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# From the Impersonal to the Ecological: Critique of Neoliberalism and Vision of Ecocosmopolitanism in Wu Ming-Yi's *The Stolen Bicycle*

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## Abstract

*The Stolen Bicycle* begins with the story of the narrator's endeavor to retrieve the stolen family bicycle but slowly expands to incorporate more stories revolving around lost bicycles. These stories offer an alternative look into the material transformation of Taiwan and Southeast Asia during and after World War II. By turns sprawling and intimate, the complicated narrative entwines memories of personal loss around various historical developments. To read this novel as another testimony to imperial invasion or to subsume it under the genre of historical realism, however, would be missing the subtle critique the novel mounts against neoliberalism. This essay aims to tease out such a critique by examining the novel's inclusion of different narrative forms and its use of a detached narrator. I argue that by having stories of others included in his narrative in their own forms, the narrator gives up his control over the narrative and allows himself to be exposed to a larger ecosystem. And the detached position that he adopts further enables him to passive-actively participate in such an ecosystem. As such, the novel revises our vision of ecocosmopolitanism, a vision based not on a personal but on an impersonal form of ecological engagement.

**KEYWORDS** Wu Ming-Yi, *The Stolen Bicycle*, neoliberalism, impersonal feelings, ecocosmopolitanism

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## ***The Stolen Bicycle as an Environmental Novel***

Since his debut in the 1990s, Wu Ming-Yi has gradually become known as a Taiwanese writer who dedicates himself to refashioning the conventional practice of nature writing. In his introductions to both *Taiwan ziran xiezuo xuan* (*An Athology of Taiwanese Nature Writing*) (2003) and his book *Yi shuxie jiefang ziran: Taiwan xiandai ziran shuxie de tansuo* (*Liberating Nature by Writing: Exploration in Modern Nature Writing*) (2004), Wu revisits the genre of nature writing along with the development of Taiwanese literatures in order to refine the characteristics of the genre and redefine what he calls a “modern Taiwanese nature writing.”<sup>1</sup> In his nonfiction writings such as *Mi die zhi* (*The Book of Lost Butterflies*) (2000), *Die dao* (*The Dao of Butterflies*) (2003), and *Jia li shuibian name jin* (*So Much Water So Close to Home*) (2007), he applies these refined characteristics in his own nature writing, using motifs of butterflies and waters to unfurl “images of nature as change,” a practice that, according to Shiu-huah Serena Chou, “confronts popular belief in an orderly nature of balance as seen in both Taiwan and the United States” (“Sense of Wilderness” 159).<sup>2</sup> In these writings, Wu contests an idealized or romantic view of nature common in both Chinese idyllic poetry and Western pastoral literature. More significantly, he expresses concern about not only the land we live on but also the entire earth, thereby revealing the more ambitious aim of investigating how humans interact with other species in the biosphere and how this interaction often brings about environmental crises.

This ambition to revamp our current understanding of local as well as global environmental crises is embodied in Wu’s *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with the Compound Eyes*) (2011), a novel which blends fantasy with realism and features an imaginary spectacle of an environmental disaster in the form of a massive trash island coming from the Pacific Ocean and crashing into the east coast of Taiwan. The novel was published to great critical acclaim, both internationally and at home. This said trash island, as Rose Hsiu-li Juan keenly observes, is at once unfathomably fantastic and painfully realistic. The image of such a free-floating concentration of trash

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<sup>1</sup> Not only does Wu redefine the genre in the context of Taiwanese literatures, but he also conducts a careful analysis of how different but related terminologies narrow or expand the scope of this genre. See Lee Yu-lin’s introduction in his book for a succinct discussion of Wu’s efforts in this regard.

<sup>2</sup> See Chou’s essay for a more comprehensive account of how Wu resorts to a wilderness aesthetics in constructing such a “modern Taiwanese nature writing” and how this aesthetics is inspired by Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*.

“finds its real-life counterpart in the massive floating debris caused by the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, March 11, 2011.” It stretches for miles on end, floating with the North Pacific Ocean current toward the East Pacific Rim, and migrating to the northeastern areas of the world (81).<sup>3</sup> Juan’s observation brings our attention to the complex entanglements of human activities and environmental problems on the one hand and, on the other hand, alerts us to the environmental dynamics compounded by the tension between a local event and its global ramifications.

In her essay on the same novel, Chou brings to the fore this tension generated by local-global encounters, regarding the novel as “an epic tale that evokes ecological destruction of global proportion” (“Environmental Literature” 2). From the novel’s reception and distribution in the global literary market, Chou discusses how a cosmopolitan writer such as Wu adopts Western environmental theories and terminology as a way of “modernizing and aligning the local with the global” (8), and how this practice dovetails with the latest thoughts of ecocosmopolitanism in promoting a sense of global interconnectedness in the face of imminent environmental crises.<sup>4</sup> Regarded thus, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* strikes a balance between fiction and reality, avoiding being too didactic about these urgent crises and yet successfully allowing Wu’s environmental concerns to seep into his fiction.

At first sight, these concerns do not seem to have been carried over to Wu’s next novel *The Stolen Bicycle*, a novel which begins with the story of the narrator’s endeavor to retrieve the stolen family bicycle but slowly expands to encompass more stories revolving around lost bicycles.<sup>5</sup> By turns sprawling and intimate, the novel weaves different but not entirely dissimilar stories of personal loss and family history into a collective story which, as David Der-wei Wang describes, “records the quotidian passions of people, flora, and fauna as they undergo modernization—from Japanese colonization, which ended in the Pacific War, to postwar industrialization under the Kuomintang.” Similarly, Bron Sibree praises Wu for using “layer upon layer of quotidian detail, historical fact and human memory to

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<sup>3</sup> In her essay, Juan argues that Wu adopts a different tack to represent this spectacle of environmental disaster. Instead of following the sensational style favored by mainstream Hollywood disaster movies, Wu “steers away from sheer sensation and veers toward reflection and penetration” (81). Such an approach, Juan suggests, more effectively concretizes the environmental otherness and “discloses the uncanny relationship between people and environments in the Anthropocene” (83).

<sup>4</sup> See this same essay for a nuanced analysis of how Wu’s adoption of foreign cultural and intellectual traditions might overgeneralize all cultures and risk bringing diversified and localized movements of resistance all under one umbrella heading.

<sup>5</sup> The novel was published in Mandarin Chinese in 2015, translated into English in 2017, and longlisted for the 2018 Man Booker International Prize.

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fashion a vast vision of the history of not just Taiwan, but of the entire era.” Wu himself seems to favor this reading as well. In his postscript, he points out that this novel “has to do with the history of the Second World War, of Taiwan and the Taiwanese bicycle industry, and of zoo and butterfly handicraft” (368). Despite slight variations on emphasis, history and personal memory are foregrounded as the main themes of the novel.

But if we peel away the layers of history and memory and take a deeper look at the narrative itself, it should not be difficult to find what Anthony Vital perceives as “a new kind of concern for the environment emerging in the post-colonial era, one attuned to histories of unequal development and varieties of discrimination” (90). Read in this light, *The Stolen Bicycle* is successful in constructing a narrative of material exploitation during as well as after World War II in Southeast Asia and Taiwan. The stories it annexed, taken all together, offer an alternative look into how the material transformation in the region and the island around that time affects both humans and the natural world.

To read this novel as another testimony to the cruelty of imperial invasion or to subsume it under the genre of historical realism, however, would be missing the subtle critique the novel mounts against neoliberalism, against an economic system that functions according to a market logic and political rationality. In my view, an implicit critique of neoliberalism can be teased out in the novel, and I believe it is in the novel’s inclusion of different narrative forms and its use of a detached narrator that this critique manifests itself most fully. In what follows, I will first discuss the logic of neoliberalism—with a special focus on Rachel Greenwald Smith’s appropriation of the term for literary studies—before moving on to analyze the novel’s narrative forms and its narrator. I argue that by having stories of others included in his narrative in their own narrative forms, the narrator gives up his control over the narrative and allows himself to be positioned in a larger ecological system. As such, he is nudged out of the zone of the personal and placed in the domain of the impersonal, a placement which extricates him from the neoliberal logic of self-care and self-improvement. The detached position he adopts over the course of his narration further helps to solicit what Smith calls “impersonal feelings,” which, as my analysis will show, is not so much an expression of feelings as a capability on the narrator’s part to navigate into the realm of ecological interconnectedness and open up a vision of ecocosmopolitanism that cannot be compromised by clashes of self- or group interests. By way of conclusion, I will explore how the novel offers a wider perspective on our vision of ecocosmopolitanism, a vision that is based less on a personal than on an impersonal form of ecological engagement.

## Logic of Neoliberalism and Reconfiguration of Emotions<sup>6</sup>

Neoliberalism started to receive critical attention in the late 1960s and gained currency in intellectual conversations in the 1970s. According to David Harvey, it is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade,” and the role the state plays in these practices is “to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (*Brief History 2*). Although Harvey’s insistence on regarding neoliberalism as a political project devised by the corporate elites to “achieve the restoration of class power” (16) remains a prominent point of contention, his succinct description above points to some cardinal features of neoliberalism: the need of capitalist accumulation, the demand for free marketing, and the emphasis on the spirit of individual entrepreneurship. Put simply, neoliberalism values a system of capitalism that is non-restricted, individual-oriented, and at the same time advocates the least intervention on the part of the nation-state.

However, there is much more to neoliberalism than being simply an economic system of free markets and trade. As Wendy Brown asserts, neoliberalism is also a political rationality and “[its] organization of governance and the social is not merely the result of leakage from the economic to other spheres but rather of the explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality on these spheres” (693). In other words, the neoliberal logic of economic investment does not confine itself to the market, but imposes itself on other spheres of collective life, potentially subsuming all human activities to the capitalist logic of calculation and accumulation. What makes neoliberalism “neo,” according to Brown, is that “it depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as *achieved and normative*, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy—not simply as occurring by dint of nature” (694). Because of this imposition of norms, the individual absorbs—or even internalizes—a market value which prioritizes personal needs and fulfillment. Put differently, this political rationality

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<sup>6</sup> Theories and practices of neoliberalism are too complex to be rehearsed in detail here. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith develop a four-phase approach to the historical emergence of neoliberalism and literature from the 1970s to the turn of the century, an approach that, expediently but informatively, accounts for how “neoliberalism’s exclusive concern with the economic at its early stage is later extended to the political-ideological, the sociocultural, and the ontological” (5-12). My discussion of neoliberalism here roughly covers the first three phases and more or less follows the lead of Smith, who relies on several scholarly resources of this subject matter in order to dissect a growing body of literature which she calls “neoliberal novels.”

constitutes an essential mindset of a neoliberal subject and produces “citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’—their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions, whether as welfare recipients, medical patients, consumers of pharmaceuticals, university students, or workers in ephemeral occupations” (694). Sharing this view, Jason Read rightly points out that neoliberalism has been achieved “not by a transformation of *the mode of production* . . . but by the mode of subjection, a *new production of subjectivity*” (32). What marks off neoliberal subjects from other subjects is that they are conditioned by the economic imperatives of the free market in their pursuit of individual success and self-improvement, with or without realizing this conditioning themselves.<sup>7</sup>

With that said, this recalibrated emphasis on individual success and self-care does not necessarily conform to the spirit of rugged individualism, which places particular priority on self-reliance and independence from others. Neoliberal society, as Smith takes care to note, “requires and encourages engagement with others: it is, after all, under neoliberalism that we see the rise of social media and the premium put on networking and the acquisition of ‘friends’” (6). And yet, neoliberal subjects do not expand their networks out of a sense of belonging, neither do they make new friends just because they genuinely care for others. Their behavior is more likely conditioned by the neoliberal logic of investment in the self for better returns. This explains why Smith also reminds us that such a rekindled interest in relating to others is rarely altruistic in nature; instead, it more often than not serves the purpose of “the enrichment of the self (as opposed to the company, family, or locality) such that the development of the self becomes the primary aim of social engagement” (6). As a result of this social engagement in the service of self-interest, a greater emphasis is placed on the personal since a person who knows how to manage every aspect of his life is deemed successful and fulfilled.

As Smith sees it, there is a strong correlation between this renewed emphasis on the personal and the logic of neoliberal capitalism in that “neoliberalism amplifies this tendency for capitalism to individualize, casting individuals as exclusively responsible for themselves” (3). What interests her most is how the market-oriented thinking—its influence is not confined to the economic reality but has extended to nonmarket spheres—reconfigures the emotional life of an individual. In her monograph on neoliberalism and contemporary works of literature, Smith argues against what she calls “the *affective hypothesis*, or the belief that literature is

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<sup>7</sup> In the words of Michel Foucault, the neoliberal subject is “an entrepreneur of himself . . . being for himself his producer, being for himself his own capital, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (226).

at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience” (1). “Such a belief,” the argument continues, “coincides historically with the securing of neoliberalism as a political, economic, and cultural dominant in the United States” (1). As a result, emotions are “increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage, rather than as instances of authentic experience that fall outside rational control” (6). And this result, in her view, exerts a shaping influence on the development of literary studies in the age of neoliberalism.

In the past few decades there has emerged a growing body of literature which Smith loosely terms “neoliberal novels.” The focus of these novels, she observes, is no longer placed on the inner emotional life of a character but has instead been shifted to personal experiences which are to a lesser or greater extent associated with a larger social context. Ostensibly, this effort to place personal experiences in relation to communities and groups heightens a communal sense in which an emotionally bound identity is created and sustained. But this sense of collective emotional intimacy, when examined carefully, “does not in and of itself run in opposition to the primacy of the entrepreneurial individual” (41). On close scrutiny, this connection is more likely enabled in ways that serve the character’s own interests. Smith calls such novels “neoliberal novels” because the affective connections portrayed in these novels, despite the intention of their authors, often submit to the neoliberal logic of calculation and individualism. She maintains that “recognizing the presence of emotions, in art, in other people, and in the self does not challenge market-oriented thinking” because personal feelings “frequently become yet another material foundation for market-oriented behavior: emotions are acquired, invested, traded, and speculated upon” (6). In neoliberal novels, what often happens is that the affective investments of the characters risk getting caught in a self-reflexive loop where their emotional identification with others ends up circling back to themselves: they may revel in a self-congratulatory feeling about their personal success or they may wallow in their personal misery and hopelessness. In consequence, they often fail to place the interest of others in a larger social or ecological system other than their own worlds, rendering it difficult for them to have a productive encounter with other people—and more significantly, leaving them ignorant of other ecological forms of engagement with nonhuman species.

In spite of this tendency to give greater prominence to personal experiences and feelings in most neoliberal novels, Smith identifies some other neoliberal novels whose experiments with narrative forms and strategies<sup>8</sup> gesture toward a

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<sup>8</sup> An immediate question arises when Smith mentions the use of experimental narrative forms as a

countervailing tendency which brings to light what she calls “impersonal feelings”: impersonal in the sense that these feelings are not always privatized by a character, nor are they easily codified according to the market-inflected rationality.<sup>9</sup> These novels, though different in their subject matters and narrative strategies, all have their characters confronted with strange situations where their understanding of themselves and their feelings about others are not in line with their circumstances. They are, as it were, estranged from their own thoughts and feelings. They are then forced to go beyond the confines of their cognitive-affective system, opening their eyes to a larger ecological system which allows nonhuman species to come into view. And in so doing, not only do these novels challenge neoliberalism’s collusion with the all-consuming logic of capitalist accumulation, but they also problematize neoliberalism’s privileging of personal experiences and feelings.

*The Stolen Bicycle*, while corresponding closely to Smith’s observation of those neoliberal novels which solicit “impersonal feelings,” also contains an implicit

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characteristic of neoliberal novels: To what extent can neoliberal novels be treated as entirely distinct from postmodern novels? This question of genre is made even more complicated when the overlapping historical emergence of neoliberalism and postmodernism is taken into consideration. Because of this temporal coincidence, Harvey posits “some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism” (*Condition of Postmodernity* vii). He thus finds a significant correlation between the transition from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism and that from modernism to postmodernism: both transitions are characterized by the movement from rigidity to flexibility. Given his emphasis on the structural transformations brought about by economic practices, it should be no surprise when Harvey contends that the advent of neoliberalism paves the way for the emergence of postmodern cultures. Mathias Nilges, however, does not fully agree with this economic reading. In his discussion of fictions of neoliberalism, he addresses the relationship of fiction and reality—a central concern of postmodern novels—and suggests that the advent of neoliberalism initiates a “transition away from the experimental forms of high postmodernism and toward the forms of realism that have come to define our moment in literary history” (107). More precisely, he argues that “the fictions of postmodernism of the sixties and seventies have become the reality of the neoliberal present” (111). Indeed, many recent novels, though still maintaining a varying degree of complexity in the use of narrative forms, have departed from their postmodern predecessors in either constructing “fictional worlds only to expose them as artificial constructions” or drawing attention to “the artificiality of historical representations, or to the narrative devices that give shape to historical material” (Currie 2-3). In light of this view, it seems to me that even though *The Stolen Bicycle* does reflect upon the relationship between fiction and reality (via Meme’s letter, 46-49) and resort to multiple narrative forms and perspectives, it does not fall neatly into the genre of postmodern novels. Nilges’s distinction between postmodern and recent novels is viable; and yet, the way he funnels the latter into “fictions of neoliberalism” risks flattening out the individual differences of these novels. Smith’s use of “neoliberal novels” bypasses this taxonomic difficulty because what unifies these novels is neither their content nor their forms but their submission to the neoliberal logic of calculation and individualism. What matters most to Smith is how these variations of content and form are used to ensure the novel’s complicity in perpetuating this logic or to render the possibility of unsettling this logic. It is in this respect that I think *The Stolen Bicycle* can be labeled as a neoliberal novel—though Wu’s use of narrative forms is much more complex than many of those used in the neoliberal novels Smith has discussed.

<sup>9</sup> Further distinction between personal and impersonal feelings will be elaborated when I analyze *The Stolen Bicycle*’s adoption of a detached narrator.



critique of neoliberalism—a critique that is made manifest in the novel’s inclusion of various narrative forms and its use of a detached narrator.

### **Narrative Forms and Critique of Neoliberalism**

In his overall comment on Wu Ming-Yi’s works, David Der-wei Wang mentions that detractors “disparage his narratives as baroque, his novels as kaleidoscopes in which themes get blurred.” I do not agree with these detractors, but I think their criticism may have to do with the complex narrative structures Wu’s works often impress his readers with. *The Stolen Bicycle* is a prime example.

The novel begins with a parable-like prologue which tells a beautiful and yet tragic tale of a little girl’s narrow escape from an air raid. This tale serves as a key backstory to the narrative to come, but the identity of this little girl as well as the true significance of the tale will not be revealed until the very end. In the chapter that follows, the narrator chronicles all the stolen bicycles that are related to his family—five of them in total, with the first lost back in 1905 when Taiwan was still under Japanese rule and the third one directly related to the narrator himself. In accounting for these incidents of stolen bicycles, the narrator sometimes throws in historical facts and sometimes brings up family anecdotes, entwining historical events with family memories. This chapter also clues the reader in on the narrator’s obsession with nearly everything about bicycles and his determination to retrieve his father’s Lucky bicycle, which is lost since the day he disappeared into thin air.

The narrator’s obsession with bicycles leads him to a group of bike enthusiasts. One day, twenty years after the disappearance of his father’s Lucky bicycle, one of these enthusiasts, A-pu, informs the narrator of the whereabouts of the bicycle and puts him in contact with Abbas, to whom the narrator assumes too readily that the bicycle belongs. As it turns out, the bicycle belongs to an old lady named Shizuko; and to finally meet this lady, the narrator goes through quite a few other people, including Abbas’s ex-girlfriend, Annie, and Annie’s friend, Sabina.

Abbas and Annie are the two key characters who bifurcate the plotline into two strands. On the line of Abbas, the narrator learns about Abbas’s indigenous background, his acquaintance with a veteran named Old Tsou, and his father Pasuya’s experience in the Japanese Army’s Silverwheel Bicycle Squad during World War II (through two tapes recorded by Pasuya himself). On the line of Annie, the narrator first reads Sabina’s quasi-autobiographical short story, which provides more than a glimpse into the rise and decline of Taiwan’s butterfly industry during the 1960s and 70s; then the narrator learns about Shizuko’s history with another

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veteran named Mu, who fought the same war with Pasuya (though on opposite sides) and turns out to be the last person who sees the narrator's father; and finally the narrator understands Shizuko's admiration for Ling Wang, an elephant whose fate was intertwined with Pasuya and Wu during and after the war.

In addition to these two strands of plot, the reader is intermittently informed of what is currently going on in the narrator's family—particularly his mother's hospitalization due to a fall on her way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Also, interspersed among the chapters are seven bike notes which, as non-official documents, not only trace the evolution of bicycles but also provide a new point of entry into a chapter of colonial history where the evolution of bicycles is intrinsically connected to military advancement and urban development.

Parables, historical facts, family anecdotes, voice recordings, short stories, emails as well as letters—these varying narrative forms and mediums prop up a complicated and yet encompassing narrative structure which propels the movement of the plotline while simultaneously impeding the reader's immediate understanding of its meaning. In order to find his father's Lucky bicycle and to know all the stories attached to it, the narrator (and the reader as well) has to adjust his pace, constantly thwarting the urge to delve into a more comprehensive knowledge about bicycles, so as to allow other stories to come to him in ways which he does not anticipate and at times which he least expects.

Now let's consider the storyline initiated by Annie. The narrator is surprised when he receives an email from her, which is an essay that tells a story about a girl named A-hûn, who earns her living by making butterfly collages. The narrator cannot tell if the story is fictional or factual, and he gets caught up in a whirl of thought.

I read it three times, to make sure there was no hidden message. Then I started thinking about how—and if—I should reply. There was a chance her email hadn't actually been for me, that she'd sent it to the wrong person. It was also possible Annie hadn't even been the one to send it, that her account had been hacked or something like that. Either way, I wouldn't have to do anything. More potentially troublesome was the third possibility—that the email *was* for me. If so, my reply would determine whether I'd ever receive another. It might decide whether or not Annie would tell me what she knew about the bicycle. (107-08)

Wrapping his mind around who has sent this email or to whom this email was meant for, the narrator comes up with three possibilities but to no avail. And yet, this email opens his eyes to butterfly handicrafts. Instead of writing a reply

which would reveal too much of his eagerness to inquire about his father's bicycle, he does some research on this subject and is impressed by "such an interesting chapter in Taiwan's history [he] knew nothing about" (108). In response to this tale—which turns out to be part of a quasi-autobiographical short story written by Annie's friend, Sabina—the narrator compiles several notes which trace the development of the butterfly industry in Taiwan from 1904 to the mid-1970s.

The subsequent exchange between Sabina and the narrator, in my view, offers one example of how the narrative of the novel can be read as a critique of neoliberalism—not only in its content but also in its form. Despite their apparent differences in narrative forms, what Sabina's short story and the narrator's research notes have in common is a revelation of how butterflies and the butterfly industry in Taiwan are subject to the exploitation of capitalism. The research notes disclose a chapter of history in Taiwan's butterfly conservation and its impingement by the rise of the butterfly industry—an industry which is conditioned by the supply and demand of a global capitalist market. The export market from the 1960s to the mid-1970s demands tens of millions of butterflies every year and constitutes an important source of foreign currency during that time. As a result, the natural butterfly habitats in central Taiwan suffer and the butterfly businessmen "started to look for butterflies further afield, buying in the south and east of Taiwan, and setting up processing plants in the north" (121). As a corollary, this relentless demand for huge amounts of butterflies takes its toll on "Taiwan's butterfly handicrafts, and the butterflies themselves, once ubiquitous in the hills and fields, gradually took their leave of the era and the wild, never to return again" (121). The narrator's objective research is complemented by Sabina's story, which tells a heartrending tale of how A-hùn's family is torn apart when her father, because of the increasing demand for butterflies, "set[s] out on a solo trip up the creek to gather pseudo-Taiwanese disparate hairstyles, never to return" (122).

The narrator's research notes and Sabina's short story complement each other in exposing how the capitalist system emerges in the 1960s and how this capitalist expansion wreaks havoc on the family, the butterflies, and the land. And yet, they achieve this purpose in a way that does not replicate the "have-it-all aesthetic [that] is deeply consonant with neoliberalism" (Smith 101). The value of this "have-it-all aesthetic" is best embodied in neoliberalism's emphasis on self-care, a technique of self-management and self-improvement which is not restricted to one's body but in effect extends to other aspects of life. As argued above, by the logic of neoliberalism, a person is deemed successful and accomplished when he demonstrates his capacity for managing every aspect of his life. Applied to narrative studies, this value manifests itself the most when the narrator manages to tell a

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story in a way that consumes all details and absorbs all perspectives into a coherent whole.

The narrator in *The Stolen Bicycle* shows this tendency when he attempts to chronicle all the incidents of stolen bicycles into a linear family history; to compile a set of encyclopedia-like bike notes; and to continue the story of how he retrieves his father's Lucky bicycle in a straightforward way. All these attempts are more or less thwarted because stories of others keep coming his way in forms that disrupt the narrator's efforts to produce a single and monolithic narrative. The narrator is forced to temporarily forgo his control over the narrative and at the same time suspend his desire to tell the story he wants to tell. He has to adjust himself to different forms of storytelling, allowing Abbas's, Pasuya's, Sabina's as well as Shizuko's stories to come together on their own terms rather than as parts of an organic and organized whole. By following the one common thread that seems to bind all stories together—the fact that each story concerns a bicycle that is either stolen or lost—the narrator comes to the realization that his story is only a small piece in a much larger puzzle that he has yet to make sense of. In this process, he is constantly nudged out of his own world, where he is obsessed with bicycles, and is wedged into a larger ecological system where butterflies and elephants come into the picture. As such, he is forced out of the zone of the personal and placed in the domain of the impersonal. And this shift is facilitated by the novel's use of a detached narrator—a subject I will now turn to.

### **A Detached Narrator and Impersonal Feelings**

I have asserted that *The Stolen Bicycle* can be read as a critique of neoliberalism in that, on the one hand, the novel challenges how neoliberalism disguises capitalism as an acquired freedom, and, on the other hand, it also problematizes neoliberalism's tendency to emphasize personal fulfillment and imagine the individual as an entrepreneur. We can tease out this inherent critique by observing the novel's employment of different narrative forms and its use of a detached narrator. I have shown how the novel's incorporation of different narrative forms succeeds in placing the narrator, as well as the reader, in a situation where his control over the narrative is rendered infeasible and where he is drawn into stories which bring him into closer proximity with the worlds of others, nonhumans included. This placement extricates the narrator from the neoliberal logic of self-care and self-improvement, a logic which replicates the market value of a capitalist system and finds its way into a narrative in the form of narrative control. In what follows, I will examine how the novel's use of a detached narrator enables the narrator, prompted by

impersonal feelings, to further engage in an ecological system to the extent that an affective dimension is opened up in the vision of ecocosmopolitanism. To begin with, it is worth returning to the distinction that Smith has made between personal and impersonal feelings.<sup>10</sup>

In her rejection of the affective hypothesis and her call for different affective connections, Smith draws liberally from theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Sianne Ngai, whose affect theories prioritize formal properties of works of art over emotional specificities of personal experience. In her discussion of neoliberal novels, Smith takes issue with those that appeal to personal feelings because these feelings “function like personal property”—they are “personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self; they are managed by the individual but they are augmented by connections with others; and ideally they enrich the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion” (2). These privatized feelings, she believes, collude with neoliberalism in perpetuating its logic of calculation and its emphasis on the personal. By contrast, Smith sees great merit in those neoliberal novels which solicit impersonal feelings.

What Smith finds most valuable in impersonal feelings is their potential of initiating different affective connections which are more likely to challenge the logic of neoliberal capitalism and its emphasis on the personal. They are able to do so because they “do not straightforwardly conform to a market model, because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections” (2). Regarded thus, impersonal feelings do not merely mean a lack of personal feelings or an externalization of one’s feelings toward others. Moving from self-care to care for others, in this case, does not fully qualify as an expression of impersonal feelings. What characterizes impersonal feelings, instead, is their ability to point characters as well as readers toward unanticipated and unintended affective connections which will position them in a larger ecological system. These connections are unpredictable precisely because they defy the neoliberal logic of control and management. That is to say, emotional associations with others are not intended for self-interest. Instead, impersonal feelings are induced when characters or readers are confronted with a

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<sup>10</sup> The dichotomy between personal and impersonal feelings is not without its problems. In her discussion of individual novels, Smith always contrasts two chosen novels with opposite feelings, implying that these two types of feelings can hardly co-exist in one novel. As my analysis will attempt to show, *The Stolen Bicycle* presents a complex narrative, not only because the novel incorporates more narrative forms and perspectives but also because it portrays more complicated situations in which both personal and impersonal feelings are evoked.

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situation or thrown into an emotional state in the least expected way. Under such circumstances, they are exposed to experiences that they cannot yet make sense of; but still, they have to establish some sort of emotional connection with other parties, whether they are human or nonhuman.

Toward the end of her analysis, Smith places great emphasis on affective responses between the reader and the text, urging us to see literature as part of our ecosystem because of its “capacity to intensify affective connections to strangers, both human and nonhuman, [so] that it can be understood to be socially and ecologically relevant—not by instruction nor by the cultivation of empathy or any other recognizable sentiment, but by alerting us to the possibility that there are forms of knowledge that we do not yet know and forms of feeling that we cannot yet feel” (126). As sound as this conclusion is, I find that her discussion of impersonal feelings gets short-circuited because Smith stops short of exploring how impersonal feelings can be solicited by a character who, while confronted with an unknown and unpredictable situation, is willing to suspend his desire to manage or master the course of events so that he himself and other parties can all engage in a larger ecological system where a sense of interconnectedness can be created and sustained. Seen in this light, impersonal feelings are not so much an expression of feelings as a capability—a capability that allows people to passive-actively participate in a larger ecosystem, and to connect with other parties without subsuming or canceling out their thoughts or feelings.

The narrator in *The Stolen Bicycle* is in a good position to evoke such impersonal feelings and engage in such an ecosystem, for he seems to deliberately maintain an emotional distance over the course of his narration.<sup>11</sup> Although the reader has earlier been clued in on the narrator’s enthusiasm for bicycles, the narrator does not express too much of his affection in this regard. This seemingly lukewarm attitude may have less to do with his personality than with his style of writing: he seems to prefer a reporter-like tone and often resorts to historical facts and scientific knowledge when telling his story. Even though he himself is a character in the story he tells, more often than not he behaves like an objective observer who reports from the outside.

And yet, this detached position does no disservice to the narrative. On the contrary, it is because of the narrator’s withdrawal of his own emotional investment in his narration that inclusion of other experiences, human and nonhuman, in his storytelling is now possible. More precisely, these experiences are adopted in their

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<sup>11</sup> Viewed in this light, it may not be a coincidence that the narrator only reveals his family name Cheng passively—through a letter Abbas writes him—but never gives his first name.

own narrative forms and/or voices instead of being subsumed into those of the narrator.<sup>12</sup> Pasuya's voice recordings and Sabina's short story are two obvious examples. In the former case, Pasuya's war experiences in the forests of northern Burma are palpably felt through his own voice; in the latter, Sabina's reminiscences of her mother are conveyed through her portrayal of A-hùn. Even in cases where some experiences of a character are relayed by the narrator—such as those of Abbas and Shizuko—the narrator's somewhat detached position ensures the integrity of the character's voice.<sup>13</sup> Whether unmediated or (partly) mediated, these experiences of other people come into the narrative on their own terms and communicate personal agonies in ways that are relatable but not subsumable to each other. Although their stories (the narrator's own story included) bear some resemblance to one another and even get entangled in unanticipated and unintended ways, they do not become mere references to each other.

It is in this respect that the elephant chapters take on special significance. In these chapters, the perspectives of the elephants are included in the narrative in such a way that they do not function as mere absent referents reproducing human values or re-inscribing human sufferings.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the elephants are treated as sentient beings with their own thoughts, feelings, and pains. Their involvement in the events of human history (wars in particular) thus exposes a history of animal and environmental abuse no less cruel and devastating than the abuse suffered by humans. In "Forests of Northern Burma," for example, the perspective of the elephants is seen through Pasuya. The fate of the Silverwheel Bicycle Squad is somehow intertwined with that of the elephants because the elephants, like the bicycles, are used to advance military purposes. In his account of this treacherous journey through the forests, Pasuya observes how the elephants are frightened by

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<sup>12</sup> Language barriers—or the untranslatability of languages—might be another reason why many experiences of the others are presented in their own narrative forms. Because of its multiethnic background and its colonial history, Taiwan is an island of many languages; and it is not always feasible to fully translate one language into another. The narrator is aware of this language complexity when he explains that there are more than one name for "bicycle" and believes that "the word a person used for 'bicycle' told you a lot about them" (8). With this language sensitivity, the narrator notices how "Pasuya would use Japanese to tell the story and switch to Tsou to express emotion or describe scenery" and how "Pasuya's Tsou and his Japanese were like host and parasite, a tree covered in creeper, impossible to separate" (140-41). In translating Pasuya's voice recordings, he admits that he has "tidied up the translation a little" but immediately clarifies that he has "not taken the liberty of omission or addition"—only to add some bracketed notes to make it easier for readers of different backgrounds (141). As I see it, the narrator's emotional detachment from the narrative plays an important role in allowing this language complexity to be expressed.

<sup>13</sup> Stories of Abbas and Shizuko are mainly told by the narrator, although near the end of the novel the reader gets to hear Abbas's voice in a letter he writes to the narrator on his way to the northern Burmese jungle. The reader also learns about Shizuko's experiences through a letter addressed to her from Japan.

<sup>14</sup> See Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's book, chapter one in part two in particular, for a discussion on how elephants are used and misused in fictional writings.

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the bombings: “Sometimes the low boom of an explosion would cause them to stampede. And if a herd of elephants got spooked, they might fall off a cliff, or trample people to death like fallen leaves on the jungle floor” (212). Passages like this reveal how war affects both humans and animals in devastating ways.

In “Limbo,” the same event is seen through the perspective of the narrator, who seems to live vicariously through a particular elephant and provides an account of what happened to it during and after the war. What makes this account especially significant is that it reads less like a faithful representation and more like a visceral expression of the fear of the elephant. The reader not only sees the chaos of the surroundings *with* it but also feels *with* it the confusion, desperation, and horror on the battlefield. After the war, the elephant is transported to Taiwan but has been tormented by dreams which take it back to the painful war and evoke memories of the dead. The elephant, as it were, becomes a character in and of itself, not just a stand-in for humans or a metaphor for human sufferings (Huggan and Tiffin 169-71). We can argue that the narrator successfully becomes the elephant and makes its perspective credible because he displays the capability of impersonal feelings, which not only enables him to connect with a larger ecosystem in a less self-serving way but also allows experiences of other people or species to be conveyed through their own perspectives and feelings. In so doing, the narrative creates a rich texture which entwines histories of imperial invasion and capitalist expansion with those of animal and environmental abuses, thus making palpable the hurts and traumas inscribed in the psyche of both humans and animals while bringing to light the transformation of landscapes caused by military and economic interventions.

### **From the Impersonal to the Ecological: A Re-vision of Ecocosmopolitanism**

While the narrator maintains an emotional distance from the narrative, Abbas shows more personal commitment to the cause he is devoted to. But instead of opening himself up to a larger ecosystem as the narrator does, Abbas ends up being consumed by his own enthusiasm. Once an aspiring war photographer, Abbas used to travel to wherever wars and atrocities took place to document them with his camera. In a conversation with the narrator, Abbas explains why he gave up this career and opened a café:

Every time I got back to Taiwan with my photographs, I got a funny feeling there at the airport. You feel relieved to return, entirely unharmed, to a safe, predictable world where neither violence nor disease can overturn the orderly progression of the cosmos. You feel like you’ve laid down a heavy burden, but



you haven't really. Sometimes I think that in the end all art is selfish, that it won't necessarily change other people's minds—but whatever it changes, you yourself know best. After I came back from my last assignment, in Chechnya, I felt like I couldn't let myself see too much, not for the time being. (153-54)

On the front lines, Abbas becomes emotionally invested in the sufferings of other people while feeling frustrated for not being able to offer any immediate assistance. He comes back to Taiwan with his sense of integrity shattered and his conscience haunted by guilt. In this case, being a witness to the sufferings of others paradoxically forecloses the possibility of sustaining a productive engagement with them. Overwhelmed by personal defeat and guilt, Abbas retreats inside his own shell and concludes that “all art is selfish” (154). The narrative created by the narrator, however, serves as a counterpoint to this argument. In displaying his capacity for impersonal feelings, the narrator breaks out of the enclosing arc of his family story and brings in stories of others, presenting them with both investigative vigor and human and nonhuman pathos. As a result, the narrator passive-actively participates in an ecosystem and achieves a more sustainable sense of ecological interconnection.

The juxtaposition of Abbas's and the narrator's experiences may not seem entirely fair, considering their varying degrees of exposure to the atrocities of war. And yet, putting their experiences together may shed light on how productive affective connections with other people and species can be established. Abbas's career as a photographer brings to mind Susan Sontag's meditation on how photographs of pain and torture, instead of arousing people's sympathy, are more likely to numb their feelings and paralyze their actions. “Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order,” fathoms Sontag, “are those who could do something to alleviate it—say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken—or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we meant to be” (42). Bringing himself in such close proximity to the pain and suffering of others while feeling powerless to help, Abbas is wracked with existential worries induced by a sense of guilt and possibly shame.<sup>15</sup> Though unintended, his active participation in the suffering of

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<sup>15</sup> Contrary to common sense, feeling ashamed by the pain of others could be a blessing in disguise. As Tsung-huei Huang rightly points out, Sontag, despite her humanitarian plea to awaken people to the pain of others and to one's ethical responsibility, “fails to explain why exposure to distressing or appalling images would evoke shameful emotions” (105). Nor does she “further investigate whether the affect of shame can create conditions under which moral action becomes possible” (105). Extending Lacan's insight, Huang has cogently argued why the experience of being shamed by the animal's suffering can facilitate a productive ethical encounter between humans and other species.

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others gets himself caught up in a self-reflexive loop where his affective engagement with others ends up strengthening the emotional specificity of his personal experience and his vision of a larger ecological system is muddied by pain.

In contrast, the narrator, though not directly exposed to the atrocities of war, is drawn into contact with them in ways that exceed his intention and anticipation. What makes his position significant is that he neither assumes an air of indifference to these atrocities nor exhibits an eagerness to subsume sufferings of others into his own logic of storytelling. Instead, he assumes a detached narrative position so that the complexities of other experiences, either human or nonhuman, can be included intact in his narrative forms. In so doing, I argue, he displays the capability of impersonal feelings which allows him to passive-actively partake of a larger ecosystem in which unpredictable affective connections are rendered possible and feasible. Thus understood, impersonal feelings offer alternative means of navigating into the realm of ecological interconnectedness and opening up a vision of ecocosmopolitanism that is not compromised by clashes of self- or group interests.

## **Conclusion**

While discussing the feasibility of what she calls “an eco-cosmopolitan critical project,” Ursula K. Heise points out that “[w]hile it can be a helpful tool in some cases and for some people, the focus on the local can also block an understanding of larger salient connections” (62). A place-based imagination of the global ecology, though taking into consideration the varieties of local and cultural differences, risks compromising this ecological imagination of the global due to conflicts of interest among individuals and groups. Following Heise’ line of thinking, I would argue that an imagination of the global ecology based on personal feelings is also limited in scope, as it endeavors to manage and manipulate the outcome of this imagination to meet one’s desired end. And this endeavor mirrors neoliberalism’s collusion with capitalism and its emphasis on the personal. In this regard, *The Stolen Bicycle* is a critique of neoliberalism. More significantly, it continues Wu Ming-Yi’s environmental concerns in offering an alternative envisioning of ecocosmopolitanism which is based on an impersonal form of ecological interconnectedness.

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