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Ethical Dimensions of Precarity in Merlinda Bobis' Refugee Novel *Locust Girl: A Lovesong*

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In seinem neuesten Statusreport vom Juni 2022 schreibt das UNHCR, dass die Anzahl von Menschen die weltweit in erzwungener Vertreibung leben, 100 Millionen überschritten hat. Zwangsmigration gehört damit zweifellos zu den wichtigsten Themen unserer Zeit und fiktionale Texte, vor allem auch *speculative fiction*, können ethisch und politisch relevante Fragen innerhalb von Flucht- und Migrationsdiskursen aufwerfen. Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht Merlinda Bobis' Roman *Locust Girl: A Lovesong* (2015), der die Fluchtgeschichte der Protagonistin Amedea durch eine grausame postapokalyptische Welt erzählt und konzentriert sich auf die Zusammenhänge der Darstellung von politisch hervorgerufener *precarity*, *refugeeness* und daraus resultierenden ethischen Forderungen. Judith Butlers Ausführungen zu *precarity* dienen im Artikel als Grundlage, um die Situation der Geflüchteten im Roman zu beleuchten. Im ersten Schritt werden die Zwangsinhaftierung der Geflüchteten in Lager und ihre Kontrolle durch die Machthabenden, die über erzwungene Hungersnöte und den Raub von individuellem und kulturellem Gedächtnis bis hin zu Massenvernichtungen geht, untersucht. Darüber hinaus spielt die Ausbeutung der Geflüchteten, als pervertierte Grenzschwach, Sexarbeiter*innen oder im Handel mit Körperteilen, eine zentrale Rolle, um den ethischen Anspruch des Romans darzulegen. Zuletzt wird die besondere Art des Storytelling im Text als Widerstand und eine Form der kollektiven Geschichtsschreibung von den Rändern gelesen. Ich argumentiere schlussendlich, dass *Locust Girl: A Lovesong* auf besondere Art eine körperlich prekäre Fluchterfahrung erzählt, die klar eine ethische Forderung stellt: Die Notwendigkeit politischer Systeme, die für Nicht-Bürger*innen gleichermaßen arbeiten wie für Bürger*innen.



Embodied Precarity in Merlinda Bobis' *Locust Girl: A Lovesong*

In a status report on forced displacement produced in June 2022, the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, writes that »total forced displacement now exceeds 100 million people. This means 1 in every 78 people on earth has been forced to flee« (UNHCR, »Global« 7). These numbers refer both to those persons fleeing who would legally be considered refugees according to the *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951/1967) and those persons who are not officially considered refugees, but who are afforded subsidiary protection or are internally or otherwise forcibly displaced. Thus, while many people have crossed international borders and are persecuted as individuals or as members of a particular group, many more have fled from general conditions of violence, famine, natural disasters, or the effects of climate change. As cultural productions reflect on and shape the understanding of the humanitarian crises of their time, literary and cultural studies can add productively to political and social discourses of forced migration.

Given the current rise in numbers of displaced persons, it is perhaps not surprising that recent years have seen an upsurge in the publication of narratives depicting experiences of forced displacement and covering a wide variety of national and cultural backgrounds, contexts, and sub-genres. *Locust Girl: A Lovesong* (2015) by Filipina-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis is one such work. The novel imagines an alternative world in which its inhabitants grapple with existential questions of refugee ethics and forced displacement.¹ A work of apocalyptic speculative fiction, *Locust Girl* tells the story of protagonist Amedea, the story's autodiegetic narrator, who journeys through a fantastical, futuristic world, trying to navigate its political system and looking for an answer to the question why she, along with so many others in her world, suffers hunger, thirst, violence, and oppression. The world of *Locust Girl* features a complex political landscape. Political power is in the hands of the self-described »carers« who live in the last remaining nation state, the Five Kingdoms, and oppress the »wasters« (Bobis 103) or »strays« (73) who are born on the »wrong« side of the Five Kingdoms' well-protected border. Thus, the novel's population is divided into citizens and non-citizens, who are technically stateless. Amedea grows up with her father in one of the many

¹ In this paper, I am using the term *refugee* as Oliver et al., among others, propose in the collection *Refugees Now: Rethinking Borders, Hospitality, and Citizenship* (2019): »a generalized marker for statelessness and displacement« (3). This is not to ignore the specificities of legal refugees' experiences, but rather to foreground the commonalities amongst experiences of forced displacement.

Locust Girl does not refer to the characters fleeing with any of these (legal) terms (refugee, stateless, forcibly displaced), though all may arguably be applied. In avoiding the legal terminology, while narrating characters that might indeed fall under the various categories, the novel stresses the similarities of the ethical demands the various experiences issue.

refugee camps in a barren, desert landscape outside the Five Kingdoms, forced to eat sand-locusts to survive. Though Amedea, as a child, has never known any other home, many of the adults have been forcibly placed and confined in the camps. When some of the adult refugees dare to move towards the border in search for a better life, the Five Kingdoms' various ruling ministers give the command to bomb the encampment, killing all its residents but Amedea, who falls into a magical slumber underground. When she is awakened ten years later by another refugee girl, who quite literally unburies her, Amedea in size still resembles the nine-year-old girl she was when her home was obliterated. However, a live locust has embedded itself in her brow, marking her as the eponymous locust girl and as an outsider even to her own community of refugees.

As the narrative progresses, the reader follows Amedea's journey through the wastelands on her side of the border, as she learns the stories of her people and regains their and her own lost memories, which she physically conserves in her body through the locust. Amedea eventually crosses the border into the Five Kingdoms, piecing together and saving within herself even more of the history that led to the oppressive present. Because she has crossed the border, she is eventually brought before a court of law whose only purpose is to uphold the status quo and current political system. In this space of (in)justice, Amedea's final metamorphosis into Locust Girl takes place: when she understands that she, like every other accused, will not have a fair hearing, she starts compulsively singing all the stories and memories her body now contains. She thus makes sure that everyone finally witnesses them, even though the practice of singing and storytelling has long been forbidden by those in power, in fear of its revolutionary potential. Amedea, it turns out, has collected so many stories that she cannot »bear the strain« of singing them all, which is why she must »burst and [catch] fire« (Bobis 173). From the remains of her burnt body, she finally rises in her full locust form, having completed the metamorphosis by sacrificing her human body in hopes of inspiring her listeners to imagine and work for a just future for everyone. As this summary shows, the novel narrates Amedea's precarious existence as a refugee in such a way that her transformation into Locust Girl ultimately encompasses the experiences of many displaced individuals within the storyworld. Though this device, the novel foregrounds a relationality within, but also beyond the refugee population that claims both individual as well as collective political responsibility.

Locust Girl has received some critical attention in the last few years within an academic discourse of forced displacement, with Dolores Herrero discussing it in her 2017 article »Post-Apocalypse Literature in the Age of Unrelenting Borders and Refugee Crises: Merlinda Bobis and Australian Fiction.« Drawing on theorists such as philosopher Giorgio Agamben, anthropologist Michel Agier, historicist and political scientist Achille

Mbembe as well as writer-activist Gloria Anzaldúa, Herrero outlines *Locust Girl's* relevance in an Australian national context, in which contemporary migration and asylum policies must be considered in the longer historical context of »White Australia Policy« and fears of a »Yellow Peril« (Herrero 953). She writes: »Australia's earlier attempts to preserve exclusionary identity, discrete binaries and forbidding borders has resurfaced since the early 2000s in response to increasing pressure from refugees [... The measures taken] included the establishment of offshore detention centres in 2002« (952). Australia's offshore processing of displaced persons was resumed in 2013, after a short pause between 2008 and 2012. Since then, all those who arrive in Australia by boat to seek asylum are sent to the Republic of Nauru or the island of Manus, Papua New Guinea (cf. Refugee Council of Australia). Even though the detention center on Manus was closed at the end of 2021, both centers were still in operation when Bobis published *Locust Girl*.

While Emily Yu Zong's article »Post-apocalyptic Specters and Critical Planetaryity in Merlinda Bobis' *Locust Girl*« (2020) does not deny the novel's »legitimacy in a national context« (Zong n.p.), she reads it »in a postcolonial planetary tradition, outside of the nation« (n.p.). Zong further claims that the novel »speculate[s] about a spectral future in which colonialist, sexist, capitalist, and ecological violence from the past (or the present) comes back to haunt humanity« (n.p.), as they arguably already do today, given that all of these are core concerns in contemporary discourses on forced migration. Especially the aspects of sexist and ecological violence are taken up again by Iris Ralph, who reads *Locust Girl* as climate-fiction, claiming that the »novel asks questions [...] about what specific human agents and agencies in Australia and beyond are most responsible for [climate] change« (67). This short overview of existing scholarship on Bobis' novel already reveals *Locust Girl's* thematic depth. Creatively imaging an alternative reality, the novel draws on fantastical elements, such as the embedded locust. The text's post-apocalyptic framework, though naturally deviating from a realist imitation, also condenses aspects of the readers' realities and mirrors many oppositions that are part of our contemporary world-order. One example of this is the strict separation of the citizens of the Five Kingdoms and the impoverished stateless and migratory population outside of their borders. *Locust Girl* can thus be called a speculative refugee novel. As Eva Menger suggests, who analyzes two other recent examples of the sub-genre, namely Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017), »speculative fiction can help us imagine the world of refugees in ways that other types of contemporary literature cannot« (92). This also holds true for Bobis' novel.

Following the idea that speculative fiction raises pertinent social, political, and ethical questions, I claim that the world of *Locust Girl's* refugees is one of physical precarity, a precarity that is emphasized not only on the level of content but also using specific

formal devices. In this paper, I argue that *Locust Girl* depicts an embodied experience of flight and refugeeness that implies a clear ethical demand: the need for political systems that function equally for citizens and non-citizens. To explain what this ethical demand entails, I will first briefly outline philosopher Judith Butler's thoughts on depictions of precarity and the ethical demands that follow from them. Based on this theoretical framework, I will present my analysis of *Locust Girl*, focusing especially on the aspects of precarity and the exploitation of refugee labor as well as commodification of refugee bodies, before concluding with a discussion of how the novel narrates storytelling as an embodied practice with the potential for empowering the powerless, including displaced and oppressed people such as the stateless or refugees.

An Ethics of Precarity

One concern of refugee ethics that is of particular interest for Bobis' *Locust Girl* is elucidated by Judith Butler's notion of precarity. In her article »Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation« (2012), Butler asks two main questions:

The first is whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance and what makes that ethical encounter possible, when it does take place. The second is what it means for our ethical obligations when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose, and must respond to solutions in language we may not understand or even wish to understand. (»Precarious Life« 134)

In reflecting the questions above, Butler considers philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt. For both, an element of involuntariness, of not having made the choice to encounter the Other, is central. The figure of the refugee – who is naturally highly relevant in Hannah Arendt's thinking – is one that comes to mind, when considering both »suffering at a distance« and »those we never chose« (134), as forced displacement is one of the main global issues of our times. One element that Butler identifies as central to responding ethically to an/other's suffering, especially if the encounter is involuntary, is that of recognizing their precarity, in our case that of the refugee. As, Butler argues,

[p]recarity only makes sense if we are able to identify bodily dependency and need, hunger and the need for shelter, the vulnerability to injury and destruction, forms of social trust that let us live and thrive, and the passions linked to our very persistence as clearly political issues [... S]ome ethical claims emerge from bodily life and perhaps all ethical claims presuppose a bodily life, understood as injurable. (147)

As she suggests here, one needs to recognize the vulnerable body of an/other to be able to consider the ethical demands that follow from it, clearly marking embodiment as political.

If one talks about precarious bodies and embodiment, such as that of forcibly displaced persons, it is important to note that

[p]recariousness and precarity are intersecting concepts. Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. [...] Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. (Butler, *Frames* 25)

A first apprehension of an/other's precariousness, meaning »a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition« (6), can be brought about involuntarily by a »sensory image« (Butler, »Precarious Life« 136). The kinds of images Butler considers in her essay are viewed by chance, for instance when watching or reading the news or scrolling social media; the encounter with the surprise image is involuntary or »nonconsensual« (137). It »comes to us from the outside, as an imposition but also an ethical demand« and thus »there are ethical obligations or agreements into which [none] of us have deliberately entered« (135). This ethical demand can be varied, but it necessarily includes questioning political frames that make parts of the world's population, such as refugees or non-citizens, precarious and vulnerable to violence and exploitation, while simultaneously benefitting others, such as citizens of a particular nation state. In her essay »Violence, Mourning, Politics« (2020), Butler further elaborates the recognition of the Other's body as vulnerable and argues that ignoring the inherent »relationality« (»Precarious Life« 23) that comes with this recognition would mean ignoring a fundamental aspect of our human and social existence. Examining these vulnerabilities and relationalities and the »bonds of solidarity that emerge across space and time« (135), she asks, whether »it [is] possible that we might [at the same time] be overwhelmed and *unparalyzed*« (136) by seeing these images of embodied precarity. Though the violence and suffering shown in surprise images are not experienced directly by the viewer and are usually distant both spatially and temporally, seeing these images can lead to an implicit demand for equality and can thus be a call to political action, Butler claims. Literary texts like Bobis' *Locust Girl* can produce a similar effect, especially when they employ narrative strategies that are unusual and thus challenge readers' faculties of apprehension and recognition in relation to issues such as refugeeness.

Butler's conceptualizations of precarity and the process by which it becomes recognized in and through images have been productively brought in conversation with fictional texts; texts dealing with forced displacement are highly relevant, as they may invite readers to consider how citizens and non-citizens are often framed as hierarchical in contemporary media discourses. Speculative fiction seems a particularly pertinent genre here with its characteristic re-imagining of familiar contexts that at first implies a safe distance from readers, only to then reveal gradually or in a plot twist that the alternative world of the story is in fact a distorted mirror-image of the reader's own world. Especially the question whether strong emotional reactions to a text can shock readers into considering their ethical obligation and possibly into (political) action is an intriguing one when looking at fictional works about refugees. In the following, I will trace instances of how Bobis' novel *Locust Girl* narrates embodied precarities, namely a violent management and exploitation of the refugee population, arguing that the narrated experience of flight and refugeeness issues a clear ethical demand that goes beyond the world of the text. It demands that there must be political systems that function equally for citizens and non-citizens.

Refugeeness and Embodied Precarity in *Locust Girl*

Locust Girl depicts the protagonist Amedea's experience of what Peter Nyers in the introduction to his monograph *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (2006), calls »refugeeness«:

The advantage of interpreting refugee situations in terms of *refugeeness* is that it highlights the very political process of becoming-refugee. This process is not a seamless, sudden, or otherwise dramatic shift from one static state to another (i.e. from citizen to refugee). Rather, it is a site of struggle, a continual process of identity construction, and one that highlights how the activity and practices of refugees are recasting the terms of ethical and political discourse. (xv, emphasis added)

Nyers' understanding emphasizes, on the one hand, the processual nature of becoming and being a refugee. On the other, it references the importance of refugee figures for the political discourse at large, marking them as Other in Butler's sense. Maria-Caterina La Barbera frames refugee-identity similarly, when she states that it is a »process rather than a property« (3). In *Locust Girl*, Amedea goes through this process of becoming-refugee in manifold ways: she is born into the group of oppressed and marginalized people, who exist outside of the protected border. Moreover, after the government-issued attack on the camp she grows up in, Amedea must survive on her

own and look for safety in a world that ultimately does not offer protection to refugees. Through it all, she is continuously confronted with having to (re)construct her own identity and being identified by others in various ways, never fully belonging anywhere. The narration of Amedea's experience as refugee, as a forcibly displaced person, may seem recognizable to the reader, not least from many media reports since the so-called ›refugee crisis‹ of 2015. My reading of the novel from a perspective of embodied precarity instead highlights how the narrative, not least through formal features, forces the reader to go beyond what they think to recognize as refugeeness, implying a clear ethical demand that has the potential to »unparalyze« readers in Butler's sense. In the following I will focus on three aspects that facilitate this call to action: the depiction of the refugees' precarity in relation to the oppressors' attempt to control and manage them, the exploitation of refugees and commodification of their bodies, and lastly the novel's unique form of an embodied telling of (hi)story.

Precarity and Forced Displacement

From the beginning, *Locust Girl* makes clear that precarity, i.e., the »politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death« (Butler, *Frames* 25), is a major element of refugeeness. One aspect of the refugees' precarity is an immobility that is enforced on them by the Five Kingdoms. Throughout the novel, Amedea and the other stateless characters go through alternating phases of movement and stillness, undermining a linear and simplistic understanding of forced migration as moving from a home nation to a potential host nation. On the diegetic level, *Locust Girl* begins with a phase of immobility. For the first nine years of her life, Amedea has »lived in the desert of many tents [... Their] halfway homes between heaven and earth« (Bobis 3). One of the many rules the inhabitants must live by reads: »No one should walk beyond the horizon« (10). This law is broadcast daily in all the camps and any breach of it is punished brutally. Especially those who were born in the camps thus do not know a world beyond their designated areas. This scenario is reminiscent of Australia's aforementioned offshore detention centers but also other refugee camps in our global community where people are often obliged to be stationary in protracted refugee situations (cf. UNHCR, »Protracted«).

Locust Girl foregrounds the desolation of this detainment further by its attribution of a specific color to each camp. In the novel's introductory paragraphs, Amedea's camp, for example, is characterized by the color blue. »[B]lue tents like water [...] The sun and wind rippled the blue cloth and [they] thought water! And drank up the thought [...] Amedea] was in [her] blue dress, also rationed like the number and letter inscribed

just beneath [her] right ear: 425a in blue ink« (Bobis 3). Altogether, the word *blue* is repeated six times in the first two paragraphs of the novel alone, which suggests an unusually monochromatic visual. Through the identification numbers tattooed on their bodies and their blue clothes, the refugees are visibly and permanently assigned to one particular camp. Beenabe, who becomes Amedea's friend after unburying her, also lives »in dull monochrome: all hues of brown« (10), »her wrap the color of dung« (11). This visual monotony of the refugees' physical surroundings, including their dress and make-shift housing, is ultimately a means to control their thoughts and hopes and indicates that the refugees cannot fall back on a functioning political support network. In fact, the ministers of the Five Kingdoms' are convinced that »[b]right tones make the eyes wish for more brightness« (10), which underlines to which level the oppressors exert their control over the refugee population. Thus, in Beenabe's camp »everything was rationed in ochre that's just like the sand, the sky. [It is] said it was a more colorful word than brown. So ochre it was, even the water barrels. And of course barley was ochre« (11), the only food item the refugees in this particular camp are then allocated. The camps' specific colors are linked to a lack of both mental and dietary diversity and once more to the refugees' bodies, further foregrounding their physical vulnerability in their statelessness and detainment.

The refugees' diet is similarly deficient in Amedea's camp, as the novel stresses: »[her father] took two mouthfuls of his sand porridge but did not touch the locust, then he walked off so the meal could settle nicely in his belly« (3f.). Likening sand to porridge in this passage might at first be read as a strange detail of the storyworld. However, through repetition, it becomes clear that it is not the name of an exotic meal, but an indication of starvation, which foregrounds the level of precariousness the refugees experience. When the reader meets Amedea, the rations in the blue camp »had stopped coming for a month. [Their] hungry mouths were gnawing at top sand, worrying the earth, and the grey, underground locusts were burrowing too deep beyond [their] reach« (5). The first few pages of the novel are teeming with mention of both thirst and hunger as well as the fact that the camp's inhabitants are completely dependent on the Five Kingdoms' rations. These repetitions can be read as a means to invite the reader to acknowledge the refugees' precarity. Later in the novel, the Minister of Mouths claims that »[h]unger is a non-word now, except for those who wish to stir up resentment for their own vested interest« (164). When contrasted with the narrated experience of the refugee population, this emphasizes the degree of violence and suffering they must endure at the hands of the Five Kingdoms.

Starvation is employed by the Five Kingdoms as a means to leave the refugee population both physically and mentally weakened and less likely to successfully escape

from the camps. They are managed through conditions of »bodily dependency and need, hunger and the need for shelter« (Butler, »Precarious Life« 147) from the very beginning. Moreover, not merely starved and imprisoned, the population on Amedea's side of the border has been poisoned by »ochre rain [that] turned the sun and sky to ochre. It made their hair fall out and their stomachs shrink. It was rumoured to be cost-saving rain. The Kingdoms did not have to supply lice poison any more or the usual amount of barley and water« (10). From the story's outset, the Kingdoms' management of the undesired Others is related to the refugee population's precarity. Anthropologist Michel Agier explains this kind of management strategy in his monograph *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (2011), noting that

[w]e need only ask what governing the stateless means today. This is simply a policing matter, which is being developed and perfected, and implies: (1) identifying the undesirable at a given point in time [... and] (2) »containing« them by keeping them at a distance. These two operations keep those who are captured outside the legal and geographical borders of the common political order, whose surface is that much reduced. (18)

This identification and containment strategy often results in a forced immobility, as statelessness often makes migration from one nation-state to another and joining another political order impossible. In a way, immobilization thus suspends the processual nature of becoming-refugee that Nyers elaborates, indicating a stillness and a violation of political rights on this level. *Locust Girl's* depiction of an arbitrary immobilization of one part of the population, both by identification and physical as well as mental containment, marks them clearly as undesirable by the citizens of the Five Kingdoms and unable to participate politically in an official way. This is also further indicated by a spatial distance between the citizens and the stateless.

However, the camps installed by the Five Kingdoms do not only manage the refugee population through the above-mentioned means, they are also depicted as spaces of extermination by the simple way in which all the refugee bodies within them can be annihilated.² Amedea describes one such annihilation event as follows,

Lights, lights! A shower of them dropped on our tents, our mats, our bowls, our spoons. They afflicted our eyes, our ears, our tongues, our noses, our skin with their song. Lights, roaring lights. Blinding lights. Not rationed for once. We had our fill.

Did I dream such abundance? Such searing heat?

² There are multiple instances in *Locust Girl* that draw analogies to the Holocaust, such as the tattooing of numbers onto the body of those detained as well as the planned, violent mass-murder of hundreds of people at the same time.

They shot down the stars

They shot down the stars

They shot down the stars

They shot down the stars

Black. The sky. The desert. And tents 1 to 500. All the colour of cinder. (Bobis 7f.)

This description of the bombing of the only home Amedea has ever known assumes a strange, lyrical quality, guiding the reader through the initial moments of seeing the »lights« and feeling the »abundance or searing heat« (7) and being unable to comprehend what they mean exactly. The pronoun »our« is repeated ten times in the above passage, connecting the refugees' sparse possessions to their injurable, physical bodies which, though desperately depending on shelter and food, are also exposed to be killed by more immediate, direct violence. The refugees affected by the attack on the camp are contrasted with the acting »They«, who »shot down the stars« (8), again stressed by repetition. Throughout *Locust Girl*, the passages in italics often indicate what the reader eventually comes to know as song and (hi)story. However, this is not explicated by the narration, but suggested implicitly over time. Official propaganda songs of the Five Kingdoms are included next to the refugees' songs and stories Amedea learns on her journey. When reconsidering the description of the annihilation of the refugee camp after becoming aware of the significance of the italicized sections, the passage may be read as a moment of making history from the margins as Amedea starts to compose her very own song, undermining the Five Kingdoms' »canonical« version of history that claims linearity and causality. By being detained in the camp, the refugees cannot escape the violence inflicted upon them, as the death of the inhabitants of »tents 1 to 500« (8) shows. The once blue camp is now burned to »[b]lack [...] cinder« (8). Again, this marks the underlying, inegalitarian system of power installed by the ministers of the Five Kingdoms, who allow for the attack, rather than supporting the refugee population. The attack already hints at the fact that the lives of the population on the margins of the Five Kingdoms are framed as »lives that are not quite lives, cast as »destructible« and »ungrievable.« Such populations are »lose-able,« or can be forfeited« (Butler, *Frames* 31) by those in power without legal consequence.

Much later, Amedea learns that the bombing of refugee camps is a means of population control that the Five Kingdoms regularly employ to prevent unwanted migratory movements. The fact that the refugees' extreme precarity culminates in the callous act of direct violence that is the camp's destruction is further emphasized by the lone survival of Amedea and her magical ten-year slumber a »hundred feet beneath the ground« (Bobis 8). One of the missiles rips a hole in the ground that becomes her »bed

or burial ground« (8). During her slumber, she remains semi-conscious and immobilized. This immobilization is amplified by the fact that Amedea stops aging physically, but mentally grows older during those ten years. Only after being excavated by Beenabe, the refugee girl from the neighboring brown camp who has dared to wander beyond her horizon, can Amedea start moving again. This representation questions an understanding of refugees as people who have managed to flee from violence in their homeland and are becoming progressively safer, the first step towards safety often seemingly being the arrival in a refugee camp which is organized and managed by wealthier neighboring nation states. Rather, *Locust Girl* shows that refugee-ness often entails precarity, a precarity that is brought about »precisely because [those whose lives are at stake] are framed as being already lost or forfeited« (Butler, *Frames* 31) by the nation-state that they are looking to for protection. This indicates an ethical demand for political responsibility and systems that function for both citizens and non-citizens.

Bobis' novel frames refugee lives as »lost or forfeited« (31) and thus precarious not only because they are destroyed but also because they are forgotten. Amedea narrates her experience of refugeeness in a manner that at times seems immediate, at times retrospect. Throughout, the novel's protagonist and narrator notices frequently that she does not remember her own past, which the reader first is encouraged to attribute to her magical slumber. Only later does Amedea learn that another elaborate technology for oppressing the population is responsible for her amnesia: the forgetting seeds. Bodily precarity and memory are linked in the narrative, as the seeds must be ingested. Food is rationed by the Five Kingdoms so that refugees are always almost starving; this ensures that they ingest the seeds which then repress their individual and cultural memory. This practice can be read as a violent form of »subjectivization«, which here

means detachment from everything except for the here-and-now. By individualizing refugees into experiencing body subjects, governing practices cut them off from familial and amiable relations, social networks, known histories and expected futures – from everything that attributes people as persons, that is, as intersubjectively constituting human beings capable of relating with themselves and others. (Häkli & Kallio 12)

Refugees are deprived of power and even their humanity by being deprived of their relations, Häkli and Kallio suggest. Judith Butler also stresses the importance of the »interdependency of persons, involving [...] social relations, and relations to the envi-

ronment and to non-human forms of life« (Butler, *Frames* 19).³ Similar to Häkli and Kallio, Butler argues that framing lives as solely individual undermines the apprehension of an/other's precariousness and the responsibility that follows from it, meaning that if every individual is responsible solely for their own life, there is no need to take responsibility for the life of another. Food consumption, a prerequisite for basic physical survival, becomes a mode of oppressing and individuating refugee bodies within *Locust Girl*, insofar as it means forced forgetting. The reading experience created by the limited narrative perspective mirrors the detachment the characters show because of the forgetting seeds. By sharing Amedea's amnesiac experience and her (re)learning of the world she has woken up in, the reader undergoes a similar learning process. At the same time, her continual becoming-refugee is disorienting to Amedea and ultimately also to the reader. In the beginning, the narrative only slowly reveals information, emulating Amedea's own lack of understanding of the world around her in the here-and-now of the narrative. One striking instance of such an initial lack of understanding is described shortly after Beenabe wakes her from her slumber. Only gradually, Amedea realizes that she is surrounded by the remains of the refugees from the blue camp:

I was looking around, needing to touch, to know things. But again my arms had wrapped around myself and it was agony to unwrap them, to hold for the first time the sticks and balls [...] I could not understand why my eyes felt watery and burning, why I hurt from chest to throat. I was looking at each stick closely, examining each ball, peering through its two holes and the third gaping one [...] Then for the first time I saw it, I knew it. >H-head< [...] >Head, head, head< rolled on my tongue that itched to ask questions. Questions I didn't even know and wouldn't know until later. Beenabe was struggling to prise it from my grasp but I couldn't give it up. It was listening to my heart, I was listing to its lack of song. How could she take this shared listening away from us? (Bobis 22)

³ The forgetting seeds are not only employed by the ministers of the Five Kingdoms to alienate the refugees from one another, but also from their natural surroundings. This can be seen in the example of trees, which are an aspect of the world that is forgotten or unknown to the refugees, depending on when they were born. The novel marks them as an important symbol within the narration, linking them to the oppression of the refugees' identity, memories, and imagination. This oppression of a relationship between the refugee population and nature has a notable impact on the people's embodied experience in their world. Thinking with Judith Butler, relationality between humans and the ecological environment is one of »the social conditions of persistence and flourishing« (Butler, *Frames* 20) that are necessary to counter precarity. In their weakened state, both physically and mentally, the refugees are robbed of any potential to imagine a lush landscape and the richer lives it might mean. Thus, they are more likely to remain stationary and be easily controlled by the oppressive government.

Here, the sensation of touching precedes knowledge (importantly life is described here as »lack of song«), as Amedea's embodied grief precedes the understanding of what or who she is grieving for. And yet, even though she does not know to ask whose remains are surrounding her, she instinctively feels a sense of belonging and relationality; even if she cannot remember her relationship to the bones and rubble consciously, she experiences it physically. Moreover, as the reader learns eventually, over the years, the »little concoctions [the forgetting seeds] have lost their potency« (171). As the refugees' bodies have grown resistant to the forgetting seeds, they start to both remember and hope for a better future again. Here, the novel implies that some (political) strategies that oppress and contain the refugee population are bound to fail eventually, leaving refugees with some agency, or prospect of regaining agency.

The Five Kingdoms' tactic of containing the refugee population in the camps by erasing their memories is thus ultimately undermined. Being unable to remember consciously does not mean that their bodies have not kept the sense memories. When Amedea reaches the Five Kingdoms after years of both stillness and wandering, she relays new and often still bewildering information about the political system to the reader in quick succession and they are finally receiving answers to all the questions raised in the beginning. Overall, the narration often either reveals the actual political circumstances much later or remains ambiguous and thus leaves it up to the reader to draw conclusions and consider the narrative's allegorical quality. This meandering narrative structure is mirrored by unusual shifts in narrative voice from Amedea as the autodiegetic narrator to passages that seem narrated by a distinct heterodiegetic narrator, focalizing various other characters. However, at the end of the novel and after Amedea's transformation into the mythical locust creature with a quasi-omniscient perspective, it stands to reason that there is in fact no heterodiegetic narrator. Rather, the seemingly »heterodiegetic« passages are told retrospectively from Amedea's own final, omniscient perspective, which results in a unique mixture of subjectivity and collectivity, as well as overlapping temporalities within her autodiegetic voice. The narrative perspective thus also foregrounds a relationality within the refugee community and beyond as one important means to combat precarity.

The gradually widening of narrative perspective parallels Amedea's process of becoming-refugee and then gaining agency, as she begins to reconnect her conscious to her body's sense memories, undermining the oppressive government's attempt to control the refugee population by robbing them of their social and cultural bonds and subjecting them to violent subjectivization. *Locust Girl* begins by narrating the refugee population's precarity, which encompasses various physical and mental violations that range from detainment to identification strategies and forceful forgetting and to

starvation and mass-murder. By ending with Amedea's freedom of movement after her metamorphosis is completed and she can no longer be kept from crossing the border at will, the novel indicates that the refugee population's precarity is ultimately the result of a long line of decisions and actions by those in power which may be avoided or reversed. Recognizing these facets of precarity in the fictional text can help readers draw analogies to the realities of forced displacement that millions face and urge them to consider what a functioning political system would look like for citizens and non-citizens alike.

The Exploitation of Refugees and Commodification of Refugee Bodies in *Locust Girl*

A further aspect of refugeeness and precarity of the displaced protagonists in *Locust Girl* is their exploitation by agents of the Five Kingdoms. This exploitation can be seen especially in the perversion of border guards, the trafficking of displaced people into sex slavery as well as in the trade of human body parts.

One significant way the refugee population of *Locust Girl* is exploited by the Five Kingdoms is as border guards. When Amedea finally sees her first real tree upon her arrival at the border of the Five Kingdoms, it is described as follows: »Up there are the leaves and branches, the leaves are green, the branches brown, and that is the trunk, it's brown too – breathtakingly beautiful« (118). These »breathtakingly beautiful« trees, though, are quickly revealed to be the physical border that separates the refugee population from the Five Kingdoms, a border that is the oppressors' »most precious invention« (164). This forest as borderland mocks Amedea in its beauty and elusiveness, as most refugees in the novel are never able to lay eyes on the border that separates them from the riches of the Five Kingdoms. It contorts a natural element of the landscape into a political tool of exclusion.⁴ This connection between trees and refugees becomes even clearer, when one links the question of refugee bodies to questions of border(lands). In their article »Bodies and Persons: The Politics of Embodied Encounters in Asylum Seeking« (2020), Häkli and Kallio write, »research on the government of forced migration reveals that governing practices work relentlessly to contain, control and organize where, and the way, refugees may appear in the realm of signification as well as physically on the borders« (3). The oppressive government in *Locust Girl* clearly tries to control and organize fully if and how any of the refugees are

⁴ These kinds of natural borders put in the service of political borders are familiar to the reader. The Mediterranean Sea can serve as a prominent example in flight discourses. It is at the same time a European vacation hotspot and the »deadliest known migration route in the world« (»Missing«). The Missing Migrants Project records more than 24.000 migrants who went missing while attempting to cross the Mediterranean since 2014, »though it is likely that many more deaths remain unrecorded« (»Missing«). These numbers illuminate, as just one devastating example among many, the intimate connection of borderlands and the bodies of those forced to migrate.

physically able to approach the border through the above elaborated means of detainment, management, and physical violence.

However, the novel goes even further in linking the tree-border to the refugee population, as the so called »tree caretakers were trained lookouts. Once they were strays [refugees] themselves« (Bobis 123). The role of the border guard is shown to be a perverted one. As the reader learns together with Amedea, the caretakers/border guards are in fact mothers and fathers that had gone missing from some of the camps. Driven by hunger and hope for a better future, they wandered towards the Five Kingdoms, being forced to leave their children behind in the camps. Instead of gaining full access to political participation and means of a comfortable life in the Five Kingdoms, they are exploited as laborers, whose job it is, perversely, to make sure that no other refugees cross the border. They will never be citizens of the Five Kingdoms, even though they are expected to risk their lives in protection of the nation-state and those who inhabit it. Again, the forgetting seeds are utilized to subdue the border guards and rob them of their memories and desires. When talking about »the guardians of the trees,« phrases such as »not allowed« or »they had been trained to labour faithfully« (123f.) are employed, making clear that the Five Kingdoms exploit the refugees for the nation-state's benefit, whether inside or outside the refugee camps. Not least, the role of the border guards »reveals the conditional hospitality in a nationalist discourse that can easily be withdrawn if the refugee other fails to prove her absolute loyalty« (Zong n. p.). The use of trees-as-borderland and the perverted border guards in *Locust Girl* can be linked to questions of precarity within refugee ethics, symbolizing a denial of full access to the potential host-nation and thus also a denial of the inherent relationality of a life.

The novel not only portrays the exploitation of some refugees at the border, it also portrays exploitation of refugees within the Five Kingdoms; inside the nation-state, refugees are exploited as sex workers, who are called »green trees« (Bobis 77), again linking them to the symbol of the tree. Verompe – the illegitimate son of one of the ministers of the Five Kingdoms and a woman who was presumably forced into prostitution – is responsible for one of the ration-operations on Amedea's side of the border and smuggles »green trees across the border« (77) into the Five Kingdoms. When reflecting on this human trafficking, he is sure, he is »doing them a favor«, asking: »When will they ever understand, these stupid wretches?« (77).⁵ The question and insult foregrounds the fact that these refugees are not smuggled across the border of their own volition, but rather trafficked into sex work. Like the trees that are used as a

⁵ This passage is one example for the abovementioned unique focalization on the past from *Locust Girl's* future omniscient perspective. This particular perspective emphasizes the changes Verompe will go through until the end of the novel, from mindless executor of oppression tactics to Amedea's ally.

border-wall, the positive connotation of the sex workers' designation as »green trees« (77) is ultimately subverted by the violent exploitation of refugees for the oppressors' pleasure. Ultimately, the case of the green trees, like that of the border guards, questions whether all those forcibly displaced are safe(r), once they have reached or crossed the national border they were fleeing towards. Rather, the novel shows that refugees' precariousness must be considered also when they are spatially closer to or have already crossed into a potential new home nation.

Locust Girl's most prominent depiction of a violent exploitation of refugees victimizes people outside the borders of the Five Kingdoms: the trade of the refugees' body parts for rations. This trade, a commodification of refugee bodies, is another strategy used by the government of the Five Kingdoms to oppress and exploit the stateless population and can be read as an extreme example of embodied precarity in the novel. Even though there is in fact an abundance of food and water in the Five Kingdoms, as Amedea eventually learns, the decision about how food and water are distributed is taken solely based on what will benefit the citizens of the Five Kingdoms. As has already been established, starving the refugee population is another means of management for the oppressors. While moving across the land, Amedea meets some of the few remaining refugee children who have escaped the camps. This is a rare occurrence as both malnourishment and the aforementioned poisonous rain are responsible for widespread infertility. The two children, two siblings named Hara-haran and Gurimar, include Amedea in their ploy to receive more rations. By far the strongest of the three, Amedea carries Hara-haran and Gurimar on her back, in turn helping them to pretend to be adults in the rations-queue, since children are not actually afforded any rations of their own. This is the first instance in which Amedea, and the reader with her, witnesses the rationing, thus discovering the true nature of this ›humanitarian aid‹ that capitalizes on the precariousness of refugees with the claim that

[r]ewards must be equally shared. Must be *reciprocal*. It was a big word that I would later hear in the Five Kingdoms. That I would see at work on the sixth day of the rations. The night before was freezing and afflicted with a new smell so foul, we had to plug our noses. The remaining hungry mouths whispered rumours that made the air whine beyond consolation. Distraught mouth to distraught ear and on it went, until the fresh rumour reached my own shocked ears. It was a rumour secretly blessed by the Five Kingdoms. A rumour that unfolded into a true story when the sun rose on the sixth day and the crowd crawled under the blankets to hide their limbs yet unclaimed by the great fires [the bombing of a camp]. When the silent men [responsible for the rations-operation] left the ruins to pick out the healthiest in line.

Rewards were reciprocal. Rewards were harvested under the blankets. Eyes here, last good leg there, maybe that hand with the ring. And deeper down, more precious parts that could be traded across the border.

What is yours will be ours.

The smell of fear rose with the sun. Among the men scavenging for a heart, a liver, a kidney, [the locust in] my brow decided to betray me. [Its] singing was now out for all to hear.

(79f.)

Amedea now realizes what reciprocity truly means in the Five Kingdoms' exploitative system: the »gifters« believe the bodies of the refugees to be at their disposal. The sentence in italics, another part of a propaganda-song, marks the violent crossing of the victims' bodily boundaries. The nonchalant enumeration of body parts as well as the equation of this physical assault on vulnerable populations to agriculture, trade, and hunting – comparisons that either imply economic decisions made by free partners or a clear hierarchy between the human and the nonhuman – expresses this powerfully. The oppressors want their own population to flourish and are willing to go to extreme measures to ensure this. To justify the oppression and exploitation of the refugees, they must be understood as Other and as ungrievable (Butler, *Frames* 31). Thus, the rations are not, in fact, the »humanitarian aid« they are made out to be. It is a shocking realization for Amedea and the reader, though, that the rumor is actually true and the refugees are expected to pay for the rations with parts of their bodies, which are then taken into the Five Kingdoms, presumably to better or prolong the lives of the citizens there.

By exposing the inhumanity of rationing as the Five Kingdoms organize it, this passage indicates that seemingly familiar concepts, such as humanitarian aid, need to be questioned, both within the context of the storyworld and outside of it. In *Locust Girl*, humanitarian aid is problematized through the irony that the refugee population is seemingly provided with aid by the very government that oppresses them so violently. Ultimately, even this rationing results in grueling bodily and mental injury. Amedea, Hara-haran and Gurimar's bodies – standing in for all those other people waiting for rations and for refugees in general – are injurable in the most immediate and obvious sense: they are hungry and thirsty; they are without shelter and are thus physically dependent on their oppressors. As a result, they have no choice but to expose themselves to the cruel practices that their oppressors implement. Their situation of complete subjection and vulnerability is reminiscent of what Judith Butler writes in *Frames of War*, when she discusses precariousness in relation to state violence:

Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection. In other words, they appeal to the state for protection, but the state is precisely that from which they require protection. (26)

Paradoxically, or perversely perhaps, those populations who have been rendered precarious by state violence, also depend on the state for redress. This dependency obscures both the acts of violence and exploitation committed and who is responsible for them.

The cavalier manner in which the bodies of the oppressed are maimed and otherwise violated by agents of the Five Kingdoms is invoked also in other moments in the novel. For instance, Amedea witnesses government officials examining the desert soil ten years after bombing the camp she grew up in. They describe the formerly barren landscape as »[b]lessed. It was the word for ›good earth‹, for rich loam where things can grow« (Bobis 24). The hundreds of human beings dead from the violent bombing are only considered valuable as fertilizer. Even after death, the refugee population is thus again instrumentalized for economic reasons. Butler writes: »The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk« (*Precarious Life* 26). What is supposedly narrated in the rations-scene – namely that in the Five Kingdoms' dealings with the refugees »[r]ewards were reciprocal« (Bobis 89) – is not what is actually happening. To receive scant rations, the people are forced to trade their own bodies, which is reminiscent also of those refugees coerced into becoming sex workers or border guards. By depicting the various instances, the refugees are purposefully exploited by those in power for the sole benefit of the citizens of the Five Kingdoms, *Locust Girl* again draws attention to the embodied nature of refugeeness.

To make matters worse, the perverted ›humanitarian aid‹ offered by the agents of the Five Kingdoms also includes a ration of the forgetting seeds, which rob the refugees of their personal and cultural memories in addition to blinding them to the violence committed against them. *Locust Girl* not only emphasizes the refugees' vulnerability to injury, both physical and mental, it also shows how they are forced to participate in their own destruction. Ultimately, the violence enacted against refugees in the narrative can be linked to the inhumane treatment of refugees more generally and thus to Agier's claim that »[t]he non-recognition of refugees and those asking for help produces [...] people whose every right is ›rejected‹: they stubbornly ask for a right to life, and find no state in which this minimal human right is extended to them« (15). In all three outlined examples—the exploitation of refugees as border guards, sex workers and for

harvestable body parts—the rejection of this right to an equal and protected life as an inherent human right is implied. It further suggests the oppressors' exploitation of the precariousness of some bodies, the refugees', in order to ›protect‹ those of their own population. It hierarchizes humans and the right to political participation and physical and mental agency. Within *Locust Girl*, the narration of the exploitation of refugees emphasizes that the »frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power« (Butler, *Frames* 1). The novel demands that the reader recognize the precarity of the lives of the forcibly displaced within and beyond the storyworld as something that is not merely the effect of the refugees' displacement or the violence they have experienced in the place they are fleeing from, but something that is an effect of the political and human failures of those who could come to their aid. The ethical demand that arises from examining these vulnerabilities and relationalities and the »bonds of solidarity that emerge across space and time« (Butler, »Precarious Life« 135) is for political systems that function equally for citizens and non-citizens.

Embodied Storytelling as Empowerment

Ethically relevant relationalities are further explored in *Locust Girl's* treatment of storytelling as an embodied practice, which adds another layer to questions of how refugee bodies are rendered and kept precarious. By connecting the individual stories of refugees to a collective story within the character of Amedea or Locust Girl, the novel presents a potential means to counteract the precarity of non-citizens, which, according to the novel, is at least in part the result of the suppression of stories that affirm the refugees' humanity. Indeed, *Locust Girl's* unique form of storytelling can be read as a practice of resistance for Amedea and the other refugees that allows them to fight exploitation and dehumanization.

The Five Kingdoms' prohibition of storytelling and singing constitutes another way of trying to erase the stateless population's memories, not only in a personal but also a larger cultural context. This is achieved by the censorship of the refugees' stories and songs as well as their forced forgetting through the forgetting seeds. The only songs allowed are the ones broadcast from the Five Kingdoms' Minister of Mouths for propaganda purposes. These songs function as a means to control and manage the undesired population, a fact made explicit when one of the song fragments states that »No one should look / No one should walk beyond the horizon« (Bobis 14) or when the »Minister of Mouths [...sings] – ›We are your keepers / We will protect you / We will care for you« (164). This promise of protection is, as elaborated, exposed in the novel as an empty one, if not as a cruel lie, before Amedea even hears it, again undermining

the Five Kingdoms' official history and self-positioning as caretakers of the refugees. Other times, the songs serve as a justification to oppress and violate those outside the Five Kingdoms inasmuch as the lies contained in them have been internalized by the nation-state's population. With an ideological fervency that indicates an extreme form of self-delusion, the witnesses at Amedea's trial chant: »*What we work for is ours / What we care for is ours / What we protect is ours / Rejoice, rejoice!*« (163). A sense of entitlement as well as an understanding of the Other as less valuable is strongly implied. The Five Kingdoms' official songs and stories sharply distinguish citizens from non-citizens and thus »produce [...] versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable« (Butler, *Frames* 24). By exposing the process by which protected vs. precarious populations are created as a result of both propaganda and a matter of (political) choices made in part based on this propaganda, the novel questions any ethical validity of denying an/other's precarity.

The ethical questions raised in the novel are further emphasized by the (hi)stories from the margins that are told in *Locust Girl*, despite the general prohibition on all story and song not produced and disseminated by the state. Sometimes the (hi)stories from the margins mentioned are just memory fragments or they are relayed as rumors; other times they are told by characters who have stopped ingesting the forgetting seeds. Within the novel, these acts of secret storytelling and story-transmission mark a communal act of resistance that requires Amedea's final transformation to fully unfold. The locust embedded in her brow is not a characteristic the other refugee characters share and especially in the beginning, it marks her as an outcast. The other stateless persons Amadea meets even identify it as a »plague« (Bobis 82). What is noteworthy is how the locust evolves from a food item to being embedded in Amedea's brow, where at first, it is experienced by her as quite distinct from her own self. Herrero summarizes the abilities of the locust in this form succinctly: »This extraordinary creature is endowed with an extraordinary gift: it can feel the proximity of water, sing the forbidden, and tell truths that no one else dares to expose« (956). The locust's practical skill of finding water is linked to its power of song, hinting at their equal, if unintuitive, importance for ensuring Amedea's survival. The locust begins to carry and thus to embody all the stories that are told to Amedea. Initially, she physically suffers from the resulting cacophony of stories, as »[e]ach of the words became like dripping water« (Bobis 43). Amedea explains: »More notes added as [the] story went on and the locust in my brow began copying each note, playing it over and over. I thought my skull would split with this invasion« (43). Amedea is thus unable to ignore that the individual stories ultimately relate facets of the overall oppression of the refugee population that go far beyond the individual.

As mentioned above, *Locust Girl*'s narration is regularly interrupted by the italicized song verses. Most of these verses reappear multiple times and are not always immediately intelligible. This emphasis on songs and their repetition inscribes them also on the formal level of the narration, mirroring Amedea's experience of the words as »dripping water« (43). The reader must accept the unfamiliar quality of these song fragments, as their overarching meaning only unfolds slowly. Initially, the personal (hi)stories and songs from the margins are not related by singing but are told in confidence to Amedea. She then, with the help of the locust, combines all of them into one song that tells through its many voices, a version of history and present that narrates the marginalized refugee experience. Some of the stories from the margins read thus like a direct challenge of the Five Kingdoms' border management such as when Amedea sings: »*Sing how lovely, how deadly / Is your dream of the border*« (136) or »*Meet me over there / My left foot says to my right / Where there still lies / A wee quiver of life*« (147). This history from the margins lyrically addresses the vulnerabilities of the forcibly displaced as well as their potential power. Another song fragment that appears early in the narrative, when Amedea still feels disconnected from the locust, thus already hints at the path to her metamorphosis: »*She who sings alone / Does not sing at all / A song is of someone / A song is for someone*« (86). This particular song suggests a relationality that precedes the individual person as well as a responsibility inherent to this connectivity that Amadea must accept. The (hi)stories and songs the locust collects thus connect the people Amadea meets during her wanderings with the inhabitants of the Five Kingdoms beyond the border and demands that the »no one« (14), i.e. the refugee the Five Kingdoms want to manage through their propaganda, is actually a *someone* that has an inherent connection also to the citizens. By understanding this relationality, the apprehension of the refugees' precarity is necessitated and an ethical demand for an equal political treatment is issued.

After she crosses the border, the locust is no longer visible on Amedea's brow (119). Instead, the »song was inside [her] skull now« (122), which marks another step towards her transformation as she and the locust slowly merge more fully. Eventually, Amedea recognizes herself in the act of storytelling and singing, rather than seeing the practice as embodied by the locust and separate from herself. At one moment in the narrative she asks, »I was singing?«, only to immediately answer: »I was singing!« (145). Soon, she no longer understands the locust as separate from her own identity, but rather inscribes her own personal history into the communal songs and (hi)stories she has collected and created during her wanderings. At the end of the novel, Amedea finds her power and her agency, even if it means the end of her humanity. By singing »a multitude« (173), she chooses to sacrifice herself in hopes of a better future for

everyone. When singing her final song as Amedea, her »body grew, pushed to accommodate all voices from all sides of the border, both desert and green haven, and [she] couldn't contain them. [She] couldn't bear the strain. [She] burst and caught fire« (173) and rises from the ashes as a »locust with the heart and voice of a girl« (175). Choosing to sing this song that relays the perspective of the refugee population thus marks the final step in her process of becoming Locust Girl, firmly claiming a place for the history from the margins.

The metamorphosis signifies Amedea's acceptance of the fact that »knowing is slow, and it must grow in you« (176). As Locust Girl, she can share this knowledge with everyone who listens. In the novel's final pages, she also addresses the reader in song: »Now you know what we've always shared. / No border can deny it« (178). This sharing of knowledge, of stories, is enabled by the ambiguity of her transformation, as both a locust and still a girl, as she understands that embodying everyone's story ultimately inscribes them into her. This is not presented as a resignation, but a call to community and kinship, »to remember all who have touched us« (174). Locust Girl's own remembrance song reads as follows:

I am Amedea, daughter of Alkesta and Abarama

I am Beena, beloved of Beenabe

I am Locust Girl, kin to Cho-choli, Daninen, Espra

Fau-us, Gurimar, Hara-haran, Inige, Just-me-uhm

Karitase, Lumi, Martireses, Nartireses, Opi, Padumana

Quxik, Rirean, Silam, Trapsta, Unre, Verompe

Wilidimus, Xuqik, Ycasa, Zacarem (174)

Amedea sings herself into community with everyone she has met on her journey, their names starting with all the letters of the Latin alphabet. She includes herself in her various identities (»Amedea,« »Beena,« »Locust Girl«), others who are forcibly displaced – both dead and alive – and, importantly, also the ministers of the Five Kingdoms (»Wilidimus, Xuqik, Ycasa, Zacarem«). Bobis thus again points at the connection between citizens and non-citizens. As Butler writes,

[t]his way of being bound to one another in precariousness is not precisely a social bond that is entered into through volition and deliberation [...] It is to the stranger that we are bound, the one, or the ones, we never knew and never chose. To kill the

other is to deny my life, not just mine alone, but that sense of my life which is, from the start, and invariably, social life. (Butler, *Frames* xxvf.)

Through her metamorphosis Amedea becomes omniscient and the novel speculates a way of knowing relationality that may also inform the understanding of the reader. One of the novel's last songs delineates: »*What greater plague is there / Than what we do to each other / What greater love is there / Than what we do for each other*« (175). This sentiment correlates with Butler's notion that ignoring the inherent »relationality« (*Precarious Life* 23) in the apprehension of an/other's precariousness means ignoring a fundamental part of our human existence. Ultimately, this apprehension is the prerequisite for »all ethical claims« (»*Precarious Life*« 147). Thus, the novel offers its understanding of storytelling as one potential step in confronting the precarity of refugee bodies.

Conclusion

I have shown that through unique depictions of the refugee characters' precarity, Merlinda Bobis' speculative refugee novel *Locust Girl* depicts an embodied experience of flight and refugeeness that implies a clear ethical demand, namely the need for political systems that function equally for citizens and non-citizens. First, I have established the text's relevance for not only Australia's cultural and socio-political context and have clarified briefly why I read it as a speculative refugee novel. Basing my analysis on Judith Butler's concept of precarity in the context of refugee ethics, I demonstrated the novel's portrayal of embodied precarity by focusing on aspects of precarity, the exploitation of refugee labor and commodification of refugee bodies, and, lastly, on how the novel narrates storytelling as an embodied practice of resistance. This last element has been read as a means to empower the powerless within the novel and a potential way for readers to consider refugees' precarity and their own responsibility and complicity. *Locust Girl*, both in its form and content, forces the reader to really see one of the most pressing ethical and political issues of our time and ask painful and necessary questions, both of oneself and our governments.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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