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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 marked by huge improvements in travel and communication technologies that shorten distances and make everyone more acutely aware of what Rajini Srikanth describes as “the past memory and future promise of connections with other lands” (37). That is, even if one does not travel or go anywhere, distances have shrunk, and the world has become, as a result, more intimate. This compression of the world along vectors of time and space has put an enormous pressure on contemporary writers so that the narratives found in their works ubiquitously jump from location to location, ceaselessly occupy one perspective and then another, switch between the first-person singular to a free indirect speech that bounds from character to character without respect for nationality or language, and jumble past events with present occurrences. Unusual among writers who are interested in trying to capture a simultaneity of social experience made possible by time-space compression are narratives resolutely staying within a given moment, ones following the action of a character in a chronologically transparent succession of events uninterrupted by shifts in perspective, breaks in the text, flashbacks, and analepses.

As Rachel Adams has pointed out, “If postmodernism is governed by a sense of paranoia, which suggests that these connections may be figments of an individual imagination, the literature of globalization represents them as a shared perception of community whereby, for better or worse, populations in one part of the world are inevitably affected by events in another” (268). Calling this an “American literary globalism,” one which supersedes a prior era’s dominant literary aesthetic loosely known as

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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 Hagerdorn [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. (251)

The novel that stands out most for Adams as exemplifying the move from postmodernism to an American literary globalism is Karen Tei Yamashita's third novel *Tropic of Orange* (1997), which imagines Los Angeles as a meeting place between the national and global. Interestingly, Adams has little to say about Yamashita's earlier two works, both of which were just as determinedly global in perspective but located in Brazil, which in turn acts as the (quite literal) magnetic center, the place which people migrate toward and imagine the world from.

Turning to these earlier novels, one finds the same interest in the themes and formal experiments that mark off the phenomenon Adams elucidates from an older aesthetic movement but with an important difference: the globalism evoked in Yamashita's earlier novels pushes America into its margins, its influence felt from a distance and, when mentioned at all, made a single strand of a more complex text. By doing so, Yamashita's first novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), in particular imagines what shifting and porous borders characterized by time-space compression might look like if the US is not at the center, dominating that moment. Just as important, the novel not only calls attention to the ways that globalization knits together the experiences of far-flung populations but also, and with even more urgency, how the novel puts all these populations in danger as global capitalism relentlessly exploits both bodies *and* environments. Because *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is set outside the US, and determinedly a part of the global south, the novel seems somehow more acutely aware of this connection. The novel thus offers a way to think about time-space compression that at once encourages a geographically non-American perspective and that also demands attention

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.

Although published at the start of the last decade of the twentieth century, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* nevertheless looks forward to writings by Asian Americans and others. These continue many of the same formal experiments Adams persuasively argues is part of an emerging aesthetic movement. So it is not a stretch here to consider how this earlier novel helps readers to understand another debut work, Sonya Chung's recent *Long for This World* (2010), which is solidly a part of a twenty-first century that its readers are just learning how to interpret. Chung's novel has been selected for attention here because it fits so well into the mainstream of a moment full of aesthetic striving to capture a simultaneity of social experience made possible by a world grown smaller. Less focused on the geopolitical polarization of the world and the paranoia that fueled it (characteristic of a twentieth-century literary postmodernism), and more on the thoughtful turning into narrative of a world compressed along vectors of time and space, then, both *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* and *Long for This World* try to "imagine otherwise," to borrow from Kandice Chuh's borrowing from Avery Gordon. As their formal similarities suggest, both novels are invested in producing a smooth space not striated by a global imaginary, an act of deterritorialization that imagines less an American globalism and more a planetary becoming, one that involves a keen interest in social relations and the ecological concerns that are increasingly turning into such an important factor in understanding them.¹

2

How does one convey, capture, depict a simultaneity that has become such a salient feature of the world as daily apprehended by so many of its inhabitants without at the same time losing sight of a finite planet which everyone must share? Critics have labored over different aspects of this question in their collective discussion of Yamashita's novels, which, in turn, are notable for precociously anticipating how literary discussions would change. About her first novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Yamashita tells an interviewer: "It wasn't Asian American feminist literature; it wasn't magic realism; it wasn't science fiction. . . . That was and still is my problem. I think a lot of Asian American authors or authors of color find merchandising their work difficult because

bookstores and publishers and publicists are looking for niches for these books” (Murashige 323). For her readers as well, the question of how she fits into critical categories has been a recurring theme, with critics debating whether this novel in particular is an example of Asian American literature, or a part of a transhemispheric imaginary, or a forward-looking environmentalist fable.² In addition to American literary globalism, *Tropic of Orange*, published just a few years after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, has also become the prime example of the transnationalization of Asian American literature’s intrinsic interethnic creative impulse, a rapprochement between ethnic specificity and universalist discourses, and thus an illustration of a literary form that is at once transnational and locally contingent.³

Taken together, this critical discussion of Yamashita’s fiction suggests a gradual shift in reader priorities, from one that values classification (especially at a time when Asian Americans were producing so few works) to one celebrating the very quality that had made it so difficult for the author to get her writing published when she first started out. The following contributes to this rich unfolding discussion by arguing that what accounts for this shift is how Yamashita’s fiction models for readers a literary attempt to capture a simultaneity of social experience that does not lose sight of environmental concerns.

Through the Arc of the Rain Forest beautifully fulfills the need to pay attention to the social and the ecological by telling the stories of several characters from all over the world who find enormous material success in the Amazon during the end of one millennium and in the beginning of another. It begins with Mané Pena, who “had wandered the forest like the others—fishing, tapping rubber and collecting Brazil nuts” (16). Stumbling into a “clearing where one of his rubber trees used to be,” he finds government men busily remaking parts of the forest into a farm which they promptly sign over to him (16). The man who officially hands title of the land to Mané tells him, “Whole new way of life, Seu Mané. Meantime, if I were you, I’d get some barbed wire, fence it properly. Congratulations” (16). The specialized help that is promised to get him started as a farmer never arrives. Instead, rain comes pouring down and without the trees to hold the earth in place all the soil washes away. What is revealed is a mysterious black substance, nearly indestructible, “with a slick shiny surface” that stretches endlessly across a recently denuded landscape (17). The Matacão soon becomes a worldwide sensation, drawing scientists, tourists, opportunists, religious adherents, and others like a magnet; it is fitting therefore that its substance, a form of plastic produced by the world’s waste being pushed down into the mantle

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, Mané 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 wonders 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 Matacão 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 Matacão 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—all natural, about as addictive as nicotine but perfectly healthy to the user, and easily packaged, transported, and marketed.

Together, the Matacão 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 Matacão 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 Matacão 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 appearances are 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 headquarter on the tourist edge of the Matacão and hires Mané 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 Mané's fortunes as a "guru" of the feather, which has attained ubiquitous global popularity. Still, such success comes with a steep price. For Mané, 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 successful radio personality, could not come by to visit his old friend: "It was not the same, not the same full house of poor but generous people who shared everything they had. And, too, Chico Paco was now so busy with Radio Chico" (151).

Beyond these obvious personal losses, which alone would make the novel appear to buy into the very "guise of folklore" that makes Mané such an ideal company spokesperson (with material success comes alienation; the only remedy to alienation is a return to a simpler lifestyle rooted in the land), the popularity of the feather also causes unforeseeable ecological problems. The price of feathers starts to go up, and with the rising price the growth of a black market also emerges. Everywhere in the Amazon and elsewhere, birds are being killed and left featherless as their plumage is sold to more unscrupulous companies than GGG, which has wisely sewn up most of the legitimate supplies in exclusive deals, and to GGG as well, whose buyers sometimes have a hard time passing up a good deal. In response, "The list of petitioners was long, everyone from the membership of the Audubon Society to groups of schoolchildren in Ranger Rick Clubs, all concerned about the preservation and protection of birds, specially those nearing extinction. There were also vegetarians in leather jackets

and tree lovers with digital sketch pads, who often picketed Mané's 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 important of all, the right to feel moral outrage.

All of this suggests—at the risk of participating in what Frederick Buell calls the “outcasting” of environmentalists by various conservative groups in the US (12)—a tension at play in this narrative between those who can assert their dominance over the fantastic occurrences that swirl all around them, a global perspective, and those who adapt to these same occurrences with a humbler sense of their personal agency in mind, a planetary one. While Mané might seem at first glance to belong to the former category, he remains a passive character who keeps stumbling on the most important discoveries of the novel—the *Matacão* and the feather—and who attains his high level of success mostly by accepting what is handed to him. “To have one’s life changed forever, three times,” the narrator observes after Mané’s transformation from rubber tapper to farmer to founder of the feather, “amounted in Mané’s mind to being like one of those actors on TV who slipped from soap opera to soap opera and channel to channel, being reincarnated into some new character each time” (18). And like an actor on such a television program, Mané is also playing a part that someone else has written for him. By way of contrast, the activist environmentalists demonstrate their participation in the former grouping, as they signify through their actions a belief that they can make a difference in the world through simple gestures. Signing petitions, participating in protests, and so forth allow them to give expression to this belief, and by doing so also to claim a certain epistemological power to know what is objectively good for the Earth.

Not shy about connecting her social satire to the ways that environmental discourses often operate in the world, Yamashita introduces the phenomenon of the *Matacão*, the origins of which remain a mystery until the very end. As the narrator observes almost as if Yamashita’s authorial voice is breaking into the lighter-hearted voice of the spinning ball,

Of course, the area surrounding the Matacão had been in question ever since international ecological groups discovered that the Amazon Forest was enormously photogenic and made beautiful calendars. Then, there had been that debate in the late eighties and early nineties about holes in the Earth's ozone layer and the greenhouse effect. In those days, everyone, whether they understood anything about it, seemed to blame Brazil for burning down the forest and replacing oxygen-producing plant life with roaming cattle and carbon dioxide. The big problem, people said, was that Brazil hadn't asked permission to destroy the Earth. But who had? At one time, there was as many "save the rain forest" groups as there was *lambada* clubs in L.A. and New York. People were madly grinding their loins in the lascivious dance and gasping and moaning about the dying forest thousands of miles away. (98)

According to this passage, the Amazon is primarily important to American environmentalists because it allows them to make a strong aesthetic argument on behalf of conservation. In this way, the "photogenic" reproducibility of the forest into "beautiful calendars" renders it as much a commodity as the selling of feathers by a large corporation. The popularity of the Amazon as a potent symbol of a vanishing nature, a planetary lung slowly being hacked away by the forces of a thoughtless global progress that dangerously worsens the air quality for everyone, itself becomes what is consumed in the metropolises of the north, a cause that can be celebrated and symbolically benefited by the "moaning" of protest and pleasure. In the name of the earth, what is ignored is the differences in power between the global north and the planetary south, between those who have already cut down many forests and rearranged other facets of their physical world in a relentless pursuit of modernization, and those who are being cajoled into following the same path of economic development. This passage expresses anger about the obvious double standard and about the ways in which as symbol the vanishing rainforest can become another commodity, not the main message of the protest.

As Yamashita makes clear in her second novel *Brazil-Maru* (1992), a sweeping account of an idealist Japanese-Brazilian commune formed in the early twentieth century heavily influenced by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and especially his novel *Émile*), the clearing of the forest that precedes their experiments in living and organic farming is something to regret keenly. "When my father talked of the sin of the immigrant," the first of the novel's five narrators observes, "I believe he meant this sin of

clearing the forest away forever” (22). 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 the attempt to imagine social relations anew was not justified? And what are the costs of making no attempt?

3

He has lived in the US for many years, almost as many years as he has lived in his country of birth, but still his command of its official language is mediated by distance and unfamiliarity. Its words do not roll off his tongue in quite the same way he imagines they do for someone who has been born here. But the “here” is problematic at the moment as he is taking a vacation from his immigrant life, cohabiting, by his own invitation, his brother’s Korean household; now his daughter has come to find out why he has left his wife and job as a medical doctor. Having taken her parents’ example of migration to the *n*th degree by moving ceaselessly from one conflict-ridden country to another to record with her camera all the pain unfolding in these far-flung places, his daughter is also looking for a vacation from her life. She has most recently been in Iraq, come close to dying by being too near an exploding car, and has watched her colleague lose his life. If she had been a little closer or if she had walked a little faster, she too would have died. Her hearing is slightly impaired. When she arrives, the father gazes at her after being apart for a long time. He is unaware of what she has recently endured. He thinks, “She is beautiful, this daughter of his; which perhaps he has never quite seen before, not in this particular way. It seems an indulgent thought, and yet he understands at this moment what people mean when they say, in English, ‘She is quite *becoming*.’ Ah-jin seems to be *becoming*—something, someone” (Chung 170).

Perhaps this is a discovery only an immigrant could make. For a native speaker, the meaning of the word “becoming” might not seem so rich or so closely related to the other meaning of the word which gets slightly estranged in this quotation from Sonya Chung’s debut novel *Long for This World* (2010). In this passage, there is a subtle verbal shape-shifting, from participle to gerund, “Is . . . becoming” and “to be *becoming*”: according to the *OED*, the former refers to a state of having arrived, a “having graceful fitness,” and the latter refers to a goal to strive for, a possibility that has yet to be achieved, a “coming to be.” The temporal oddity of these two uses of “becoming” seems embedded in the meaning of the word itself, as becoming signifies in this instance a being

fully present in a moment (“she is”) 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,” a surrounding that cannot easily be differentiated from the person who occupies this space. This is undoubtedly why “becoming” in this sense is just as often used to describe not the person but the person’s surroundings or, more often, the clothes a person wears—i.e., it is flattering but in a way that does not alter one’s appearance.

The meaning of becoming as a participle, to describe a person or a thing, enhances the sense that person and milieu are of one piece, a total belonging that shows one to be at complete ease where one happens to find oneself. But the other usage of the word, as gerund, denotes the sense that such a belonging is elusive, something that always slips into the future and out of grasp. This is certainly apt in describing a character who has been traveling the world, fearless and indifferent to personal security, who has no permanent home except an apartment that she keeps in Paris for those rare occasions when she is not working, and so—to repeat a cliché about cosmopolitanism—who belongs everywhere because she belongs nowhere in particular. This also means, of course, that she still does not ever actually feel a complete sense of belonging in any one place, a point the cliché tries to paper over. Regardless, the second usage, of a state of being defined less by a sense of having arrived at such a belonging but of being in the process of arriving, a present progressive teleological state, re-contextualizes the first meaning, infiltrates its peace. It suggests that the father’s observation of how her daughter is “quite *becoming*” in *Long for This World* cannot be separated from “*becoming*—something, someone.” A temporal oddity is buried in the concept, regardless of whether it is expressed as a participle or a gerund.

Becoming thus necessarily refers to a present and a future, a complex flow of time described by Deleuze and Guattari (glossing a point explored by Henri Bergson) as a line as opposed to a point: “A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure, or arrival, origin nor destination. . . . A line of becoming has only a middle. The middle is not an average; it is fast motion, it is the absolute speed of movement. A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle” (293). This sense of being in the middle, with “neither beginning nor end,” is exactly why they insist that “becomings are

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 provides a way to be becoming-Asian American. What the father sees in *Long for This World* is a stillness that is found solely in motion, contingent on a sense of ease that becoming “something, someone” alone affords. In connecting this latter usage of becoming with the former, the father opens up an affective component in a concept that seems otherwise to flow through more material strata of concern, and in doing so he calls attention to how becoming can at once be minoritarian and also a kind of completion in its own right, a belonging in transitory and deterritorialized spaces that refuse reterritorialization (or at least keeps deterritorializing what gets reterritorialized): a becoming embedded in becoming.

Still, perhaps it is not exactly accurate to attribute this play of words exclusively to the father being an immigrant. Surely, even native speakers can be equally self-reflexive about their language, especially if, like the father, they are dislodged from their usual settings so that the altered vantage point enables even the most familiar object to appear in a different light. Why would not one’s language also begin to operate along novel lines of association if one were so displaced (if not because one has moved elsewhere, then because one’s surroundings have been altered in some way), even if it is the only language one knows? The father himself, as well, is not just an immigrant. He has a particular history, an irreducible uniqueness, a singularity, which *Long for This World* works to detail. And, just as important, this novel seems less focused on the experience of immigration, and more on the experience of living in a world of time-space compression. Through the daughter’s profession, photojournalism, the novel also touches on how violently unequal the worlds being brought into such intimate proximity with one another are, the relative security of the home in Korea, more so (oddly?) than in the US, standing in for a world insulated by wealth, education, and social status that abuts, and cannot quite keep out, the other worlds of devastating poverty, violent conflict, and societies in free-fall.

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—as 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 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

take a great love out of the world. Love was a rare thing, easily confused with a million other things, and if anybody knew this to be true it was him. He told them about Ybón and the way he loved her and how much they had risked and that they'd started to dream the same dreams and say the same words. He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved. (321)

Love, in this instance, is exactly imagined as another order of connection that deterritorializes the circuits of money, power, pleasure, and masculinity which have formed throughout the Dominican diaspora. It is such an enduring connection that it is imagined in otherworldly terms, a deterritorialization that cannot be reterritorialized even by death. In comparison, the Dominican diaspora itself is figured as already thoroughly reterritorialized by globalization, as in the joke made at Oscar's expense in a prior beating by the same men:

Then he blurted out, I'm an American citizen.

The capitán waved away a mosquito. I'm an American citizen too. I was naturalized in the city of Buffalo, in the state of New York.

I bought mine in Miami, Gorilla Grod said. Not me, Solomon Grundy lamented. I only have my residency. (295)

The power of the state, which Oscar tries to invoke in saying "I'm an American citizen," is a gesture toward the global, a striation, whereas his eventual recourse to love is something less rooted, planar, smooth. If Díaz were Asian American, this could be a prime example of a becoming-Asian American (a possibility that tantalizes with the extravagant thought, what if this novel was considered an example of becoming-Asian American, in addition to becoming-immigrant, becoming-Latino/a, becoming-Dominican American?).⁴

Similarly, in *Long for This World*, the father looking at the daughter sees something that suggests a potential ease-in-motion, and not the friction that globalization routinely conjures: "She is

different, he thinks; *becoming*. Quieter in her skin, not so anxious to go as she's 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" (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 "becoming" that is both participle and gerund simultaneously, recalls Paul Gilroy's insistence that there is an important distinction to be made between globalization and what he calls "planetary." Regularly confused terms, they "point to some of the same varieties of social phenomena" but "resonate quite differently": "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" (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.

4

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 *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* offers a perspective on time-space compression that does not exclusively privilege the US, but that at the same time *excludes* the ecological. One is never asked to wonder, for instance, about all the oil that is required to make possible all the travel these novels narrate (not even when one of the main narrative traumas occurs during the Iraq War, as in *Long for This World*), nor to wonder how a world grown smaller through time-space compression might endanger ecosystems as much as populations. These are concerns readers are not allowed to forget in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. When the end comes in the latter novel, it comes quickly. First, because of the plastic's magnetism, the artificial feathers produced out of mined Matacão turn out to induce hallucinogens in their users, leading many to their deaths when they come to believe that they can fly. Then, the natural feathers turn out to be carriers of "rickettsia," which are

“microorganisms that traveled via a minute species of lice, which in turn traveled via feathers” (198). The all-natural commodity is too natural, becoming the carrier of a dangerous form of typhus that kills indiscriminately, leaving only 10% of the population alive in its vector’s wake.

The wholesale disuse of the feather in Yamashita’s novel is not enough to stop the contagion, and so the authorities in Brazil take a logical leap that should be all too familiar to the reader. As they write to a pigeon enthusiast who is another key character in the novel, “We are infinitely sorry for the loss you will have to suffer, but think of it, Batista, this is for the good of mankind” (201). Shortly thereafter, in a nod to Rachel Carson, these same officials rain DDT down on the whole of the rainforest until every bird is dead and much of the vegetation withers. Finally, as everything in the region has become “void of insects and real living creatures,” the Matacão itself becomes “invaded by devouring bacteria” until none of the plastic anywhere survives: “Buildings were condemned. Entire roads and bridges were blocked off. Innocent people were caught unaware—killed or injured by falling chunks of stuff. People who stepped out in the most elegant finery made of Matacão plastic were horrified to find themselves naked at cocktail parties, undressed at presidential receptions. Cars crumbled at stop lights. Computer monitors sagged into their CPUs. The credit card industry went into a panic. Worst of all, people with facial rebuilds and those who had added additional breasts and the like were privy to grotesque scenes thought only possible in horror movies” (206, 207). Rather than opposition or displacement, as it turns out, artifice and nature are mutually dependent on each other. When one collapses, so does the other. The world that Yamashita thus conjures is one where such distinctions make little sense, insofar as what is a natural resource in the novel is also the most artificial, a waste byproduct produced by, of all things, the chemical manipulation of another essential natural resource, oil. In this way, both terms become deterritorialized.

But even this observation relies too much on a distinction that the novel refuses. In one of the most oneiric descriptions to be found in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, which has deservedly attracted much commentary by critics, the narrator observes the discovery of a parking lot near the Matacão filled with vehicles from the fifties and sixties, “F-86 Sabres, F-4 Phantoms, Huey Cobras, Lear Jets and Piper Clubs, Cadillacs, Volkswagons, Dodges and an assorted mixture of gas-guzzlers, as well as military jeeps and Red Cross ambulances” (99). As if anticipating the publication of *The World Without Us*, Alan Weisman’s 2007 thought experiment about what might happen to the physical

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 flowers; slipping down into those brown sacks, they were digested in a matter of minutes" (101).

As if to emphasize further how important she considers this image of abandoned machines being repurposed as a habitat through a quick-moving adaptation, Yamashita conjures a similar kind of take-over in *Tropic of Orange*. When a fiery freeway accident traps traffic along a one-mile stretch near downtown Los Angeles and takes away what shelter the homeless have found under a nearby overpass, they take over the automobiles. This time around, adaptation occurs even faster than in her first novel: "In a matter of minutes, life filled a vacuum, reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways" (121). For the rest of narrative, the homeless take residence in these makeshift dwellings, naming streets and neighborhoods around specific arrangements of vehicles and the physical landscape of the freeway as if they are planners designing a new mixed-use suburban development. Businesses take spontaneous form, while other commodities—most prominently a Mercedes with a car phone—become public property. To make a phone call, all one has to do is wait in line for one's turn. The resilience of these developments only comes to an end when the homeless are forcibly driven out by the state's use of force: "The coordinated might of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the Coast and National Guards, federal, state, and local police forces of the most militaristic of nations looked down as it had in the past on tiny islands and puny countries the size of San Bernardino and descended in a single storm" (239).

In these ways, Yamashita's fiction provides an active commentary on a world full-to-bursting with dreamlike tension between culture and nature, between human activities and the physical world, between global inequality and catastrophes that

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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 Matacão. 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 Matacão 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—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

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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 drags on.

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 libratory 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 Filed: 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*'s 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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