



AUTHOR-CRITIC  
INTERVIEW



## The Theory and Practice of Utopia in Our Troubled Times: A Conversation with Author Larissa Lai and Critic Sherryl Vint

*Interviewed by Rocío Carrasco=Carrasco,  
with Irene López=Rodríguez*

Amid current global crises, the international conference “The Knock at the Door: Utopian Dreams for Post-Covid Times,” jointly organized by the University of Huelva (Spain) and the University of Calgary (Canada) on May 21–24, 2023, at the University of Huelva, provided a forum for reflecting upon the role played by speculative fiction in (re)imagining better futures, while remaining vigilant to possible threats and dangers. The title of the conference, borrowed from philosopher John Rajchman,<sup>1</sup> is intentionally ambiguous. Lying behind that door could be total liberation for all—or it could be secret police who lead us toward genocides, deportation, rapes, and mass graves. Taking this dichotomous trope, “the knock at the door,” as a point of departure, professors Larissa Lai (University of Toronto, Canada; recipient of a Maria Zambrano fellowship at the University of Huelva at the time of the interview) and Sherryl Vint (University of California Riverside, USA) engaged in a fruitful conversation, moderated by Dr. Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco in a hybrid format (in-person and streaming), on the second day of the conference.

The aim of the conversation between these two—one an internationally renowned author and the other an internationally known literary critic—was to

offer two different yet complementary viewpoints about the theory and practice of utopia and dystopia from a gender and genre perspective, focusing particularly (considering the difficult cultural junction we are at) on how literary texts represent and interrogate contemporary issues. Among the topics addressed during the conversation was the controversy surrounding the very term *speculative fiction* in relation to *science fiction*, *fantasy*, and non-Western ways of knowing. Larissa Lai offers the concept of *insurgent utopia* (or *emergent insurgency*) as a form of utopian thought and practice that makes way for many dreams and many kinds of action, depending on one's location. Later topics included the figure of the posthuman, key for deconstructing binary oppositions based on domination practices of one over the other: human/ nonhuman; masculine/ feminine; white European/nonwhite/Indigenous. Both Vint and Lai turn to Donna Haraway's concept of "making kin" to explain how posthumanism might expand the concept of family and community beyond genetics, generating new relational and ethical systems.<sup>2</sup> Lai and Vint draw attention to the human-animal bond needed for the understanding and wellbeing of our planet.

Turning to the topic of feminist utopias, the notion of "unfinished projects" highlighted the struggles of the past are left incomplete, and need to continue today. Works written in the '60s, '70s and even '90s opened up many important questions that were only partly answered at the time; when examined today, these responses seem quite out of date, because times have changed. Hence, although Vint and Lai explain that feminist concerns basically remain the same, both underscore the need for different answers in our contemporary context. Finally, recalling how Indigenous knowledges and forms of being have traditionally been suppressed by colonialism, Vint and Lai recognize the pivotal role that postcolonial utopian writers play on building a relational approach to Indigenous peoples and their narratives. On the one hand, Lai reflects on the politics of the body and on the legacies of the colonial past in order to learn from mistakes, to demand recognition and apology for the atrocities committed. She advocates therefore working to create bridges and to foster cultural understanding. On the other hand, Vint talks about the risks of romanticizing Indigenous knowledges and of reappropriating them. Given the topics addressed and the speakers' thoughtful and thought-provoking approaches to several problematics, this conversation should stand as a valuable contribution to navigating between our past, present, and future worlds.

## The Interview

**Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco (RC):** Good evening. We are truly honored and excited to bring together today these two experts in critiquing our global present and imagining new paths into our future. Thanks to both of you for accepting our invitation and for being here today.

My first question for you has to do with speculative fiction. Both of you have extensively used the generic name “speculative fiction” for your work, Dr. Lai as a writer, and Dr. Vint as a critical thinker. The genre certainly offers metaphorical possibilities for dealing with our troubled contemporary times. So, do you think the genre of speculative fiction has changed, especially in these times? In which ways, if so? And is “speculative fiction” a term or a label that you are still happy with?

**Larissa Lai (LL):** It is still a useful label because it makes room for questions of the social besides questions of science, technology, biology and also makes room for fantasy, myth or folk tale and the intersections of those forms with non-Western ways of knowing. I like it because of its capaciousness. I still find it useful for that reason. Yet, there’s a reason why I think it might be passing. It might be simply that we’ve entered a contemporary moment in which literary realism as a category is no longer capacious enough to address the present, but speculative fiction is. So maybe we just need to begin using the term “literary realism” for the kind of material we used to call speculative fiction. Speculative fiction has for a long time addressed issues of technology, gender, sexuality, and cultural difference in a way literary fiction is just starting to catch up to. I like the term because it holds questions of the scientific and technological beside questions of the social. The other reason why I like it is also because the notion of the speculative still makes that gesture toward the future. It is good to have a category in which one can discuss the future. If someone is interested in the inhabitation of more than one epistemological position, including non-Western epistemological positions that don’t necessarily think about time in a linear sense, speculative fiction makes room for that. We still need to be attentive to the way that the idea of speculation privileges Western linear models of time in its emphasis on the future, however. But there is no reason why one can’t speculate about the present, or the past or circular time or time immemorial.

**Sherryl Vint (SV):** I have mixed feelings about this as well. I still use the term “speculative fiction” and also I am not opposed to the term “science fiction.” I do think “speculative fiction” is a more inclusive term, an umbrella term under which lots of different genre categories fit; the previous types of boundary policing that worked to keep these categories separate has mainly broken down, including the boundary between speculative genres and literary realism. There has been so much ink spilt about genre categories, what names and what counts. I am not interested in those questions at all anymore, if I ever was. Among the things that have particularly changed to enable these boundary breakdowns are that there are more people from more countries who already write in a tradition recognizable as speculative fiction, and not yet shaped by the Western forms policed in (by?) the early pulp-magazine categories. These developments are shifting our understanding of what the genre can do, of what kinds of stories it can tell, and of what kinds of cultural histories are brought to it.

I sometimes like to use the term “science fiction” specifically, as you asked, because I am very concerned with the impacts that science and technology have on everyday life, and with ways that we often do not understand science officially and with the unintended as well as the designed consequences of technology. So I think that this literature, which foregrounds those questions of the built environment *over* questions that I associate with literary realism (at least with how I was trained to think of literary realism) is still really about subjective interiority—but the focus on the built environment, on the material, structured world in which your characters are having those internal experiences, is really important to emphasize. I now tend to use “speculative fiction” over “science fiction” because of exactly the kinds of things (issues?) that Professor Lai was already foregrounding. There is more than one way to deal with science, and in many traditions science and story are very close together; you cannot disarticulate them from one another, and thus the term speculative fiction is more inclusive of many traditions of science and culture.

I remain especially concerned when thinking about the impact of science because as a topic it has often been kind of “outlawed” from proper literature, as it were, and so other literary traditions sometimes fail sufficiently to engage it. I do want that notion of science to be

quite capacious, which is why our program at University of California Riverside is called “Cultures of Science”: we acknowledge that there are multiple such cultures. I like Professor Lai’s idea that maybe we should do away with the term [science fiction] because literary realism is speculative these days. This [conclusion] comes really from my own situatedness, as someone who has been doing work on science fiction since the 1990s, as part of a field of such scholars. Often literary scholars today, reacting to the fact that speculative fiction is better at dealing with the present than older forms of realism, tend to repeat the tradition of dismissing the genre itself—and thus of ignoring the newer body of scholarship. So some critics act as if they have only recently discovered these topics of enquiry. And that’s true of writers as well, right? I think, for example, of Ian McEwan writing *Machines Like Me* (2019), which is an interesting book in some ways but incredibly derivative in other ways because he has never read any science fiction. He suggests in interviews that nobody has ever written anything like this before. That science fiction long has been marginalized in this way means that the conversations those of us working in the genre have had for a time are *also* pushed to the side. People suggest that one is talking about the Anthropocene or that one is talking about futurity . . . and they often want to step around those scholars or those earlier writers who have been doing this work, as if this all only appeared about twenty years ago.

I do have some resistance to doing away with the term “science fiction” and letting it become just the default of literary realism today, so maybe literary realism is the term I would do away with . . . but I completely agree with the way these boundaries are disappearing. I think we see speculative elements in contemporary literature, because the reality we live in is so shaped by agencies beyond the human that we need a form capable of narrating things like climate change in ways that, historically, literary realism has not been able to do. There are some ways in which it is important to recognize that there is a long history of talking about these topics; if you go straight to literary authors who have been doing it, you can avoid the “reinventing the wheel” conversations I am resistant to, for, I guess, obvious reasons.

**RC:** Okay, so, in spite of everything, we may still need the term science fiction for particular reasons, as you were mentioning. Let’s move on then to the idea of utopia. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist utopian literature (in works by Monique Wittig, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, Marge Piercy,

and others) emerged as a powerful and influential genre. These works of fiction were written primarily by women and focused on imagining alternative societies that would be more equal, just, and freer from the oppression of patriarchal social norms and structures. These utopian visions were often inspired by feminist activism and the women's movement of the time.

Do you think these works continue to inspire and influence feminist thought and activism today? Or perhaps do you look toward more contemporary feminist utopian communities/forms of activism for inspiration?

**LL:** Would you like to speak first?

**SV:** Sure! Yeah! Well, my answer to that is, I guess, *both*. We should backtrack a bit and clarify that when I say utopian studies, I mean the tradition of a kind of speculative transformative of thought, largely linked to theorist Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. This work is about the utopian possibilities in everyday life that we can activate, but part of what he discusses is also that such hope is materially real, that out there in the world these kinds of residues of previous utopian movements whose work was perhaps unfinished thanks to repression, displacement, dismissal—but which remain out there. That's why I said both: there are ways in which previous feminist utopian visions, including not only the utopian narratives of the seventies and eighties but also the earlier novels of the 1960s, present projects that were left undone. So there are still ways that they are relevant. But there are also real gaps in those works too, which come out of their situatedness. They tend to be very liberal in their visions; they tend to be almost entirely, although not exclusively, written by white feminists—or at least the texts by white feminists tend to be the more well-known or the more talked about. These visions tend to have a narrower projection of who and what lies in the future. So that needs to be corrected, updated. But I also think as I said that the struggles of the past are incomplete, and we are here to continue that work. Whatever it is that we haven't done or finished is what other people will do [carry forward into] in the future, as I talked about in the previous panel [at this conference].

What I see as a real danger is the kind of co-optation of the utopian impulse and thought we see within consumer culture. I also think there's a real danger of co-optation of the *language* of utopianism by white supremacist fascists. So there are ways in which the project of utopianism

is a struggle we always have to engage in. Bloch writes extensively about what he calls the concrete utopian impulse vs. abstract utopianism. Utopias for him are real, part of what shapes daily life by informing actions and materiality. But why he differentiates concrete from abstract is that concrete utopianism is about hope for a different kind of future, specifically for a *transformed world* (thus his title, *The Principle of Hope*). Hope pertains not just to one's own particular circumstances being transformed for the better; to think so is the *risk* of that impulse being attached to regressive fantasies. He is very aware of this danger, and in fact because he lived through Nazi fascism, he is in a way writing in response to this. He also is aware of this co-optation of utopian forms, and argues that it emerges from a place of fear. Fascists locate a better world in the past, and try to bring back whatever that nostalgia suggests that past is/was: that idea that people had it better in the past siphons utopian energy away from the more difficult project of utopianism, the work of asking, given that we are the people that are here and have to fulfill a role together, what our role [in change] is going to look like?

**LL:** I still very much return to the feminist writers of that moment. There is so much power in those works, although of course they are dated because history has moved on. What Professor Vint says about their necessary incompleteness makes a lot of sense to me. They address the concerns of their moment in its own terms, even as they speculate. But times have shifted in ways that Octavia Butler, Wittig, and Russ couldn't have been expected to predict. They asked all the right questions. But the answers to those questions are necessarily different now because our present is a different moment from theirs. In *The Tiger Flu* (2018) I took up the romance of an all-women society as both Russ and Wittig did, and asked questions about human reproduction, as Piercy did. But I answered them very differently. The kinds of reproductive technologies just coming into view at that time, techniques such as in vitro fertilization, donor insemination, and cryopreservation—are old hat now. The discussions around alternate family formations that they began for us are now much more widely experimented with and lived out. Notable too is cloning technology, which has become a reality since the 1970s. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Piercy asks important questions about race, but her answers to them read as very dated now, as feminists have realized much more broadly and deeply how constructions of race are more historical and social than biological. I still love Piercy's work, but

I don't embrace her desire to separate race from culture—I appreciate the utopian impulse, but as the voices of Black, Indigenous and Asian feminists have grown more audible to mainstream feminism, it's clear that such a separation would erase too much of who we are. Octavia Butler still reads as contemporary for me because she understood that. She was also really cutting edge on questions of species in ways that I feel I'm still catching up to. So the question of which feminist past we are talking about remains in play.

I am still very much drawn to Monique Wittig's experiments in language. And in many ways, the 1960s and 1970s were a more progressive time than the one we are currently inhabiting, as Michael Hardt has recently written. Still, between all of them and myself, the intensive rise in the presence of zoonotic diseases and their effects on human self-conception, reproduction and relationships has been really profound. That was a condition that was still ahead of those writers, but which I am obliged to take on. A different imagining of the future will necessarily come out of that.

**RC:** You are right, many people were touched by reading these projects, these new ideas . . . so I think it is very interesting to update us. We all enjoyed reading Octavia Butler; I particularly remember her work making an impact on my way of thinking. It was interesting to see how we coincide over some of these concerns.

Let's move on to the next question. Both of you have touched or reflected on the contribution of Indigenous writing to our understanding of current dilemmas. What would you say is the relation (if any) between Western epistemologies and Indigenous writing? Do you think Indigenous writing can help build bridges between different communities and promote cross-cultural understanding? And could Indigenous views perhaps help us out of the problems Western neo-liberal "progress" has created globally? There are too many questions, but you can just answer any or whatever you feel more comfortable with.

**LL:** Thanks so much, Dr. Carrasco. I think it is a really important question but also a very difficult question to answer. The way I approach indigeneity has always been relational, which means that I necessarily think and live through this question through a politics of the body in the first place. I have to recognize my own Asianness. I am not an Indigenous person. And therefore, when I approach Indigenous knowledges or Indigenous people, I need to be very clear that I can't assume to know what it is

to inhabit that position, and therefore what it would be to take on that knowledge. Judith Butler taught us that bodies matter, both in the sense that they are important and that they come into being through iterative practice. Indigenous people will often talk about the importance of land to their history and experience. As a non-Indigenous person inhabiting both Canada and Turtle Island in the aftermath of the [Canadian] Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) I need to do my best to understand and respect this. There was a small community with us who were trying to do this work in the 1980s and '90s, trying to figure out good ways to be with one another across vast power imbalances and differences in embodied experience. One imperative is not to appropriate the knowledges and embodiments of people who have suffered genocide as the founding condition of the state in which Canadian citizens like me make their homes. I owe a vast debt, the repayment of which is almost insurmountable. That means when I approach Indigeneity, I am thinking deeply about what my responsibilities are. It is important to think with Indigenous people and think with Indigenous ways of knowing but it has to be in a dialogic kind of way; so then in terms of responding to the question of what those knowledges might or might not do, it is up to Indigenous people to respond, if they want to. We need to recognize, however, that it is not their responsibility to solve for us the problems that have been created from Western colonial locations. I am thinking about contemporary and historical Asian imperialism as well, which has not necessarily been friendly to Indigenous land, bodies, or ways of being on the land, and so all those things are on my mind when that question arises.

In response particularly to the question around building bridges and cross-cultural understanding, again I don't think we can ask that of them, but occasionally things are offered. I am thinking particularly of Marie Clements's amazing play *Burning Vision* (originally staged in 2002) which is about the trail of uranium from the Sahtu Dene territory in the Northwest Territories, to the Manhattan project in New York, to the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. The play is related to an extraordinary journey that a group of Sahtu Dene elders went on. They traveled to Japan to apologize: an amazing gesture because Japan has also been an empire—an amazing gesture of generosity and of relation building. It was exemplary; in a sense the kind of pedagogy that teaches the rest of us how to be responsible for things that have come

from us, even if we didn't personally enact them in an intentional way. The elders went because something from their land caused harm somewhere else. They went because this is what you have to do to really start building right relations. When Marie Clements offered us that play, it was an extraordinary gift and also a call to a new depth of responsibility.

So, in answer to your question, I think Indigenous people—sometimes, when the moment is right—give us gifts to help us be in relationships differently. Other times, of course, they are busy with the work of surviving the ongoing structural violence that's been inflicted on them. Other times, too, they are just busy living, as other humans do. But when the work is relation-building, it's not so much about building bridges as changing the structures of relationship.

**RC:** Very interesting. (To Vint) What do you want to add?

**SV:** It is very hard to follow this brilliant response. I am very fortunate because at the University of California Riverside we have three Indigenous scholars in my department, and we have a very strong program in Indigenous studies at my university, so these are very active conversations for us. And I am well positioned to learn from these leaders in the field. I have also observed that the wider conversation in the US is *not* the conversation taking place on my campus; but when I go back to Canada periodically to visit my family, it seems to me that in the ten years since I have been outside of Canada, these conversations are more and more at the center of Canadian politics and of the Canadian context generally. As I said when we opened, the land acknowledgement practice has become a kind of pro forma, a kind of cynical exercise that suggests that if you do the acknowledgement, you do not have to engage in material processes. And I think sometimes that happens. But I also think that the practice itself reminds us that there are other ways of being on the land, other ways of inhabiting the space, other ways of theorizing what it means to be human through inter-relationality with nonhuman species. These are not “historical” examples, right? These are living traditions.

So this is just how utopianism of the everyday operates, with the small gestures by which we change some of how people think and behave; that can make *us* change and move towards something more open; and that can lead us to have that dialogue that we need to have. But at the same time, the real risk is that we romanticize Indigenous knowledge, or that we appropriate it, right? These idealizations we see, which

imagine Indigeneity as this beautiful unspoiled way of life, etc., we then *desire*, because we are exhausted by this destructive capitalist world that we built; we just want to flee into that world of imagined Indigeneity and appropriate this kind of romanticized space. So we have to find a way to resist that, but treat seriously these gestures of solidarity that land acknowledgements could represent. What I know of Indigenous cultures through my interactions with my colleagues has very much to do with *listening* rather than always wanting to speak. Being in these spaces, seeing what people have to teach you, not presuming that you know in advance, being open to realizing that the categories by which you explain the world to yourself are not the only categories by which the world might be explained: these are the ways to let Indigenous views guide us. And then also for me this involves reading a lot of Indigenous writers, some of them are working in distinctly speculative kinds of fictional spaces. I think that also we have in North America generally and in the US particularly a tendency to imagine Indigenous peoples either through a nineteenth-century-settler lens, or to imagine them as “disappeared.” In fact there is really a lot of Indigenous SF, much of it within the framework of technological speculative fiction.

This is also where the genre question [that we opened with] comes back for me, and my very good friend, the scholar Grace Dillon, brings Indigenous perspectives on science fiction and speculation and world building into conversation within a wider cultural context. She has introduced a series of Anishinaabe<sup>3</sup> words into that conversation: they allow us to say things that other languages do not allow us to say, so the words help us to see other ways of living as well. Then when you participate in these conversations, you start to think again via small shifts that are dialogic; you see what is being offered, instead of grasping and appropriating; and you realize as well that Indigenous peoples are not monolithic. There are different cultural traditions, and there is no universal agreement. But I find this openness to dialogue across those differences, and also with other people that are willing to be part of the dialogue, to be what is promising. I do think that because of Indigenous humanity, because Indigeneity used to be a word outside the category of “the human” by certain logics of liberal colonialism, that Indigenous versions of being people in the world offer alternatives to the many damaging ways of being humans. Despite their exclusion from “the human,” their cultural traditions survived that dehumanization: this

shows us the contingency of the human, helping us realize that ideas about the “essential” ways Western modernity understands human are not inevitable. I find a lot of hope in that, not that we romantically can go back to what pre-colonial civilizations looked like, but we can reactivate and perpetuate into the future ways of being that were deliberately erased or suppressed by colonialism—and by “we” I mean multiple kinds of peoples in a dialogue not in a monolithic sense.

- RC:** I really agree with that, particularly with the idea of listening before speaking, and how we need to recognize other ways of being on the land. Some food for thought. For both of you, the animal question seems to be of import, because you have highlighted the necessary bond human-animal for the understanding and wellbeing of our planet. Not only with *The Tiger Flu*, which is a metaphor for our complicated times, but already with the earlier novel, *When Fox is a Thousand* (1995), Dr. Lai provides readers with an unusual and rich point of view from which to understand gender relations and life in general. For her part, Dr. Vint has extensively theorized the relationship between animals and human categories, and the way this bond affects our understanding of gender. For instance, in *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (2013), Dr. Vint argues that “the binary male–female is as central to our intellectual and cultural history as is that of human–animal.” How do you see the future of this human-animal relation? What steps need to be taken? What aspects of these connections should be thought or re-thought?
- SV:** So, I think it is my turn to answer first now. This is a very huge, complicated question and my thinking on it has changed over time. Certainly, I think one of the early ways that I came to the posthumanist conversation was out of dislike of the kind of hierarchies, or binaries as we used to always want to call them, of Western culture and in recognition that the really grounding one, in many ways, is the human–animal boundary. But in saying that, the human-animal boundary always functions as a way to sort or segregate some homo-sapiens from other homo sapiens, right? and so, particularly, it’s a racialized boundary and then often it’s a gendered boundary as well. But I do have concern for non-homo-sapien species as well, not in a kind of flattening way of undifferentiated vitality, but in the sense that much of what I find wrong with the metaphysics of modernity—the way we think about subjectivity and personhood and modernity—is that it is based on these hierarchies, leading to relations of domination. Not the least of these is extractivist

capitalism, which connects then to the hetero-patriarchal family . . . all of these things are entangled with one another for me.

So, I never want to lose sight of actual animals, and how we interact with them, and to think of them as kin, but I don't mean this in any sort of pan-vitalist flattening way either. I do think and have written about it, I think animals have a lot more affect and sentience than we give them credit for, but that doesn't mean I think that they have human versions of these qualities. That they do that in ways that are the same as the way that humans do it. But I'm not that interested in hierarchizing the way humans express sentience or language or affect either, so I don't want to collapse everything into some kind of vitalism. But I do want to have respect for beings beyond the human, simultaneously with an understanding of how that human-animal boundary works biopolitically within the human species to create notions of differentiation we have tended to call race.

And I think that very much connects with what we were talking about in terms of Indigenous studies too because Indigenous cultures have a different metaphysics, and by which animals are kin, but it's important to recognize this is a notion of kinship that doesn't match to Western liberal concepts. I find people tend to challenge these ideas with me in flattering ways, suggesting "well if you like animals so much, if they have agency just like us, then how are they going to vote" or something like that. So, it's not this model, it's not incorporating them into liberal subjectivity, but it's seeing precisely the failures of liberal subjectivity if we can only imagine ethical belonging through the structures of liberal subjectivity.

As for what we can do or what we should do, answering that question is really beyond me, but I can name a few things I'm concerned about. Even as we tend to be more environmental in our thinking I often notice, because I've been vegetarian for a long time and vegan for a while, that when you describe these diets "vegetarian" or "vegan" lots of people are very resistant to the idea. But if you call them "plant-based," people see them as about human health, and then it's a great thing and people will embrace them. So I think, even as we've become more concerned about animal welfare and about environmentalism, and more aware of species and ecosystems as necessary to our ability to live at all, we still have an instrumentalist view: "oh we have to care about these things now because as it turns out you need soil and if you

don't have microbes you don't have soil;" and then "if you don't have bees you don't have pollination". . . so suddenly we care about bees. We are still smuggling too much liberal hierarchizing into that way of thinking. So that concerns me.

The de-extinction projects [also] concern me: they are again too focused on fetishized organisms, as if they could ever exist apart from an entire ecosystem in which they live and thrive. And so, for example, reintroducing endangered species to environments that are protected for them, that's one thing, but using DNA so that we can bring back the woolly mammoth so that we can put them in captivity and say "wow, that's a woolly mammoth!": I think that's a really unethical project. And so, a lot of the ways that animals are more on people's minds these days I don't think necessarily serves animals. There are also rewilding projects born from people's awareness that we have severely damaged multiple species by making them passive, smaller, and easier to engage and slaughter. These rewilding projects try through genetic engineering to, well, re-write these animals to be closer to their wild ancestors. But again, in the absence of an environment for these animals to live in, what is the point of those projects? So it's not that I don't want there to be other species thriving in the world, I desperately do, and it's a source of a lot of grief to me how many species are disappearing but bringing them back as exotic specimens is just another kind of damage, another kind of violence that we would do to animals.

**LL:** Thank you so much for that. Our entanglements are so complicated, and there are so many entangled ethical questions. I want to make the recognition that humans are animals too. It's implicit in what Dr. Vint is saying. Humans, especially in the West, have imagined themselves as separate and exceptional for the longest time, and it's precisely this that has given rise to the fraught relations Dr. Vint explains. But not all cultures believe that God created the animals for the enjoyment of humankind, not all cultures inherit the story of expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Not all cultures inherit Descartes either.

What I have been doing since my earliest writing days in relation to animal figures has been to try to recuperate for myself a sense of a chthonic relationship to animal beings that is rooted in a geographical area that we currently call China because my roots are there. I'm implicated of course in all of the conditions that Dr. Vint has so beautifully described. I don't want to run away from the responsibilities that attach

to those conditions. So many of them are structural though, that I feel they need to be addressed structurally. For me, refusal doesn't work as a mode of address. How can it when I am so deeply embedded in all the systems of food production, circulation and consumption that shape life in the West, including the mass production of meat, produce and grain. I eat that food; it is part of my body. And I do eat meat, there's no point pretending I don't. Though I also think that there are more and less ethical ways of obtaining and eating meat.

I look to my own cultural history for other kinds of relations to the animal. *When Fox Is a Thousand*, my first novel, published in 1995, is about a young woman whose body is overtaken by a fox spirit, as a kind of haunting. The overtaking is a metaphor for being thrust into memory in an embodied kind of way. It partakes of earth-based spirituality and ways of knowing that have been in the culture for millennia and exist with us in the present as folk tale, fairy tale, myth, gossip, pornography, horror film and speculative fiction. In that novel I took it up imaginatively as a way of remembering and recuperating my own cultural past in the wake of a childhood of intense assimilation. It's a very different kind of relationship to the animal world than a biblical or Cartesian one. The animal world permeates the human world; it is possible to pass from one world to the other. In traditional fox stories, foxes can help humans through good deeds, but they can also harm them through ill deeds or spiritual contamination. There is a complex relationship between the animal world and the human world, but it is not one of subject/object relations. It's something else entirely.

*Salt Fish Girl* addresses snake and fish figures. In the Chinese myth of origin the world is created by a snake goddess. There is a famous Chinese story about a white snake who falls in love with a mortal man and becomes his wife. Her true identity is discovered by a Buddhist monk, and the story is about how her husband, even knowing what she is, tries to save her. The ethical question at stake is what the right relationship ought to be between the animal world and the human world. The story is too old to ask questions about the vote for animals, but it does ask about human/animal love and marriage! My novel plays with these two stories but also addresses speculative fictional issues of human/animal hybridization through gene splicing.

*The Tiger Flu* addresses issues of human/animal continuity through the figure of zoonotic diseases. Written after the avian bird flu of the

early 2000s, but before COVID, the titular Tiger Flu is a disease that erupts from the de-extinction of the Caspian tiger and the mass circulation of tiger material in the form of tiger bone wine. The novel is a broader contemplation of human interference in both our own biology and that of other beings through DNA manipulation. In all three novels, I bring Chinese animal stories into contemporary Asian Canada, and ask how they might unsettle knowledges that have come into being through (Western) binaries of human/animal and Occidental/Oriental.

I really like what you're asking about future relations between the human and the animal. The future can only come out of the past, but we have many pasts to access. And the present is always creative. So for me, it's about both looking to the past to see what can be brought forward in ways I'd like, but also to see what is being brought forward by cultural, political, financial, scientific or technological forces whether I personally like it or not. I use story as a way of researching the interactions among forces, both those that could be brought into the present, and those that are being brought in the present. I'm not sure what steps need to be taken broadly, but for myself, I try to recuperate from my own background stories and ways of knowing that I find useful or compelling, in the hopes that they might offer something to shift existing practices as ways of thinking.

**RC:** Thank you very much for all these reflections on this idea of the human-animal boundary, which leads us to my very last question, which you have partially answered; it has to do with the posthuman subjectivity. The idea of having a posthuman subjectivity is a pivotal aspect in both of your careers. Dr. Vint has written on Bruna Husky, the posthuman character of acclaimed Spanish author Rosa Montero, and appears to be very keen on the idea of the posthuman as articulated by critical thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti or Francesca Ferrando. Dr. Lai has also offered the posthuman point of view in some of her writings, as in *Automaton Biographies*. We were just debating precisely these recent approaches to the posthuman last week at a conference in Zaragoza. Which are the posthuman possibilities for our future? I know it is a complicated question at this time of the evening . . .

**LL:** *Automaton Biographies* was a poetry book I published in 2009. It was a series of handmade chapbooks first, self-published through the early 2000s in very small editions of fifty each online. CHAPbooks subsequently published an extra fifty copies of *Rachel*. At that time, I was feeling a lot of

pressure to write autobiography in the conventional sense of explaining where I was born, how my family came to live in Canada and what their lives were like before. It was a pressure I resisted fiercely because I was not interested in producing an anthropology of the (racialized) self to satisfy the prurient curiosity of a white Canadian public. While I wanted to resist that pressure, I was also interested in questions of the self and the problem of identification. I was and am still interested in knowing myself, as I am interested in knowing those around me. After all, you can't be in relation with others unless you have an understanding of who you are yourself, even if that understanding is constantly moving and shifting. At the same time, I was caught up in a set of conversations unfolding in the Vancouver poetry community about the place of the speaking subject in poetry. There was a huge battle raging between poets who embraced the so-called experimental and poets who embraced the so-called lyric. Caught in the crossfire were many Black, Indigenous and Asian poets, as well as women and queer poets, who had historically not had much access to publishing and public voice; we had not really had a chance to consider our own subjective being as such.

The question of "identity," then as now, was a burning question in many communities of color. It was also a question that was being asked of us by a well-meaning but clueless Canadian publishing industry. So these were the debates I was entangled in at the moment of writing. But with regards to the question of identification, one of the first screen figures I remember identifying with as a child, after Princess Leia in *Stars Wars* of course, was the character Rachel in Ridley Scott's now famous sleeper, *Blade Runner* (1982; originally published as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* [1968]). In terms of theory, in the early 2000s, I was reading Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and a bit later into the decade, *When Species Meet* (2007). I find Haraway a bit more capacious than Braidotti in terms of making room for non-European ways of knowing, though of course both thinkers are brilliant. I don't jettison people because their thinking is limited; everyone has to frame their work somehow or we'd never get to talk about anything.

So the first chapbook, which is now the first section of the book *Automaton Biographies*, reimagines Rachel as an Asian woman, taking up the aesthetics that Ridley Scott's film pours into the *mise-en-scène*, but also remembering Philip K. Dick's figuring of Rachel as Jewish in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)? I wrote my own Rachel, superimposing bits

of her story from both the film and the novel over my own childhood identifications and self-imaginings, with an eye toward the possibilities of experimental poetic language, and without jettisoning the possibilities of writing the self and the work of identification as they were being taken up by racialized writers through the 1990s and into the 2000s.

The next section, “nascent fashion,” tracked the Second American War in Iraq most immediately, but also related wars including the American War in Vietnam for its dehumanization of non-white people, and the impossible inhabitation of both “Western” and “Eastern” subjectivities for people like me, both culpable in the violence and subject to it at the same time. The third section “ham” addresses the story of the chimpanzee sent up in NASA’s Mercury Redstone mission for his biological similarity to human beings and the fact that he was not one. Both NASA and the press racialized him, at different times, as Black or as Asian. I was trying to language my way into a sense of what kind of subjective being Ham might have inhabited. Ham is also Hamlet, caught up in forces beyond his control on whether to be or not to be human.

The last section, “auto matter,” was my capitulation to the mainstream demand for autobiography, tracking memories of my Newfoundland childhood in the “proper” kind of way that Asian writers are supposed to write about Asia. Roy Miki had just published his book *Surrender* (2001), a complex meditation trying to inhabit the racial category handed to you but in so doing letting go of the self, in part because the inhabitation is impossible and in part as a matter of surrender in the Buddhist sense, of letting go of the self as the route to enlightenment. The two enlightenments—Buddhist and European—are at play in complex ways that are sometimes kind of funny and sometimes quite horrible. That book was much on my mind in this section. Of the three sections, “auto matter” is the least taken up by critics. No one knows what to do with an Asian person whose childhood was outside Asia, and even outside California, Vancouver or Toronto. The sections are numbered in Romanized Cantonese, the way I spelled the numbers as a child, trying without much luck to hang on to something of my Hong Kong roots.

The nonhuman and the inhuman are as much at work in *Automaton Biographies* as the posthuman. The human itself is a term I very much struggle with because of who it has historically excluded. There’s no getting away from those exclusions or their reverberations, though. I have to address them in my work. So if there’s something I borrow

from Braidotti, it's the notion of the raced and gendered body as "the seed which corporate capitalism wants to patent and eventually clone, according to the paradox of a new global compound of nature/culture that is naturalized and commercialized simultaneously."<sup>4</sup> Her idea that capitalist expansion creates new territories within the biology of the body makes absolute sense to me. Those parts of our being, and those beings among us that can't be covered by the paradoxes of representation that adhere to the discourse of rights, and fall outside of it, are precisely those sites where we are being both exploited and remade anew. They are also the sites where I seem to feel the imperative to find a speaking self—my own inability to let go of this profoundly enlightenment figure seems to lie there. So these are ideas that feed *Automaton Biographies*, as well as *Salt Fish Girl* and *The Tiger Flu*.

**SV:** All my books in some way use this terminology of the posthuman, but when I was working on my PhD, which then became my first book, this was prior to N. Katherine Hayles publishing *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), and so the term wasn't really in use a lot when I first started asking these questions. I found it a useful term, but I also think its meaning has changed radically over the time I have been working in the field. I published an anthology recently, for example, and it collects a bunch of different scholars reflecting on this question of our "posthuman condition" from a range of critical perspectives, and that volume is called *After the Human* (2020) because, for me, the post is really post to the ideology or philosophy of humanism, and by humanism I really mean Western liberal humanism. So I still find the term useful, but I'm aware of scholars who critique the term, whether to highlight ways that some people were never included in "the human" in the first place, or to reject the entire notion of "the human" as conceived in Western thought as universal.

I have learned from my colleagues who work in Indigenous thought, who often do not want to use the terms human or posthuman, either of them, because there's a kind of binary, really foundational to Western thought, between the organic and the inorganic, which is not relevant in some Indigenous thought; in their metaphysics, an animal could be an ancestor, but so could the stone. The human is just not a category that's operational in the same way as it is a Western space, where we think of "the human" . . . it's always with that definite article, right? I've worked recently with a lot of Sylvia Wynter's thought, and she talks about different genres of the human and ways of being human that are not the

Western way, which exported itself through colonial mechanisms and forced everyone else to live as non-human within it, or to assimilate to it. And so, although I don't share it, I know some people have an investment in the politics of recognition that humanism implies, because so many have been dehumanized, excluded from the paradigm of being a full ethical subject that goes under the name of human.

I tend to still use the term *posthuman* because, for me, and this is undoubtedly also about my own situatedness; I try always to think in ways that move outside of modernity, outside of liberalism, but the way I learned to think at all is through modernity and liberalism, right? And so I'm necessarily shaped by these histories, including "the human" as a central category in metaphysics. The reason I don't want to expand the category of *the human*, as those working in the tradition of "recognition" would argue for, is that it continues to trap us in too much of this baggage. I'd rather use *posthuman* or sometimes I even just say *homo sapiens*, as you may have noticed, because for me, the human is inevitably tainted by liberalism, and liberalism is about possessive individualism, and liberalism gives us ways of thinking about subjectivity such that some are subjects and some are "things." Property becomes so foundational, so I find that things such as human rights frameworks are incredibly fraught and not very useful in the geopolitical set of crises in which we find ourselves. Which is not to say that I don't share those ideas—the recognition of all peoples—but the rights framework is already in a kind of civic structure that is inherently problematic, and so I just don't see a way to recuperate those kinds of concepts using liberal language and categories.

So I've continued to use the word *posthumanism*, but for each book where I used that word (and this is the sort of thing you can only see retrospectively), the aspect of liberalism I was trying to find my way outside of changed. In the first book, it was really about a kind of gendered binary, then in the book on animals it was about that animal boundary; the most recent book deals with commodification of life and so it is much more essentially about racialization, as well as being engaged with contemporary biotechnologies. I realized all of this is about modernity itself. Modernity is inevitably tainted for me by relations of property and appropriation and extractivism, none of which will enable a future. So being a being who is different from what we have called "the human" is a priority for me. But the term *posthuman* itself has a range of meanings beyond the ones that matter to me: Braidotti works

in a sort of Deleuzian framework, and Ferrando speaks of posthumanism as a kind of religion, almost an aspirational posthumanism. Those are not really the influences for me, however. Donna Haraway is a huge influence for me, and I mentioned Wynter with whom I'm working already; environmental thinkers such as Stacy Alaimo as well. I write very little about the technologically augmented human, which I would prefer to call the *transhuman*, and I write much more about the kind of abjected remainder of "the" human, who is captured by these liberal state apparatuses and deformed and instrumentalized by them.

**RC:** I agree, we need to find new ways of naming, other ways of being human in this context. Thank you very much to both of you for your excellent answers and the thought-provoking ideas.

ROCÍO CARRASCO-CARRASCO is Associate Professor at the University of Huelva, Spain. She lectures on North American literature and feminist studies in the English Department. Her fields of research include gender in science fiction and cultural studies and she has published her work in *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *Journal of Film and Video*, *International Journal of Robotics Applications and Technologies*, *Journal of Futures Studies and CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, among others. She has been a visiting scholar Cambridge University (UK), Brown University (USA), Harvard University (USA), University of California Riverside (USA) or Calgary University (Canada). An active member of the Research Center COIDESO at the University of Huelva, she also currently is holder of a research grant funded by the Spanish Ministry of Universities, in collaboration with the English department of Calgary University (Canada) in a project dealing with the idea of transforming the body in contemporary narratives.

IRENE LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ is Assistant Professor at the Department of English at the University Complutense of Madrid, where she also teaches comparative Canadian and Spanish literature. Her research focuses on metaphor, with a particular interest in their use in discourses of gender and gender-based violence. She was the recipient of the post-doctoral research fellowships Margarita Salas (University of Huelva) and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (University of Huelva-University of Ottawa), and is a member of the COIDESO research group. She holds a PhD in Modern Languages and Cultures from the University of Extremadura and a PhD in Hispanic Studies from the University of Ottawa. She has been

a visiting professor and researcher at the University Autónoma of Mexico, Bishop's University, and University of Edinburgh.

LARISSA LAI is Professor and Richard Charles Lee Chair in Chinese Canadian Studies at the University of Toronto. Until recently, as Canada Research Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Calgary, Lai directed The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing, a project that featured symposia, talks, readings, and podcasts on such topics as Asian/Indigenous relation and gender and power in Canadian creative writing communities. A critic, a novelist, and a poet, Lai is author of nine books, the most recent being the historical novel *The Lost Century* (2022), which won several literary awards. Lai is well known for her interest in utopias and in figures of the posthuman, particularly in relation to questions of race, gender, and sexuality.

SHERRYL VINT is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies and Chair of the Department of English at the University of California, Riverside, where she directs the Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science program. She was a founding editor of *Science Fiction Film and Television* and is an editor for the journal *Science Fiction Studies* and the book series *Science in Popular Culture*. She has published widely on science fiction, including, most recently, *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First Century Speculative Fiction* (2021) and *Programming the Future: Speculative Television and the End of Democracy* (2022, co-authored with Jonathan Alexander).

## Notes

Dr. Irene López-Rodríguez participated in the transcription edition of the interview and also organized the international conference, together with Dr. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez and Dr. Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco.

1. John Rajchman, "The Contemporary: A New Idea?" In *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, edited by Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski, 125–44. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011.
2. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).
3. The Anishinaabe comprise "a group of culturally and linguistically related First Nations that live in both Canada and the United States, concentrated around the Great Lakes" (Karl Hele, "Anishinaabe." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published July 16, 2020; Last Edited October 19, 2022).
4. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (London: Polity, 2006), 54.