Merlinda Bobis's *The Kindness of Birds* (2021): A Transmodern Ecofeminist Manifesto[1]

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Abstract:
The aim of this essay will be to analyse Merlinda Bobis's latest short story collection, *The Kindness of Birds* (2021), as this Filipino-Australian author's transmodern attempt to promote an ecofeminist agenda that aims at questioning Eurocentric conceptions of the world and the subject. This will consist in expanding the boundaries of knowledge with the help of insufficiently explored cosmologies and thought-worlds, which can alone help us counter the anxiety and dangers brought about by the effects of global warming, the spoliation of nature, the excesses of post-industrial capitalism and, more recently, the pandemic and its consequences on a worldwide scale. Transmodernity is the term coined in the late 1980s to designate a paradigm shift inaugurating a new global worldview that attempts to take up Modernity's ethical and political challenges and values—but assuming the postmodern criticism of it—and those of formerly discarded premodern cultures. As this collection claims, these pre-modern beliefs and attitudes are very much in tune with the main ecofeminist tenets, and by extension with the so-called ethics of care/attention, which hold that moral action centres on interpersonal relationships and care or benevolence as a virtue. Linked by the omnipresence of birds, which stand for the human need to connect and learn from other species to preserve life on the planet, the stories in this collection can also be seen as "narratives of the limit," since they posit new kinds of anti-establishment (aesth)ethics by conflating fiction, testimony and (auto)biography, while advocating love and care across continents, cultures and species as the only way to pave the way for a better global future.

Keywords: Transmodernity; Ecofeminism; Ethics of Care/Attention; Narratives of the Limit; Limit-Case Autobiography.

The Kindness of Birds as a Transmodern Ecofeminist Text

Merlinda Bobis's works have always shown an unrelenting concern to claim and dignify the author's ancestral Filipino culture, while also striving to integrate and delve into that of her host country, Australia. It could thus be argued that one of their main targets has been to build bridges and promote on-going dialogue between different communities and cultures. *The Kindness of Birds* (2021), Bobis's latest short story collection, is no exception. These stories may seem apparently disconnected at first sight, as they deal with different settings and characters: two women mourning a dead neighbour, a dying father, two cleaners caring for a wounded crow, two sisters and a Holocaust survivor linked by poetry and a bottle of perfume, a 91-year-old pearl diver, two broken marriages linked by a jade bracelet and a Krishna figure, a Filipino PhD student in Australia, a grandma tormented by the dead of her young son, a Filipina who has a special connection with doves, a loving boyfriend who cares about trees, a

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woman undergoing cancer surgery, etc. However, they are all linked: some characters are related and appear more than once in the collection and, over and above everything, the character of Nenita appears in nearly all of these stories and is related to most of the other characters in one way or another. Furthermore, the presence of birds and the kinship among women of all sorts and the planet are omnipresent. In a word, all of these stories bring together settings, characters and cosmovisions belonging to the so-called First and Third Worlds (Australia and the Philippines respectively), which turns this collection into a good example of Transmodernity, the term coined in the late 1980s by the Spanish philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez Magda in order to designate a paradigm shift inaugurating a new global worldview. The prefix 'trans-' takes up Modernity's utmost ethical and political challenges and values (equality, justice, freedom, etc.), but assuming the postmodern criticism of it, which in turn allows for the integration of some formerly discarded values from premodern cultures.

Moreover, *The Kindness of Birds* also complies with Enrique Dussel's notion of transmodern literature (2012), insofar as this collection engages in a pluriversal dialogue and offers a paramount project of cultural synthesis which implies: firstly, self-affirmation and self-valorisation of one's own (Filipino) debauched cultural identity; secondly, a critique from within the dominant globalised culture; and thirdly, a dialectic proposal that blends borders and encompasses post-modernity and precolonial (or pre-modern) worlds and cosmovisions. For this critic, transmodernity is a project that mainly involves "the development of the potential of those cultures and philosophies that have been ignored, upon the basis of their own resources, in constructive dialogue with European and North American modernity" (2009, 514). Contrary to what most Westerners believe, Eurocentric views are by no means universal. As Catherine Walsh has put it:

> All theories and conceptual frames, including those that originate in Western Europe and the Anglo United States, can aim at and describe the global but cannot be other than local. The proposition … is to advance the undoing of Eurocentrism's totalizing claim and frame, including the Eurocentric legacies incarnated in US-centrism and perpetuated in the Western geopolitics of knowledge. It is not *with eliminating but reducing to size* … North Atlantic abstract universal fictions. (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 2; original emphasis)

To put it differently, transmodernity does not aim at replacing one cosmovision by another, nor at giving priority to nature at the expense of culture, but rather strives, to quote Val Plumwood's words, to "reintegrate nature and culture across the great western division between them and … give a positive value to what has been traditionally devalued and excluded as nature *without* simply reversing values and rejecting the sphere of culture" (1993, 10-11; original emphasis). According to Dussel, the complexity of the contemporary globalised world requires the accommodation of diverse worldviews and strands of knowledge, namely, what he labels as "pluriversality," an alternative to the univocal knowledge provided by grand universal narratives. Likewise, Walter Mignolo (2011, 344) emphasises the need to prompt "a pluriversal response and confrontation with universal Eurocentrism," while urging to build "histories-others," that is, "histories written by those who were made others and the histories of Western expansion seen from the receiving end of globalisation" (330). In Dussel's words, the starting point should be "that which has been … devalued and judged useless among global cultures, including colonized or peripheral philosophies" (2009, 514). In line with this new ideological and aesthetic trend, then, *The Kindness of Birds* shows an interest in expanding the boundaries

of knowledge by having recourse to insufficiently explored cosmologies and thought-worlds, and the concomitant need to question the dominant Eurocentric conceptions of the world and the subject.

Furthermore, this collection can also be analysed from the perspective of ecofeminism, which can be defined, to quote Elizabeth Carlassare's words, as a "social movement and form of theoretical inquiry that resists formations of domination and seeks to construct a politics for planetary survival and social egalitarianism" (89). Many ecofeminists share the belief that Eurocentric beliefs are mainly responsible for women's oppression and ecological destruction, since they both arise "within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination (Ruether, 204). Yet, ecofeminism brings together multifarious, and at times apparently contradictory perspectives and views on how to actually effect social change, which has led some feminists like Janet Biehl (1991) to regard it as inconsistent. Generally speaking, there are two main ecofeminist branches: socialist and cultural ecofeminism. As Elizabeth Carlassare explains (91-93), socialist ecofeminism has been advocated by critics such as Carolyn Merchant (1992), Mary Mellor (1992) and Ariel Salleh (1995), to mention but three of the best-known. Socialist ecofeminists, in contrast with orthodox Marxists, bring forms of oppression such as patriarchy and imperialism in addition to that of class under capitalism. All of them interact and are equally ecologically destructive. Socialist ecofeminism is anti-capitalist and forwards non-statist forms of socialism as potentially ecologically sustainable. Moreover, since it originates in materialist feminism, it is based on a constructionist stand that regards knowledge and nature as being historically and socially produced, that is, as the outcome of the conditions and circumstances in which they exist. Last but not least, they historicise human biology and gender, thus relegating them to the realm of representational, discursive and material variability.

As regards cultural ecofeminism (Carlassare, 93-95), it has its origin in radical feminism, and consequently rejects patriarchy's devaluation of the qualities associated with the gender construct 'woman'—intuition, care, nurture, emotions and the body—which they advocate as the only means to prevent ecological and social degradation. Moreover, cultural ecofeminists such as Gloria Orenstein (1990), Merlin Stone (1976), Marija Gimbutas (1991) and Riane Eisler (1987), strive to retrieve women's history and foster woman-centred and earth-based spiritualities and cultures as ecological alternatives to religions that proclaim a transcendental god. In clear contrast to these god-the-father-based religions, the spirituality that cultural ecofeminists uphold is based on the divine as immanent in nature, including people. In keeping with this, they highlight the values of interconnectedness and biological and cultural diversity, and regard the earth as a living organism and humans as yet another part of the community of life on earth. Finally, they often oppose hegemonic discursive practices by resisting patriarchal language, very much in tune with the embodied theory about language put forward by radical feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Audre Lorde and Mary Daily, to mention but some. This being said, it is true that, differences apart, the divergent strategies for social change prompted by socialist and cultural ecofeminists are by no means incompatible. Instead, they should be regarded as complementary, as their means often overlap, and their targets are the same, namely, to fight against oppression and in favour of planetary survival. Moreover, ecofeminism's apparent incoherence should be seen as a sign of the movement's vitality and all-inclusiveness, rather than as the main reason to reject it altogether.

Another issue worth considering is the fact that ecofeminism has often been considered to be a Western movement with "non-Western links" (D'Cruz, 59), or at most an "earth-wide network of connections" (Haraway 1991, 187). Ecological activism by so-called "third-world women" should therefore be taken into more serious consideration, firstly because different places and social contexts demand different strategies, and secondly because it is only by acknowledging this diversity that ecofeminism can become a global and effective network of resistance against the ecological degradation prompted by the combination of the lethal effects of patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism.

The Kindness of Birds as a "Third World" Cultural Ecofeminist Text

Taking all that has been said into consideration, Bobis's collection could be seen as a literary example of third-world cultural ecofeminism, since a number of female characters in it advocate, and actually embody, the earth-based spirituality and communion with nature that characterise Indigenous cultures such as the Filipino one, whose ancestral stories regard the universe as sacred and whole, and uphold a "relational account of the self, which clearly recognises the distinctiveness of nature but also our relationship and continuity with it" (Plumwood 1991, 29). To make this possible, they establish the ways in which all things, animate and inanimate, should live and remain interconnected so as to maintain order and sustainability, and describe the shaping and developing of the world as people know and experience it through the activities of powerful nature creatures and forces. This is how Vicky Grieves defines Indigenous spirituality:

> Spirituality is a feeling, with a base in connectedness to the past, ancestors, and the values that they represent, for example, respect for elders, a moral/ethical path. It is about … experiencing community and connectedness with land and nature including proper nutrition and shelter. Feeling good about oneself … . It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and "deep wellbeing." (365)

The cosmovision advocated by cultural ecofeminists, and by extension Indigenous cultures, clearly show affinities with the so-called ethics of care as initially formulated by critics such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Virginia Held (2006), who hold that moral action centres on interpersonal relationships and care/benevolence as a virtue. In particular, it strongly encapsulates an ethics that allows for "both continuity and difference and for ties to nature which are expressive of the rich, caring relationships of kinship and friendship" (Plumwood 1991, 16). This clearly implies a radical view of human nature that propounds interconnectedness and empathy as the driving force that can alone save us, and by extension the planet we inhabit. In keeping with this, an idea which is constantly brought to the fore in the collection is that the universe is the "web into which all of us are born" (77), without exception, and that "we must all be connected, duly life-linked. It's the rope to trust: tenderness to make us kinder, kindness to keep us safe" (76). Human contact, affection and communication are quintessential, for they alone allow us to belong in a community and make our lives meaningful and possible.

Several are the figures that embody all of these pre-modern Indigenous values in this collection. In addition to references to Aboriginal knowledge, as when Wadi Wadi poet Aunty Barbara reveals that Mount Keira and Mount Kembla are Grandmother Mountain and Grandfather

Mountain respectively, in charge of looking after all who live and come to Wollongong (202), there are three female Filipino characters that deserve special mention: Corazón (Corin), Lola Paela and Luningning (Lou). Corazón is a cleaner of the House of Representatives in Canberra who happens to be "kin of crow" (12). On account of this parentage, she has been endowed with "a precious gift: *pag-aram*, knowing," that is, the secret "gift of healing" (12), which is passed on from one female generation to the next. One day, while she and her friend Orla are doing their job, hailstones outside mortally wound a crow, which Corazón soon rescues and wraps up in her white scarf. Interestingly, this crow is very similar to that which some time before had prevented Orla's abusive husband from raping her by hitting once and again the picture window against which he was trying to corner her. Corazón knows that "*it is she who must make it right*" through "that inner graciousness that helps us to be kind" (23; original emphasis). She picks up the bundled white shawl and breathes out an incantation, her mother's, with the result that the bundle finally opens: the crow has come back to life and turned white. Moreover, this creature scatters "infinitesimal white feathers" (25) that will later on get stuck to the sleeves and soles of the MPs in the chamber, producing an astonishing effect: these men get rid of their usual aggressiveness and suddenly become "polite," "bipartisan" and "caring" (25).

For her part, Lola Paela masters "avian-human kinship" (154): she teaches to her grandson the songs and calls of the birds on their volcano, Mayon, so that they "can call them back if they start leaving … so they don't disappear from the face of the earth" (149). It was one of those birds, her mother *Berdeng Púnay*, that actually warned her that the volcano was about to erupt, thus saving their lives. Lola Paela belongs to the Agta people, the Indigenous hunter-gatherers of Mount Isarog, another volcano in the region, so often despised and ill-treated by the *mestizo* community. She tells children the story of Princess Daragang Magayon, after whom the volcano Mayon was named, and of the dove that saved her: the princess died at her wedding with her boyfriend because bad Pagtuga wanted to marry her instead and attacked both of them in revenge. Yet, someone very special also attended the wedding: Daragang Magayon's great-great-great-grandmother *Púnay*, the dove. When Pagtuga's spear hit the princess, *Púnay* opened her wings and flew to her, held her to her heart and sang to her until the princess finally closed her eyes. And this is how Púnay got its colours and managed to save Daragang Magayon:

> That, children, was how *Púnay* got the red on her white breast. Like she's wounded too. So *Púnay* became very special, different from all other doves or pigeons anywhere. She became known as *Puñalada*, "she who was wounded by a dagger," and she still lives on the mountain to this day. She's still guarding her great-great-great granddaughter, keeping her safe. (164)

Lola Paela is, thus, kin of dove. The Luzon Bleeding Heart Dove, a most rare bird, feasts on her tree and gives her and her family protection, like Mayon, the volcano that emerged as a result of the princess's grave growing taller and taller. Finally, Luningning (Lou for the Australians) is related to owls: when she was born, a *kwaw*, an owl, cried outside the window, and the *partera* told her father that owl was her twin. Hence her nickname Grandma Owl. Yet, her father thought that owls were "omens of death" (178). This is the reason why she, a devout Catholic, sometimes blames herself for the death of her son in a car accident, and keeps a rosary close to her collection of porcelain owls: "to counter the bad luck" (179). It will be up to her Filipino friend Matilda to make up for her father's belief and change Luningning's mind by asserting that white barn owls are a big help for farmers, as they eat the mice that eat their

wheat: they are "angels … not bad luck" (179). The story closes with her grandson Victor, with whom she must be confined during the COVID lockdown, drawing a picture of Grandma Owl standing up to, and actually defying, the Coronavirus, thus making it clear that he regards his grandmother as a powerful protecting figure.

In the very last short story, significantly titled "Ode to Joy," Nenita confesses that she has been moving all the time, and that birds have always followed her, or she has followed them: "Always, there was a bird encounter, inspiring or presaging something" (207). Birds have taught her that to sing together, notwithstanding our differences, is all that matters, "to sing not only with our kind. To sing even with the invisible, the unknown. But always to sing. Both ways, all ways" (148). This is why she feels the compulsive need to tell and listen to stories, because

> she thinks of the kindness of the storyteller and the listener, the kindness of the mouth and the ear. One gifts a story, the other gifts back a trusting ear. Only then can story grow. And prosper. … We speak, we see, we believe. Together. (80-81)

Birds seem to function as the ultimately subtle but omnipresent link between the different and apparently disconnected stories in the collection. It is birds that teach humans how to find "grace in balance," how to have our "feet steady on something so thin, so tenuous" as our life on earth (216). Birds are also related to the vegetable realm, as when they, significantly enough, are equated with apples, thus adding a further layer of meaning to the well-known colloquial Australian expression: "She'll be apples, she'll be birds" (35). In tune with the main arguments prompted by well-known ecocritics such as Donna Haraway (2003), the recurrence of birds and their connection with plants undoubtedly points to the human need to discard anthropocentric views in order to connect and learn from all sorts of non-human beings so that planetary love across continents, cultures and species can pave the way for a kinder global future. A future in which kindness is by no means selective, and strives to fight against the effects of global warming, the spoliation of nature, the excesses of post-industrial capitalism and the consequences of pandemics on a worldwide scale. Furthermore, birds are constantly linked with marginal female characters, who partake of the same need to show kindness and affection and do their best to "bond together" (178) because, as is clearly stated, "sisterhood can't be imposed, it's not easy … like all relationships, [it] is negotiated, we work on it" (178). The lives of women, especially of those who rank low in society, can be difficult but, as Nenita ponders, most of them often have the resilience, and the power, to turn bad situations around: "She often wondered why '*she'll* be apples' or '*she'll* be right' means 'it will be all right.' Maybe it's women who are often not right, or maybe it's women who know how to make it right" (219, original emphasis). Last but not least, birds and humans are even conflated with angels, in particular with the Angels of Care that Nenita associates with the nurses who looked after her before and after her surgery, to the point that they all blend into a harmonious caring whole: "Maybe angels are human birds or bird humans. Not celestial but planetary: of the earth, where we need them" (192).

Caring is what really matters because, as Sandra Laugier emphasises, "the human is vulnerable" (219). Vulnerability consequently defines ordinariness, and moral values like caring, attention to others and solicitude are regarded as quintessential to fill the void left by theories of justice and ensure the maintenance and sustainability of human life and the planet as a whole. The ethical focus is no longer the "just" but the "important," and sensibility is thus seen as a

necessary condition of justice, not as a mere add-on to it. We are made to draw our attention to our situation of mutual interdependence, analyse social relations as organised around dependence and vulnerability, and become aware that the contempt for ordinary life is often due to the fact that it is domestic and female. In Laugier's words: "The ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see, to what is right before our eyes and is for this very reason invisible to us" (218). It is an ethics that makes us worry about the environment as if it were a quintessential part of ourselves, and in turn of the whole human race, as when Arvis, Nenita's partner, phones the ACT authorities and writes letters of representation on behalf of the cedar trees whose existence is being threatened by the vans and trucks of the workers who are building a new apartment. It is his "devotion" that finally saves the cedars whose lives will no doubt transcend that of his and Nenita:

> "They're slow growing, so we won't be here when they're grown to their full height."
> "But there'll be others who will enjoy them. They're *everyone's* trees." (141, original emphasis)

Attention to human primary needs and the benefits of expressing proximity to the others, often through physical contact, are also foregrounded: "*To try and ease fears, even if it's a matter of touch*. After all, care is epidermal: skin on skin, we affirm our interconnected living and dying" (189, original emphasis). As Silvia Caprioglio Panizza explains when advocating what she labels as the 'ethics of attention': "touching, we are participants, more open to reciprocity and experience. … Touch is waiting (*attendre*), and it is vulnerability. It is attentive passion" (8). In short, the ethics of care/attention gives voice to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform unnoticed, invisible tasks and take care of basic needs—and more often than not these humans are women, particularly non-white women. Likewise, it implies a normative view that considers attention to be central, engaged, imaginative, directed at the reality of each particular entity and individual. To quote Caprioglio Panizza again:

> The exercise of attention (or its failure) has two main, interconnected, manifestations: one is that there are things that we may wish to ignore, but that in order to be morally responsible we ought not to ignore, the other is that, while some things are within our field of vision, we may not fully engage with them, we may "look" without "seeing," and ignore certain aspects, block our sympathy, avoid exercising the imagination, and so on. Attention involves not just "knowledge," but also … acknowledgment. (2)

As Bobis's collection, and Indigenous cultures in general claim, together with a number of Western critics like Amy Elias and Christian Moraru (2015) and Rosi Braidotti (1994), to mention but some, it is only by believing in the interrelationality between 'ecology' and 'planetarity' and acknowledging that we are all 'nomadic subjects' that we will be able to become one with the universe and realise that we cannot possibly possess the earth, as we are always in transit. Yet, this does not exempt us from the ethical obligation to sing the universal song or tell the communal story that can alone make us aware of our own frailty, and thus of our binding and impending need to care and profess kindness towards the rest of creatures, human and non-human alike.

The Kindness of Birds as a Narrative of the Limit

Last but not least, since this collection posits new kinds of anti-establishment (aesth)ethics, it could also be labelled as "a narrative of the limit," relying on the term coined by Rodriguez Magda in "The Crossroads of Transmodernity" (2019). In this essay, this philosopher distinguishes between "narratives of celebration" and "narratives of the limit": whereas the former reiterate the dominant discourse and make it hegemonic, the latter attempt to think what has not been conceptualised yet, both as regards form and content, thus marking the advent of a paradigmatic turn towards the new understanding of the very notions of liminality and relationality in an ever-increasing globalised world (28). *The Kindness of Birds* is a hybrid text that conflates such diverse genres as fiction, testimony and (auto)biography. Yet, although its pervasive autobiographical content cannot possibly be denied, this is by no means a conventional autobiography. The family and immigrant traumas that every now and then can be glimpsed in the stories that make up the collection demand that an altogether different kind of genre should be used, namely, what Leigh Gilmore describes as "a limit-case." As Gilmore explains (6-7), concomitant with the experience of trauma are the numerous difficulties that inevitably crop up when trying to articulate it. The relation between trauma and representation, especially through language, is clearly problematic. On the one hand, trauma is regarded as the unrepresentable, as being crucially beyond language; language cannot possibly describe it, and trauma systematically confronts it with its deficiency. On the other, language is posited as the best means whereby the traumatised individual can be healed. In other words, language is put forward as that which can encapsulate trauma even as it is formulated as that which fails in the face of it. This paradox puts the writer at a crossroads: since testimonial projects require subjects to make public and shareable a private and unbearable pain, and by extension to become exposed to judgements about its veracity and relevance, one plausible solution to sort out this problem is to rely on limit-cases, that is, to produce texts that "move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography's central questions" (Gilmore, 7). To put it differently, limit-cases turn not writing a conventional autobiography into an achievement by claiming autobiography's impossibility and revising the testimonial imperative. To quote Gilmore's words:

> An engagement with autobiography (its conventions, problems, questions, and demands) is both a recognizable and significant feature of texts that do not readily conform to the genre of autobiography. [These texts] are rather less concerned with enumerating the boundaries to which one can point between autobiography and fiction, autobiography and history … or autobiography and theory. Rather they confront how the limits of autobiography, multiple and sprawling as they are, might conspire to prevent some self-representational stories from being told at all if they were subjected to a literal truth test or evaluated by certain objective measures. (14)

Limit-cases conflate self-representation and the representation of trauma, thus highlighting the productivity of the limit and the liminal, which allow the fictive and the autobiographical to traverse each other and coexist in a sort of impossible balance. For his part, Laurence Buell distinguishes between two main strains when classifying autobiographies: texts in which the autobiographer offers the detailed and complex narrative of a portion of her or his life, and texts that have a strong autobiographical dimension but do not qualify as autobiography but rather dwell at its limit. Interestingly, Buell concludes, creative writers prefer the latter autobiographical mode to the conventional autobiographical genre.

This is, no doubt, the case in question here, but with one interesting peculiarity: the main trauma that recurs in this collection is that of the author's difficult relationship with her mother, and this is not the only text in which this occurs. Similar allusions can also be found in previous works, in particular in her novels *Banana Heart Summer* (2004) and *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012), which undoubtedly points to the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship as a site of enigmatic trauma. In the light of the above, it could be argued that Bobis's project of self-representation becomes open-ended, susceptible to constant repetition and incapable of completion, as is the case of another well-known author like Jamaica Kincaid. According to Gilmore (96), Kincaid's practice of serial autobiography, that is, autobiography beyond a single text, puts the limits of the genre to the test by creating what could be labelled as endless autobiography. Autobiography is, above all, a self-representational practice through which a subject-in-process is articulated. Yet, in the case of serial autobiography the process is a bit more convoluted. As Gilmore has put it:

> This construction occurs in two locations of becoming: in one is the subject-who-writes; in the other, the subject-in-the-text. They are joined to each other in this emergence-through-enactment, and form a representational figure capable of signifying beyond any single text. … This new self-representational figure … does not suggest a one-to-one correspondence between real and represented life. Instead, this figure, as a representation of identity, is capable of crossing all kinds of boundaries, including the boundaries of discrete texts, to extend the autobiographical into an intertextual system of meaning. (97-98)

This self-representational figure reappears once and again in the autobiographical scene, but neither as an exclusively recurring fictional character nor as the autobiographer herself in different phases of her life. Instead, it becomes recognisable on account of the preoccupations/trauma that it systematically encapsulates across texts. In the case of Bobis, it is her abiding belief that her mother did not show her enough affection, and often reserved for her the harshest treatment. Being the eldest daughter, the burden of caring for her siblings fell on her and, to make matters worse, she had to put up with the fact that her youngest brother, whose behaviour towards the rest of the family left much to be desired, was nevertheless her mother's favourite (Bobis, 105, 126). In Bobis's writings, this is an injustice impossible to forget, with the result that, to quote Gilmore again, "the autobiographical scene … can never be fully or finally written. … There will be no last words. There will always be a mother" (115).

In the collection under analysis, this self-representational figure most often goes by either "she" (third-person singular) or the Nenita character, which might be seen as one and the same entity. Only once does "I" (first-person singular) appear, significantly in the short story titled "My Father's Australia," some sort of moving elegy in which the death of the father of Bobis's self-representational entity is mourned, at the same time as his hard life, generosity, tenderness and wish to "go ghosting" (99), that is, to travel and visit new places like Australia, are celebrated. Her father is depicted as a caring man who always tried to make up for his wife's emotional limitations: "Let's hope we remember the kindness and that we remember kindly. My father was trying to appease unhappiness and perhaps my mother did not know how to handle her eldest daughter's broken heart" (95). It is as if only the implied author's deep love and gratitude to her father can cross the threshold of deferral to openly disclose the autobiographical self. On the contrary, her relationship with her mother brings so many traumatic memories that the pain must be necessarily transferred onto other indirect figures like that of Nenita.

> [Nenita] returned to … her mother and her hands as quick to hit as her tongue. Always the blame, sometimes a bruise. "You're the eldest, you're to blame!" For her mother, it's always the fault of the eldest if anything goes wrong in the house or among her children. Even if they're all grown-up adults responsible for their own hurts and hurtings. Even if the eldest is now living an ocean away. That dark wing of blame still flaps around her and she's almost always undone. On the phone in Canberra or at every homecoming, still receiving her militant dressing down. (29-30)

This heart-breaking sorrow feels like a "bird in her chest. Unsure if it could fly out" (113). All that this self-representational figure asks for in order to work through her trauma is some kind of repentance on the part of her mother:

> Acknowledge that broken kid, mother. Please. Perhaps this is the heart's need: recognition of its hurt and, if unsaid all those years, recognition that it's still hurting. For redress. Remembering the unkindness as much as the kindness, or the other way round. For balance. Oh the little flutters of the heart, its unlikely turns. (32)

Since this apology is never offered, this grieving daughter chooses to believe that "mother didn't know what to say or how to say whatever it was that needed saying" (114), and finishes up the poem that her mother left incomplete by inserting the expression "a kinder hand" (115) as her only way to fill up the affection gap that she carved in her heart. She felt like embracing her mother after she underwent breast cancer surgery, but "they don't really hug in the family, … they're awkward touchers, so she swallowed back all that's lachrymosal" (196). However, there is so much sorrow contained that, now that she is going through the same kind of surgical experience, only made worse by distance and the COVID pandemic, she cannot but burst out crying while muttering the words that could be seen as her ultimate attempt at reconciliation: "When I'm better, Mama, when COVID's over, I'll come home and replant your garden" (196). It is, yet again, only communion with nature and their mutual love of flowers and plants that can work the miracle.

Conclusion

Judging by all that has been said, it can be concluded that, in addition to being a good example of limit-case autobiography, this collection mainly aims at undermining anthropocentric and androcentric Western assumptions with a view to paying homage to non-Western cosmovisions, and ultimately advocating planetary love across humans, continents, cultures and species. In a word, it upholds what Catherine Walsh labels as "relationality" (namely, "the awareness of the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part) with territory or land and the cosmos" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 1). Bobis's stories demand that new ways to relate to our human and non-human Others should be conceived and enforced to allow for the encouragement of mutual cooperation, and ultimately the survival of life on the earth as we know it. After all, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos optimistically affirms, this is "a time when mismatches and conflicts are as potentially destructive as encounters and convergences are potentially and mutually enriching" (439).

Luckily, in keeping with the transmodern paradigm shift explained before, this pre-modern belief has partly taken hold on a number of Western scholars, such as psychologist Martin L. Hoffman (2000), biologist Edward O. Wilson (1984) and sociologist Jeremy Rifkin (2009),

who claim that, in opposition to most official discourses, which have always put the emphasis on social conflict and wars as the true engines of human history, it must be argued that it is the "hundreds of small acts of kindness and generosity" which characterise the everyday world that constitute the "very means by which we create social life and advance civilization" (Rifkin, 10). Empathy, Rifkin goes on to argue, makes us aware of our shared vulnerability, at the same time as it reinforces and deepens our own sense of selfhood, with the result that this combination, together with a "greater exposure to diverse others," dovetails into "a greater likelihood of extended empathy" (41-42). As a matter of fact, it was in the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II that humanity, above all in the Western world, decided to extend empathy to groups of human beings so far regarded as less than human (women, homosexuals, the disabled, non-white people, ethnic and religious minorities), and articulate and enforce social rights and policies, human rights laws, even regulations to protect animals. The problem is that, unfortunately, this empathic consciousness, apart from being anything but widespread, the rise of ruthless autocracies and war conflicts in the world being good evidence of this, "comes right at the very moment in history when the same economic structures that are connecting us are sucking up vast reserves of the Earth's remaining resources to maintain a highly complex and interdependent urban civilization and destroying the biosphere in the process" (24). And here lies the paradox because, as Rifkin concludes, "just as we [were] beginning to glimpse the prospect of global empathic consciousness we [found] ourselves close to our own extinction" (25-26). The question is whether this consciousness may come too late. As Bobis's collection tries to say, there is still time to make a change, to take our kindness throughout the world, as if we could embrace the whole universe, as if we were birds:

> …
> Now open arms, give in.
> Let it lift you.
> Eyes to sky.
> For a start.
> Float. (224)

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