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"Imperceptible Webs" of Conversation: Silence and the Making of Planetary Collectivities in Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016)

In the first third of Arudpragasm's short debut novel, the narrator muses about the ways in which the extreme violence of Sri Lanka's civil war turns citizens into refugees of their own country and profoundly alters communal life, its customs, daily interactions and rhythms. In ordinary times, the narrator states, "Thoughts, feelings and conjectures, stories, jokes, and slander were nothing but thinly spun threads that tied the insides of people together long after speaking had ended, so that communities were nothing more than humans held together… in imperceptible webs whose function was . . . to connect each individual to every other." But under conditions of severe violence, the narrator surmises, "the diaphanous threads which in ordinary life had been so easily spun had been dissolved now, leaving nothing left to unspool, and each and every person in the camp had to sit silently alone . . . unable, in any way, to connect" (67). Here, the breakdown of conversation and social relations, of communal and individual bodies ("the insides of people"), including the fiction of a national community, signals the demise of the community as a whole. At the same time, the passage gestures towards the novel's ambiguous project of tracking the "expansion of the present," inherent in states of extreme violence, and its various configurations of silence, to "generate," as Pheng Cheah puts it, "different experiences of contemporaneity" (*What Is a World* 12).

More specifically, against the novel's narrative of disintegration the narrator, as I will show in this paper, poses a poetic language of webs, silence and physical matter that puts forth

alternative modes of being in a place and in the world, of communicating and orienting oneself collectively and individually. By raising important questions about the ways in which literary texts undo received categories of critical analysis and engage with some of the most pressing challenges of our times, namely the violent fallout of our post-global moment and multi-centric world, marked, as it is, by climate change, the massive displacements of people, including refugees, evacuees and migrants, and the ever increasing violence of economic inequality, the novel participates in an active process of what Cheah calls "world-making" (2). In particular, the novel asks what happens if we approach the narrative representation of violence neither discursively nor historically but through a materialist and planetary perspective. My reading, then, draws attention to the ways in which the novel narrates what appears to be immaterial in terms of matter, alterity and relationality. The latter three elements comprise the central epistemological building blocs of planetary thinking. In what follows, I will first discuss silence as an enabling trope and ethical modality of planetary thinking and listening and then briefly address the role a materialist reading of the body and the earth, understood as the ground we inhabit, plays in imagining planetary collectivities.

Let me begin, however, with a cautionary note about my understanding of planetary thinking. First and foremost, planetary thinking does not overrule or transcend local experiences and configurations of culture, history, politics and violence into a new and universal humanism, nor is it, as Gayatri Spivak warns us in *Planetary Loves*, reducible to a project of "ecological justice" (61). Indeed, as Ursula Heise observes in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, "there is nothing in the idea of localism itself that guarantees its connection with the grassroots-democratic and egalitarian politics that many environmentalists envision when they advocate place-based communities" (50). Rather, Heise, along with critics such as Christian Moraru and Amy J. Elias, advocate a relational approach that foregrounds and restructures the ways in which we read the

local through a planetary lens and vice versa. Thus, Heise argues that a "sense of planet" entails "a sense of how political economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines" (48) at the intersection of the local and the planet. In contrast to the global, the planet, as Spivak famously puts it, "is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan" (*Death* 72). She further explains, "To be human is to be intended toward the other . . . If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents . . . alterity remains underived from us" (*Death* 72-73). Planetary thinking, then, critically engages with alterity and emerges from an ethico-political concern for the other and the multiple effects of global capitalism and violence, including Sri Lanka's civil war. It is in this context that planetary thinking mobilizes new alliances and modes of social and political interaction. Methodologically, planetary thinking seeks to recognize and "detranscendentalize" alterity (Abraham 79 /in *Planetary Loves*). As Arudpragasam's novel suggests, planetary thinking, although it is articulated from the global "brink," as Matthew Omelsky states, opposes the politics of difference and, instead, seeks to put multiple configurations of alterity—of the planet, the human, and the nonhuman—into relation with one another without relativising or hierarchizing them.

War and the Textuality of Silence

Set in the Northern Part of Sri Lanka during the early spring of 2009, close to the end of the war, and after the devastating experience of the tsunami in 2004, Arudpragasam's novel pays close attention to the interconnected human and environmental devastation caused by war and the effects of climate change. In both events the casualties were staggering and emblematic for planetary transformations. *The Story of a Brief Marriage* narrates one day in the life of Dinesh, an orphaned evacuee who lives, together with thousands of other refugees, in the uncertainty of a

makeshift refugee camp that is subjected to arbitrary but constant bombing by the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE alike. Amidst the carnage and hopelessness, a fellow refugee offers him his daughter, Ganga, in marriage to "keep her safe " (7), as he himself does not expect to survive for long. The offer propels Dinesh out of his shell-shocked state of living death and, for a brief moment, makes him "keenly aware of the multitudes of people around him" (9). Despite his hazardous living conditions and looming death, he accepts the proposal and what ensues is not a narrative of bare life, as one might expect, but one of a tragic encounter, approximation, re-connection and loss.

The narrative's formal orchestration uses personification and hyper-realist description, while drawing from symbolic images of the earth/planet, the atmosphere, breath, and nonverbal communication. Numerous ellipses and sprawling, open-ended sentences with minimal punctuation reflect the unmoored and broken state of the narrative's two protagonists. The novel's aesthetic composition reflects its political project in that it charts what might be called a "textuality of silence" that forces the reader to rethink the ways in which political demands shape or are excluded from public debate. To argue that silence practices a sort of textuality proposes that it generates meaning through its various interpretations, its material production, its relationship to language and must be "understood "in the context of the "larger structure[s it] is a part of" (Barry loc 810). In *Life and Words*, Veena Das argues that "the antiphony of language and silence re-creates the world in the face of tragic loss" (38). Narratives of violence, she maintains, are frequently built around productive "zone[s] of silence" (54). In women's narratives of the violence of India's Partition, Das reports, "silence was achieved by the use of language that was general and metaphoric" (54). In Arudpragasam's novel, hyper-realist descriptions of organic and inorganic matter, as well as the "antiphony" of sound and silence invite the reader to listen carefully in order to distinguish different silences, for example the silence generated by trauma

from that which signifies relationality and alterity. In the novel, silence indexes the collective shell-shocked and alienated state of the refugees (99), while signifying protection and the tenuous connections between Dinesh and Ganga (137). Making legible the textuality of silence, I suggest, plays a seminal role in imagining planetary collectivities and in creating and reshaping the public sphere.

To relate silence to the public sphere, which is the space in which a collective will can be formed and expressed, it is useful to consider its sensory production. Judith Butler convincingly argues that "To produce what will constitute the public sphere . . . it is necessary to control the way in which people see, how they hear, what they see" (*Precarious* xx). The public sphere embodies a discursive space and, constrained by the politics of representation, regulates what Jacques Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible" (54) and what can enter, according to Butler, the "sphere of appearance" and thus "establish what will count as reality and what will not" (xx). As a textual practice, silence acts as a regulatory and transformative element, reflects a "strategic choice . . . or enforced position" (Glenn 13), and, as Chris P. Miller insists, "reconfigures listening as a discontinuous and non-linear act" (n.p.). In other words, silence interrupts and rearranges our reading habits and expectations. In Arudpragasam's novel, silence seeps through all aspects of Dinesh's life as a war refugee and relates to the silences, gaps and fractures left behind by the dead and disappeared, in the bodies and minds of the survivors. First and foremost, however, it frames the arbitrary shelling of the camp and its inhabitants:

> There was, always, before the shelling, for the slenderest moment before the earth began shaking, a faraway whispering . . . which turned indiscernibly, into a whistling. This whistling . . . was a tremulous vibration, the trembling of earth, . . . followed by a blast of hot air against the skin and then finally the deafening explosion. It was a loud, unbearably loud explosion, followed immediately by others, so loud that … the rest could no longer

> be heard. They could be registered only as the pervasive absence of sound…The world becomes mute. (14).

After the shelling, the narrator observes, “a deep silence pervaded the camp” and the living “sobbed in silence” (17), lovingly caressing the faces of their dead kinsmen (17) and “nobody in the camp could tell with certainty when the loud silence of the bombing was replaced by the soft silence of the stillness” (18). Here, silence seems visceral. The silent vibration of the earth caused by the falling bombs takes on a materiality of its own and registers the collective and catatonic state of the refugees under fire, the drowning out of the world, of the possibility of storytelling (66-67), of life, of the earth itself. In short, the silence that surrounds extreme violence undoes what Arendt sees as the fundamental elements of the “human condition.” It is precisely in the “loud” silence or silent scream caused by the shelling that the “Levinasian” notion of the “face understood as human suffering, as the silent cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation” (Butler, *Precarious* 144) comes into view. The face is not an actual face but can be figured as absent sound (of the human cry), a silence or productive failure that makes, as Butler says in a different context, “a life apprehend[able] as a life” and “grievable” (Butler, *Frames* 13).

Dinesh’s unexpected marriage with Ganga is equally orchestrated by silence and unfolds what it might entail to “be intended toward the other” (Spivak, *Death* 73), including the nonhuman other, and, by extension, to reconnect with the world. Although he is unable to make love to Ganga, their mutual intimacy enables him to recollect and grieve the death of his mother, which was previously shrouded in “silent images” (112). For the first time he cries inconsolably for himself and thereby comes face to face with the precariousness of the other, of everybody else, because, on the one hand, he realizes his own “vulnerability” and naked exposure to the “world” (151). On the other, he recognizes that tears for oneself “could only come when one

ignored the suffering of everybody else" or imagined that "the pain you faced was unique and . . . different" from that of others. Thus, his encounter with Ganga inserts him into a larger, planetary collectivity held together by the experience of loss and precarity. Such collectivities are tenuous and open constellations. Spivak describes them as follows: "It is almost as if [they are] one person's textuality internalized by many people flung out into history in a model of something to come" (190). In other words, they keep in view the critically mediated plurality and openness of subject formation processes as well as the latter's historical situatedness while, all along, working through a non-linear and non-teleological timeframe.

Dinesh, however, also understands that the precariousness of life itself, politicized and unevenly distributed as it is, extends from his perception of Ganga and "touch-me-nots" (71) as equally "fragile" "life-forms" (90) to other nonhumans, including his perception of flies as "respectful" "temple-goers" (39). Similarly, it is through a silent encounter between Dinesh and an injured crow that the novel convincingly develops its non-anthropocentric and planetary perspective. Dinesh leaves Ganga and their safe hiding place to follow an unfamiliar sound only to find a squawking adolescent crow that must have been "hurt by one of the shells that had fallen in the camp that morning" (156). Yet, instead of killing the crow to secure his own survival, Dinesh recognizes the bird as a fellow civilian casualty of the war. He instinctively decides to lie down next to it and stroke its beak (155-8), which instantly "soft[ens]" (157) its screaming, and "to let the crow go on living, to let it continue existing" (158). The narrative's Derridean rhetoric of sur-vivance points towards overlapping temporalities and affinities, perhaps to a planetary future-to-come. In fact, the proximity between the human and nonhuman does not transcend a mutual sense of alterity but it affords "solace" and "sanctuary" to both Dinesh and the crow, as they both rest on "the tender earth" (159). Dinesh's refusal to kill the crow —even though he is under duress to survive and to end the bird's suffering—constitutes him as a planetary subject.

The relationship between Dinesh and the crow underscores that planetary subjectivity is shared and plural. Politically opposed to the doctrine of just wars, a Kantian *doxa* often quoted to legitimize contemporary global wars, Dinesh's pacifist refusal to kill a fellow creature resonates with Butler's argument that "self-preservation is never a sufficient condition for the ethical justification of violence" (*Precarious* 136). Yet war continuously denies the social and multi-species dimensions of precariousness, that "we are subject to one another, vulnerable to destruction" and "in need of multilateral," that is, planetary, "agreements based on the recognition of a shared precariousness" (*Frames* 43). The encounter between the "human-human and the nonhuman-human" (11) recalibrates, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, historical thinking in terms of non-ontological species thinking. More so, I think, the encounter implies that the planetary subject emerges, as Levinas writes, with an "awakeness to the precariousness of the other" (in Butler, *Precarious* 134) and presupposes a shift in thinking the productive capacity of organic and inert—seemingly non-ontological—matter. Given the lack of time, I will briefly discuss two passages that illuminate the significance of matter the novel mobilizes to displace its localized narrative of war into a larger context of planetary relationality.

The Matter of the Planet: A "Final Offering" and "Earthen Bed"

The first incidence narrates Dinesh's sudden "psychological" rather than physical "urge" to "empty his bowels" (20), while the second is concerned with his sleeping habits and environment. Although both acts are fundamental and dirurnal human activities associated with bodily functions, under the necropolitical conditions of war and the anthropogenic devastation of the environment, these acts unexpectedly turn into sacred rituals that reset the relationship between the human and the planet. They question the relationship between matter, materiality,

and meaning production in important ways. It is no coincidence that, in contrast to many other narratives of Sri Lanka's such as, for example, Minoli Salgado's *A Little Dust on the Eyes, The Story of a Brief Marriage* entirely abstains from engaging in national or postcolonial, historical or political discourses of Sri Lanka's civil war, as such discussions, wittingly or unwittingly, remain complicit with the various legitimizing narratives of the war. What remains in the novel is its focus on the materiality of the body and the earth, "the quintessence," as Hannah Arendt puts it, "of the human condition" (2). Once Dinesh finds an appropriate place to relieve himself, he meticulously "digs a small pit in the sand" while thinking that "in the camp and scattered beyond, there were hundreds of rotting bodies, their parts strewn across the ground" (24). The absence of human dignity and proper burial rites make it imperative for Dinesh "that his excreta be properly disposed of . . . for the offering he was making to the earth would be void if not properly presented" (24). He finally crouches down "in full view of the earth's enormous face" and, with enormous effort and pain, he strains his thin, "weak body . . . to send out one final offering into the world" (24). In the end, "it was a paltry offering . . . It was not rich and heavy and rounded, but had made it himself . . . and the earth, he knew, would be grateful" (26). The novel's hyperrealist narrative of defecation counters the abject state of the refugees in the camp. In fact, it defamiliarizes given critical modes of abjection and the abject by turning the act of defecation into a narrative of corporeal dis-alienation and integration that emphasizes a symbiotic and vitalist relationship between Dinesh and the earth. What strikes me is the epistemological shift from the abject to planetary thinking, making the planet uncanny, and then, from a critique of ideas to a poetic choreography of physics. Simplistically speaking, if we follow Mary Douglas or Julia Kristeva's well-known concepts of the abject, the abject is that which is rejected and disturbs social reason; it is associated with the maternal, death, corporeal excrements and excretions. It is always subversively situated as a form of excess that operates as the self-

constitutive outside of the symbolic order. In this reading, the underlying assumption is that the logic of the abject requires a Cartesian cogito that distinguishes between culture and nature, the paternal and the maternal, and thereby remains—despite its deconstructive impetus—a species of instrumental reasoning. The novel, however, links the materiality of the body to the alterity of the planet. More importantly, by dramatizing the process of materialization associated with the laboring body in a hazardous environment as an almost sacrificial ritual or offering, the novel unhinges normative modes of critiquing bare life (see also, David Farrier and Patricia Tuitt's "Beyond Biopolitics"). Thus, if the production of waste or excess is commensurate, as I think it is, with a process of materialization, which, according to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, refers to "an excess, force, vitality, [and] relationality . . . that renders matter active" (9), then the novel's interdependent narratives of defecation and the earth ask the reader, in Coole and Frost's words, "to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency" (9).

In Coole and Frost's account of the new materialism, the capacity for agency is not restricted to human agents but also assigned to matter and objects to form a shared, "multiply tiered ontology" (10). This observation resonates with the novel's orchestration of everyday objects, most specifically the sleeping area Dinesh creates for himself outside the camp. Without delving into the controversies that surround theories of "hyperobjects" and "object-oriented ontology" (Timothy Morton), I want to insist that the novel tracks the fragmentation of seemingly stable object-relations and emphasizes what one might call, with a view to Sarah Ahmed, a "re-orienting" intersubjective materiality between the human and the nonhuman. Here the new materialism maintains its predecessors'—historical materialism—commitment to social change and historical situatedness. Located in the protective vicinity of a "long elliptical rock" (55), Dinesh's bed, then, is a "narrow rectangular space" with a pillow sculpted from "a gentle mound of earth" (56). He had cleared and decorated the space with pebbles as "a kind of spiritual

fortification" (56). The space at once evokes and defamiliarizes the functions of a regular bed, in that he gains "a sense of security" but rests "without sleeping" (56), he lies next to Ganga but remains unable to consummate his marriage. Yet, he develops an intimate relationship with the ground itself, at once bed and potential grave, noting that "his body had shed some warm, imperceptible substance into the earth and stone, something that filled the little space with an understanding of him, so it had become in a way a part of him, . . . a home almost" (57). In turn, the materiality of the place itself appears animated and productive of its own agency, for "the place," Dinesh remarks, "cared for him . . . [and] would take care of him" (58). Thus, the careful narrative orchestration of the "earthen bed," while drawing attention to the historical and material destruction of every day life, dissolves the common divides between culture and nature, the sentient and non-sentient, the material and the spiritual, use-value and commodification. In this sense, a relational reading of the object, i.e., the bed, makes it, in Ahmed's words, a "disorientation device" and thereby makes "things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world" (254), which is now open to rethinking and reshaping.

By way of conclusion, let me return to the moment when Dinesh goes back to his hiding place after his encounter with the crow. Upon his return, he discovers that Ganga left once the shelling had resumed. Shortly thereafter, he finds her dead and his world is once again shattered in silence. He realizes that all he can do is breathing, not living, not dying, just breathing. "Breathing," he muses, "

> was a pact between the chest and the atmosphere about which the mind could say nothing, perhaps, though life itself was nothing but an oscillation between these states, between drawing in the atmosphere and having it drawn back out, between attempting unconsciously to encompass the world and then being forced to give it all up. (185)

Here organic life is part of the planet's alterity, its atmosphere, on which human beings depend but which they cannot claim. The notion of the atmosphere is useful for unpacking the idea of the planet's alterity. For instance, Karl Marx observes the material yet effervescent character of the atmosphere when he asks, "although the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it?" (Speech 1856). Impalpable and invisible, the atmosphere nevertheless constitutes a life force able to gather mass and move objects, to affect social and political relationships while remaining outside of human control and ontologies. The atmosphere can be read as a Mortonian hyperobject yet, against Morton's OOO, it also embodies and enables a historical materialist critique of human suffering and dispossession. Materially and metaphorically, the atmosphere, as Renisa Mawani aptly states, "signal[s] something always on the brink of emergence." Its "critical value," she emphasizes, resides in "its ability to encompass disproportionate and opposing forces" (4). Thus, although the atmosphere—not unlike silence—consists of immaterial matter, it is neither inert nor without creative capacity. Dinesh realizes that the act of living means to be attuned to the planet's material alterity, its atmosphere and indifference towards human life, but not to life itself. This recognition, while it does not guarantee justice, demands new forms of collective thinking that provide alternatives to the dead-end of anthropocentric, historicist and culturalist ontologies and invest in a non-ontological, material understanding of life itself. Indeed, it is by reading the relationship between the planet and the human "as at once continuous and discontinuous", to quote Spivak one more time, that we comprehend the precariousness and materiality of life and reshape what can be seen, heard and represented in the public sphere. What I hope my short reading of silence and matter in Arudpragasam's novel has demonstrated is the importance of making legible, on the one hand, the various configurations of alterity that structure the relationships between the human and the nonhuman and, on the other hand, the failure of fully representing human suffering. This failure

generates the conditions of possibility for thinking planetary collectivities related to but not exclusively based on what Chakrabarty calls "negative universals" ("Theses"). Planetary collectivities function, cautiously, as a non-totalizable whole of pluralized political positions—often marked by dispossession and violence but always negotiated through the gender differential—and demands within multiple temporalities, one of which remains the trauma of the "unlived" present (Agamben, "Contemporary")—signaled, in Arudpragasam's novel by Dinesh's short-lived and unconsumed marriage—through which to anticipate a possible future.

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