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**Merlinda Bobis's Use of Magic Realism as
Reflected in "White Turtle": Moving across
Cultures, Redefining the Multicultural and
Dialogic Self**

M. Dolores Herrero Granado

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Merlinda Bobis's Use of Magic Realism as Reflected in "White Turtle": Moving across Cultures, Redefining the Multicultural and Dialogic Self (note 1)

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Abstract

Merlinda Bobis was born in the Philippines but now lives in Australia, which turns her 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 bridge the gap, or else bring to the fore, the discontinuities that separate one world from another. The aim of this paper will be to show how "White Turtle", the short story that gives the title to the collection of stories that Bobis published in 1999, makes use of magic realism and relies on Bakhtin's well-known

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notions of heteroglossia, hybridization and polyphony to encapsulate the most pressing concerns of postcoloniality and, by extension, of the multicultural diasporic subject.

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

A white turtle ferrying the dreams of the dead. A young man who falls in love with a painting of a dead girl and tries to woo her with his cooking. A working *sista* in a five-star hotel. A woman's twelve-metre hair rescuing corpses from a lemongrass-scented river. 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 made up Merlinda Bobis's collection *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. (note 2) “White Turtle”, the short story that gives the title to the whole collection is, without any doubt, one of the most puzzling and meaningful, for it can be said to encapsulate the most pressing concerns of postcoloniality, and by extension of the multicultural diasporic subject.

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 of Iraya. He had literally “fallen in love with her chant about the white turtle” because, in his opinion, it was “pure poetry” (1999: 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. Beautiful but bewildering, lyrical but mysterious, Lola’s tale seems to contain some kind of hidden inscrutable message that the listener must try and decipher.

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

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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, and so does her translator, but it is obvious from the very beginning that she does not fit, she does not belong in there, nor do the rest of people seem to understand her and her chanted story. Significantly enough, it is only when Lola 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 appears and makes a stunning entrance in the room, much to everybody's amazement and perplexity. The same perplexity that may confound readers who are not acquainted with magic realist texts and practices, and more particularly with the ample use that many postcolonial writers are nowadays making of them. (note 3) 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, the concept of magic realism is, to say the least, very difficult to define. As Stephen Slemon has put it:

The concept of magic realism is a troubled one for literary theory. Since Franz Roh first coined the term in 1925 in connection with postexpressionist art, it has been most closely associated, at least in terms of literary practice, with two major periods in Latin-American and Caribbean culture: the 1940s and 1950s, in which the concept was closely aligned with that of the “marvelous” as something ontologically necessary to the regional population’s “vision of everyday reality”, and the “boom” period of the Latin-American novel in the late 1950s and 1960s, where the term was applied to works varying widely in genre and discursive strategy. In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighboring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvelous, and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether (1995: 407).

Despite the essential elusiveness of the term ‘magic realism’, it is nonetheless seductive and useful enough to keep it in critical currency. Among other things, it encapsulates a kind of implicit uniqueness or difference from mainstream literature. To take Stephen Slemon’s words again:

The incompatibility of magic realism with the more “established” genre systems becomes itself interesting, itself a focus for critical attention, when one considers the fact that magic realism, at least in a literary context, seems most visibly operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions. [...] magic

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realism as a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of "living on the margins". [...] magic realism, as a socially symbolic contract, carries a residuum of resistance toward the imperial center and to its totalising systems of generic classification. [...] it does help to underscore the fact that the established systems of generic classification are complicit with a centralizing impulse in imperial culture (1995: 408).

Through magic realism, writers can make it clear that 'reality' is not as transparent and coherent as conventional/ official narratives have intended to show. As Robert Kroetsch has affirmed:

Some of those older conventions of realism, and of narrative, really were deceiving us about our world, were imposing a coherence that isn't there and imposing limitations that aren't there (1983: 14).

In addition, magic realism allows writers to express their faith in imagination in the face of oppression. To give but two well-known examples, this trend became tremendously popular during the German occupation of Belgium in 1942, and also in South and Central America when Roh's book was partly translated into Spanish in 1927. In Latin America, magic realism soon became intimately connected with the myths and cultures of the indigenous populations, who do not draw a line between the real and the supernatural. The magic real-

ists' concern with the people went hand in hand with a political determination to regain an identity largely eclipsed by colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The concept of magic realism therefore becomes of fundamental importance in the field of the so-called postcolonial studies, since it allows for analyses that are totally unthinkable in a rather more conventional critical framework.

the concept of magic realism can provide us with a way of effecting important comparative analyses between separate postcolonial cultures, and the belief that magic realism can enable us to recognize continuities within literary cultures that the established genre systems might blind us to: continuities, that is, between present-day magic realist texts and apparently very different texts written at earlier stages of a culture's literary history (Slemon. 1995: 409).

Magic realism thus becomes a very empowering framework for reading texts across postcolonial cultures, since it makes it possible to read those cultures, not reductively, 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 Delbaere, is intrinsically "ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place other than 'the' or 'a centre'" (1990: 222), a place where different forces coexist in an on-going dialectical process. Moreover,

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magic realism is a socially and politically committed trend. 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? (1982: 12).

Yet, the concept of magic realism also poses a danger. Just as it can imply resistance to monumental theories of literary practice, it can also become a monolithic category at the service of centralizing genre systems whereby all literary differences are done away with in one swift pass. Difficulties apart, what do we basically understand by magic realism? Can we offer any kind of definition, however vague and elusive this may be? Without any doubt, the most outstanding characteristic of the term is its essentially contradictory nature. Stephen Slemon's words speak for themselves:

The term "magic realism" is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place,

each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the “other”, a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences (1995: 409).

H.H. Arnason’s definition is also well-known:

the precise realistic presentation of an ordinary scene with no strange or monstrous distortion: the magic arises from the fantastic juxtaposition of elements or events that do not normally belong together (1968: 363).

Furthermore, what basically characterizes magic realism is not so much the juxtaposition or mixture it implies, but the fact that it is completely impossible to establish any kind of hierarchy between the worlds and narrative modes that it encapsulates. They co-exist, but never conform any kind of binarism of the type superior/ inferior. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, the novel –and, by extension, the literary text– is the site of a “diversity of social speech types” (1981: 263) in which a confrontation takes place “in discourse and among discourses to become ‘the language of truth’, a battle for what Foucault has called power knowledge” (Carroll. 1983: 77). In magic realism this confrontation is represented in the foregrounding of

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two apparently opposite discursive systems, with neither succeeding in subjecting or containing the other. Needless to say, this is of fundamental importance in the field of postcolonial studies, which mainly aim at undermining all the logocentric and ethnocentric assumptions upon which the dominant culture and ideology rely. As Stephen Slemon argues:

In the context of a comparative, postcolonial literary criticism, this use of language has important consequences. Here, the argument is often made that colonization, whatever its precise form, initiates a kind of double vision or "metaphysical clash" into colonial culture, a binary opposition within language that has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population. [...] In a postcolonial context, then, the magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle within language, a dialectic between "codes of recognition" [...] the magic realist text can be read [...] as a "speaking mirror" (1995: 411).

In spite of the dialectical nature and formal elusiveness that characterize this trend, two different branches have been established by critics: an intellectual one derived from Borges and the surrealists, and a popular one derived from García Márquez. As Jeanne Delbaere explains (1992: 76), in the intellectual branch the magic generally arises from the confusion of the tangible world with purely verbal constructs simi-

lar 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.

All in all, magic realism is one 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, the 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

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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.

It is obvious that "White Turtle" 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 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 for another, nor to subvert the hierarchies imposed by dominant discourses. Rather, it is to abolish all kinds of hierarchies in order to ac-

centuate hybridity and integration. One can only really love what one does know; it is ignorance and the irresponsible reliance on stereotypes that generates conflict and unnecessary suffering.

The main character in “White Turtle” can be said to illustrate this hybridity. (note 4) 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’, as was stated before, 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 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

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are denied the role of agents; they 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, and are thus relegated to the silence of the margins.

Another dichotomy or binarism that is openly denounced in this short story 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. The dichotomy primitive-ancestral/ civilized-modern automatically comes to mind. Not in vain does she feel "very nervous" and that "she [doesn't] 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). It is interesting that, of the three authors who are going to read from their books, the two male ones should show a rather patronizing, even contemptuous, attitude towards the old female chanter. 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).

A committed anti-gun lobbyist who dresses like a cowboy and writes crime fiction! Not only does he embody contradiction itself, but his whole description also suggests that he is utterly ridiculous, even pathetic. He is totally devoid of any kind of sensibility: Lola's story makes him feel "bored", and believes 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

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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 gets moved by Lola's chant. The text censoriously 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.

As is well known, in the western world orality and literacy have often been regarded as mutually exclusive terms as regards both their textual and cultural signification. In his seminal work *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong claims that writing implies patterns of memorization and rational thought that are undoubtedly superior to more primitive oral-traditional ones. He even goes as far as to assert:

Orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy [...] is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explication of language (including oral speech) itself. There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not

somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living (1982: 15).

According to Ong, literacy is, without any doubt, the superior term, an almighty means without which knowledge is ultimately unattainable. In opposition to Ong's maximal assumptions, cultural anthropologists and social linguists such as Finnegan and Street have spoken instead in favour of what Street calls "an alternative 'ideological' model" (1984: 95). (note 5) James Paul Gee has defined this model as follows:

The ideological model attempts to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices and to theorize it in terms of the ideologies in which different literacies are embedded. Literacy only has consequences as it acts together with a large number of other social factors (1990: 61).

Consequently, Peter Dickinson argues (1994: 321), if the term 'orality' cannot be used without taking into account a whole range of physical, cultural, social, sexual and linguistic signifiers, all of which change historically and contextually, it is also meet that the term 'literacy' should not be detached from the material conditions which make its acquisition possible. This

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alternative model therefore rejects universals to proclaim instead the need to study linguistic and cultural patterns in specific societies and contexts. As Peter Dickinson concludes:

By re-situating orality and literacy within social space in this manner [...] we are able to position the two terms not in absolute opposition, but rather in differential relation. Both orality and literacy become embodied by/ in specific processes of speaking, writing and representing that encompass not only the individual text or utterance but also their place within a given discursive formation (1994: 321).

Orality and literacy should no longer be taken as opposites, but rather as complementaries. Difference does not necessarily imply any kind of hierarchical ranking. Moreover, in primitive cultures orality is by no means considered to be inferior. On the contrary, it is regarded as the most powerful link, and emblem, of the community's ancestral roots and spirituality. What Aboriginal writer and critic Mudrooroo said with regard to his own culture might well be extrapolated to the study of native cultures in general:

Before the Europeans brought a system of writing to Australia, all literature was oral –that is, a spoken or memorised literature. Religious traditions and beliefs, legends and historical events which were considered important, were handed down from generation to generation, usually in the form of verse as it is easier to learn and

keep straight lines of verse rather than unwieldy prose. Prose was used in the telling of stories, tales and some historical events such as did not need to be as rigidly fixed as those things dealing with religious beliefs. [...] When the Europeans arrived with their system of writing, Aboriginal literature began to change from an oral to a written one. [...] But too often the Aborigines were observed through British eyes and culture and put down in British form. Aboriginal culture became as distorted as others seen through British eyes such as the Irish, African, Indian and Chinese (1985: 22).

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 (1990: 3).

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Only the original story, that is, the original words with their original sounds –Ngunyan na banggi/ ipangaturugan taka ki pawikan;/ duyan sa saiyang likod/ kasingputi kang buto./ Ngunyan na banggi/ ipangaturugan 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 6-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, integration for the first time. And it is now that the turtle turns up.

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).

Meaning itself does not seem to be that important. The unstable balance resulting from the precarious bi-directional relationship between signifier and signified, so fundamental in western rational culture, has been somehow suspended; indeterminacy has given way to harmony and consequently to effective communication and action. It is also worth pointing out that it is thanks to a young girl that all this is finally possible. 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 said, 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.

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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. On the other hand, Lola's chant and the anthropologist's translation are described as "a dialogue in two tongues *blending and counterpointing*" (my emphasis, 41). The beauty resulting from the co-existence of dif-

ferent voices in the same utterance, the use of words from different languages by the same speaker (Spanish-English; Filipino-English; or even the three of them when Lola says, “*Hoy, luway-luway daw, Basyon, easy, easy, she chided herself, or else they might think you’re very ignorante*” [46]), and the urgent need to establish a dialogue between both worlds, so often emphasized in the text, inevitably bring to mind Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism.

As is well known, the notion of heteroglossia (*raznorechie*, literally ‘varied speeches’), reflects Bakhtin’s emphasis on the understanding of language not as an abstract system but as a mode of social interaction. Bakhtin denies the existence of any unitary, normative language. As he sees it, “a unitary language is not something which is given but is always in essence posited, and in its every moment of linguistic life is counterpoised to the real heteroglossia” (1975: 83-84). The novel and, by extension, any kind of literary text is, for Bakhtin, “an artistically organised social heteroglossia” (76). In “Discourse in the Novel”, Bakhtin mentions several compositional forms through which heteroglossia is introduced and organized in the text, such as: author’s speech, the speeches of the narrator, the speeches of the protagonists, and the inclusion in the text of genres such as confessions, letters, diaries, drama

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and poems. Bakhtin also discusses devices used by texts to create heteroglossia such as stylization and parodic stylization, variation and hybridization. According to this critic, intentional hybridization and hybrid constructions are the most effective means to introduce dialogised heteroglossia in the text. Hybridization, in Bakhtin's words, is "the mixing of two social languages in one utterance. It is the meeting of two different linguistic consciousnesses in the arena of an utterance" (170). In a hybrid construction it is possible to locate "two consciousnesses, two voices, two accents" (171) and "two different outlooks on the world" (172). (note 6)

Moreover, according to Bakhtin, the most important aspect of being is co-being, since "being is a simultaneity, is always co-being" (Holquist 1990: 25). As he goes on to explain, "to exist means to exist for the other, and to be for oneself through the other". In his opinion the dependency on the other is so absolute that he denies any "internal sovereign territory" for the self. For Bakhtin, the self is "completely located at the boundary and looking into himself he looks in the eyes of the other through the eyes of the other" (1986: 330). These convictions have led him to stress the differences between the monologic and the dialogic modes of constitution of the self. Monologism can have pernicious effects because, as he sees it,

Monologism negates outside its own self the presence of an equal consciousness that is equal in answering; it denies an equal / (*you*). In a monological approach the other completely remains an *object* of (my) consciousness and not the other consciousness. From that consciousness one does not expect an answer which could transform everything in the world of my consciousness. A monologue is final, complete and deaf to the answer of the other person, it does not wait for it and does not recognise its *decisive* force. A monologue circumvents the other and that is why it objectifies all reality to a certain degree. A monologue pretends to be the *final word*. It closes off the world and the people represented by it (1986: 336).

In opposition to monologism, Bakhtin speaks in favour of dialogism and the dialogic relationship:

The singular adequate form of *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended (unfinalised) dialogue*. Life by its nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in a dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the symposium of the world (1986: 336-337).

Taking into account all this, it would be no exaggeration to conclude that the short story is, at least up to a point, echoing

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Bakhtin's aforementioned beliefs in so far as it advocates hybridization (juxtaposing reality and fantasy, words from different languages and social registers in the same utterance, and including poems and a variety speeches), and the dialogue between different peoples and cultures. The cowboy who refuses to listen to Lola to look at nobody or nothing but his text can be taken as the ultimate embodiment of monologism. Lola's utterances in particular are, no doubt, a good example of heteroglossia. Furthermore, Lola's chant and the anthropologist's translation could be given a rather more positive interpretation if they are thought to represent the effort to bridge the gap between different cultures by establishing a rich and empowering dialogue in spite of all difficulties and, finally, the fusion of Lola and the turtle's voices could be seen as the supreme example of communion and harmonious polyphony, where difference does not necessarily mean confrontation.

The text's emphasis on integration can also be seen in the contrast it establishes between the notions of individuality and community, to subtly disclose a clear preference for the latter. While most white Australians in the festival 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 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, even more important, 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 there 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, their close communion with nature and the rest of living creatures should neither be underestimated. Lola connects with the female author because she reminds her of “a rare bird in the forest back home. A

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glossy oriole" (38). On the other hand, the snakeskin 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 now being regarded by them as 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 towards them!

In clear contrast with Lola's communion with nature and the people and the environment that she belongs to, the two male authors show, as was stated before, a rather individualistic, arrogant and self-confident attitude; they only worry about their own careers as writers. The figures of the anthropologist and the Filipina journalist also deserve special mention. The passage in which both of them 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”. Notice also the abundance of first-person singular pronouns, which makes it clear that they are interested in Lola for their own fame/ benefit. For the anthropologist, the story is good 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,

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the search for the exotic often becomes the search for the esoteric; westerners mainly want "to invest [their] existence with greater intensity" (1994: 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". 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" (1996: 201). (note 7)

It is nonetheless interesting to point out that the text should take its own revenge against characters who mainly pay attention to the clothes that Lola is wearing, thus ignoring her human dimension and reducing her to a mere ornamental object, an icon to be looked at. "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. 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 before.

To put an end to this analysis, some attention should also be given to the figure of the turtle which, in this short story in particular, could be regarded as embodying, and advocating, 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. (note 8) 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 caparace, and a lower section, the plastron. The caparace, which happens to be dome-like, 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. Its long life, together with the fact that their shells are overlaid with horny shields that conform 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.

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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, the fact that their protective shell encloses all the vital organs of the body has also led to take them as symbols of the main domestic virtues (prudence, caution, safety, protection) and also of spiritual introspection and the return to the primeval stage.

As far as the turtle's colours are concerned, it is well known that 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: integration of opposites). 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. As regards 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. (note 9) Moreover, when the police try to take the turtle out of the room, they realize that “it was as large as the table, but oh so light” (52). It is obvious, then, that the turtle stands for the integration of opposites.

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).

One final question remains: why was the police at all called? It is clear that, for many people in the audience, this animal was a disrupting, and therefore dangerous, element. The only plausible explanation for this is that its appearance had done away with their illusion of a fixed, ordered, coherent, transparent and fully understandable reality. Life, like truth, the short story seems 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

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to repress and deny it. As Merlinda 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 skeptical 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. (<http://www.auntlute.com/bobisinterview.html>)

Merlinda 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" (www.auntlute.com/bobisinterview.html). With her writing of "White Turtle", Merlinda Bobis is not only narrating a beautiful story but, which is even more important, is bringing to the fore the urgent need to accept difference so that a better world is somehow possible.

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1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the M.C.YT (Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología) .D.G.I./ FEDER, Proyecto BFF2001-1775.

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 term '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 which 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. 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 (1994). However, it was during the 18th and 19th 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 puts it, "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" (1996: 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.

5. See Finnegan (1988) and Street (1984).

6. A thorough study of the notions of heteroglossia and hybridization can be found in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson's *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of Prosaics* (1990).

7. 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" (1992: 21).

8. For more information on the subject, see Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1986: 1007-1010).

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9. This double symbolism of green can be seen, to give but two well-known examples from different cultures and literary periods, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

