* focuses on eruptions of the unexpected from the initial utopian impulse. What emerges is a complex alternate society which unfolds its own wonders and horrors. These give way to yet more wonders and horrors. The novel's two protagonists, both flawed, must negotiate their way through a world of

rapid and continuous change. There is thus a certain Taoist impulse in my work—this is my way of bringing my Chinese history productively into a complex global present.

I embrace my own form of Taoism not just as a reclamation of roots/routes but also as a way of doing alliance work on Coast Salish and Treaty 7 Territories, I hope without appropriating the traditional cultures of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, Blackfoot, Tsuut'ina, Stoney Nakoda, or the Métis Nation of Alberta (Region 3). I employ the elements of the Bagua—the Taoist trigrams: Earth, Fire, Wind, Thunder, Mountain, Water, Sky, Marsh—to elucidate clockwise Asian/Indigenous relations (which I understand as neocolonial and extractive) and counter-clockwise Asian/Indigenous relations (which I understand as matriarchal spirit-to-spirit relations).[18] My call, obviously, is for the latter, but I want to acknowledge and take my share of responsibility for the former. This work goes beyond thought and talk—I have been doing a fair bit of organizing in Calgary, as I also did in Vancouver when I lived there. It is important for me to do the work of community building beside the work of writing. These days, most of this takes place at my "un-centre" at the University of Calgary: The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing.

So for me, then, speculative fiction holds profound possibilities for building community while making art. It does so because it is an open-ended practice that's available to me in my own cultural wheelhouse. It sings, it entertains, it dreams, it calls to its audiences to be themselves only a bit different. I hope it brings my voice to the table as one voice among many, making productive noise beside the productive noises of others so that collectively we might nudge our shared society into a better place—if not a utopia.

NOTES

1 This essay is a revised version of a keynote talk that I gave at the Alberta Writers' Guild Conference in Edmonton in the Winter of 2019, recast to address the concerns of this special issue.

2 See for instance Sofia Samatar's "Towards a Planetary History of Afrofuturism" in which, watching Jonathan Akomfrah's and Edward George's *The Last Angel of History,* she articulates the "History" (with a capital "H") of white capital and progress as a virus that shuts down the "lowercase histories" of Afrofuturism that are coded in the sounds and images of the past, and do not necessarily exist or reveal themselves in a linear/progressive order (176-77). In a related vein, Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) makes a distinction between Western/industrial/colonial time, which is linear and related to production and profits, and ceremonial/"Indian" time, which is based on a ritual understanding of order

and harmony (153). Allen suggests that ritual or ceremonial time demands another kind of storytelling than industrial time does—a kind of storytelling that does not lend itself well to the marketable novel because it is relational in the first instance, rather than being oriented towards a single, heroic protagonist (152).

3 See "Embargoes and Sanctions."

4 See Hilliker and Barry (55).

5 See Pepper. There is also a good article by Kevin Chong on Chinese Canadian response to the uprisings (see "Divided Loyalties").

6 According to my aunt but not my mother.

7 The Call for Papers for this special issue asked, among other questions, "How do Black and Indigenous writers respond to the different positions colonialism historically imposed on those who were subjected to alien abduction versus alien invasion?"

8 See Chen.

9 See West.

10 Please see my essay "Insurgent Utopias: How to Recognize the Knock at the Door" in *Exploring the Fantastic* for more on the concept of insurgency.

11 Sofia Samatar articulates alien abduction as a metaphor for the Middle Passage and posits Octavia Butler's *Patternmaster* series as an example.

12 Rita Wong importantly reminds us that we are seventy per cent water (Wong and Mochizuki 5).

13 This is a Chinese term that has been translated as "old Overseas Chinese," "settler from China," "old-timers," or "pioneers." I use it to refer to the generation of Chinese sojourners who came with the railways, mines, laundries, corner stores, and restaurants in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

14 H. G. Well's *War of the Worlds* and H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Chthulu" are much quoted examples. It is there in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, in the cyborg figure Rachael. For more, see for instance De Witt Douglas Kilgore's chapter "'The Best is Yet to Come': or Saving the Future: *Star Trek Deep Space Nine* as Reform Astrofuturism" (48-64) and Edward James' chapter "Yellow, Black, Metal and Tentacled: The Race question in American Science Fiction" (199-224) in Lavender.

15 My representations of Indigenous peoples and places are as material/historical/grounded as I could make them within the speculative fiction frame of the novel. It seemed somehow more respectful, given ongoing injustice and the responsibility I carry as a Canadian citizen of Chinese descent to take up the terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the necessary ongoing work of making things right. In writing the novel, I felt that while I could reinvent and overwrite Asian tropes and figures because they were, in a sense, "mine," it didn't seem fully respectful to do the same with Indigenous tropes and figures because of their attachment to real people and places to whom I owe a debt. I needed to make Indigenous peoples and places present because they are important beings in the world I actually inhabit, but it didn't feel right to take liberties with them, except where necessary to extrapolate from the world as it is to the world of the novel. My intention was to acknowledge Indigenous presences and to respectfully write Indigenous peoples into the future as I imagine it, but in a way that is not "polly-anna-ish." The Indigenous peoples in *The Tiger Flu* still have problems and struggles because all humans do. This is something I discussed a great deal with Warren Cariou, who worked with me on "sensitivity" issues, though of course any flaws, faults, or errors are my own. I hope I got the balance right, and I look forward to seeing how other non-Indigenous fiction writers handle this challenge. It seems to me to be a meaningful one to take up. I also feel that it cannot but evolve if we continue to do this work in a good way.

16 See Lai, "Insurgent Utopias: How to Recognize the Knock at the Door."

17 The concept of insurgency is, of course, attached to the work of revolution. I am however less and less convinced of the power and productivity of Marxist dialectics because they seem to make so much room for lateral violence and the silencing of outcry about it. The insurgency I call for necessarily involves the interactions of more than two forces. It values chance and mutation. This is why I sometimes call it "emergent insurgency." Emergent insurgency is possible both within the cultural realm and beyond it. For instance, it is possible for me as an Asian Canadian person to stand in solidarity with the protests at Standing Rock and the Unist'ot'en camp as neither a proponent of colonization or an Indigenous person. I don't escape my complicity with the colonial project, but that doesn't mean I have to like it or agree with it. I can work against it, at least some of the time. I am never entirely free from my engagement with it, however, as long as I am paid for my work using national currency, or as long as I buy commodities using that same currency. Or, for that matter, as long as I work at a university. Later in this essay, I talk about clockwise and counter-clockwise movement to help think this through. For further elaboration, please see my essay "How to Recognize the Knock at the Door" in *Exploring the Fantastic*.

18 See Lai, "Speculative Taoism, Bagua Insurgencies." The notion of matriarchal spirit-to-spirit relations comes from Lee Maracle in *Memory Serves*.

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