

**“Ay, siyempre, Gran, of course,
Oz is—multicultural!”:
Merlinda Bobis’s Crossing to the Other Side
as Reflected in Her Short Stories**

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I’ll dream you a turtle tonight;
Cradle on her back
Bone-white.
I’ll dream you a turtle tonight.

(Bobis “White Turtle” 49)

A white turtle ferrying the dreams of the dead.¹ A communal tongue. A woman’s twelve-metre hair rescuing corpses from a lemongrass-scented river. A man mesmerized by the colours worn by a woman to the point of falling in and out of love with her without ever daring to disclose his feelings. A curse that makes a child pay for the death of her own mother. A working siesta in a five-star hotel. A young man who falls in love with a painting of a dead girl and tries to woo her with his cooking. A heart-broken mother who finally manages to wash the remnants of her young son’s last days at hospital. Hearts that have a life of their own. A little girl in brand-new plastic shoes who will never see her mother again. The cultural abyss that separates a grandmother from her ‘postgraduate’ granddaughter. A sadness collector that is about to burst after eating so much human loneliness and sorrow. An old female storyteller who manages to defy a whole army and keep the moon from rising. A jar that speaks to a poor saleswoman and recommends her taking up belly dancing as her ultimate revenge on her lascivious boss. A Wind Witch in Darlinghurst who is eventually charged with scandalous and deranged behaviour. These enigmatic and enhancing tales of chance, hope and frustration are but some of the most outstanding twenty-three stories set in the Philippines and Australia that make up Merlinda Bobis’s col-

lection *White Turtle* (1999). Merlinda Bobis was born in the Philippines but now lives in Australia, which turns her, to take Salman Rushdie's well-known expression, into a "translated" woman, that is, a woman who has been carried across different cultures and who consequently cannot be defined by making exclusive reference to any of them. Her condition of *in-betweenness* provides her with a privileged perspective that allows her to talk from different angles, and thus to bridge the gap (or else to bring to the fore) the discontinuities that separate one world from another.² "White Turtle," the short story from which the collection takes its name is, without any doubt, one of the most puzzling and meaningful, for it can be said to encapsulate the most pressing concerns of postcoloniality,³ and, by extension, of the multicultural diasporic subject. Although my analysis will mainly focus on this short story, a full understanding of it will only be possible if intersecting references are made to the other stories in the collection, since they are all parts of a whole and, consequently, find their ultimate meaning in the relationship they establish with one another.

Filipina storyteller and chanter Lola Basyon is taken by an Australian anthropologist, who met her during his research on the origins of native peoples, to a writers' festival in Sydney so that a big audience can listen to the enigmatic story about a white turtle that he so much enjoyed during his stay in her village Iraya. He had literally "fallen in love with her chant about the white turtle" because, in his opinion, it was "pure poetry" (40). This poetical tale is, without any doubt, also a mythical one, and thus part of the oral tradition and cultural heritage of Lola Basyon's people. The same oral tradition that Selma, the storyteller of the North and South in "Before the Moon Rises" will again be bound to preserve and transmit on her hundredth year, much to her disappointment. Selma, who had promised herself to wait for her last days "peacefully in a hut apart from people and their stories" (143), without caring any more, feels compelled to help her people defy the army that wants to expel them from their village, and remember their past so as to ensure their present and future dignity. It is only by keeping stories alive that people can assert their identity, cope with their existence and sustain some faith in the future, however fragile this faith may be. As the Fish-

Hair Woman says in the short story to which she gives the title, “in our Iraya we had mastered the art of faith, because it was the only way to believe we existed, that our village was still alive . . . during that purge by the military” (11). If the present and the world outside are far too harsh to bear, one can always try to escape by clinging to the old legends and beliefs that conform the collective unconscious, the myths, the hopes of the community: “How little we know or wish to know of the history of our icons or our saints or our gods. It is enough that we invent for them a present and believe that they can save us from ourselves” (13). Yet, stories, like history, like the past, can also hurt. “Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory” (11), the Fish-Hair Woman claims. The corpses of the disappeared may be netted by her so that they can receive a decent burial, the river can be “restored to its old taste, sweetened again by the hills,” and people can “fish again or wash [their] clothes there” as before (19), but these crimes will never pass unnoticed, for this woman’s hair has stolen all the grief from her soul, which makes it grow longer and longer. There is no point in trying to ignore the past, however painful this may be; the past always leaves perennial marks on the present. Moreover, without a past, there can never be any future. It is only by remembering the past that people can understand their present and, which is even more important, change their destinies. In Selma’s words,

Another people must be told stories, so they can hear the forgotten tale in each drop of blood that they spill. Every tale, which dries up and dies when it leaves the body. What nuisance! On my hundredth year, I will be asked to sing their blood again, so they can understand and change their story. So they can keep the moon from rising. (143)

Beautiful but bewildering, lyrical but mysterious, oral tales—Lola Basyon’s in particular—seem to contain some kind of hidden inscrutable message that the listener must try and decipher. In Lola’s tale the listener is told the following:

Once the turtle was small and blue-black, shiny like polished stones. It was an unusual creature even then; it had a most im-

portant task. It bore on its back the dreams of Iraya's dead children as it dived to the navel of the sea. Here, it buried little girl and boy dreams that later sprouted into corals which were the colour of bones. After many funerals, it began to grow bigger and lighter in colour; eventually it, too, became white, bone-white. (40)

Lola Basyon does her best to communicate with her audience, as does her translator, but it is obvious from the very beginning that she does not fit; she does not belong. The rest of people do not seem to understand her and her chanted story. Crossing to the other side is always a difficult task, for the 'civilized' and 'non-civilized' alike. Misunderstandings soon arise, together with the fear of losing one's 'proper and original' identity, of becoming contaminated by the 'other.' This anxiety is, to give another example, the same uneasiness that the grandmother in "Border Lover" experiences when talking to her postgraduate granddaughter, who has come home, like every year, to pay her a short visit. "My English [the granddaughter says] she considered un-Filipino and my 'accented dialect', she found even more strange—'siguro, you now have a new heartbeat as well, and we're all out of step here'" (127). Prejudices and prior assumptions prevent people from communicating and getting to know one another, and thus from reaching the social harmony and peace that they long for. Significantly enough, it is only when Lola Basyon feels that she has had "a real conversation at last" (48) with a child from the audience that the climax takes place: all of a sudden the turtle makes a stunning entrance in the room, much to everybody's amazement and perplexity. As a result of the turtle's materialization and appearance, the barrier between 'the real' and 'the fantastic' gets blurred, and two apparently opposite systems of representation are juxtaposed and therefore left in suspension.

As is well known, magic realism is a very empowering framework for reading texts across postcolonial cultures, since it makes it possible to read those cultures, critically on the basis of their shared conditions of marginality with regard to metropolitan cultures, but productively, on the basis of their persistent controversial engagement with colonialist

discourses. Magic realism, claims Jeanne Delbaere, is intrinsically “ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place other than ‘the’ or ‘a centre’” (222), a place where different forces coexist in an on-going dialectical process. Moreover, magic realism is a socially and politically committed genre. For these writers, literature is much more than games with words. For them, the raw material of fiction is not language but people. It was this conviction that led Keith Maillard to establish a difference between magic realism and fabulation:

The spirit of fabulation is something like this: Nothing important can be said, so why not have fun? The spirit of magic realism, in contrast, is: Something tremendously important *must* be said, something that doesn't fit easily into traditional structures, so how can I find a way to say it? (12)

In spite of the dialectical nature and formal elusiveness that characterize this trend,⁴ two different branches have been established by critics: an intellectual one derived from Jorge Luis Borges and the surrealists, and a popular one derived from Gabriel García Márquez. As Delbaere explains (76), in the intellectual branch the magic generally arises from the confusion of the tangible world with purely verbal constructs similar to it but without their counterparts in extra-textual reality. Playful and experimental, this branch has much in common with the spirit of fabulation. The rather more popular branch accommodates the supernatural, relies heavily on superstition and primitive faith and has its source in popular myths, legends and folklore as well as in the oral tradition. Moreover, despite the challenge it offers to traditional realism, it continues to adhere in its form to the realistic conventions of fiction. As can be easily deduced, *White Turtle* could be included in this popular branch.

It is obvious that *White Turtle* often relies on magic realist strategies and devices, which definitely contribute to emphasizing its main concern, namely, to bring to the fore the difficulties, misunderstandings and discontinuities that the co-existence of two or more different cultures inevitably implies, and the deleterious effect that colonization and the subsequent formulation of hierarchical structures with their intrinsic enforcement of binarisms always have upon them. Moreover, it is

also made clear that it is within the boundaries of the so-called 'official' or white culture that indigenous writers can reclaim their own cultural matrix or legacy, their sense of the mythic past as alive and present. Biculturalism, with its emphasis on the always difficult and unstable co-existence of different cultures, is probably the best way—or rather the only way—to preserve a sense of indigenous/primitive cultural difference (the lesser of two evils). The aim of this short story (and of the whole collection in general) is not to replace one culture with another, nor to subvert the hierarchies imposed by dominant discourses. Rather, it is to abolish all kinds of hierarchies in order to accentuate integration and hybridity.⁵ Like the granddaughter in "Border Lover," one can enjoy breathing western air in one's 'White Land' and yet be still a tropical baby (122): "See, Gran, here's the proof of my loyalty. I'm due to land in Sydney, but I'm still writing about your banana heart and your irrepressible kitchen discourse, naturally" (126). For Bobis's characters it is not a question of choosing between two cultures, it is simply a question of expanding one's heart and mind and integrating. One can only really love what one does know; it is ignorance and the irresponsible reliance on stereotypes that generate conflict and unnecessary suffering.

In "White Turtle," it is the figure of the turtle that seems to embody, as well as advocate, tolerance, peaceful co-existence and integration. As is well known, the turtle has tremendously powerful symbolism, not only in primitive, but also in classical cultures.⁶ The turtle is regarded as the ultimate symbol of the universe and the universe's stability: turtles have four limbs, are slow-moving animals, can be found in most parts of the world, and can have very long lives. Their shell and brains are often used to prepare immortality concoctions. Symbol of the universe, the turtle's shell is separated into an upper section, the carapace, and a lower section, the plastron. The carapace, with its dome shape, like the sky, is joined at the sides to the plastron, which happens to be horizontal/flat, like the earth. Due to this, the turtle has been regarded as the mediator *par excellence* between heaven and earth. Their long lives, together with the fact that their shells are overlaid with horny shields that contain various kinds of patterns, as if they had something written on them, has also led primitive cultures to consider turtles as the very embodiment

of wisdom and power. As a matter of fact, in many primitive communities, when the patriarch is not present, it is to the turtle that people first offer food and drink. Moreover, turtles are aquatic or semi-aquatic, that is, they are both earth and water creatures. This explains why they have often been associated with the creative powers of the universe, and why they have also been taken as embodiment of the internal forces of the earth and the primordial waters. In a word, they have been taken as symbols of both the superior and the inferior spheres, the supernatural realm and the underworld. In addition, because their protective shell encloses all the vital organs of the body, they are seen as symbols of the main domestic virtues (prudence, caution, safety, protection) and also of spiritual introspection and a return to a primeval stage. In addition, the turtle's colours, like most of the colours that appear in Bobis's collection, also strike the reader as being symbolic and meaningful. White can represent many different things: purity, spirituality, perfection (white is the sum of all the basic colours, of all the colours of the rainbow, but also no colour). Furthermore, just as white is the colour of resurrection (eternal life) in western culture, it is also the colour of mourning (death) in many eastern cultures. In regards to the colour green (the turtle has "emerald eyes" 52), it can represent, not only the eternal regenerative powers of nature and the universe, that is, hope/life, but also death.⁷ The fact that the turtle's colours can represent opposite things could be given a positive meaning: white and green, in this particular case, stand for the integration of opposites, and thus for the possibility of achieving some kind of ever-lasting compromise and reconciliation.

In some other stories, however, white does not appear to have such optimistic connotations. Although white undoubtedly suggests innocence, purity, and hope, it is often used to paradoxically emphasize the main character's frustration and disillusionment. The brand-new plastic shoes of the little girl in "Shoes" are white. In this story, the girl is anxious to see her mother again after almost a year's absence, but she and her heart-broken father soon realize that this will never happen, because her mother was offered by the little girl's uncle "as a housemaid for the master in exchange for her family's temporary shelter on his farm. And 'temporary' became forever" (117–18). Just as the shoes lose their origi-

nal whiteness after she walks for so long in the dust, the hopes of the girl and her father eventually vanish. Their plea is “both lame and desperate” (117), but to no avail. The girl’s mother has by now become the property (the housemaid, *and* mistress, as the baby’s screaming invites the reader to infer) of the master, and there is nothing they can do to change this, however distressing and unfair the situation may be.

White is integrated again in the colour of the flowers that girls are to offer to the Blessed Virgin in “Flores the Mayo.” But “white flowers become impossibly rare in May” (158), as impossible as the main character’s dreams and illusions. Only the rich can please and win the Virgin’s favour. As the child protagonist asserts, “the roses and the gardenias go either to those with gardens at home or to the early and best beggars from those with gardens at home. But persuasion is a waste of time with stingy neighbours” (159–60). If you are poor, you are left to your own devices, and nobody will listen to your desperate prayers, not even the divinity, who might even feel offended when not receiving the expected offering. The little girl is unable to find white flowers, and is therefore going to “play a trick on the Virgin” as she intends to go “to the *Flores* with flowers not white” (167). The result of this ruse speaks for itself: her mother is run over by a bus in Manila, as if this were some kind of punishment for the girl’s daring trick.⁸

Furthermore, the same combination of colours is often used to represent opposite things. Bright colours are sometimes used to express the main character’s vulnerability and impossible and unrequited love. This is the case of the man in “Colours,” who feels irresistibly attracted by the bright red, yellow, and blue worn by his voluptuous and energetic neighbour. “Superlative,” he calls her (24). He describes the sensation he experiences when he sees her as “a sharp contraction, no, a flush, a tingling. Eyes about to sing?” (25), and as “a half-note about to drop from its stem,” and further as a “departure from the possibility of song” (24), that is, from the possibility of happiness and fulfilment. On the other hand, in “Frock,” bright colours seem to encapsulate life and love’s never-ending possibilities and contain the power to perpetuate them. The blue, green and pink of Emilia’s frock are as intense and iridescent as the woman who wears them, and even make little Bobby believe that

the fishes and turtles that make up the pattern of his aunt's most beautiful and wild sea-dress are really alive. The multiplicity of different (at times even opposite) meanings that can be attached to the same signifier inevitably brings to the fore the relativity of everything, and of cultural symbols and assumptions in particular. There are no absolute truths, truth is always relative, and it is always aligned and concomitant with power. Hence the need to think critically, to open up our minds to difference and to question all kinds of so-called universal truths, is the only absolute.

Without any doubt, the turtle, out of all the figures that appear in Bobis's collection, points to this relativity and therefore suggests that the integration of opposites, that is, reconciliation and harmony, should be possible. When the police try to take the turtle out of the room, for example, they realize that "it was as large as the table, but oh so light" (52). The turtle's story is communal, universal; nobody's but everyone's story. As Lola tries to explain to the policemen, "Perhaps it came to the reading because she did not have a book. Because the story that she chanted was written only on its back, never really hers. Only lent her in a moment of music" (52).

Old storyteller Lola Basyon can also be said to illustrate this hybridity. One could go as far as to assert that her very self (whatever that may mean) is nothing but a palimpsest on which traces of successive inscriptions/colonizations form and conform the complex experience of her subjectivity. Significantly enough, this woman, a member of the 'primitive' community of Iraya in the Philippines, has been given two names: Salvación Ibarra and Lola Basyon, which respectively point to the Spanish and American presence in the Philippines. She seems to have been doubly colonized, and her identity is therefore a hyphenated or multi-layered one (Irayan/Filipino-Spanish-American). Moreover, she was 'discovered' by an Australian anthropologist who "had met her during his research on the mythologised genesis of native peoples" (40). As can be easily deduced from this statement, official white (Australian) culture does not seem to contemplate the possibility of regarding native peoples as historical/cultural subjects. Native peoples belong in the realm of anthropology and myth instead, with all the implications that this

has: they are denied the role of agents, and are therefore objectified and conferred a passive role that deprives them of the privilege/right to control their own lives and evolution. In a word, they are outside history.

Another dichotomy or binarism that is openly denounced in this collection, and in this short story in particular, is literacy/orality. Lola Basyon is a seventy-year-old native chanter who has been taken to a writers' festival that is being held in an art deco building in Sydney. As is also the case in "Border Lover" when grandmother and granddaughter confront one another, the dichotomy of primitive-ancestral/civilized-modern automatically comes to mind here as well. Lola feels "very nervous" and that "she [does not] quite belong, with no book or even paper to cling to" (38). For those "strange, white faces" (39) she is nothing but "a poor thing" (45). A similar kind of patronizing attitude is displayed by the granddaughter in "Border Lover" when she meditates on her grandmother's ignorance and lack of interest in western academic theories and jargon; she does not, however, lack respect and affection for her grandmother. For this old woman, a thesis "sounds like an affliction of the lungs . . . *tisis*" (124). Moreover, when her granddaughter starts talking about Kristeva's semiotic as opposed to the symbolic, she cannot help exclaiming, "*Aysus*, buzzing to the wall again, like a mosquito" (124). She does not feel the need to be saved "from the enslavement of the kitchen" (125). Feminism is an empty word for her. As she finally retorts to her granddaughter: "Pimini—piminisim Just what are you saying, you silly . . . *Anong pakiam ninda*—I love my stove. LEAVE MY STOVE ALONE!" (125).

It is also interesting that, of the three authors who are going to read from their books in the writers' festival, the two male ones should show a rather patronizing—even contemptuous—attitude towards old female chanter Lola Basyon. The crime fiction writer who wears a cowboy hat and snakeskin boots seems to be particularly proud of himself and his writing:

He had a way of running his fingers over the crisp pages of his book, almost lovingly, before he began reading. He hardly looked at anyone or anything except the fine print of his text. . . .

Cowboy caressed his pages again and cleared his throat before launching into his old spiel, with improvisations this time. He rhapsodised over more details on the writing of his latest novel. How he was converted to crime fiction, but not the genre writing kind, mind you. He was a committed anti-gun lobbyist. His heroes were good cowboys like him, some like the Lone Ranger without a gun. (38, 44)

Not only does the cowboy embody contradiction, his description also suggests that he is ridiculous, even pathetic. He is devoid of any kind of sensibility: Lola's story makes him feel "bored," and believe that performance poetry was invented mainly "to disguise pedestrian writing" (42). The other author, a bespectacled middle-aged man, also finds Lola's performance extremely long and tedious:

her act is a multicultural or indigenous arts event, definitely not a writers' festival. And those organisers should have, at least, printed and handed out the translation to the audience. That anthropologist's reading is painfully wooden, dead. And this could go on forever, heaven forbid. He looked at his watch, shaking his head. (42)

The figure of the cowboy appears to rely on the attributes that have been traditionally associated with virility (action, strength, command over nature, individuality). On the other hand, the fact that the other author misses some kind of *printed* translation and that the only information that we are given about him is that he is middle-aged and wears glasses might in turn allow us to interpret him as an emblem of literacy itself. By contrast, the third writer of the night is a "vivacious young writer with her silver bangles and vivid gear" (38), who gets "engulfed by [Lola's] chant, lulled into it" (41). Of the three, she is the only one who is moved by Lola's chant. The text points to the patriarchal assumption that it is men, and not women, who belong in the realm of culture, literacy and logic, while questioning yet another well-known stronghold of western thought and culture, namely, the superiority of literacy over orality.⁹

If any translation implies some kind of distortion, the written narrative that has resulted from the transcription *and* translation of oral sources inexorably implies a double distortion. This is what “White Turtle” seems to suggest. The anthropologist’s translation and rendering of Lola’s chant into English prose is, to say the least, imperfect, and the printed version that the bespectacled author demands would be even worse. The translation fails to transmit the spirit, the magic, *the doing of the story*. According to Lee Maracle:

Words are not objects to be wasted. They represent the accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples. We believe the proof of a thing or idea is in the doing. Doing requires some kind of social interaction and thus, *story* is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people. (3)

As is the case in “The Wind Witch,” when “all ears were straining to capture the weight of each word, syllable, vowel, consonant” uttered by that enigmatic figure because they were convinced that they were magic, that they “must have more weight than it sounds” (176), in “White Turtle” only the original story, that is, the original words with their original sounds—“*Ngunyan na banggilipangaturugan taka ki pawikan;/duyan sa saiyang likod/kasingputi kang buto. /Ngunyan na banggilipangaturugan taka ki pawikan*” (49)—will eventually make it possible to invoke and actually bring the turtle into the room. When Lola feels that she has managed to communicate with the six-year-old girl, and thus that it is possible that this white audience should after all see the white turtle she, “amidst this comforting company . . . was transported back home, close to the forest and the sea of her village, among her grandchildren begging for the old story” (49). She starts singing so enthusiastically that, all of a sudden, she fuses with her village’s natural environment, and her chant generates movement, life, with the result that everybody in the room forgets about books as they get trapped by her chant and succumb to the spell. They cannot understand her words, but nonetheless *feel* the magic of them. There is harmony, communion, and integration for the first time. And it is now that the turtle makes its entrance:

The warmth in her stomach made double-ripples as she began to chant again, filling her lungs with the wind from the sea and her throat with the sleepgurgles of anemones. Her cheeks tingled sharply with saltwater. "I'll dream you a turtle tonight," she sang softly at first, then steadily raised her volume, drowning the chatter in the foyer. Three harmonising voices reverberated in the room with more passion this time, very strange, almost eerie, creating ripples in everyone's drink. All book-signing stopped. People began to gather around the chanter. By the time the main door was pushed open from outside by a wave of salty air, the whole foyer was hushed. An unmistakably tang pervaded it—seaweed! "White white . . . oh, look . . . beautiful white!" The little girl saw it first, its bone-white head with the deep green eyes that seemed to mirror the heart of the sea and the wisdom of many centuries. (49)

A young girl has not still been wholly contaminated by western rationality and civilization. As can be clearly appreciated, the text reverberates with romantic, or rather staid, Wordsworthian, echoes: the girl is open-minded, imaginative, free, innocent, still able to transcend the rational realm to catch a glimpse of the supernatural. Integration results in "choreographed motion" (50), that is, harmonious movement, energy, the energy that can alone generate love and operate a real change, a real transformation. Either harmonious movement or "benevolent chaos" (two synonyms, as is suggested in "The Wind Witch") will alone make the miracle happen. Significantly enough, it was only when "elbows were not as sharp, bodies leaned against one another and generously allowed others to squeeze in, cars did the same, no one honked, voices played a range of timbres, from curious-doubtful to curious-awed, all primed with excitement, but not quite agitated or impatient" (176) that the Wind Witch could make people's dreams and desires come true.

Special attention should also be given to the harmonies that Lola's throat produces. As somebody in the audience says, "It's like listening to three voices singing" (40). Later on, it is suggested that the turtle appears, among other things, because Lola's "three harmonising voices

reverberated in the room” (49). Significantly enough, the turtle joins in Lola’s chant, thus adding even more registers and complexity to her singing, much to the amazement of the already overwhelmed audience, who cannot help approaching the two chanters, as if trying to internalize and definitely make that beauty theirs:

[the turtle] began to make turtle sounds, also in three voices harmonising in its throat and blending with the song of the chanter. . . . Six voices now sending ripples through everyone’s drink. *Hesusmaryahosep*, the Filipina journalist muttered under her breath, a miracle! . . . all bodies began to lean towards the two chanters, arms stretched out, palms open, raring to catch each of the six voices. Even Cowboy had succumbed to this pose which was almost like a prelude to a petrified dive or dance. For a brief moment, everyone was still. (50)

Such is the beauty generated by those harmonies that everybody is arrested in motion. The perfect communion reached by Lola and the turtle inevitably brings to mind the shocking situation that is offered in “An Earnest Parable,” although for opposite reasons. It is not that two different tongues blend so as to produce a perfect melody, but rather that the same tongue is shared by different individuals, who thus become a deeply coherent community/unity. In this short story, the residents of a street, however different their origins (“there was the baker from Turkey, the Filipino cook, the Australian couple with the fish shop, the Italian butcher and the Sri Lankan tailor” 2), happen to have a communal tongue, “one tongue for five homes” (2). What could have meant much anxiety and dissatisfaction turns out to be the most wonderful of all arrangements. Since “the tongue had an excellent memory” (3), “everyone spoke, ate and listened with care and passion, and shared various languages and delicacies” (2). In a word, they learnt to listen to the others, to accept and assimilate difference, and ultimately to make the most of all the positive things they shared:

when the tongue was accommodated elsewhere, one could not eat with the usual joys of the palate. But the pleasure of the

ear was enough compensation. Every tongue-owner's soundings, especially those that were heard as foreign noises, seemed to orchestrate in everyone else's middle ear into something intimate and comforting. This was inevitable for, muted at different times, they learned how to listen intently to whoever had the chance for speech or song—and how they spoke and sang and even told stories, usually with words of beauty and kindness. The moment of speech was too dear to be wasted on loose, heart-less talk. It was a shame not to do justice to the little, pink animal in the mouth. (2)

On the other hand, Lola Basyon's chant and the anthropologist's translation are described as "a dialogue in two tongues *blending and counterpointing*" (my emphasis 41). This blending reveals the beauty that is a result of the co-existence and reverberation of different voices in the same utterance; the use of words from different languages (Spanish-Filipino-Bikol-English) by the same speaker can be seen when Lola says, "*Hoy, luway-luway daw*, Basyon, easy, easy, she chided herself, or else they might think you're very *ignorante*" (46), and when the granddaughter in "Border Lover" affirms "I've got a banana heart for my head and, each time I unfurl, I wear a different face speaking a different tongue. My dialect Bikol, then Filipino, then English, all mixed up, broken into an almost infantile blabber" (124). It also shows the playful disposition of words in different kinds of columns, thus revealing, as is the case in "Triptych," that there is no absolute or objective truth/story, that meaning is always relative, negotiable and transient; and finally the never-ending embedding of translations/explanations within translations/explanations. In "The Long Siesta as a Language Premier," for instance, every new non-English term demands the inclusion of an explanatory note that in turn contains yet another native term, which requires yet another explanation, as in a never-ending set of Chinese boxes. In other words, the urgent need to establish a dialogue between different worlds, so often emphasized in the text, inevitably brings to mind Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, dialogism and polyphony.¹⁰

The text's emphasis on integration can be seen in the contrast it establishes between the notions of individuality and community, to disclose subtly a clear preference for the latter. It is only when people forget about their individual rational selves and join in the community that wonderful things happen: a beautiful turtle appears, people's dreams and hearts' desires come true by magic, the moon does not rise and so on. In particular, while most white Australians in the festival in "White Turtle" seem to embody individual values and priorities, Lola belongs in a totally different kind of culture, which above all advocates and stresses the importance of the community and the cohesion and unity of all of its members. This commitment to community explains why she does not care about her own individual triumph. Although she "was on her road to fame . . . she didn't know this, nor did she care. Her main concern was to get the night over with" (37) and, more importantly, to make those people see the turtle so that they could also join in the chant and become one with her and the beautiful animal. Lola always has her grandchildren, that is, her community, on her mind; even "the pony-tailed young man" who expresses his admiration for her performance and wishes he could have a copy of it (47–48) reminds her of her grandson. Moreover, Lola feels so strange at the festival that she desperately looks for the protection of her ancestors. She hides her hands under the folds of her *tapis*, trying to keep her nerves under control:

The old woman rubbed the fabric of her *tapis* between her fingers for luck. She had chosen to wear her dead mother's *fiesta* clothes, because they had always made her feel as if she were wrapped in a cosy blanket but, at the same time, dressed for a special occasion. (39)

If the certainty of belonging in a community is of fundamental importance for native peoples, neither should their close communion with nature and the rest of living creatures be underestimated. Lola connects with the female author because she reminds her of "a rare bird in the forest back home. A glossy oriole" (38). On the other hand, the snake-skin boots that the cowboy is wearing disturb her: "she kept an eye on his boots under the table, worrying that anytime they might slither all

over the stage" (38). Lola finds it difficult to deprive an animate creature of its life to reduce it to a piece of skin for the making of shoes. The short story's ultimate irony can undoubtedly be found in its final pages when, once the spell has been broken due to the little girl's cry (her mother refuses to let her touch the turtle), some people go as far as to accuse Lola of "cruelty to animals." The turtle is suddenly regarded by them as being a "poor, strange, beautiful thing, an endangered species," which might have been "smuggled in" and "might not have been quarantined" (51). Those who are afraid of helpless animals and who only seem to care for their skins and furs dare to accuse Lola of cruel behaviour!¹¹

The figures of the anthropologist and the Filipina journalist deserve special mention. The passage in which they meet speaks for itself:

"*Kumusta*, I'm Betty Manahan, a Filipina journalist originally from Manila. *Ang galing mo talaga*—great performance!" She hugged and kissed the chanter then shook the anthropologist's hand before adjusting her camera. "I'll put you on the front page of my paper," she gushed at Lola Basyon. "I can make you famous in Sydney, you know—isn't she fantastic?"

"She's very special," the anthropologist agreed. "Her turtle story is just—just beyond me, I must say I . . ."

"I liked your translation, too—could you take our photo, please?" The journalist handed the camera to the enthusiastic translator before posing beside Lola Basyon, who looked a bit baffled.

"Picture *tayo*." The journalist flashed her most engaging smile at the old woman and towards the camera, putting an arm around the waist of her greatest discovery. (45–46)

Lola Basyon seems to be the commodity they are exchanging, their "greatest discovery."¹² For the anthropologist, the story is valuable mainly because he likes it; it is beyond him, he says. The journalist wants to get promoted and become famous, and Lola is 'exotic enough' to sell newspapers well. This also seems to denounce a recurrent practice on the part of westerners when they get in contact with 'other' cultures: the phenomenon that has come to be labelled as 'the commodification

of the exotic.’ For critic Dorothy Figueira, the search for the exotic often becomes the search for the esoteric; westerners mainly want “to invest [their] existence with greater intensity” (13). In the opinion of Deborah Root, the capitalist system resulting from the expansion of industrialization and the empire and based on never-ending consumption led, and still leads, the West to look for “new aesthetic and cultural territory” which could be “discovered” and “colonised” (201). Therefore, the hegemonic appropriation of the other compensates for two different kinds of lack: economic and spiritual, and the West consequently reveals itself as “hungry predator” and as “horribly confused and ill” (201).¹³

The text takes its own revenge against characters who pay the most attention to the clothes that Lola is wearing, thus ignoring her human dimension and reducing her to a mere ornamental object, an icon for their gaze. “A woman in black and pearls” is impressed by Lola’s “fabulous top” and cannot “take her eyes off Lola Basyon’s *piña* blouse,” to the point that she can only wonder what it is made of; she is not actually listening to the story (43). Some pages later, the narrator refers to the same woman by calling her “the pearls” twice (46–47), thus inflicting on her the same objectification process that she carried out.¹⁴

One final question remains: why were the police called? It is clear that for many people in the audience this animal was a disruption, and therefore a dangerous element. Something similar happens in “The Wind Witch” when the reader learns that “someone had rung someone who had rung someone that ‘we have a situation here’ and the police could not contain it” (184). This “aberrant event” (182), as they call it, has to come to an end. Uninhibited people can be far too disruptive to normative life. In Bobis, however, the human thirst for justice and beauty, that is, human longing, keeps on growing and growing, like the turtle, like the Fish-Hair Woman’s hair, like Selma’s hut when she tries to comfort the whole village, like the expectation of the people queuing up in Darlinghurst. Moreover, human longing is never wholly satisfied. As Bobis writes at one point in the text:

longing rests in the stomach which breaks up the daily nourishment of our wants. It is in our intestines digesting these

wants, though not all the time succeeding and often missing the point—which is the true want, the fake want, the want-want—and in our anal passages that is never allowed to betray this excreta of failure in public, this inability to feel content, this sense of never having been fully nourished despite our thorough process of feeding, digesting and eventual elimination of the superfluous or the indigestible. Longing is at gut-level. (187)

This is the magnificence of human longing. It will never meet all its requirements. Desire keeps its tantalizing, and subversive, effect in so far as it is never fulfilled. Satisfaction is the end to desire. Satisfaction, like “beauty, is nothing but the beginning of terror” (15), the terror of having no more dreams, no more ideals for which to fight.

All in all, the only plausible explanation for people's disproportionate reaction in these stories is that the very existence and appearance of the turtle and the witch have done away with their illusion of a fixed, ordered, rational, coherent, transparent, and fully understandable reality. Life, like truth, these short stories seem to assert, is never monolithic. It is tremendously complex, ever-changing, and fluid. If we insist on applying our own binarisms and cultural parameters to the study of other cultures we will never deal with them on equal terms and, which is even worse, we will never manage to communicate with them and, by so doing, get to know ourselves, because the ‘other’ is also part of ourselves, however hard we may try to repress and deny it.

Magic realist texts and practices are some of the most powerful and subversive weapons that postcolonial writers can use in order to bring to the fore and denounce the so many inconsistencies and injustices that the imperial enterprise has brought about. As a form of postcolonial discourse, magic realist texts engage with the legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity that imperialism has enforced in order to undermine it from within. Their systematic juxtaposition of opposites brings to the fore the futility of all kinds of binarisms, but also the urgent need to remember, reconsider and reformulate them into a rather more empowering and liberating ideological scheme, which might allow us to heal past

wounds and pave the way for a better future. In this way, past deleterious discontinuities now become a weapon in the hands of the formerly dispossessed, silenced, and marginalized, who choose to rely on them so as to find voice and be part of the dialogic continuity of community, time and place.

As Bobis herself put it in an interview, the role of the writer in the context of this complex world society is that of being

A bridge, a translator. In books we cross to the other side, even in our homes. Such an intimate crossing. The other side becomes real and is accommodated in our lounge rooms and kitchens. Then perhaps, we may become less sceptical or less threatened by the other, especially in this age of paranoia—I am talking about both sides here. Even better, perhaps we may curb the horrific consequences of any repudiation of the other. I might have never met you, but I have smelt the bread rising in your kitchen, heard your child's breathing in her sleep. My body eases, my psyche opens up. ("Interview")

Bobis clearly embodies the push and pull between different cultures and languages. Yet, the liminal space that she seems to inhabit never means disruption or affliction. On the contrary, for her "[this] border becomes a space for discovery and invention. Between the East and the West, between Filipino and English, [she] is not pulled apart . . . [She is] singing new songs" ("Interview"). With her writing of *White Turtle*, Merlinda Bobis is not only narrating beautiful stories but, more importantly, she is bringing to the fore the urgent need to accept difference so that a better world is somehow possible.

Notes

- 1 The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the M.C.Y.T. (Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología y Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional). D.G.I./FEDER, Proyecto HUM2004-00344/FILO.
- 2 Merlinda Bobis is the author of four poetry books and four plays, has received Philippine national awards for her poems in Filipino and English, and has performed her poetry as theatre in Australia, the Philippines, France and China. At present she lectures in creative writing at the University of Wollongong.

- 3 When I use the terms 'postcoloniality' or 'postcolonial,' I do not want to say that colonialism is a thing of the past. On the contrary, I am very much aware of the ever-increasing strength and expansion of neo-colonial projects and attitudes in our contemporary world. I use 'postcolonial' for want of a better word, since no single label can be said to be good enough (Commonwealth literature, Third World literature, New literatures in English, World literature in English, Other literatures in English--each one of them has its own flaws and disadvantages). The term 'postcolonial' is therefore used as an umbrella term that mainly encapsulates an inherently critical attitude against all kinds of colonial and neo-colonial schemes. In other words, the prefix 'post' should be interpreted, not with the meaning of 'after,' but rather with that of 'due to' or 'as a consequence of.'
- 4 For more information on the concept of magic realism, the origins of the term, the difficulties to define it, its ideological implications, and the importance that this genre has acquired in the field of the so-called postcolonial studies, see Arnason, Kroetsch, and the collection of essays edited by Parkinson Zamora and Faris. Within this collection, the article written by Slemon is of special interest.
- 5 As is well known, the term 'hybridity,' so often used in contemporary critical jargon, is nowadays given quite a positive interpretation, mainly thanks to Bhabha's treatment and formulation of it in postcolonial times and contexts. However, it was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the scientific theories on racial difference and hybridity emerged and proliferated. During those times, 'hybridity' had rather negative connotations, because it was mainly seen as a symbol of degeneration from 'pure' races and as the cause of the racial chaos resulting from the elimination of racial hierarchy and the privileged position of the white western man in the colonial world. In opposition to these views, Bhabha reformulated the term 'hybridity' to make it represent a discourse of partiality which works against the colonial reproduction of (unitary) meaning. As Low writes, "hybridity's alteration in the field of relations unsettles colonial discourse's 'mimetic or narcissistic' demands; deformation and difference undermine this base of agreement on which authority is generated" (199). To put it differently, hybridity has acquired a new, subversive and empowering dimension, in so far as it now appears as a way of deconstructing the discourses of power based on the self/other dialectic. However, as Young points out (27), we should also be aware of the dangers that the use of the term 'hybridity' entails. There is no single or correct concept of hybridity, since it changes as it repeats, but also repeats as it changes. In other words, we are still locked into parts of the ideological schemes of a culture that we presume we have already surpassed, which means that, very often, when trying to deconstruct essentialist notions of race, all we are in fact doing is repeating the past rather than distancing ourselves from it or providing a critique of it.
- 6 For more information on the subject, see Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1007–10).

- 7 This double symbolism of green can be seen in, to give but two well-known examples from different cultures and literary periods, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.
- 8 It is worth mentioning that many children in Bobis's collection have been deprived of their mothers' affection and care, either because their mothers' misery forced them to work—mainly as housemaids, prostitutes or dancers—far away from their offspring ("The Sadness Collector," "Shoes" and "Flores de Mayo"), or because they died when giving birth to their daughters at a far too early age ("The Curse"), or eloped with a foreigner who promised them a better and more exciting life ("The Kissing"), or simply had their children by an unknown father outside marriage, and were thus condemned by the community and forced to go away and leave their children in the hands of their elders ("Pina and the Flying Cross"). However different the reasons may be, the resulting story is always one of rootlessness, sadness and frustration. It is undeniable that the figure of the mother is a very relevant one in most societies, but especially so in native cultures, in which it is the mother who transmits and embodies the ultimate link with the community and its ancestors and, which is even more important, the community's beliefs and spiritual values. Having no mother can therefore have rather profound implications, not only personally, but also socially and culturally.
- 9 As is well known, orality and literacy have often been taken as mutually exclusive terms as regards both their textual and cultural signification. Whereas in primitive cultures orality has been generally regarded as superior due to the fact that it is considered to be the most powerful link, and emblem, of the community's ancestral roots and spirituality (see, for instance, Mudrooroo), many western critics, such as Ong, have often argued that writing implies patterns of memorization and rational thought that are undoubtedly superior to more primitive oral-traditional ones. However, it is also true that many other western cultural anthropologists and social linguists, among whom the names of Street, Finnegan, Gee and Dickinson could be mentioned, have more recently spoken in favour of an alternative model, whereby all kinds of universals are rejected to proclaim instead the need to study linguistic and cultural patterns in specific societies and contexts. In this way, the terms orality/literacy are no longer in absolute opposition but rather in differential relation. Put most basically, as they see it, orality and literacy should no longer be taken as opposites, but rather as complementaries.
- 10 For a thorough development and explanation of Bakhtin's well-known notions of heteroglossia, monologism, dialogism, hybridisation and polyphony see Bakhtin (*Dialogic and Problems*). A very illuminating summary of Bakhtin's ideas and theories can also be found in Holquist, and Morson and Emerson.
- 11 A similar anticlimax can also be found in "The Wind Witch." As soon as the "journos," who here can be said to embody prosaism and the so-called 'reality

principle,' make people aware of their own "blatant, unadulterated, unashamed display of vulnerability . . . the deflecting or denying of any obvious vested interest, in this queuing up to petition for one's heart's desire, quickly travelled through the line of bodies like an eclectic current short-circuiting" (183–84). In other words, uncertainty settles in, and everything goes back to 'normal.' Desire is no longer accepted, and triviality presides again over everybody's life. Without any doubt, having dreams, ideals, and illusions can be tremendously dangerous. People can die for them. It is always better, 'safer,' to stop that from happening, to put an end to collective euphoria, to make people accept that miracles do not happen after all.

- 12 Bobis's collection also abounds in Filipino women who are regarded by their non-Filipino bosses, employers or even husbands as objects or commodities that they can buy, use, possess, or destroy at will. This is what is clearly denounced in stories like "Fruit Stall," "Store," "The Long Siesta as a Language Premier," "Shoes," or "Jar," to mention only some of the most outstanding.
- 13 bell hooks puts forward the same idea in "Eating the Other" when she argues that, in a capitalist/consumer society, the 'ethnic' is often used as a kind of "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21).
- 14 An even worse punishment will be inflicted on the boss who, in "Jar," regards his shop-assistant as a mere body, a mere belly button. He is so obsessed with navels that he cannot keep himself from measuring their depth with his little finger. The woman's fantastic revenge is as follows: his little finger will get stuck, and her navel, which has grown a black mouth with teeth, will swallow him up. He will totally disappear, "as [she flushes] the last remnants of what, [she supposes], will upset [her] stomach" (157).

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