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Post-apocalyptic Specters and Critical Planetarity in Merlinda Bobis' *Locust Girl*

Emily Yu Zong

Abstract: Climate change and global ecological crisis demand the reimagining of humanity on a planetary scale, yet planetary ideals risk downplaying human difference and inequality. This article examines Filipina Australian writer Merlinda Bobis' novel *Locust Girl* (2015) in terms of the development of a critical planetarity that prioritizes an ethics of alterity. The novel links the post-apocalypse with spectrality and alternative futures to suggest that, for one, the planet is already a fragmented concept haunted by uneven geographies of empire and capital, and, for another, the imagination of alternative political life needs to recuperate unrealized historical possibilities of the local. Specifically, the novel draws on the trope of nonhuman metamorphosis to depict its female protagonist, whose nomadic subjectivity unsettles anthropocentric worldviews. Bobis' novel makes a case for placing the ethnic minority writer's response to the Anthropocene at the center of a situated practice of planetarity.

Keywords: planetarity, climate change, post-apocalypse, postcolonial, Merlinda Bobis

The Filipina Australian writer Merlinda Bobis' award-winning novel *Locust Girl* (2015) imagines a post-apocalyptic planet subject to scarcities of water and care. The world is polarized between a stateless refugee group named the Strays, who dwell in a desert ravaged by climate change, and the last remaining green haven, the Five Kingdoms, which is home to pious citizens and tyrannical caretakers. After the Kingdoms bomb her village, nine-year-old Amedea sleeps underground for ten

years then wakes up with a magical locust embedded in her brow. Against the Kingdoms' border control and terrorist attacks, and the extreme fear and hunger that dominate the Strays, Amedea ventures on a journey to the Kingdoms, with her locust acting as a sensory compass that predicts, copies, and creates songs to direct her border crossing. Amedea's locust reorients her embodied subjectivity to become in and of the environment: "A stray gust of wind, a rolling pebble, dust from a rock, and my brow itched in response, sometimes into full melody copying what it heard" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 36). In her nomadic openness to alterity and entanglement with the nonhuman, the locust girl suggests the horizon of a planetary future. As the blurb on the novel's back cover explains, "[t]his political fable is a girl's magical journey through the border. The border has cut the human heart. Can she repair it with the story of a small life?" How are we to understand the political possibilities of Bobis' novel, and the literary devices that she deploys, in planetary terms?

Dolores Herrero places *Locust Girl* within the established tradition of post-apocalyptic Australian fiction, whose history can be traced to precolonial imaginings of Australia as an antipodean incognito on maps and post-WWII speculative fiction that hails Australia as a victim of increasingly industrial and ecological catastrophes, which, as the *Mad Max* film trilogy depicts, would eventually lead to total destruction (949–50). Such an approach secures a place for Bobis and *Locust Girl* in the national literary canon. Yet even Herrero's analysis suggests that the scope of Bobis' novel is difficult to contain within a national frame. Although Bobis resides in Australia, her writing targets an audience not limited to the Philippines and Australia. Her previous works, such as *White Turtle* (1999) and *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012), are preoccupied with postcolonial and transnational concerns. Despite the fact that *Locust Girl* is written partly in response to George Bush's global "War on Terror" after 9/11 (Bobis, "Emily Yu Zong") and alludes to the Australian government's policy on refugees and asylum-seekers, the deliberate absence of specific nations, races, or ethnicities signals that ecological damage and border politics in the novel take place on a planetary rather than national scale. The novel's focus on the subaltern confronts unequal human political

and economic power in the context of climate change even as ecological disasters bind humanity globally.

As I read it, *Locust Girl* expresses one ethnic Asian writer's response to planetary crisis in an age in which ecological damage amplifies colonialist and nationalist inequality through the capitalist control of resources and state control of borders. The book is valuable in several related ways. For one, the book invites attention to the tradition of postcolonial and diasporic writers who engage with speculative genres and expressions, such as science fiction and fantasy, that typically privilege a mainstream/white canon. It provides an opportunity to question the mainstream conceptions of speculative fiction that adhere to anthropocentric values and emphasize modern Western narratives of progress, conquest, and rational thought at the cost of alternative modernities and postcolonial histories.[1] For another, an ethnic speculative text such as *Locust Girl* unsettles the Australian literary industry that reads ethnic Asian literature in multicultural and exotic terms. The novel challenges hierarchies within the national literary institution that often exclude ethnic texts from mainstream Australian fantasy or climate change fiction. While classifying Bobis' novel as speculative fiction gives it legitimacy in a national context, the novel can also be read in a postcolonial planetary tradition, outside of the nation. The categorical slipperiness of *Locust Girl* and the novel's prominent themes—climate change, refugee crisis, terrorism, and economic and cultural imperialism—emphasize what David Palumbo-Liu describes as the autonomous strength of ethnic minority literatures, namely, their "latitude as a counter-discourse" to comment on the hegemonic and resist essentialist reading (17).

Locust Girl exemplifies the emerging contours of postcolonial responses to the Anthropocene, the current epoch in which human actions have altered the geology of planet Earth. In this light, the novel resonates with a corpus of recently published fictional texts by ethnic minority and Indigenous writers, including Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), and Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018). Employing speculative, magical-realist, or fantastic literary devices, these texts open a schism in dominant realist traditions by creatively engaging with colonial pasts in a dystopic

future of environmental ruins. Jacques Derrida's concept of the "specter" can help explain these novels' depictions of an apocalyptic future as the "'experience' of the past as to come" (xix). That is, the novels speculate about a spectral future in which colonialist, sexist, capitalist, and ecological violence from the past (or the present) comes back to haunt humanity. In doing so, the texts highlight an important conversation between postcolonial literature and environmental discourse because they portray the planet as the stage on which human inequality plays out. Ecological events such as mass pollution, natural resources depletion, and climate change in these texts provide a temporal mechanism, I argue, that exposes anthropocentric history and suggests possibilities of reorienting human agency through human-nature engagement. By portraying female protagonists whose subjectivities incorporate both human and nonhuman attributes, the novels also offer an ethical and feminist corrective to masculine and rationalist perspectives at the center of hegemonic power.

Bobis' book shows how planetary imaginations in literature recuperate differences and localities suppressed by linear timelines of human reason and the nation-state. The novel does so through alternative futurism: the future predicted out of ecological catastrophes and the future opened by the alternative political life from the margins. Through fantasy, fable, and the uncanny, the novel denounces a widening wealth gap and the enforcement of border laws against the dispossessed mass for the benefit of a few and acknowledges the specters of exclusionary nationalism in a context of climate change and natural resources exhaustion. As such, Bobis problematizes a so-called universal humanity based on endangered environmental futures. Her novel is planetary because it depicts earthly entities (wind, water, earth, fire, blood, and metal), which are under colonialist and capitalist control, as always already the very elements and material forces that constitute the human subject. As the novel links the marginalized woman's nonhuman metamorphosis to the recuperation of cultural memory and affectivity of the subaltern, a micropolitics of planetary becoming connects local time to social change. This metamorphosis allows for a productive recalibration of alternative histories of the future that are not premised on anthropocentric

worldviews. Through these two narratives of the planet, speculated in either a post-apocalypse of eco-devastation or a postcolonial future of planetary rebirth, *Locust Girl* reveals the future as already in and part of our social reality.

I. Imagining the Planetary Impossible

Planetarity has emerged in literary criticism as a concept that is familiar and timely. It is familiar because the planet has defined human literary imaginations, not least in the form of colonial frontiers in eighteenth-century European exploration writing or an extra-terrestrial backdrop in space opera. It is timely because solutions to the current crises of climate change and global capitalism demand a comparable global solidarity. In her call to reimagine the planet, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that the planet offers an ethical corrective to the anthropocentric and capitalist drive to control and commodify the Earth. Since it is difficult to think the planet, the planet points to what exceeds human calculation and is "in the species of alterity, belonging to another system" (Spivak 73). Spivak is careful not to set planetarity as an atavistic romanticization of the rural, or in a neat contrast with globalization. The planet posits a "countertext to the idea of city/nation," an instrument that places history in the forces of nature and away from the specificity of nations (94). Doing so involves an attempt to "depoliticize" in order to move away from "a politics of hostility, fear, and half solutions" (4). Borrowing from Derrida's notion of "teleopoiesis" ("tele" meaning "distant" and "poiesis" meaning "imaginative making"), Spivak renders planetarity the literary imagination of a future-to-come and "an experience of the impossible" (98).

Spivak's call sets an ethical agenda for a planetary remapping of world-systems in literary production. In their work on "the planetary turn," Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru distinguish planetarity, as an emerging worldview and structure of awareness, from the concepts of globalization and cosmopolitanism. Defined as a pluralizing "worldly structure" of "relatedness" that is keyed to "anti-hegemonic" operations subtended by "an eco-logic" (Elias and Moraru xxiii), planetarity challenges globalization's homogenizing tendency and compensates for

cosmopolitanism's lack of care for nonhuman life. Deliberately provocative rather than deterministic, Elias and Moraru, however, acknowledge that planetarity has yet to inspire a world culture and a model of relational localisms that would make up its postnational and geocultural formation (xii). Indeed, the utopian potential of planetarity prompts questions as to how it can be grounded against the violent topographies of empire and capital. In response to planetary propositions, such as Spivak's and Elias and Moraru's, Matthew A. Taylor is skeptical. Juxtaposing the recent planetary turn with the speculative fiction of H. G. Wells and Jack London around 1900, he claims that planetarity assumes solutions and alternatives to remake the world while cultivating the Earth for salvific ends (115). For him, planetarity may perpetuate the culture/nature boundary it intends to subvert because the very imperative of saving the world presumes, and thus perpetuates, human mastery over a non-agentive Earth (126).

To bring this discussion to speculative and fantastic literature, the problem is perhaps not with the imperative to reimagine the planet but with how such an imperative is strategized and interpreted. It is worth considering that the merit of speculating planetarity lies not in building one-off solutions and utopias to a problematic world but in training our ability to constantly imagine otherwise from within the world that we have, the world that exists. In his acclaimed comment that it appears easier to imagine the end of the world today than to imagine the breakdown of late capitalism, Frederic Jameson adds that this is perhaps "due to some weakness in our imaginations" (*Seeds* xii). Calling for "an empowered imagination" (199), Robert T. Tally reaffirms fantastic literature's ability to project "otherworldly" mappings of the planet beyond comfortable landscapes of national literatures. Against notions of fantasy as an escapist, politically resistant, and backward-looking art form, he argues that through techniques of estrangement, fantasy allows the real world to be viewed differently (203). Such estrangement is valuable because the national paradigm and late capitalism pervade human sociality to an extent that it is hard to imagine alternatives to the status quo. By meditating on the planetary impossible, fantastic and speculative literature helps us act in ways that make utopian projects more realizable and

practical, rather than building a viable otherworld to escape to. Echoing Tally's claim of re-evaluating fantastic literature but with a focus on the genre's relevance to the Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh pitches planetary awareness against the dominance of so-called serious fiction, namely, the realist novel. For him, the literary novel needs to cultivate an awareness of "the uncanny"—the familiar but forgotten—human intimacy with nature and nonhuman beings (68), and such awareness depends on an imaginative confounding of the Enlightenment version of reality framed by rationalism and human centricity.

The strategies of postcolonial and ethnic speculative fiction allow planetary alternatives to be localized in the uneven geographies of colonial and anthropocentric history. Postcolonial speculative fiction such as *Locust Girl* explores the promise of the planet less as a redemptive solution than as a productive analytic to explore unrealized historical possibilities. By relating Bobis' book to debates on planetarity, I argue that the novel and similar texts can be read along a model of *critical planetarity* that confronts the difficult task of charting a shared planetary identity while being inclusive of the world's divergent localities. The risk of planetarity becoming yet another unifying trope of abstract environmentalism can be effectively evaded by considering literature, for example from the Global South and Indigenous authors, whose activist planetary perspectives offer local understandings of the planet's trajectory as "always in earthly orbit" (Giles 145). The universalizing tendency of planetarity can and should be revised through a politics of differentiation that attends to local cultures and knowledge systems. Métis scholar Zoe Todd, for example, suggests that locally informed responses to global environmental crises cannot be constructed without first deconstructing the universalist and Eurocentric framing of the Anthropocene that often sidesteps questions of race, colonialism, and slavery and blunts the distinctions between "people, nations, and collectives" whose experiences of human-environmental relations have developed differently (244). Unpacking how anthropocentrism is entwined with colonial and sexist hegemony, fictional texts like *Locust Girl* showcase ethnic literature's advantage in challenging universalism through literary forms that are at once local and global. A planetary perspective

as such allows fantasy to be read as the unsettling of a unifying rational reality and ideological domination in the Anthropocene.

II. The Post-Apocalypse and the Spectral Planet

Locust Girl, as Herrero argues, is a desperate call for "an ethics of alterity" and "a politics of care" against the deadly role of borders in our globalized world (953). A planetary fable that interrogates geopolitics to convey concerns about the shared survival of the human species, *Locust Girl* takes place in a mythic future that does not refer to specific nations or cultures. Bobis explains that she wrote the novel to be about all of us, to be "owned by anybody" ("Emily Yu Zong"). The names of the novel's characters exemplify this concern for plurality, since they begin with every letter in the alphabet: from Amedea, Beenabe, Cho-choli, Daninen, Espra, Fa-us, Gurimar, and Hara- haran to Wilidimus, Xuqik, Ycasa, and Zacarem. Bobis also designs these characters to accommodate a multitude of human archetypes, including heroes, villains, perpetrators, victims, and the in-betweens. The borders that the novel explores refer to both physical borders and imaginary ones, such as fear, hatred, and a lack of love within the human heart. Of particular interest for my argument, Bobis depicts how ecological catastrophes shape unequal power relations in ways that entrench established borders, thereby calling into question the notion of a unifying planetarity. Through the motif of the specter, the novel invokes material forces of the subaltern and environmental other that are in excess of hegemonic temporality.

With the allegorical landscape of the novel divided between the powerful and the powerless, *Locust Girl* is comparable to George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Similar to Orwell's invention of "thoughtcrime," which depicts governmental persecution of independent thinking, Bobis creates "singingcrime" to expose the imposed silence on minority groups by authoritarian political regimes. The protagonist Amedea lives with her father Abarama and other Strays in numbered tents in the desert. In this desert, extreme hunger and sand storms are widespread; water, seeds, oil, and even colours are meagerly rationed by the Five Kingdoms. When rations fail to arrive, locusts become the only source of food. Each household is allocated a broadcasting box, whose only tune, "The

Songs" sung by the Minister of Mouths, aims to regiment people to their own patches of sky: "*No one should look. No one should walk beyond the horizon*" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 11; emphasis in original). If the Strays do not follow these rules, a punishment fire from the Kingdoms bombs and burns those daring to cross the border or those who speak out against the Kingdoms' political message.

In contrast, in the Five Kingdoms—the Kingdoms of Waters, Seeds, Oils, Colours, and Fires—there are "green trees everywhere" and "fields of grain and fruit and flowers" (119). In this lush landscape, the Ministers colonize the planet's remaining resources. At the Kingdoms' yearly festival, the Honourable Head preaches to the applause of his fellow citizens the "ideal for preservation": "piety comes with the strict observance of caring values that preserve the human race and its home: the Five Kingdoms" (121). Such obfuscating claims of equality and justice, however, are predicated on an unequal distribution of subject recognition, which dictates the Kingdoms' citizens as humans and "carers of the natural world" versus the Strays as less-than-human "wasters" who have "dried up nature with their profligate ways long ago" and "have no place in this new order" (121).

The ecological dystopia that Bobis envisages is thus intricately enmeshed in the material politics of racial and colonial violence. The Five Kingdoms' political model displays a colonial ideology that orders planetary life according to rational ends and human control over nature. Their fabrication of hegemonic historiography as universal reality is filtered through the collective singing by the Kingdoms' citizens:

> '*Lest we forget—*
> *There is only one story*
> *There is only one song*
> *That we take home*' (120; emphasis in original)

Such totalizing narratives justify exclusion by selectively endorsing what will count as normative reality and impose it across the globe. After she arrives at the Kingdoms, Amedea detects the fearmongering among citizens. The Kingdoms' ideological hypocrisy is betrayed by the sneaking tiredness, fear, and anger of its citizens who are forced to watch video

playbacks of war to be reminded that only the Kingdoms' citizens' lives are valuable and worthy of grief, because the ministers are "fearful that they'll forget and . . . stop guarding the border" (158). At the same time, the Kingdoms' leaders feed Strays with "forgetting seeds" so they will forget their stories—and their desire and need to cross the border (157). Under this selective remembering, the Five Kingdoms reductively concoct historical meaning to serve their slanted interests.

Environmental events in the novel, such as climate change, deforestation, and water shortage, disrupt colonial and anthropocentric history. These ecological disasters present political, economic, and ecological consequences that resist the "progress" of human self-making addressed by Derrida's deconstructive materialism. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida resists Francis Fukuyama's claim that we have reached the "end of history" in which market economy and liberal democracy reign supreme. Instead, Derrida recenters the alterity to which history fails to do justice. The promise of change and the future, or "the messianic," lies in "the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*" (Derrida 33; emphasis in original), as opposed to a justice reduced to "rules, norms, or representations, with an inevitable totalizing horizon" (34). Alterity and otherness cannot be appropriated or assimilated by history because they are fundamentally non-appropriable. Materiality is always in excess of meaning. As telos of progress, celebratory claims such as Fukuyama's endorse the hegemony of an ideal finality, repressing the inequalities and heterogeneity of historical conditions. In the context of ecological crises, Bobis' text echoes Nick Mansfield's warning that climate change will recharge economic and cultural imperialism by capitalist competition for resources, exacerbating the division between the prioritized and the expendable. As a result, the cultural politics of climate change will lead to historical disjunctures in which the unresolved historical injustice will come back to haunt future politics in material forms: scarred nature, economic instability, mass dislocation, and war.

Locust Girl speculates on the political challenges of ecological calamity by portraying an environmentally conditioned resurgence of sovereign politics. While the Kingdoms blame the Strays as impure, unassimilable

people who deserve nature's punishment, the truth, as revealed by the weeping woman Cho-choli whom Amedea encounters in a cave, is that the Kingdoms' resources once belonged to the Strays: "They came to tell us that we had too much water and we were wasteful. We had to save water for the future. So they built pipes into our well and our water disappeared" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 42). By using water as a collective survival discourse, the Five Kingdoms deceptively employ a sense of planetary "us," which disguises their assertion of sovereignty and ecologically devastating cultures of occupation. Their self-serving liberal humanism hints at how First World countries accumulate capital and resources at the cost of an ever-widening wealth gap and environmental degradation. Environmental events as such set the stage for planetary alterity to become the ethical center, commanding the need to listen to the neglected trauma of the unprivileged other and their legitimate claims to place. Like generations of women before her, Cho-choli weeps out the memory of Indigenous dispossession. Years of sobbing turn her tears into a pool and her eyes into empty sockets. Compared to the Kingdoms' recorded memory, Cho-choli chants stories of "once upon a time" that resemble Indigenous oral storytelling: "we had a well once upon a time. Our whole village could drink once upon a time, even our animals. It was green once upon a time" (42). Embedded throughout the novel, forms of Indigenous oral storytelling, such as Cho-choli's weeping and Amedea's singing, open up gaps within the Kingdoms' imperialist historiography and fragment the unity of sovereign power.

The deployment of supernatural elements in the novel destabilizes the Kingdoms' hegemonic reality by presenting a dystopian world wrecked by the material violence that comes from the past but is expressed through the future. The novel's specter-like characters epitomize a dissociation of history, as their ghostly return gives a corporeal form to unfinished historical pasts. Strays, such as Karitase—a female "creature" who is "afflicted with sores" (84)—and Cho-choli, are suppressed human-others in their violated physicality. In a more subversive manner, the narrative's haunted atmosphere highlights the structural ironies of imperialist and anthropocentric power. For instance, at the burial ground of the Strays who were killed by the Kingdoms' bombing, Amedea witnesses

the "unrested spirits": "white bodies with no face! The skulls and bones are alive, the dead were walking!" (24). Seen in a baffling act of cremating a child's tiny skull into white powder while reverently uttering the word "Blessed," the two white bodies are later revealed in the novel to be workers sampling the richness of the earth at the Strays' burial ground. These workers use the Strays' ashes to nourish the Kingdoms' trees. Beyond Amedea's immediate awareness is the ghostly fact that the Kingdoms' greens are fertilized by the whitish powder from the Strays' dead bodies. The Kingdoms' trees, in turn, are used as watchtowers for sending signals to firebomb more Strays, which incurs greater death and makes the natural environment drier and more uninhabitable. In this surrealist circulation of injustice (skulls-nutrients-trees-skulls), the material residue of the minority other reincarnates and returns incalculably.

The residue of the minority other is a specter haunting the novel's post-apocalypse. Its return is bodily and physical. Derrida sees the specter as "a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body," whose flesh and phenomenality are both present and non-present, living and dead, and thus the specter collapses any absolute knowledge (5). Bobis' portrayal of the specter evokes the minority's remnants by recuperating the bodies and phantoms that cannot be subsumed into the Kingdoms' imperial meaning, such as the tiny skull that used to carry a young life that has not yet been properly lived. "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony," Derrida writes, because hegemony organizes repression and thus confirms "the future-to-come and the coming-back of a specter" (Derrida 46). In its irrepressible return, the Strays' skull powder signifies the *différance* that suspends hegemonic teleologies of the world. It comprises the "bodiliness of death" that restores to otherness the materiality that is irreducible to historical or political valuation (Mansfield). The appearance of the specter, as Avery Gordon suggests, alters the linear ordering of time—the way we separate the past, present, and future—warning that what appears to have been concealed and invisible is very much alive and present (xvi). The specter's return configures the novel's futuristic dystopia as a continuation of the present as well as an uncanny projection of conflicting historical pasts, the

non-appropriability of which explicitly aligns the minority other with an equally repressed environment.

Through its allusion to the ghosts of the planetary other, the novel exposes the limit of anthropocentric frames for thinking time and space and restores back to temporality its planetary dimension. In a deconstructive account, time is not proper to human design because it is given by "the absolutely or nonhuman other" whose coming both tears and suspends temporalization (Cheah 161). For Derrida, the planet would be textually undecidable, consisting of endless *différance* in the name of the real—that is, the limitless attempts to capture meaning with words, while never getting there. This constitutive inability of language is also the realm of literary writing. The literary writer belongs in a repetitive ordeal of returning to the beginning of their task and discovering again the proximity to authenticity from which they "could not make an abode" (Blanchot 23). Literature is "the gift of time" through which we are given any determinable reality, claims Pheng Cheah, in that it does not simply represent material reality but generates "a passage, an experience" that fashions a new world while imparting meaning to the given world (186). This reimagining enables a re-evaluation of the elements of fable and fantasy in *Locust Girl* as futuristic stylistics that remake worlds. Bobis' conscious deployment of fantastic devices exposes the constructed nature of imperial history, and in doing so, she opens up the reader to a temporal reflexivity that negotiates alterity between literature's referential exterior and its imaginative and interpretive interiority.

Bobis' imaginative play with planetary alterity, however, goes beyond the textual domain. Derrida's deconstruction conceives materiality in terms of "permanent linguistic reflexivity" (Jameson, "Marx's" 84), figuring the world as always to-come and elsewhere but never present in the relations between subjects. This deconstructive account offers a provocative frame through which to characterize *Locust Girl*'s depiction of the cultural politics of haunting in the context of climate change. However, configuring planetarity merely in the sense of representation lacks a revolutionary edge. It is politically insufficient to dislodge the anthropocentric and sovereign machine that persists in our challenging

times. Postcolonial haunting tropes, as Emilie Cameron warns, can "'write out' the bodies and voices of living, politically active" Indigenous and minority people by translating the specific experience of ghostliness into generalized metaphors of a contested colonial past, rendering postcolonial redress equally a fantasy (388). In this respect, *Locust Girl*, through the narrative trope of metamorphosis, exhibits a radical critique that locks the deconstructive spirit into more immanent experiences of subjective and intersubjective relations, thereby presenting planetary imaginations in literature as a creative force for social change.

III. The Transformative Feminine and Becoming Planetary

Locust Girl can also be read as a political fable because fable is a literary genre that features allegorical meanings conveyed mainly through nonhuman creatures, such as animals, plants, and inanimate objects. The novel's specters and haunted lives—ghosts of anthropocentric humanism—point to the multispecies landscapes and layered temporalities that decenter anthropocentric worldviews. In this sense, *Locust Girl* not only alerts us to anthropocentrism but also opens up possible planetary futures. Through the aesthetic practice of metamorphosis and becoming-animal, the novel engages the reader in speculating a planetary temporality that privileges the subject's opened-ended and embodied relations to the environment. The denaturalized figure of the locust girl embodies a "transversalist" subjectivity that cuts across and reconciles dualist ends (Guattari qtd. in Braidotti, *Transpositions* 125): instead of pitting nonhuman resistance against human domination, the novel shows the naturalizing of both as historical manifestations of the subject. The nonhuman parts of human subjectivity are given voice by Amedea's locust, which plays an important role in reorienting the formation of subjectivity towards planetary multiplicity.

The novel first interrogates the asymmetric power behind an anthropocentric construction of subjectivity. It does so by identifying the domination of what Val Plumwood calls hegemonic rationalism, which assigns political mastery to elite men over the "Others of reason": women, the body, materiality, the enslaved, and the more-than-human world (19). That male-centered and rationalist values occupy the

position of power is readily apparent in the Five Kingdoms, where three out of the four Ministers are male. These Ministers are patriarchal representatives of the nation. The narrative describes them as the crystallization of historical time—"[h]undreds of years old" and "bound to live forever" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 141)—and out of too much thinking for the Kingdoms, they have shrunk to the size of children. The Honourable Head, in particular, has "re-thought this earth" by restoring laws of "purity," "symmetry," and "justice" (149–50). In contrast, the novel portrays the bodies of the female characters as subordinated in "nonhistorical, naturalistic, organist, passive, [and] inert terms" (Grosz 3). This is apparent in Amedea's amnesia, after she sleeps underground for ten years due to the Kingdoms' firebomb; her female body becomes a site of trauma and non-history.

The novel intricately links the subordination of women to that of the nonhuman. Amedea is saved from her underground sleep by a girl named Beenabe. After their separation, Amedea reunites with Beenabe in the Five Kingdoms, where Beenabe has become a sex worker. The collusion between sexism and anthropocentrism is embedded in the Kingdoms' epithet for sex workers: "green trees." Green is the most common colour in the Kingdoms and the colour the Strays desire the most; trees are absent in the desert but found everywhere in the "master's houses, tables, beds, chairs, even their spoons" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 50). A "green tree" is a euphemism for the precarious subject status of a sex worker, who is not quite human—less human than a Kingdoms' citizen and more human than a Stray. Beenabe displays the boundary imposed upon sex workers and asylum seekers. Her abject identity is written explicitly in the title of her residence—"the impure room" (166)—and her service is part of an economy of reciprocity, as a "return payment" for the "gifts of the Kingdoms" (140). After Amedea is charged with breaching the Kingdoms' laws, the Kingdoms request Beenabe to testify against Amedea, which reveals the conditional hospitality in a nationalist discourse that can be easily withdrawn if the refugee other fails to prove her absolute loyalty. After she fails to accuse Amedea, Beenabe falls victim to nationalist violence when she is betrayed and lynched by hateful citizens.

Locust Girl's concern with binary oppositions, Herrero argues, could easily slide into didacticism based on either/or distinctions, but the novel also depicts characters whose "hybridity" and "liminality" disturb categorical divisions (959). I argue that Bobis deploys the potential of liminality to refashion the categories of both the human and the imagined nation. Because the female gender never quite made it into full humanity in patriarchal history, her allegiance to the category of the human is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 130). A "green tree" is also a metaphor for youth and potential, and as such, its "impurity" can bridge conceptual gaps between recognizable and unrecognizable subjectivities to recast the human and the nation as creolized. Beenabe's death challenges the idea that reciprocity is framed by simple mechanisms of giving and returning and instead invites readers to ask: Who sets the rules of reciprocity? How can the dispossessed reciprocate? Her care for Amedea, which she shows in the ambiguous answers in her testimony, indicates a disruption of rationalist logic with a feminist ethics of care. Beenabe is killed and her blood shocks the Kingdoms' citizens who are astonished by their own capacity for atrocity, because they are told that they are good people and have "never known blood in their hands" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 169). Her death further provokes a shift in perspective for Verompe, a proudly assimilated other, the bastard son of the Minister of Mouths, and a sex worker. Verompe holds out Beenabe's body to challenge the Kingdoms' arbitrary definition of legitimacy: "How do *we* plead? . . . Does the other side have no right to their peace? No. Because their peace threatens our own and more legitimate peace?" (169–70; emphasis in original). Verompe, who lives as a citizen in the Kingdoms, discards assimilationist ideologies and starts to identify as a Stray, and then a hybrid: "My blood runs from both sides. I am contaminated. . . . Blood is red on both sides of the border. I am witness and victim and culprit" (170).

Crucially, Bobis deploys motifs of transformation and metamorphosis not only to create something new but also to reveal what is already within the characters. She uses the uncanny to unfold the multiplicity of subjectivity, a relational strategy that combines self and other. Bobis'

fiction stages the uncanny through the body and via the disruption of the mind/body hierarchy. In her account of Bobis' short story "White Turtle" (1999), Tara Goedjen writes that the uncanny's ingression in the body reacts disquietingly with the readers' senses, altering us, inducing us to conceptually reconsider an "unrecognizable sphere" where the unfamiliar intrudes into the familiar (3). This use of the uncanny is significant in *Locust Girl* and made visible through the novel's main animal metaphor, the locust, which expresses both plague and love. Conventionally, the locust is a signal of famine for farmers, but Bobis inverts this stereotype by depicting locusts as simultaneously a predatory pest and a source of food for the Strays: "Good for protein. . . . The locust crackled between my teeth" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 3); "They ate grains. . . . Then we ate them. . . . Then they eat their eaters[;] . . . they clambered out after the silence and nibbled at the dead" (8). The eerie sensation of a locust crackling between one's teeth is an unsettling image for Western readers, and the novel provokes this bodily uneasiness as a means of converging disparate cultures. While the Strays and the locusts feed on each other, the nibbling of a locust into Amedea's forehead challenges an oppositional human-nonhuman relationship:

> *We listen to the other's dreams*
> *In the other's skin—once a locust*
> *And a girl, then a locust girl*
> *Dreaming a single dream* (9; emphasis in original)

The main feature of Amedea's locust is that it gathers sounds and whirrs, and therefore it is not static but dynamic. When Amedea and Beenabe despair in the desert, the locust sings their way through the wilderness: "It was this whirring that kept us moving. It whirred towards other sounds, or led us towards them. . . . It seemed to carry on a conversation with even a faraway sound and always our feet could not resist" (36–37). A sensory antenna that intuits alterity, the locust shapes Amedea's relationship with her surroundings with an ontological openness invested in the indefinite: "A stray gust of wind, a rolling pebble, dust from a rock, and my brow itched in response" (37). It

unsettles the monotone of the Kingdoms' propaganda broadcasting to enunciate polyphonic sounds "'It's only one, but it sings like two' . . . three notes . . . all at the same time" (35). In a cartographical manner—in which the environment where Amedea travels creates her multiple becomings—the locust helps Amedea embrace a nomadic version of subjectivity. According to Gilles Deleuze, the nomadic model of being affirms differential relations as the cause of qualitative experiences that further produce the thinking subject, instead of the subject imposing fixed codes of identity upon difference to make sense of the environment (56–57). Actualized in a flux of differences and experiences, the subject, like Amedea, is not sovereign but nomadic, embodying a "subject-in-becoming" and a "vector of subjectivation" capable of affecting and being affected by a multiplicity of others within the environment (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 126). Concomitantly, a nomadic model perceives time as the transcendental force of change and shifting relations, as opposed to the Kingdoms' rationalist and utilitarian notion of time.

There is thus a micropolitics of planetarity in the novel's central theme of border crossings: Amedea, the Stray, becomes locust girl, the Nomad. The nomadic subject is planetary and disruptive of the nature-culture divide, for while the subject is the relay-point of intensive interconnections, the Earth is the ecological-social ground for all encounters and provides the material entities that animate the nomadic subject. Further, as Rosi Braidotti explains, the nomadic subject is constituted by "a folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding-outwards of affects" ("Ethics" 135). This is characteristic of Amedea, who has to relearn emotion and language after resurfacing from her sleep. Amedea's amnesia empties her of established societal norms and she remakes sense of the world through affective and bodily experiences of the unexpected. For example, when Beenabe rubs earth onto Amedea's body to cover her uneven skin colour, the locust whirs "with pleasure" and starts to sing in "melodic" tunes (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 34), allowing Amedea to feel love and care. In contrast, when the locust replays the traumatizing sobs of Cho-choli, Amedea senses that her skull would "split" with "invasion" (43) and thus remembers pain and suffering. Throughout the novel, the locust allows Amedea to listen, sense, process, and endure the

affectivity of her surroundings. Her body becomes more vulnerable and her subjectivity more empathic and complex. While nomadic thought can reproduce another rendition of "the universalized western subject" (Wuthnow 190), *Locust Girl* depicts Amedea's nomadic subjectivity to unsettle raced, sexed, and anthropocentric relations of domination. Amedea's corporeality challenges the Kingdoms' imposed distinction between the human and the nonhuman and their affective structuring of the Strays as bodies of shame. Amedea's difference arouses fear in Beenabe and other Strays. Shining Lumi, a shamanic swindler who deems Amedea's singing a competition, accuses her of being monstrous and marked with "the plague" (87).

Because the locust can sing, it also recuperates the minority group's ability to self-represent and rebuild their cultural memory. While lining up for rations, which the Kingdoms occasionally offer to show mercy, Amedea discredits Shining Lumi, who promises that a skull she owns can sing, though it never does. Hopeful supplicants keep queuing up outside Shining Lumi's tent, paying her with their rations and pleading for her skull to sing out the stories of loved ones who have disappeared and may return home one day. Fearful of committing the Kingdoms' "singingcrime," Shining Lumi shamelessly practices the "crime of hope," spreading rumours that the skull will sing in due time (93). A prophetic old man, Fa-us, exhorts Amedea to disavow rumours—spread by both Shining Lumi and the Kingdoms—with singing: "Plague them with songs, Child. . . . Rumours are not stories, are not songs. Rumors are in the air and we only catch and copy them, but songs are in the lungs and the throat . . . And stories are lived in the bones" (54). The distinction between song and rumour in the novel parallels the difference Deleuze and Guattari discern between becoming and imitating. "Becoming is never imitating" but the "double": the painter, while painting a bird, can only become-bird to the extent that the bird becomes something else, a pure line or colour (Deleuze and Guattari 336). Amedea's locust, which starts to sing in the voices of the supplicants' lost ones, provokes the Strays' collective singing and becoming. One by one, the despairing supplicants sing out their memories and stories, which fuse into the "longest song after a very long time of silence" (Bobis, *Locust Girl* 103).

Singing, here, is a relational, embodied resurrection of the repressed affectivity of the subjugated, and it frees their desire to become nomadic. It reclaims the local desires and struggles at becoming that hold the potential for alternative solidarities and political life. Amedea's individual becoming leads to the Strays' collective becoming and, as the novel's ending reveals, the planetary becoming of the human species.

The planetary exegesis of *Locust Girl* is fully manifested in Amedea's final metamorphosis. Charged with transgressing the border and singing unauthorized songs, Amedea is brought to the Kingdoms' Supreme Court, where the novel reaches its climax. When she refuses to testify against Amedea, Beenabe is killed by outraged citizens. Angry citizens need a criminal to blame and in order to appease them, Amedea takes on the role of the culprit. She gathers the unheard voices: her throat swells and her eyes, cheeks, chest, and belly grow, and then her whole body expands, pushed to accommodate "all voices from all sides of the border, both desert and green haven" (173). The strain of embodying this multiplicity makes her implode and catch fire. She is airborne and comes out of her chrysalis, growing wings and truly becoming the locust girl. The uncanny reappears in this scene: the implosion that is in other parts of the novel associated with dryness and the Kingdoms' firebombs becomes here a redemptive act of love and sacrifice. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Amedea is reborn. Her self-sacrifice imagines the planetary impossible. In an interview, Bobis comments that through Amedea's self-immolation she intended to appeal to the Christian ideal of *Agape*, or selfless and unconditional love for others ("Emily Yu Zong"). The release of the trapped locust from Amedea's human body suggests an emancipation of our affective organs from their normative indexing, as a way of dismantling the old metaphysics of time and subjectivity. This also leads to the novel's preeminent message—that each of us harbours a locust within herself or himself, only waiting to be released. Towards the end of the novel, Bobis addresses readers as listeners of the locust's song:

> Can you hear that little flutter?
> It's an insect heart.
> Too close for you?

> Ah, in you.
> Now you know what we've always shared.
> No border can deny it.
> It's small and snug, and not quite hidden.
> Don't despair, it will settle. In you.
> It will settle. Like the wind.
> The wind is kind. It leads me home. (*Locust Girl* 178)

Amedea's self-immolation explores the subjectification that, as Braidotti terms it, "explodes the skin of humanism" ("Animals" 527). Her implosion allegorizes a planetary regeneration of the political anatomy of our society through an individual's metamorphosis. Becoming planetary in this aspect is an ethical choice of multiplicity. Yet, while *Locust Girl* calls for planetary love and projects idealism onto our imaginative map, this idealism deconstructs itself, deconstructs love, and deconstructs how we care for each other and for the planet. What Bobis reminds the reader by juxtaposing the Kingdoms' exclusive love for its own citizens and the locust girl's unbiased love is that love is not always ethical. Love asserted in the name of sameness and unification is different from a love that is genuinely open to differences and transformations. In his attempt to understand love as a motor for social change, Michael Hardt critiques the forms of narcissistic love that exclude difference, conceived in "reactionary political projects" of fascism and nationalism and around conventional identity projects of class, race, gender, and sexuality (677). A properly political concept of love, argues Hardt, "must transform us, that is, it must designate a becoming such that in love, in our encounter with others we constantly become different" (678). In other words, love would involve risk and operate in the fields of multiplicity and differences in order to engender social transformation. It is with this transformative politics of love that the planetary impossible in *Locust Girl* must be imagined and read. It is also alongside this transformative love that planetarity becomes a promise devoid of completeness or any finite destination. As the nomadic subject of the locust girl shows, hope lies in the collective journey and transformative work we achieve in cultivating ethical and empathic modes of encounters, in which difference and

otherness cease being a reason for fear and borders; they become, rather, the departure point for conversations.

IV. Conclusion

I have explored *Locust Girl* alongside a notion of critical planetarity, which demands that a planetary ecology of belonging does not need to lose political edge. With its environmental and pluralist focus, planetarity may appear to be a universalist ideal that erases human inconsistency, but Bobis' novel demonstrates that the tension between the universal and the particular can in itself be a source of social critique. Written from ethnic, feminist, and postcolonial concerns for alterity, the speculative aesthetics of *Locust Girl* develop planetarity as an episteme of differentiation that recovers local struggles and political history suppressed by anthropocentric and imperialist temporality. The novel's other-worldly post-apocalypse of environmental ruins is reminiscent of colonial pasts and offers a striking metaphor for the exclusionary geopolitics and nationalist discourses of our contemporary times. In the uncanny future-as-past-to-come, climate change and capitalist redistribution of resources may resurrect and intensify haunted lives and landscapes that arise from racial, gendered, and ecological violence, further fragmenting the planet and rendering it spectral. By insisting on the imperative to imagine alternative futures, Bobis' novel provokes readerly and social metamorphosis that must constantly be speculated into being. The locust girl embodies a cosmological orientation of our political community since her border crossing and entanglement with material and more-than-human forces recuperates a planetary ethics of multiplicity that undoes anthropocentrism. As such, Bobis configures planetarity as both a relational ethics of care that bridges competing localities and ontological worlds towards shared responsibility for the environment and a political approach of differentiation that highlights vulnerability, inequality, and (neo)colonial forms of exploitation. With this double vision, Bobis' novel must be shifted away from the multicultural canon and into the center of a situated practice of planetarity. This situated practice creates space for literary imaginations and ways of reading that may promise more transformative pathways for the planet.

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Note

1 Speculative fiction by postcolonial, diasporic, and Indigenous writers has greatly broadened the genre's definition, exposed its colonial, racist, and sexist underpinnings, and highlighted the long tradition of futuristic imaginings by writers of colour. See works by Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Larissa Lai. For story anthologies that intervene in Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism, see *So Long Been Dreaming*, edited by Hopkinson and Mehan; *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*, both edited by Thomas; *Walking the Clouds*, edited by Dillon; *We See a Different Frontier*, edited by Fernandes and al-Ayad. See also Bahng's *Migrant Futures* for a critical study of Asian futurism and Asian American speculative fiction.

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