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Becoming Planetary

Min Hyoung Song

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It should go without saying that the start of the twenty-first century has been *

postmodernism, Adams enumerates who she thinks are its outstanding contributors:

Many of these authors—Jhumpa Lahiri, Sandra Cisneros, Chang Rae Lee [sic], Junot Diaz [sic], Ruth Ozecki [sic], Jessica Hagedorn [sic], Gish Jen, Bharati Mukherjee, Susan Choi, Oscar Hijuelos, Edwidge Danticat, and many others—were either the children of migrants or were themselves migrants who had come to the US as a result of the global upheavals of the past two decades. Relatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War, their fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents.

to the ways that this compression puts both ecological and social balances at risk. This ecological way of thinking is, in other words, a complex view of a phenomenon that can be neither simply celebrated nor reviled.

of the earth by poorly understood geological forces, also turns out to have magnetic properties.

In a related plot development another in a series of delirious multiplication of plots and characters that evoke simultaneity, Manó has also discovered only a few years before that stroking a feather on his neck and his ear has amazing recuperative powers. The narrator, who is a plastic ball spinning wondrously in front of a Japanese immigrant man, muses, "Of course, it was not as good as sex, but what feather could compete with that? It had worked wonder on his sleepless children and was completely natural. It was like those copper bracelets everyone used for rheumatoid arthritis: if it didn't help, it sure didn't hurt" (18). Perhaps the mysterious Matakaó has something to do with this newly discovered power in the feather? Or is it just one more episode in a novel bursting with such magical events? Certainly, a world where the Matakaó is possible can also make room for a feather that supposedly provides as much calm as cigarettes without any of the noxious side effects, that could also make one feel more energetic at the same time, that could cure certain minor ailments, and that could do all of these things while being ornamentally pleasing. As a large corporation in New York soon realizes to its immediate fiscal benefit, the feather is a kind of perfect commodity—100% natural, about as addictive as nicotine but perfectly healthy to the user, and easily packaged, transported, and marketed.

Together, the Matakaó and the feather become more than clever plot devices allowing a host of unusual characters to meet at a site of feverish environmentalist and sociopolitical concern. Instead, they are important tropes for imagining the relationship between nature and artifice. The Matakaó figures what may easily be the most artificial of substances—plastic, as something found deep in the earth, a natural deposit of sorts that can also become, as it does in the course of novel's story, a natural resource equal in value to the other rich natural resources mined in the Brazilian rainforests. The feather, by contrast, is a natural object produced without any direct human intervention that becomes as a result of the powers supposedly contained in its use, a kind of technology almost as alluring as the small consumer electronics that have become the coveted objects of a self-proclaimed global age. Through an alchemical process of intense marketing, the feather becomes denatured, turned into a finished commodity with a use value completely shorn from its source, and as much a finished good as the plastic mined from the Matakaó is a raw material. Such role reversals, when what is most artificial becomes most natural and what is most natural becomes artificial (striated becoming smooth, smooth becoming striated), eventually collapse the

distinction between natural and artificial in the novel. As a result, the reader is left wondering where the artificial begins and the natural ends in a world that has become wholly remade physically by human activities. Even the most pristine of places on earth, it turns out, have already been transformed by these activities even before its outward appearance is rearranged.

Of course, describing something as natural, reducing its becoming to a state, has its utility, a way of seeing fully exploited by the corporation known primarily through its initials GGG. Soon, an employee at GGG realizes how profitable the feather can be as a commodity. As a result, he sets up a headquarters on the tourist edge of the Matacão and hires Mane to authenticate the feather's power so that its popularity might be understood as a product of the discourse somehow spun around the apparent goodness of its innovator: "This was, someone said, science in the guise of folklore" (80). As the novel progresses so does Mane's fortunes as a "guru" of the feather, which has attained ubiquitous global popularity. Still, such success comes with a steep price. For Mane, it is social isolation: his wife, who finds the glare of the spotlight unbearable, retreats with their youngest children to the small town where she was born. The older children have also "slipped off one by one to a variety of jobs in distant cities in Brazil" (151). And Chico Paco, a young man from the seashore whose pilgrimage to the Matacão to fulfill the promises of a neighbor has made him a "a of where

and tree lovers with digital sketch pads, who often picketed Manó lectures, accosting him with wild threats, following him everywhere, holding candlelight vigils and making videos of performance-art pieces in front of his house (153-54). In this passage and in several more like it, it is clear that while the most benign use of a natural object, once commodified, can become one more rationale for the plundering of the natural world, Yamashita is also interested in satirizing the activist environmentalist response to it. Petitions, public gatherings, more creative forms of assertive protest, and even the turn to violence take on a festive air, as if the occasion for such actions gives rise to social possibilities, opportunities to gain fame, and most

Of course, the area

clearing the forest away forever²²). Imagining social relations anew, in other words, can often come at the cost of exploiting natural resources and destroying what cannot be recovered. Does this mean, then, that

fully present in a moment (‘‘shás’’) and also a looking forward to a future when one will be fully present (‘‘to be’’), a becoming ‘‘something someone.’’ This temporal oddity is further accentuated in this passage through its juxtaposition of meanings. In the first usage, becoming is a description of someone whose beauty is captured in a person who belongs to a milieu, from the French meaning ‘‘middle,’’

minoritarian; all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian (291). To be majoritarian is already to have arrived, to be at a starting place or a terminus but not to be in motion to a something and a someone else. This also means that being members of a minority, whether it be Jews, Gypsies, etc. does not automatically vest one with the status of becoming: "Even blacks, as the Black Panthers said, must become-black. Even women must become-women. Even Jews must become-Jewish (it certainly takes more than a state) (291).

This becoming-something, becoming-someone is a non-state of being of which Asian Americans are, as a consequence of their unique history, incessantly made aware. Moreover, this condition

In terms of content, this interest in compression is signified by the plot's refusal to remain in one place. The characters travel, meet in far-flung places, communicate (or miscommunicate) through the use of phones and, more frequently, email. The family that the novel depicts is spatially far apart, dispersed, divided by time zones and oceans and languages and political borders, even mental instabilities. Formally, this kind of compression is communicated by a multiplicity. Fitting precisely the formal description of contemporary novels interested in time-space compression that began this article, Long for This World jumps from one location to another, ceaselessly occupies one perspective and then another, switches between the first person voice of the daughter to a free indirect speech that bounds from character to character without respect for nationality or language, and jumbles past events with present occurrences. The full text of emails between characters is also included in between other forms of narratives, making the novel at least in part epistolary.

Who is to say what an immigrant is in such a world? Even if one does not travel, like the members of the brother's household upon whom the father and daughter intrude, distances are shrunk and the world is at once vast and close by. If "immigrant" ceases to be a useful term to describe the perspective the father occupies when he finds his daughter becoming then it is because *Nas* occurs literally in *Tropic of Orange*, the world itself has shifted under everyone's feet, blurring the distinction between immigrant and native. In such a circumstance it may make more sense to talk of a becoming-immigrant and a becoming-Asian American.

Long for This World and by extension its many peers, then, enacts a tireless, ongoing search for another order of connectivity that might respond to globalization as a geo-social-economic-political fact without merely imitating, and being complicit with globalization's forms. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), to borrow an example from Adams's list of notable contemporary works, the eponymous antihero, a character who seems to have begun his existence as someone who possesses all the opposite qualities that the dictator Trujillo embodies in the Dominican imaginary, martyrs himself on behalf of what he calls love. It is an earthly love, rooted in his physical lust for an older woman who is also a retired sex worker, but the devotional speech he makes to it before his execution could have easily been borrowed from an age-old tradition of religious devotional poetry. The passage deserves a lengthy quotation:

He told them [the henchmen who are about to kill him] that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to

different, he thinks; becoming Quieter in her skin, not so anxious to go as she ~~Ó~~been all these years. . . . Once, after returning from a walk with Min-yung, she seemed agitated, seeking him out with her eyes. But the moment passed. Whatever it was that may have disturbed her seemed to settle, like a cup of hot tea cooling to a soothing warmth as it goes down ~~Ó~~(181). This search, or perhaps more appropriately a yearning, for another order of connectivity, figured in this passage as an easing of anxiety, a settling of personhood, a ~~Ó~~becoming ~~Ó~~ that is both participle and gerund simultaneously, recalls Paul Gilroy ~~Ó~~s insistence that there is an important distinction to be made between globalization and what he calls ~~Ó~~planetary. ~~Ó~~ Regularly confused terms, they ~~Ó~~ point to some of the same varieties of social phenomena ~~Ó~~ but ~~Ó~~ resonate quite differently ~~Ó~~: ~~Ó~~ The planetary suggests both contingency and movement. It specifies a smaller scale than the global, which transmits all the triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals ~~Ó~~(Gilroy xv). There is, in short, something sovereign about what gets signified by globalization, a nomos that divides, restricts, hierarchalizes and criminalizes. It is a royal epistemology, a striation. Planetary, then, might be thought of as a different order of connection, an interrelatedness that runs along smooth surfaces, comprises multitudes, and manifests movement.

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In making this claim on behalf of the contemporary novel, as struggling to narrate a becoming planetary, one cannot help sensing in Long for This World and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao a focus on the social, one that like

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in turn traveled via feathers of minute feathers of
which lice, species

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world where humans suddenly ceased to exist, the narrator reveals that during the parking lot's many years of inactivity, nature had moved to accommodate and make use of it (100). A rare butterfly forms in the nests made by vinyl seats of Fords and Chevrolets and develops a beautiful red coloring that is due to a steady diet of hydrated ferric oxide, or rusty water. A new species of mouse . . . had developed suction cups on their feet that allowed them to crawl up the slippery sides and bottoms of aircraft and cars. Because of their diet, the mice have extremely high levels of lead and arsenic in their blood and fat so that every predator dies when they feed on them except a new breed of bird, a cross between a vulture and a condor, that nested on propellers and pounced on the mice as they scurried out of exhaust pipes (100). There is also a plant that grew on the decaying vehicles which attracted the rare butterflies and other insects who fell prey to these carnivorous owls; slipping down into those brown sacks, they were digested in a matter of minutes (101).

As if to

await to be visited on everyone without any respect for persons. About the typhus epidemic in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, the narrator observes: "Just as the disease would not remain with the poor, it would not be confined to the Matabele. It had become a national disaster. For the moment, most people assumed it would confine itself to the third world. Europeans, Asians and Americans eager to see the Matabele simply rearranged their vacation plans that year. Wait until they find a vaccine, they thought. Epidemics, plagues, drought, famine, terrorism, war. All things that happened to other people, poor people in the third world who cavorted with communism and the like" (184). As this passage illustrates, her fiction resonates eerily with the ways in which populations and nations who are most vulnerable to disaster keep trying to mitigate and adapt to environmental changes that human activities in toto do but disproportionately more so in the global north keep introducing, much like Yamashita's imaginary fauna in the Amazon forest or the homeless in Los Angeles. As events like perennial wild fires in the southwest, tornadoes in the great plains, floods along the Mississippi, searing droughts in the deep south, earthquakes all around the Pacific Rim and in the Caribbean, and of course Hurricane Katrina, the BP Deepwater oil spill, and the nuclear accident at Fukushima keep occurring, the imagination of disaster in the US as something easily confined to "other people, poor people" is becoming harder and harder to maintain as geographic boundaries provide little refuge from what is happening to the planet as a whole. Of course, wealth and other forms of accumulated capital provide buffers from disaster, so that the effects are most often visited directly on the least capable of defending themselves.

As is becoming increasingly clear, however, this advantage is a relative one. The steady pressure of severe weather in the anthropocene—a recently coined geological term only imaginable in the twenty-first century—erodes wealth, strains resources and even at times cuts across whatever protections money can buy.⁵ An epidemic like the typhus carried by the feather, for instance, cuts cruelly across socioeconomic lines, disproportionately affecting those with the least access to medical care but nevertheless leaving no class of person unaffected. In *Tropic of Orange* Yamashita conjures this feeling of encroaching vulnerability by making the familiar landscape of Los Angeles and the whole of the southwest region down to the Tropic of Cancer move, condense and rearrange itself in a dramatic literalization of geographical and cultural deterritorialization. As the character Buzzworm observes: "Harbor Freeway. It's growing. Stretched this way and that. In fact, this whole business from Pico-Union on one side to East L.A. this side

dreamlike tension between culture and nature, between human activities and the physical world, between global inequality and catastrophes that await to be visited on everyone without any respect for persons.

and South Central over here, it's pushing out. Damn if it's not growing into everything! If it don't stop, it could be the whole enchilada (189-90). And so, even when the privileged in the first world work hard to freeze the imagination into prejudicial place, the work of adaptation continues, a perpetual and implacable becoming-planetary. Such adaptation also occurs in more recent novels, but many of those miss how the social is inextricably tied to the fortunes of the planet itself so that even the relatively utopic vision of a becoming embedded in becoming, as explored in a novel like *Long for This World* has costs that remain to be fully reckoned as the current century dragon.

Notes

1. These comments, and the discussion that follows in later parts of this article, borrow terms found in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. Smooth versus striated, deterritorialization, becoming—because this work provides a powerful vocabulary for thinking about how social relations and the environment are bound up with each other. As Ursula Heise has observed, the term deterritorialization is a central term in globalization theories which has its origins in Deleuze and Guattari's writings but has since taken on a more generic meaning, to explore how experiences of place change under the influence of modernization and globalization processes (51). By turning back to its origins, this article seeks to recover some of its more specialized meanings and to reconnect it to a larger toolkit of related critical terms.
2. See Rachel Lee, "Asian American Cultural Production in Asian-Pacific Perspective," *Boundary 2* 26.2 (1999): 231-54; Kandice Chuh, "Of Hemisphere and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's *Literary World*," *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 618-37; Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (2003); Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), 91-115.
3. See Caroline Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (2009), 126-44; Sue-Im Lee, "We Are Not the World: Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.3 (2007): 510-27; David Palumbo-Liu, "The Occupation of Form: (Re)theorizing Literary History," *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 814-35. In addition, Mark Chiang responds to the argument put forth by David Palumbo-Liu by questioning some of the libRARY claims the latter makes (and by extension questions many of the claims that others mentioned here make). See Chiang, "Capitalizing Form: The Globalization of the Literary Field: A Response to David Palumbo-Liu," *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008): 836-44. Unfortunately, there has been no similar interest in Yamashita's fascinating second novel *Brazil-Marú*.
4. In an informal conversation, I asked Díaz if anything Asian American affected his writing, something I suspected in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*—many references to Japanese popular culture and its sly inclusion of an

Indian American as one of Oscar's friends. Díaz candidly responded that in fact Asian America was very much a part of his growing up; that for a studious Dominican like himself going to grade school in New Jersey, the persons he felt closest to socially were Asian American students. This does not, of course, take away from the ethnic specificity of Díaz's work.

5. The term "Anthropocene" was introduced by the Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (for his work on identifying the hole in the ozone layer), who argued in a 2002 article in *Nature* that human activity has propelled the earth into a new geological epoch. See Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Science* 415 (2002): 23; Philip Gibbard et al., "Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene?" *GSA Today* 18.2 (2008): 4-8.

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