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Trabajo Fin de Máster

OF BONDS THAT MAKE A HOME:

POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM IN MERLINDA BOBIS'S *THE SOLEMN LANTERN MAKER*

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Abstract/Resumen

This Master Thesis analyzes Merlinda Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker* (2008) as a postcolonial text that creates a privileged space where the voices of the subaltern can be heard. Bobis manages to subvert the US War on Terror, official discourses, and global hegemonic discourse under the façade of the exotic otherness that is often associated with Christmas. This thesis relies on some of the most relevant assumptions put forward by well-known ethical and postcolonial critics in order to show that Bobis's novel succeeds in illustrating how nomadic identities that create multiple forms of belonging allow for the encounter with the "other." A close examination of the novel reveals that it favours the cross-cultural encounter between characters that belong to different worlds, in particular that between two vulnerable women in a liminal space. The outcome of these encounters will be the transformation of the character that allegedly belongs in the dominant culture, to the point that the artificial boundary self/other eventually fades out. This work also analyzes the fundamental role played by subversive non-verbal communication in the novel. Noland's bodily language allows for the articulation of love and care, while his notebook contains a subaltern text that encodes a story of bonds that make a home.

Esta Tesis de Máster analiza la novela de la autora filipina Merlinda Bobis *The Solemn Lantern Maker* (2008) desde una perspectiva postcolonial, que permite dar voz a las demandas de grupos y personas marginales. El libro pone de manifiesto el rechazo al idioma del imperio y a los discursos creados para justificar la Guerra contra el

Terrorismo o la globalización, utilizando como escenario el exotismo que caracteriza a la estación navideña. Basándose en conceptos desarrollados por críticos expertos en crítica ética y postcolonial, este análisis muestra cómo las personas que llevan una existencia nómada son especialmente capaces de abrirse y beneficiarse de encuentros multiculturales. El breve encuentro entre personajes que pertenecen a mundos diferentes, y más en concreto el de dos mujeres especialmente vulnerables en un espacio híbrido, tiene como resultado la transformación del personaje que representa al grupo privilegiado, hasta el punto de que, al final, la distinción artificial yo/otro se desvanece. El lenguaje no verbal se muestra como una poderosa herramienta que permite articular sentimientos que resultan casi inexpresables por medio de palabras, tales como el amor o el afecto. El diario de Noland representa la posibilidad de narrar una historia marginal que contiene el mensaje del eterno ciclo de nacimiento, muerte y renacimiento de una familia, en la que los lazos entre sus miembros son irrompibles.

KEYWORDS: Merlinda Bobis, postcolonial studies, ethical criticism

PALABRAS CLAVE: Merlinda Bobis, estudios postcoloniales, crítica ética

Introduction

The Solemn Lantern Maker (2008) is the second novel written by Merlinda Bobis, a woman born in the Philippines who now lives in Australia. In "'Voice-Niche-Brand': Marketing Asian-Australianness" (2008), Bobis refers to herself as a transnational writer with a "cross-pollinated" voice that attempts to connect her political convictions and Filipino sensibility with the mainstream reading public (120). She rejects being pigeonholed with the term "Asian-Australian" writer, a designation that "evokes a broken, halted negotiation between the Asian and the Australian in the writer; and/or between the Asian writer and the Australian reader" (119). From *Banana Heart Summer* (2005) to *The Solemn Lantern Maker* (2008) to *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012) and to *Locust Girl. A Lovesong* (2015), her latest novel, Bobis's main interest has been to offer a reflection on "social and political issues, basic decency and human rights," without forgetting the "surge of empathy for the other" (124). Bobis tries to create a "transnational imagery" in her works, a creative liminal space where self and other collide, collaborate and play in an ethical impulse (Bobis and Herrero 231).

Set in a post-9/11 climate in Manila, *The Solemn Lantern Maker* questions neo-colonialist forces that try to perpetuate western supremacy and power. The novel invites readers to compare the current situation with the colonial past under Spanish, US and Japanese rule by combining both a "grim" content and a "spare" style (Bobis and Herrero 124). The vulnerability of Filipino people to western hegemony is shown when the government gives priority to the case of Cate Burns, a disappeared American tourist who is accidentally injured by a motorcycle at one traffic intersection in Manila. Cate

Burns's absence leaks to the media as a possible case of terrorism and becomes an affair of state. Foreign and local authorities work shoulder to shoulder in order to fight a non-existent war on terror, while sidelining local problems, such as poverty, child prostitution and poor living conditions in the slums. Moreover, little emphasis is given to the murder of Germinio de Vera, a polemic Filipino journalist, known for exposing the Senator's apparent involvement in illegal gambling. Noland and Nena are imprisoned for taking care of Cate Burns, to be then allegedly accused of being involved in a terrorist organization known as "Abu Sayyaf" (222). Elvis, a sexually exploited street child and Noland's best friend, is shot dead for the same reason.

The story unravels over the last six Advent days, and provides an insight into the lives of the main characters. In a season characterized by wonder and hope, but above all by remembering, especially the (deceased) loved ones, Noland, Nena and Burns's cross-cultural encounter serves as a powerful mourning and healing process tool. The three of them are compelled to revive the past sorrows that brought them to their present situation, which offers a good example of the aforementioned transnational imagery. Noland's family was brutalized by the military for taking the law into their own hands, in an attempt to avoid their eviction from their own land. Noland's father was shot dead, and his mother was savagely beaten up, to end up suffering life-long physical consequences. Cate Burns's miscarriage is the straw that breaks the camel's back after a toxic long-term relationship with a man who mostly cares for his professional career.

The novel ponders on the ineffectiveness of verbal language, which often proves to be futile. Words are either misinterpreted or unheard, as is reflected in the American

consul's inability to listen to Cate Burns's statement, which would exonerate Noland, Nena and Elvis from any responsibility. *The Solemn Lantern Maker* allows the underprivileged to express their voices in a different way, giving importance to silences, body language and Bikol, their regional language. Accordingly, Noland's selective mutism is not a problem that fully prevents him from expressing himself. Noland cannot speak, nor can he read or write, but his kindness makes communication with the young American woman possible, thus enforcing the need to care for the other. Noland's voice is also expressed through his crafty work, especially his notebook and the decoration of his hut, which reveal the boy's own personal vision. Moreover, Nena and the American woman manage to open themselves up to each other's feelings thanks to the level of intimacy which is created as a result of Burns's painful miscarriage and the tiny size of the hut they are compelled to share. The two women speak different tongues, but they manage to bridge the divide by using body language, a piece of an article, and the few words uttered by Nena in broken English.

The Solemn Lantern Maker has not received much attention on the part of postcolonial scholars so far. In "Merlinda Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker*: The Ethics of Traumatic Cross-Cultural Encounters" (2013), Dolores Herrero sees the novel as an "allegory of traumatic cross-cultural encounters" that "effect unexpected changes in an apparently indifferent globalized world" (115). She analyzes the novel following current discourses on narrative ethics, in particular those put forward by Emmanuel Levinas and Andrew Gibson. Herrero argues that the novel gives instances of cross-cultural encounters that strive "to reduce the Other to the Same" in "a rather unethical imposition" of Western culture (111). She also studies the novel from the perspective of trauma studies, arguing that people suffering from belated Post-traumatic Stress

Disorder can undoubtedly benefit from encounters with the other (109). Similarly, although in a rather more pessimistic vein, Feidhim Hanrahan's essay on *TSLM,* entitled "The Poverty Tour: Life in the Slums of Mumbai and Manila as Seen in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* and Merlinda Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker"* (2015), addresses the novel's representation of neo-imperial realities in our global world. Disposed people's "harsh" and "gritty" living conditions in the slums are pitted against the most luxurious and vibrant parts of Manila, which brings to light the dark side of the effects of modernization (105). Besides, Hanrahan gives special attention to the exploitation and violation of the rights of the most vulnerable people, namely, children. (111).

The aim of this Master Thesis is to analyze Merlinda Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker* (2008) from a postcolonial perspective, since this text clearly resists western hegemony. Chapter I will deal with land dispossession, errantry and diasporic subjectivity. Relying on a brief account on the recent history of the Philippines, I will reflect on the present-day effects of the tenure system imposed under colonial rule. Chapter II will revolve around the novel's subversion of the US War on terror, giving special emphasis to David Lane and Cate Burns's personal transformation. Chapter III will explore nomadic identities, mainly relying on Emmanuel Levinas's seminal work. Chapter IV will try to privilege the intimate nature of cross-cultural encounters in contrast to depersonalized global discourses. In order to do so, the encounter between Nena and Cate Burns in a liminal space will be examined in detail. The last Chapter will revise official and subaltern forms of language, privileging silences and non-verbal communication in order to articulate the unspeakable nature of care. Special emphasis

will be given to Noland's notebook, a subaltern story that contests white authoritarian forms of narration.

Chapter 1: Landlessness and Homelessness

The history of the Philippines is inextricably linked to the land, an archipelago razed by natural disasters which has been several times occupied. Indigenous territory was expropriated under Spanish rule (1565-1899) in order to impose a land tenure system called *encomiendas*. The country's plantations were in the hands of few Spanish friars and officials, while native peasants were expected to "comply with the often limitless wants of the *encomendero*" (Anderson 31). In this manner, not only were Filipino people deprived of their existing communal rights of access to the land, but they also suffered impoverishment and harsh living conditions. The land tenure system turned into a practical tool for the Spanish empire, since it became an important source of income and revenues in the form of "gold, pearls, wax, cotton cloth or mantas" and, last but not least, a powerful institution to control the population (Anderson 28). Indigenous people predominantly converted to Catholicism, and were accordingly instructed in the Spanish language and culture. Philippine land was annexed by the US in 1899, in the aftermath of the war against Spain resulting from their dispute over Cuba (Dalton 498). Whereas US governance gave the Filipino population the status of wards, that is, an inferior race in need of American instruction and supervision (Gross 172), powerful landowners became the principal puppets of US imperialists, the outcome of which being the perpetuation of the existing tenure system (Guerrero 349). On the other hand, the US implemented some programs that sought to improve the educational system, health care and economy of the occupied territories (Rafael 349). In 1942, the Philippine archipelago was occupied by Japanese forces. Finally, the Filipino nation gained independence in 1946, in the aftermath of World War II (Dalton 77). Nowadays, the Filipino population suffers from a deep pain of unbelonging. The landlord class

controls the economic and political power, which often means that the landless peasants' attempts to improve their situation are systematically frustrated. Exorbitant land rents often leave tenants with insufficient resources for their own subsistence. Social improvement is very unlikely in rural areas, which compels many people to migrate to the city or overseas countries in order to survive (Guerrero 79).

Bangsamoro, that is, the Muslim southern islands of Mindanao and Sulu, were never controlled by Spanish settlers. Moro peoples resisted Spanish colonial incursions, thus preserving their sultanate regime and maintaining their own form of social organization and culture (Tuazon 12). Under American colonialism, *Bangsamoro* sovereignty was transferred to the Philippine state in the Treaty of Paris, signed between Spain and the United States in 1898 (Abreu 17). The Americans implemented a policy of pacification in an attempt to integrate this Muslim population into the rest of the Philippine political structure. This policy involved the implantation of a new legal system that did away with the sovereign power of the sultan and established non-Muslim syllabuses in the schools (Gross 173). Furthermore, vast tracts of moro territory were snatched away and handed over to multinational companies and Christian settlers (Dalton 501). Several revolts and uprisings broke out in the 1970s, resulting in attacks against civilian people by organized militias of the two religious groups (Gross 185). Nowadays, Philippine Muslims still suffer the effects of US foreign policy —especially land expropriation. *Bangsamoro* people struggle for their self-determination and political independence, for a separate Muslim nation with their own religious practices and traditions. As Julkipli Wadi has put it:

> The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) strive for power and justice so that the Moros would be freed from the grip of Philippine colonialism, oligarchy and traditional politics; however, due to entrenched

> feudal structure worsened by democratic and electoral deficit in Moro areas, it is Muslim *trapos* (traditional politicians), their families and their clans that end up as the primary beneficiary of peace dividend and other forms of "economic development" in Mindanao. (2008: 36)

It seems that *Bangsamore* independence is coerced by economic interests, which has prompted the emergence of insurgent groups, such as MNLF, MILF and ASG, the Abu Sayyaf Group. The international dimension of the moro struggle comes from the apparent connection of ASG members to *al-Qa'ida* and several kidnapping crisis, in which civilian people were hold captive, tortured and murdered (Gross 242).

The Solemn Lantern Maker brings to light the economic and political power of the Filipino upper class through the character of Senator G.B. This politician, ironically nicknamed "Good Boy," uses illicit enrichment to fund his election campaign, as his apparent connection with illegal gambling suggests (146). Furthermore, the Senator enjoys a comfortable lifestyle, "flaunts his mansions and fast cars" (59), and uses his influence and "circuitous persuasions" to make sure that everything is handled the way he expects (217). The journalist Germinio de Vera is extorted and eventually murdered for exposing the Senator's corruption (146), and the whole issue of Cate Burns's being kept hostage by an Abu Sayyaf cell is used as a cover to exonerate the politician from any responsibility and rekindle the issue of the moro struggle. The Senator uses his control over the media and the police to make sure that the "drumbeating about the poor child in custody" is appeased (217): Chief Roberto Espinosa is threatened with losing his job "by the New Year" if he does not move the culprits "somewhere safe from the media" (217). Such cynicism masquerades as a good Christian attitude. When the reporter Eugene Costa asks the Senator what he thinks of the journalist shooting, he answers that "any decent Christian would feel enraged by the salvaging and his heart

bleeds for the bereaved family" (94). Moreover, this 'decent' politician is famous for his religious charities, and this Christmas is hosting a "party for orphans at a hospice" (59).

The Solemn Lantern Maker delves in the problem of land dispossession. The aforementioned parasitic tenure system is the source of anguish for Noland's family — the squatting tenants— mainly because they are not in possession of the land they work. The absentee landlord enjoys a life of privilege, owns a "Mercedes," and goes out to eat as often as he wants (246). He makes the decision of evicting the peasants from the hacienda because he has other property development plans. Within a period of no more than one year —just "after the next harvest"— Noland's family will have to give up their house and job because they lack any kind of legal support (245), and this in spite of the fact that they have *de jure* rights over the hacienda because they have farmed the rice plantation for generations (239). Noland's father feels an intense connection to this land, which keeps strong bonds with the blood of his ancestors, and also of his descendants. He experiences the "blade of rice, the tree trunk, the brook behind the hut" and the "little hill on the hill" as part of himself (251). As a result, he does not comply with the landlord's decision, and hacks him to death on one of the rare occasions he is not in the company of "his usual bodyguards" (246). Shortly after, Noland's father is murdered by the military while trying to escape, and his mother is savagely beaten up (213).

The Solemn Lantern Maker also explores diasporic subjectivities, giving special attention to the grief experienced by exiles and landless people. Lily Cho explains that diasporic consciousness is "marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession" (11). Diaspora subjectivity is therefore

marked by loss, by the feeling that "something is not quite right about where you are now" (19). Merlinda Bobis's condition as diasporic subject provides her with an excellent position to tackle this theme in her fiction. In the novel, Noland and Nena become exiles and must drift to the slums of Manila with nothing but a cart, plastic bags and an old TV set (166). Mother and son are marked by an acute sense of loss: their beloved are no more and they cannot go back to their farm. They build a hut "where all the sewage flows," a tiny box made out of "corrugated iron, wood, cardboard, and plastic, and a hole for a door" (12). They are left in utter poverty and must struggle to survive (22). Nena works as a laundry washerwoman at the local pump, but loses her only client because she is constantly sick (37). Noland helps his mutilated mother collecting plastics, cans and other valuable materials that are discarded in "public dumps or the backstreet bins of restaurants," and selling hand-made paper lanterns at traffic car intersections (11). The family's wretched situation is once again aggravated when Noland falls into the trap of a local pimp and is sexually exploited by a Japanese man (142).

At the end of the novel, mother and son are once again ferociously evicted from their hut and relocated in a "safe house" in an unknown neighbourhood (255). Helen — one of the members of this neighbourhood— discovers that Cate Burns is staying with them. Helen has to negotiate an internal conflict: "If she rings the authorities, that would be betrayal. If she doesn't, there's the bulldozer" (167). As this quote shows, Helen hesitates between breaking with the ingrained Filipino concept of *utang na loob* ("the primacy of personal connections," "the importance of maintaining in-group harmony and coherence" [Dolan 52]) and running the risk of becoming dispossessed She feels indebted to Nena and Noland, mainly because of their wretched situation, and often

offers them food (38). Nevertheless, the terror of losing her house and job leads her to ring the authorities in the end. The dwellers of the slum find it difficult to live with this rupture of *utang na loob* with one of their kin-members, and consequently try to justify and comfort themselves by concluding that "murders can look like saints" and that Noland and Nena did not really belong to the community because "they've always kept to themselves" (206).

The Solemn Lantern Maker also explores the feelings of the relatives who remain at home. Mang Gusting and his daughter Mikmik desperately long for an absent mother who "has worked as a maid in Hong Kong for six years now" (62). Mang Gusting knows very little about raising his daughter, and even less about how to run his store (62). Consequently, some years after his wife left, he took his neighbour Lisa as a lover and got drunk every night (63). The mother went to Hong Kong with a resolute sense of duty, and kept on sending them money for a store and a karaoke (62). However, her affections seem to have dissipated because she "did not send any money, not even a greeting card" this Christmas (63). Mang Gusting and Mikmik's grief brings to mind that of Rica and her father in Bobis's earlier short story "The Sadness Collector," included in her collection *White Turtle* (1999). Rica, like Mikmik, is brought up by her father because "her mother left for Paris" to work as a domestic helper three years ago (130). Rica's mother also "used to call each month and write her postcards," until the year when she seemed to have forgotten her so that she could give all of her affection to "the new baby of her employer" (132). Rica's father, like Mang Gusting, also struggled to raise the little girl on his own, and invented tales to try and console his abandoned daughter.

It is possible to conclude that *The Solemn Lantern Maker* is a postcolonial novel, very much concerned with past historical events and the clash between cultures. The analysis carried out in this chapter indicates that this novel seeks to denounce the lethal consequences of the Spanish *encomiendas* by making readers aware of the lasting effects of this parasitic feudal system and the resulting political corruption. Senator GB is depicted as a corrupted political figure, whose main concern is to gain his election campaign at all costs. This ambition will lead him to use illicit means, such as illegal enrichment, extortion and manipulation of the information. On the other hand, Noland's family suffers from the pain of land dispossession. The tenants' *de jure* rights over the hacienda are totally disregarded because they lack any kind of legal support. Unable to comply with the landlord's decision that they should abandon their house and job, Noland's father hacks the landlord to death. The book further attempts to make readers reflect on the pain of loss and unbelonging; that is why tormented diasporic subjectivities, such as Nena and Noland's, are carefully depicted. Mother and son drift to Manila, where they must face daily difficulties. Helen is portrayed as the embodiment of the terror of dispossession, which leads her to forget about the ingrained Filipino concept of *utang na loob.* Finally, the narrative explores the feelings of abandonment that the relatives who remain at home suffer: Mang Gusting and his daughter Mikmik's longing for the absent mother is a case in point.

Chapter 2: Subverting Neo-colonialism

Colonialism and territorial expansion were firmly founded on the notion of an enrooted form of dwelling. In *The Ethics of Exile* (2005), Timothy Francis Strode offers a revision of the Heideggerian ethics of place. As this critic argues, enrooted forms of dwelling posit an attachment to place, that is, "an association between identity and territory," an ethical stance founded on property and possession (5). Identity involves the implantation of the self in a homeland, which in turn implies a shift "from autochthony to nativity," in which the subject is "a creature of a particular land, of a particular soil" (13). Accordingly, imperial wealth and power mainly consisted in appropriating territory, in discovering and seizing new lands. In Zygmunt Bauman's words:

> Heavy modernity was the era of territorial conquest. Wealth and power was firmly rooted or deposited deep inside the land bulky, ponderous and immovable like the beds of iron ore and deposits of coal. Empires spread to fill every nook and cranny of the globe: only other empires of equal or superior strength set limits to their expansion. (114)

Western settlers sought to implant their own socio-cultural practices in the new territories, because they considered them to be superior to those of the conquered lands. Drawing on the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Robert Young defines this process as "reterritorialization," that is, "the violent dynamics of the colonial or imperial propagation of economic, cultural, and social transformation of the indigenous culture" (52). Foreign cultures were perceived as irrational, savage and inferior to European identity and culture. In his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said explains that 'Orientalism' is a cultural construction based on the dichotomy Occident versus Orient. In Said's words:

> The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences […] In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (1-2)

For his part, Stuart Hall expands this idea of otherness in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), mainly by arguing that 'difference' is essential to comprehend human experience. Relying on the works of Michel Foucault and Derrida, Hall argues that meaning is ultimately reduced to the difference between binary oppositions (234): there is always a relation of power between the poles of binary pairs, that is, a hierarchical relationship between the hegemonic and the subordinate group (235). Consequently, the imperialists' sense of alleged superiority impelled them to undertake a civilizing enterprise to 'educate' the subordinate group, which they did by relying on racialized and gendered constructions in the form of stereotypes and myths. As Gayatri S. Spivak argues, imperial domination is still at work in contemporary times, as Oriental discourses are constantly being represented and reproduced (*Critique* 2-3).

The Solemn Lantern Maker can be read as anti-imperial discourse that evinces the futility of the US War on terror. As critic Feidhlim Hanrahan argues, Bobis uses the character of Miss Fuentebella as the explicit voice of anti-imperial discourse. In Hanrahan's words:

> Bobis uses the character of Miss Fuentebella as a political voice of explicit anti-imperial discourse in the novel. She tries to expose the injustices that American neo-imperialism has brought to the Philippines and is extremely critical of her government's role in this affair. (113)

Anti-imperial discourse is also generated by breaking with Orientalist constructions. Maryam Khalid's article "'Gendering Orientalism': Gender, Sexuality, and Race in

Post-9/11 global Politics" (2014) revises the Orientalist constructions used to justify US intervention in Afghanistan. In Khalid's words:

> In official US 'War on Terror' discourse, the image of the oppressed (veiled) Muslim woman was a potent symbol of the threat posed by the irrational, backward, violent, and dangerous masculinity of the enemy (9).

The construction of the image of barbarian men and infantilized women in need of protection was used to justify US military involvement. In Bobis's novel, the US War on Terror is subverted by showing the absurdity of the case in the media, which systematically rely on the image of Muslims as "irrational, backward, violent, and dangerous" (Khalid 9). In a previous article entitled "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror" (2011), Maryam Khalid argues that Lynch's rescue reasserted Orientalist discourses and served to "camouflage the paternalistic and imperialist nature of the interventions" (25). Khalid goes on to state that powerful images of Lynch, carried by US marines and covered by an American flag, "served to harness the Orientalist image of a barbaric and ruthless Arab/Muslim male who poses an uncontrolled threat to (white) women" (26). It is clear that Cate Burn's possible hostage crisis (allegedly organized by ASG members) parallels the successful rescue of Jessica Lynch by US forces in Iraq. Likewise, the US rescue mission is intended to be shown as an act of heroism, whose main aim is to save an innocent western female citizen, kept captive by an ASG cell. The operation implies a great deployment of military forces, spilling from a van "in dark camouflage and helmets and masks, assault rifles at the ready" (175). The slum is overseen by a "Huey helicopter" and cordoned off by the authorities (89). Millions of people worldwide "search their screens for that ferocious monster lurking inside, waiting until it's dragged out of the hut" (177). The ending of the mystery is "Nothing" (177). "In no time the

screen is filled by a startled-looking white woman being strapped to a stretcher" and "another screaming woman is bodily lifted by one of the uniforms" (176). A little boy looks dazed, "like he just woke up among the masks and assault rifles" and "holding onto the hand of one of the soldiers" (186).

The US War on Terror is also overturned by depicting an American colonel as a disenchanted new-colonizer. David Lane's ultimate aim consisted in protecting the essence and purity of his *home* country, which clearly echoes the aforementioned Heideggerian ethics. At the beginning of his professional career, he blindly justified wars because he related civilian population to barbarity and terrorism; hence, he believed in fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and in finding the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (213). His identity is put to the test and finally shattered in Fallujah, when he realizes that he has become a demolisher of overseas homes. He originally thought he was about to rescue an oppressed (veiled) Muslim woman, but instead found out an ordinary mother, desperate to know whether her arrested son was still alive. "Maybe it was her hand around his, that grip of mothers" that makes David realize that US assumptions do not do justice to reality (196). He also understands that this woman's desperation parallels the suffering of his wife, who untiringly waits for him to come home (197). In a meeting with his grandfather, he even becomes aware of the blurring of the barrier between I/other and good/evil. The veteran fought the Japanese in the Second World War, a war that was about survival, not patriotism, because "you're so damned afraid the other guy will shoot first" (234). Furthermore, he experiences the injustice that Elvis, Nena and Noland are enduring under US control in Manila. He requests Bettina —the US consul— to protect these innocent people and, as a result, he is subtly accused of being unpatriotic (214). Bettina decides that Nena and Noland's

case is no longer an American matter, and thus transfers the case to the Philippine government. The consul fuels the idea that Nena and Noland are part of a "terrorist cult," when it is clear that they are innocent because they are Catholic, among other reasons (214).

Cate Burns's journey to the Philippines can be seen as a mockery of western spiritual pilgrimages to the East. Cate Burns's identity is somehow linked to the Heideggerian enrooted conception of life and dwelling, as her comfortable life in Cornell illustrates (220). Her existence mainly revolves around her life in a "sleek apartment", her relationship with her lecturer, and her PhD research in literature (220). Burns's ethical stance basically consists in possessing her "gray-haired" husband, in desiring "the scent of his spunk on her skin," and in his child growing in her womb (220). Her husband's chief aspiration is to get "the professional chair" at university, not to beget a child (221). Cate's accidental pregnancy of an undesired child leads her to take off to Manila without giving him any notice. In Dolores Herrero's words: "her American partner's selfishness and unwillingness to let her have that baby, […] led her to fly to the Philippines on her own in a desperate attempt to keep some distance between them" (109). Moreover, Cate Burns decides to embark on a spiritual (and eventually Orientalist) journey of self-discovery. The American's quest takes place on the last six Advent days, thus becoming an allegory of the shepherds' pilgrimage to Bethlehem, as the following quote suggests:

> The morning star is brighter, perhaps because it's Christmas Eve. Though it's only the early hours, pilgrims must be guided to the stable where it all began. But this first story is *too* familiar and the star has long been unmasked as a planet. Pilgrimages no longer end with epiphanies. We know too much now. (201)

Bobis succeeds in mocking the Orientalist prism through which Manila is perceived in Western discourses. The author portrays Cate as the typical tourist, roaming "like a bad shopper, looking for bargains and taking no responsibility for his or her actions" (Braidotti 89). This American woman is mesmerized by the mysterious and exotic otherness of the Christmas atmosphere in Manila, a time interlude in which quotidian routine and daily reality are superseded. Cate's senses are stimulated by the chaos and rhythm of the streets, full with illuminations and handicrafts. She is fascinated by the local vendors, in particular the lantern sellers, which leads her to hunt for a *parolito* bargain at the traffic car intersection, in spite of the fact that she has no intention to talk or socialize. Her encounter with Elvis when purchasing Noland's five-pointed *parolito* is brief and shallow, a mere consumption task (9).

Bobis's novel subverts the stereotypical western image of Manila by using the trope of the city border. As is well known, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa defines the concept of the border by claiming that "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe" (25). Anzaldúa thus contends that borderlands are physically present whenever "two or more cultures edge each other," whenever "under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). Similarly, in Bobis's novel, the traffic intersection stands for a city border, where "star and money change hands" in a "quick meeting of star-maker and heaven keeper" (42). The poverty that prevails in Noland's slum —the poor side of the border— is never disguised. As Hanrahan puts is, "Bobis's depiction of the slums of Manila is harsh, gritty and unforgiving, with little time for sugar-coating the difficulties the residents face" (106). Bobis's novel successfully undermines the idealized view of the wealthy area of the city by depicting it through the

eyes of Elvis and Noland. These two street kids are pitted against the stereotypical image of the affluent customer. Noland crosses the city border to visit a mall for the first time in his life. He is bewildered by "so many corridors leading to so many shops with everything that anyone can buy and eat" (67). On a different occasion, Noland and Elvis go to Star City — "the largest shopping center in Asia" (105). The place is well protected by a guard who blocks their entrance because they are street kids, intruders "who would interfere with the consumer's or shopper's splendid isolation" (Bauman 98). Besides, the novel draws the readers' attention to the problem of sex tourism, which shatters the image of the civilized, rational Western man (it is mainly due to the western men's demand that this sex industry thrives). Noland is forced to pose for a Japanese man in the suite of a five-star hotel (142), and Elvis is sexually abused in "the suite next door" (143).

The analysis of *The Solemn Lantern Maker* carried out in this chapter proves the novel's anti-imperial agenda, since it evinces the futile nature of the US War on Terror. The character of Miss Fuentebella, in particular, is offered as the figure who spells out the injustices of American imperialism. Edward Said's theoretical concept of Orientalism has also proved essential to understand the anti-imperial nature of the novel. *TSLM* puts to the test the racialized and gendered myths that were constructed to justify the War on Terror. The Orientalist image of Muslims as barbaric, ruthless and violent is clearly put forward in the media, which clearly contribute to perpetuating this negative representation. This US act of heroism, intended to save an innocent western female citizen, is ridiculed when US marines finally drag a defenseless woman and her child from the hut in which Cate Burns was staying. Similarly, David Lane is portrayed as a disenchanted new colonizer. Martin Heidegger's notion of enrooted forms of

dwelling, together with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism/otherness, have played a key role to better understand the colonel's ethical stance. At the beginning of his professional career, David Lane reduced the Other to barbarity and terrorism, a constructed image that justified the need to protect the essence and purity of his home country. Lane's identity is eventually shattered when he finds out that US representations of the Other do not do justice to reality; what he finds out in his missions is ordinary people like him. It is at this moment that David Lane realizes that he has become a demolisher of overseas homes, working at the service of unscrupulous economic and political interests.

Heideggerian ethics have also been fundamental to study the figure of Cate Burns, since her existence mainly revolves around her life of comfort in Cornwell. Cate Burns's accidental pregnancy leads her to embark on a journey of self-discovery, which turns into a mockery of western spiritual pilgrimages to the East. Bobis succeeds in mocking the Orientalist prism through which the East is perceived in Western discourses by portraying Cate as a tourist mesmerized by the mysterious and exotic otherness of the Christmas atmosphere in Manila. Bobis's novel also subverts the stereotypical western image of Manila by using the traffic intersection as a trope of the city border. The poverty that presides over Noland's slum is never disguised, whereas the idealized view of the wealthy area of the city is depicted through the eyes of street kids, pitting them against the stereotypical image of the affluent customer. In addition, the image of the civilized Western man is seriously questioned when the problem of sex tourism, an industry that thrives mostly due to western men's demands, is brought to the fore.

Chapter 3: Nomadic Identities

In *The Ethics of Exile* (2005), Timothy Francis Strode offers a revision of the nomadic ethics of place, which he sets in opposition to the Heideggerian enrooted conception of dwelling. Strode explains that Levinasian nomadic ethics "will posit an essential uprootedness or extraterritoriality" by privileging wandering or *movement without return* (4). Furthermore, Levinasian ethics, he goes on to argue, are linked to human relations, thus involving the relationship of the self with the other "in the primordial ligature of responsibility" (6). Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997) relies on the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome (uprootedness) to develop the idea of relational poetics. For Glissant, errantry involves the practice of movement across territories, without implying a "frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin" (18). "Relation" is the term which denotes the conscious choice to embrace the Other in all its multiplicity and difference (11). The poetics of relation are seen as beneficial because "by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself" (18). Moreover, Rosi Braidotti's contribution to nomadic ethics emphasizes that "becoming-nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances" (84). To put it differently, nomadic identities involve the creative construction of identity and, by extension, reaching out to the Other.

In *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, Elvis can be said to encapsulate a nomad identity, since he is a street kid who wanders from one place to another in Manila. The boy is

uprooted from any particular place or home because he does not even know who birthed him or where he was born (123). The statue of the mayor reading a newspaper in Manila Bay is Elvis's favourite place to visit. He enjoys sitting on a bench, imagining that "the mayor would hush him like a proper father and tell him to go and play" (232). It is clear that Elvis's relationship with Bobby Cool is mostly based on a ligature of economic interest, as the kid is forced by this procurer to prostitute himself in order to earn his living. Nevertheless, Elvis's money does not help him to improve his social status; no matter how much he earns, he is always treated as a street kid, a slum-dog. Elvis is "fuming" and "on fire" when he and Noland are not allowed to enter Star City, in spite of the fact that he has "a wad of pesos" in his pocket (104). Swearwords and games with words are used by the kid to outwit the people who refuse his entrance to certain places. To give but one example, Elvis outsmarts the officers guarding a local church, making one of them lose his tongue and "getting his own back at all the guards in the world" (122). Moreover, he uses his cap and a toy gun to protect himself against the injustice of society: "He [Elvis] fancied himself armed to the teeth. I am deadly" (174). As this quote illustrates, Elvis's money and tokens function as self-defensive mechanisms. Yet, he cannot do anything to make a better world, as the following fairy tale illustrates:

> Once upon a time in a land far away, there was a ball in a box with slats to peek through. It saw that the world was not good. The seeing hurt it more than the being out there, because it could not do anything. In the box the ball bounced and raged, but still it could not do anything about the world. The bouncing bruised the ball, strained the box to its seams, hurting it too. (183)

It could be argued that the ball stands for Elvis: he sees that the world is not good, and this hurts because he cannot do anything to change it. He bounces and rages against everything, but only to get deeply hurt in the end.

Elvis's friendship with Noland, on the other hand, is a relationship based on responsibility and care. The two boys make up a brotherhood that supersedes and transcends conventional forms of social organization. They had "met only a month ago" when Elvis became Noland's *parol* assistant, helping him to sell the lanterns in a traffic car intersection (5). Elvis embraces Noland as his own little brother, often giving him "a *balato*, a gift of four hundred pesos" or food, and showing him different parts of the city (66). Elvis enjoys behaving as an elder brother: "You think Jesus had a brother? Would have been nice […] safe. His brother would have fought all those bad soldiers off […] saved him from the cross or something" (123). Similarly, Elvis tries to prevent Noland from falling into Bobby's net of sexual exploitation. However, in spite of his efforts, Bobby takes Noland to a pornographic photograph session with a Japanese man. "[Elvis] does not hesitate to hit his pimp right on the mouth, notwithstanding the fact that this will condemn him to utter helplessness and destitution on the streets" (Herrero 123). Bobby beats up Elvis badly, leaving bruises all over his body and a swollen black eye (183), and the boy is compelled to go on engaging in street prostitution, hanging around car parks (202). Elvis's only responsibility is his adopted brother, Noland, as the folk ditty *Leron-Leron Sinta* suggests:

> *Love me, a brave man*
> *Unafraid of playing shoot-outs*
> *My knives are seven, my guns nine*
> *A plate of noodles is my enemy.* (202)

Elvis's dauntless attitude, as revealed by the ditty's seven knives and guns, is countered by his true friendship and affection for Noland. Elvis cannot suffocate the pain of not knowing what happened to Noland "in the room next to his in that hotel" (226). Therefore, he goes back to the intersection, where "two men watch him from a car" (248). He is chased by plainclothes police officers because he has been accused of being

involved in Cate Burns's kidnapping. Eventually, he is shot dead, which puts "an end to the violence and sexual vexations that he would have had to keep on suffering" (Herrero 123).

It might be said that Noland is compelled to adopt a nomadic identity when his family is evicted from their farm. His squatting position at the feet of his dead father could in turn be understood as the boy's moment of transformation into the active producer of multiple forms of belonging. Noland's crouched position, as he balances himself on the front part of his feet, might be interpreted as a symbolic subversive act, as his subtle attempt to squat, that is, to occupy "an empty building or area of land without the permission of the owner" (*Cambridge Online Dictionary* 2015). Moreover, from the perspective of meditation and yoga studies, squatting can also be seen as "a symbol for the harmony between a higher and lower pole and for the equilibrium between extreme pairs of opposites like joy and sorrow, success and failure, hope and despair" (Grill 58). In the novel, the boy was found squatting in the hills, "in the dark, silent at his father's feet," which evinces his new illegal status in his home place, and also the equilibrium between up and down, desperation and hope (252). In Manila, Noland's transformation into a nomad will be eventually accomplished. Noland's decoration of his hut stands for his rhizomic identity, for his ability to make his home anywhere, which turns him into a light traveller with no earthly attachments. He decorates his home place in Manila according to his past memories and some stories narrated to him by his parents. Whereas his father taught him to draw, as a little child, his home place in his head: the farming land with the "blade of rice, the tree trunk, the brook behind the hut [and] that little hill on the hill" (251), his mother taught him to associate "the stars above the hill" with protective angels (209). As a result, Noland

"conjured his own cathedral. He longed for angels; he found them. He wished for stars; he made them" (58). The angels and the stars clearly represent the night sky in the farm, and "a bamboo Christmas tree" inexorably recalls their home tree trunk (15).

Noland's identity is deeply embedded in a web of kinship and poetical relations. In *Philippines: a Country Study* (1993), Ronald E. Dolan states that the nuclear family is the prime social unit in Philippine culture. To quote the author's words:

> Philippine personal alliance systems are anchored by kinship, beginning with the nuclear family. A Filipino's loyalty goes first to the immediate family; identity is deeply embedded in the web of kinship. It is normative that one owes support, loyalty, and trust to one's close kin and, because kinship is structured bilaterally with affinal as well as consanguineal relatives, one's kin can include quite a large number of people. (88)

For Noland, his family is the prime social unit because it represents a safety net. As his name (No Land) suggests, the boy's main source of anxiety is the loss of his farm, and by extension that of his family/home. He is mesmerized by the sight of the Holy Family Stable in a local church, since the nativity is the ultimate representation of one of the most traditional family units. It is at this moment that "Noland feels as if the warmth in his chest will spill over" (126). Moreover, he grew warm inside when "uncle [Bobby] and nephew [Elvis] assured him that business would grow if they worked together like family. *Like family*" (5). Noland owes support, loyalty and trust to his mother Nena and to his friend Elvis. For him, Elvis is a quintessential part of his safety net, mainly because "other children didn't like the mute boy in their games" (19), and it is with Elvis that he can share some of the best moments of his life, as the following excerpt shows:

> The boy remembers twelve fish-ball sticks for the twelve days of Christmas, and the noodles at midnight, the McDonald's pancakes with sweet water on them, and the full revolution of a cap when the tummy is full and warm. (231)

Noland's relationship with Cate Burns begins at the traffic car intersection where the boy sells his lanterns. Relying on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the "borderland" or contact zone once again, it might be asserted that the traffic intersection stands for the borderland where Noland and the Other (Cate Burns) collide (25). The American woman seems to be inexorably guided by the local lanterns or *parols* to the traffic car intersection, as the following quote illustrates: "This story began with a star. At the airport she [Cate] imagined it flashed a warning. Two hours later it seduced her out of a taxi and spun her life out of her hands" (220). In *Philippines: a Country Study* (1993), Ronald E. Dolan explains that Filipino *parols* stand for the Star that guided the Three Kings to Bethlehem, thus fostering hope, goodwill and the welcoming of visitors. Likewise, in Bobis's novel Noland's five-pointed *parolito,* made of coloured Japanese paper, propitiates and welcomes the American's arrival at the traffic car intersection. Whereas Cate's initial encounter with Elvis and Noland is a mere commercial transaction (9), Noland regards the American woman as "an angel," a glowing beautiful creature with hair swirling like a halo (8). Grief strikes Noland when Cate is suddenly hit by a Pizza hut motorcycle (9). His immediate reaction is to lift the woman into the cart and take her to his hut, in order to desperately try to save her life (10). Noland treats Cate Burns with care and devotion, and squats "like some slave dog" at her feet (64). He then makes sure his guest is fine, "laying his hand on her brow to check for fever and, in a bold impulse, his head on her chest to check for life" (75-6).

Judging by what has been said, it is clear that Merlinda Bobis's novel raises awareness of contemporary ethical issues. Nomadic ethics of place, first introduced by Emmanuel Levinas and further developed by Édouard Glissant and Rosi Braidotti, have proved essential to understand Elvis's characterization as an errant subject. In *The Somemn Lantern Maker*, errant identities are pitted against a rooted ethical stance, to be ultimately privileged. Elvis is portrayed as a street kid, uprooted from any particular place or home because he is an orphan. It is obvious that Elvis's relationship with Bobby Cool, mostly based on a ligature of economic interest, is set in contrast with his relationship with Noland, based on a ligature of care. Elvis's money and tokens function as his self-defensive mechanisms against the injustice of society, a dauntless attitude that is countered by his pain of not knowing what the Japanese man did to Noland, his adoptive little brother. Elvis risks and eventually loses his life when he decides to go back to the intersection, back to his brother's home.

Noland also adopts a nomadic identity when his family is evicted from their farm. His squatting position at the feet of his dead father can be understood as the boy's moment of transformation into the active producer of multiple forms of belonging. Noland's transformation into a rhizomic identity is accomplished in Manila, as his ability to make his home anywhere illustrates. Bobis's narrative clearly seeks to expose Noland's sense of pain after losing his farm and, above all, after losing his father. For this reason, the kid feels deeply moved by any representation of traditional family units. Nena and Elvis are quintessential parts of his safety net; he owes them support, loyalty and trust. Bobis's novel ultimately stresses Noland's moral superiority when he tries to save the life of the American tourist after being injured at the traffic car intersection, the borderland.

Chapter 4: Intimate Feminine Cross-Cultural Encounters

The Solemn Lantern Maker makes the reader reflect on the global and the local, the political and the personal, the public and the private. In "Introduction: the Global and the Intimate" (2012), Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner seek to link the domain of intimacy with that of the global. In their edited volume, these two feminist scholars argue that grand narratives of globalization call attention to the global market and communication technology, thus sidelining day-to-day experiences. Global forces give way to variegated experiences for distinctively located individuals, who also happen to differ from one another on account of their race, class and gender. Bobis's novel contests oppressive global narratives by questioning the fluidity of information, capital and people. Official information is clearly discredited, as CNN channel is only filled with "the rhetoric on the war against terrorism," with "the usual honor roll of dead American soldiers" (222). Moreover, Cate Burns's case becomes an absurd show on the TV newsreel *City Flash*, while Germinio de Vera's murdering for exposing Senator GB's presumptuous implication with illegal gambling is relegated to the background and silenced. The fluidity of capital is also put at stake because, as is stated in the novel, "the dollar flies back" "when the body is unable to return" (69). As far as the flux of people is concerned, millions of diasporic Filipino workers send out money back home, while trying not to know about the loneliness and unhappiness of the families they left behind, as is the case of Mang Gusting. The much celebrated mobility of people as synonymous with freedom and progress is also questioned, because Noland had never even visited a local shopping mall. Furthermore, the novel uses the character of Lydia de Vera as a political figure with an explicit anti-global discourse. Lydia complains

about her husband's interest in human rights, which leads him to sideline his intimate family and personal sphere. To quote Lydia's words:

> Foolish men. Not for a moment do they think of their wives who will be widows or their mothers who will be childless, but about country and integrity, the bigger picture. Always the home is too small. The heroic resides somewhere else. If not the streets, the halls of government, or a war. (198)

As this excerpt shows, Lydia de Vera privileges the intimate domain at the expense of the public (198), and resents that her husband's "sense of justice was more ardent than his desire", that is, his preoccupation for his home and family (224).

The Solemn Lantern Maker fosters the benefits of care and understanding in the intimate sphere. The fleeting cross-cultural encounter between Cate Burns, Nena and Noland in the liminal space of the hut contests homogenizing global forces, thus bringing to mind Homi Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space". As is well known, in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha argues that this site of resistance allows for cultural plurality and negotiations without ever relying on the hegemonic/subaltern distinction (225). In the novel, Nena and Cate Burns physically inhabit a hybrid space for six days. The hut is described as a "magical shabby heaven," which therefore encapsulates the opposed meanings of rottenness and wonderland (85). Nena's hut brings to mind a spiritual place —full of angels and saints— which creates a privileged emotional atmosphere to reach out for the Other. In spite of their shared female condition, Cate Burns and Nena belong in different worlds. In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (2003), Chandra T. Mohanty argues that non-white women's needs and claims were never heard because of the universal assumption that all women made up a coherent group with similar interests, regardless

of their distinct socio-cultural backgrounds (261). However, Bobis's novel succeeds in undermining such differences between these two women mainly by drawing attention to their deformity and abjection.

Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) provides a detailed examination of the representation of "monstrous-feminine" women in contemporary horror films. The construction of women as shocking or terrifying monsters evinces male anxieties and fears about the female body (1-2). Creed relies on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and the maternal in order to argue that "woman as monstrous womb" is the most common representation of women in horror films, because this is the utmost form of abjection. Quoting Creed's words:

> The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces. (49)

As this quote shows, the womb's encapsulation of the inside/outside distinction "point(s) to the split between the natural world of the mother and the paternal symbolic which is regulated by […] proper civilized codes of behavior and the clean and proper body" (49). The inherently monstrous nature of the womb comes from "the impossibility of ever completely banishing the abject from the human domain" (49). Likewise, in *TSLM* Cate Burns's miscarriage and possible infection in her vagina might be said to stand for the monstrous feminine. Cate is represented as containing all traces of contamination when she is examined for the first time by Nena:

> Very blond hair stained with blood, ugly bruise on the left temple, spreading beyond the hairline perhaps to the back of the head. Looks like a very bad fall, which she probably tried to break with her arms, also bruised and bloodied. But the pink top is not as messy

> as the white slacks. The blood is mostly around the lower torso, between and down her legs. (14)

As this quote clearly illustrates, Cate's condition after her accident and subsequent miscarriage is described with meticulous detail in order to show the inherent monstrous nature of the womb and the abject dimension of the (female) human body.

"Woman as witch," Barbara Creed goes on to argue, is yet another common representation of women in movies. This critic explains that the figure of the witch is usually depicted as monstrous and endowed with supernatural powers. Her social role as healer and developer of "early forms of herbal medicine" was one of the most remarkable aspects of the representation of the witch in the past (74). Following Creed's definition of the monstrous woman as witch, Nena might in turn be regarded as a representation of this kind of figure. Nena is described as "an old woman," with "streaks of gray," a "hunched frame in a tattered housedress" (87-8). Moreover, the children that play in the slum are scared of her and "call her a witch but soon amble away" (13).

Last but not least, Nena could also be said to represent the subaltern, following Gayatri Spivak's definition of the term. As is well known, in her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), Spivak claims that the relationship between knowledge and power should be regarded as one of the most important aspects of postcolonial thought. Spivak coins the term "subaltern" to refer to the subordinate class or, to put it differently, the group without knowledge and power (66-111). Taking this into account, it is easy to conclude that the figure of Nena also represents that of the subaltern woman. Nena is the ultimate victim of the landlord class corruption and exploitation.

The abuse she has suffered is an attack on her identity, firstly as a land worker because, as a result of it, she can no longer work in the fields, and secondly as a woman, because her deformed body will make it very difficult for her, if not impossible, to start a new life by marrying again. Nena's abjected legs, with "smashed knees and ugly scars up to her thighs," stand for a memento of violence, injustice and domination (37), and clearly put to the test and denounce the Orientalist representation of the elusive Eastern woman as the embodiment of "irresistible sexual desire" (Hasan 35).

Nena plays a crucial role as subaltern healer, to rely once again on Creed and Spivak's aforementioned theoretical concepts. The novel highlights the invisible hands and the contained tears of the wretched family that takes care of Cate, who thus becomes the beneficiary of their generous compassion. Nena looks after Cate and tries to put an end to her intense pain, nursing and healing her injured guest with her own curative methods. The local woman uses "a hot sponge to make her sweat, to get that fever down," and sends her son to buy a bottle of herbs for miscarriage (53). Nena's role of healer and generosity also brings to mind Carol Gilligan's definition of a "feminist ethics of care," that is, an ethical stance with special emphasis on the interdependence of human, and in particular female, connections (155). Nena's behaviour towards Cate Burns is quite compassionate because she cannot help feeling sorry for this foreign woman. Cate's wretched condition undoubtedly helps to bridge the divide between the two women and to connect them. It can be concluded that their shared monstrosity (Cate as the figure of woman as 'monstrous womb' and Nena as that of 'monstrous witch') somehow blurs the hierarchical relationship between the woman from the centre and the woman from the margins.

Cate's fever might also be understood as part of the personal transformation she is undergoing as a result of the psychological journey undertaken. According to Andrew Gibson, the "ethics of affect" are concerned with openness, sensibility and reception; in other words, with being affected by the Other (162). Accordingly, it could be argued that Cate is deeply affected by Nena's care but, above all, by Noland's affection. During her convalescence, Noland tenderly caresses the sick woman, laying "his head on her chest to check for life" (76). Cate experiences an unknown emotion, an intimate connection that propitiates affection when she feels Noland's breath "so close, like a kiss, like something she's been searching for all her waking life" (40). Noland looks at her with an intense and solemn stare, with a look that "knows about her" "from the day she was born" (79). Cate trusts Noland's face-to-face affection because his eyes say: "tell me a story and it will be the only story that will matter" (79).

Cate Burns's awakening in Nena's house somehow brings to mind the shepherds' arrival in Bethlehem: "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh" (Matthew 2: 11), However, in the novel, Cate's awakening in Nena's hut is not described as positively as in the gospels. Noland and Nena enter the house, gaze at Cate and see her as "a white giant" (86). Cate "folds in two for a second," while the old woman crouches on the floor to scold her with a "high-pitched voice" (86). In this face-to-face encounter, the two women "are sizing up each other warily": "Nena is still blocking the door, caught between anxiety and hope," while "Cate is sitting on the mat, between fear and grief" (129). Cate Burns sees her host as a negative, abnormal and dangerous figure. The American woman tries to bribe Nena with money in exchange for her liberty; all she

wants is to make a call and get her personal belongings from the embassy (125). Following Andrew Gibson's ideas once again, it can be concluded that Cate is unable to open herself up to the Other: she refuses to listen to them and instead tries to make them play by her own rules. To put it differently, she tries to "speak of and therefore master the other as whole, to reduce the other to the terms of the same" (65).

Paradoxically, Cate's 'monstrous' condition and isolation (her English is no good to make herself understood) eventually prompts her to listen to the native woman's voice with respect. In *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence* (2004), Emmanuel Levinas claims that ethical responsibility means being opened up to reciprocity and vulnerability in a two-way movement with the Other. Reaching out for the Other implies both the impossibility of possessing the absolute truth and the willingness to be transformed by the Other's background in a dialogical process (49). In keeping with this, it could be argued that the two women finally open themselves up to reciprocity and vulnerability, mainly because they share the same pain of loss. In Nena's words: "You sad…like me…no son, no husband…he die?" (148). Nena then shows the American woman her son's notebook with "a blond angel cut out from an old Christmas card" (149). She confides to the American woman her secret, leaving her breathless. The two women look at a tabloid clipping pasted on the last page of the notebook: "It's a photo of a young Nena with four-year-old Noland" with the caption "WIDOW OF SHOT FARMER CRIES FOR JUSTICE" inscribed (154). Cate wants "to say sorry forever" and "to weep with this woman for a long, long time" (154). When Noland arrives home, she is sure that he has suffered some kind of tremendous shock. Yet, she cannot possibly understand "the new clothes and shoes, the sweet scent, the expensive toy, the food" (161). Cate tries to comfort his frantic mother, while she

searches the boy's body for marks and clues. When Nena "finds Cate's photo folded under the bill" (162), she reaches the conclusion that "she's the root of all this" (163), which makes these two women feel estranged from each other once again. "Nena stares into the blue eyes welling with tears" and invites her to leave the house (165). However, Cate eventually returns to the hut because "they are irrevocably bound" (165): Cate is mourning her miscarriage and failed marriage, and Nena is torn apart when Elvis confirms that her son has been sexually abused (173).

Cate Burns's process of transformation culminates in her understanding of hybridity. The character which could be seen as representing the imperial West has finally realized the importance of establishing bonds with the Other. This epiphany makes her rethink her previous life and question her future plans and intentions. She is now drowning with "this antiseptic smell, with a touch of flowers" in a private hospital (221), but her fleeting encounter with Noland and Nena prevents her from resuming her previous life and worldview as if nothing had happened. After revisiting her entire life on her mind, she is only certain that her marriage "has grown shadowy, like something under mossy water," and that the last six days represent a whole lifetime, a new start, "ending with an oh-so-solemn face in her head" (221). Now she can only think of her bonds with this family: the touch, the feeling in the intimate hut. She asks Colonel David Lane the meaning of being American. This question stuns David, and the narrator concludes:

> Maybe certainty is impossible. We're only as real as what we do and what is done to us in the moment; knowing comes much later, if it comes at all. We're jostled by too many acts that we choose to forget. (242)

Cate's questioning continues, though: "What is it to be you…or me? "…Or a child?" (242). As these questions suggest, the boundary line that separates her culture from that of the Filipino has been blurred. The care and understanding resulting from this intimate encounter have shaken up Cate's principles to the point of doing away with all sorts of previous artificial boundaries.

In this chapter, *The Solemn Lantern Maker* has been addressed as a local narrative, a site for the feminist revision of intimate cross-cultural encounters. Bobis's novel critically contests global narratives by discrediting official information and by questioning the much celebrated mobility of money and people. The novel draws readers' attention to the fleeting encounter between Cate Burns, Nena and her son in a hybrid private space. The analysis carried out indicates that *TSLM* succeeds in downplaying Nena's inferior status as regards to that of Cate, the woman who stands for the central/dominant culture. Relying on both Spivak's notion of 'the subaltern' and Barbara Creed's idea of the 'monstrous feminine,' the figure of Nena has been examined as an instance of a monstrous subaltern witch, as the ultimate victim of the landlord class corruption and exploitation: her abjected legs are an attack on her identity as a land worker and, above all, as a woman. Moreover, Nena's scars put to the test the Orientalist representation of the sexually desired Eastern woman.

In this chapter, it has also been argued that Nena's generous compassion as shown in her role as healer recalls Carol Gilligan's definition of a "feminist ethics of care": an ethical stance with special emphasis on the interdependence of female connections. The connection between these two women is prompted by Nena's desperate attempt to put an end to Cate's intense pain after her miscarriage. In addition,

the American woman's awakening in Nena's hut has been read as a reversal of the shepherds' arrival in Bethlehem. Cate Burns sees her host as a negative, abnormal and dangerous figure, whereas Nena sees her guest as a dangerous and intrusive white giant. Cate tries to make Nena and Noland play by her own rules, thus evincing her initial inability to open herself up to the Other. Cate Burns's monstrous condition and isolation eventually helps to bridge the divide between the two women. The American woman's fever has been addressed as part of the personal transformation she is undergoing, as a result of the psychological journey undertaken. Andrew Gibson's notion of "ethics of affect" has been fundamental to understand Cate's intimate connection with Noland, resulting from the affections she experiences as the boy touches and keeps an eye on her during her convalescence.

Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity has also proved essential to make sense of Nena and Cate's opening to reciprocity and vulnerability. Cate Burns's position of dependence and isolation impels her to listen to the native woman's voice with respect. The two women eventually learn that they share something very important: the pain of loss. This two-way movement between Cate and Nena is once again arrested when Nena fears that Cate is the root of her son's shocked condition. However, this moment of estrangement is soon overcome when they realize that their common pain-of-loss bond cannot possibly be broken. The American woman is transformed by the Other's wretched background, to the point that she finally understands the meaning of hybridity. Her initial principles are so shaken up that all sorts of previous artificial boundaries are finally done away with. This is the result of the care and understanding that she experienced in her intimate encounter with Nena and Noland.

Chapter 5: Of Peripheral Counter Language

Language plays a central role in *The Solemn Lantern Maker*. As Gayatri S. Spivak argues in her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), the voices of subaltern individuals have been systematically muted in history. Spivak claims that the subaltern should engage in the act of speaking for themselves in order to eradicate their marginal condition (289-92). In a similar vein, Bill Ashcroft et al explore the oppressive nature of language in their seminal book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). These scholars state that "one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language" (7). The standard version of the metropolis is regarded as the norm, while the "englishes" of the peripheries are marginalized, thus perpetuating an unfair hierarchical power structure (8). The language of anti-colonialism entails expressing and spelling out Otherness (11). *The Solemn Lantern Maker* uses the official language with a spare style in order to criticize American foreign policy, institutions and the media. The hegemonical language privileges the characters that stand for the center and isolates those who dwell on the margins. Colonel David Lane is isolated in Manila by Bettina, the American ambassador. He is silenced because he does no longer uphold the War on Terror discourse, which implies that he may even lose his job (216). Language also isolates Cate Burns when she stays in a hospital for some days. She wishes to report to the police that Nena and Noland are innocent. She tries to leave the hospital, screams and hits "at the men dragging her back inside" (223), but then receives sedation in order to keep her silent (241). The use of official language by characters which defy the centre also proves to be dangerous, as is the case of the two local journalists who are "in this business of telling the truth" (117). Germinio de Vera's exposure of the Senator's

alleged implication with corruption is silenced forever. Germinio has "old files on every corrupt official in the country" and "newspaper articles that grew bolder through the years" (111). As a result of this, he is shot dead by a motorcycle by-driver at a traffic car intersection (9). Similarly, the road reporter Eugene Costa is pushed by the bodyguards until "he falls into the pool" when he stalks the Senator about his possible connection with illegal gambling (146). Eugene is ashamed of his colleagues' "wish for rest" and "resignation" (230), and feels deeply frustrated because, even though he knows the truth, he cannot do anything against all of these unscrupulous interests.

The novel explores different forms of speech as reflected in the use of Bikol, the Filipino native language. Bobis includes the local tongue, thus offering "a form of resistance to the powers of the postcolonial, globalized country where they find themselves" (Hanrahan 106). As Hanrahan goes on to argue, "the women's singing of Christmas carols with alternative, humorous lyrics" "gives an insight into the resilience and solidarity that exists among the residents" (106). Bikol is also used to isolate Cate Burns in her fleeting encounter with Nena, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> Cate: I can make a run for it.
> Nena: *Ang reward…puwede kaming mag-Chritmas.*
> Cate: Surely she can't run after me…
> Nena: *Baka makapag-aral si Noland…* (130)

As this quote suggests, Cate's main problem is that she cannot use English, the dominant language, with Nena. Not only is she unable to communicate, but she has also lost her identity card and personal belongings. In this manner, she is metaphorically freed from her hegemonical speech and her metropolitan identity. Stranded in a

wretched hut situated in a slum of Manila, she has no other choice than to open herself up to the Other.

Noland can be said to represent the absolute Other, to use Spivak's term once again. He can actually speak, but has become mute as a result of the trauma he suffered when his father died (18). Dolores Herrero interprets Noland's muteness as "the discourse of silence," that is, as the repressed voice of a civilian person who has been ravaged by the military (112). Herrero goes on to argue that the boy's silence can also be understood as a sign of respect, as a significant refusal to appropriate his voice (114). Moreover, Noland's dumbness makes it possible for him to use a different form of communication which better allows for the expression of Otherness, since it breaks with the hierarchical structures of power encapsulated by the English language. Noland communicates with his mother by using body language; the boy takes his mother's hands to his chest and looks at her with his solemn eyes. "Her son can speak in there and her hands can hear. His heart is true and she trusts it" (84). Noland's speech from the heart also transforms Cate Burns. His touch and breath articulate the unspeakable nature of true care, a cross-over bond that does not need the structures of formal speech. Similarly, the doctorate literature student is mesmerized by Noland's "silent tale" (40), "the one speech that truly gratifies" (76). Furthermore, Noland and Nena's squatting position when they are kept in custody can be seen as yet another form of bodily communication. "They look like one body, not human, just limbs bound together" (184). Their crouched position illustrates the intimate bond between mothers and children, an unbreakable tie, no matter how wretched their current situation may be. Noland and Nena have lost Elvis, the American woman and their house. Yet, they "wait for the morning" (254), that is, they wait for a change of fortune.

Noland's notebook also provides a privileged space to voice a subaltern story that contests white authoritarian forms of narration. The novel aims to tell a subversive story from the margins in a very subtle way, thus offering a fresh perspective on the ethics of writing and reading. Dolores Herrero interprets Noland's notebook as "the silent story of his belated trauma and desperate need to believe in angels, in salvation" (114). However, Noland's journal is lot more than the mere attempt to narrate and articulate his own traumatic experience; the boy's book is also a retelling of what he loves most: his own home/family story. Noland's notebook seems to be a chaotic and confusing sketch book, including a tabloid clipping, rough sketches of stars, a five-pointed star and a comic strip with angels and stars. The tabloid clipping with "a photo of a young Nena with four-year-old Noland" (154) "on the farm where the hill had stars that were angels who watched over them" is the visual representation of a home/family (243). No wonder he is mesmerized by the sight of the Holy Family Stable in a local church: he "feels as if the warmth in his chest will spill over" (126), and grew warm inside when "uncle [Bobby] and nephew [Elvis] assured him that business would grow if they worked together like family. *Like family*" (5).

Noland's five-pointed star illustrates a home/family map, made up of his parents and the other people he loves: Elvis and Cate Burns. In *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols,* Becker explains that the pentagram represents the sum of two feminine elements and three masculine elements and the quintessence, that is, Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit, bound within the circle of life, death, and rebirth (116). Noland's five-pointed star clearly responds to this pattern: a framed star with each of the five points encircled (178), with tree masculine figures (Noland, his father and Elvis) and two feminine ones (Nena and Cate Burns) (238). Each of the members of the family

seems to stand for one of those elements: Cate Burns, as her surname suggests, represents fire; his father embodies earth, because of his close connection with the land (251); Nena stands for water, because of her job as a washerwoman (36); Noland for the spirit with his "saintly poker face" (32); and Elvis for air, because it is said that he "flies" in the city (248). Finally, Noland's family five-pointed star also seems to stand for his wish to keep all of them alive in this eternal cycle of birth and rebirth.

Noland's comic strip is also the narration of the reunion of the members of his family/home (See Fig. 1. Below). The comic strip is made out of six vignettes, together with a prologue and an epilogue included by the narrator to finish up "a Christmas fairy tale" (255). The epilogue vignette illustrates Noland's family reunited and ascending together to the sky. The family members are described as winged creatures (255), and the prologue anticipates a marvelous story about angels (See Fig. 1. Below). Thus, it can be said that in his comic strip Noland's angels stand for the members of his family. "The angel on the pavement" in vignette one symbolically illustrates Cate Burns's traffic car accident (25), whereas the "small angel on the pavement" in vignette two stands for Noland's rescue (46). The "fallen angel on the ground" in vignette four seems to anticipate Elvis' death because it is part of Noland's prayer at the moment he is with Elvis in a church (127). Comic strip five shows Noland's shock and despair after having been sexually exploited, the outcome of which is that he can only see "a strip of black boxes" (160). Vignette six clearly illustrates Noland's father lying on the hill after having been shot (253).

PROLOGUE	VIGNETTE 1	VIGNETTE 2	VIGNETTE 3
The First Christmas Carol *"They stretched their willing wings, and gladly sped from their bright seats above, to tell the shepherds on the hillside at night, the marvelous story…. […] but with joy and gladness, such as angels only can know"*	"Four stars in the sky. Angel falling from the fourth star. Angel on the pavement and three stars in the sky" (25).	"Four stars in the sky. Big angel falling from the fourth star. Small angel flying from the first star. Small angel on the pavement, arms open and waiting for the fall" (46).	"A sky filled with stars. Angel falling from the sky. An empty sky. […] *Whatever happened to his wings*?" (95)
VIGNETTE 4	VIGNETTE 5	VIGNETTE 6	EPILOGUE
"Empty sky. Fallen angel on the ground. Fallen angel ascending. Sky with shining star" (127).	"The comic strip is not only empty. Each box is black" (158). "[…] he sees only a strip of black boxes, the black bleeding into each other. All starless night, all nothing (160). "Even the comic strip has gone" (210).	"Field. Hill. Sky" (244). "Is that a stick figure on the hill? It's racing up, furiously" (247). "The stick figure is halfway up" (248). "He wants the brightness to swallow the stick figure on the hill again, or the dark to swallow the brightness, so the stars can come out, the winged creatures" (249). "That stick figure, that body on the hill. *His father*" (253). "His father is waiting too, eyes open" (254).	"We look closely at the boy and the mother. We draw wings on him, on her, we let them fly through the locked window, to the canopy of fairy lights, to a woman on a hospital bed. We make sure she too sprouts wings, make sure they fly together, glide over bodies in a morgue to finally find the other boy who needs his own pair. We make him test them, make him join the flight back to that hill where the man with open eyes sees four winged creatures descending—we hesitate, but we take our chance and draw his own pair, flawed but taking off with them back to the sky, all five points of light" (255).

Fig. 1. Reproduction of Noland's comic strip

Noland's vignette six is particularly relevant, mainly because it is the boy's last comic box. The sketch symbolizes the universal cycle of birth and rebirth, in other words, the story of his family's eternal life. In "Merlinda Bobis's Use of Magic Realism as Reflected in "White Turtle": Moving across Cultures, Redefining the Multicultural and Dialogic Self" (2003), Dolores Herrero explains that the turtle has a powerful symbolism in Bobis's earlier short story "White Turtle". Herrero argues that the turtle is

"the mediator *par excellence* between heaven and earth," as "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" (36). Furthermore, "the turtle's white/green colour represents "hope/ life, but also death" (52). As a result, "the turtle's story is communal, universal; nobody's but everyone's story (38). Likewise, in *The Solemn Lanter Maker*, the "Field. Hill. Sky" becomes a powerful symbol in Noland's last comic strip (244). The hill, like the turtle in the aforementioned short story, also becomes the mediator between heaven and earth. The dome-shaped little hill with "the rice embankments" functions as a ladder to the sky, and also as home, shelter and the ultimate embodiment of domesticity (251). The flat fields of rice symbolize the earth. Significantly, "the rice isn't really white. It's green and still" (251): the white/green colour of rice brings together life and death. Whereas whiteness can be said to stand for Noland's generations of ancestors "erased from this land" (246), greenness might be seen as representing hope and life. Moreover, when his father lies on the hill waiting for the arrival of the winged creatures (254), this can be regarded as implying both his death and rebirth.

This chapter has sought to decentralize official language, while privileging other forms of communication. The works of Gayatri S. Spivak and Bill Ashcroft et al have been indispensable to comprehend the subaltern engagement in the act of speaking for themselves against the oppressive nature of the language of the centre. This analysis has evinced that official language privileges the characters that stand for the center and isolates those who dwell on the margins, thus questioning the reliability of the media, official institutions and politicians. The use of official language by characters which defy the centre has also proved to be very dangerous. David Lane and Cate Burns are

isolated when they do no longer uphold hegemonical discourses, and the journalists Germinio de Vera and Eugene Costa are silenced, the former one forever. The novel explores alternatives to the official language, arguing that Bikol stands for a form of resistance among the residents. The use of Filipino native language can also be seen as a tool to free Cate Burns from hegemonical speech and her metropolitan identity; since her English is no good when she tries to communicate with the subaltern, her only choice is to open herself up to the Other.

Noland's body language has been addressed as the ultimate expression of Otherness, since it breaks with the hierarchical structures of power encapsulated by the English language. Noland speaks from the heart with his mother, a form of speech (together with his touch and breath) that transforms Cate Burns, because it alone allows her to experience the unspeakable nature of true care. Moreover, Noland's notebook stands for a privileged site to voice a subaltern story, which in turn offers a fresh perspective on the ethics of writing and reading. In addition to being the boy's attempt to articulate his own traumatic experience in his journal, the book is also a retelling of what Noland loves most: his own home/family story. It has been shown that the tabloid clipping with a photo of mother and son stands for the visual representation of a family. The drawing of a five-pointed star represents a family map that seems to stand for his wish to keep all of them alive in this eternal cycle of birth and rebirth. Noland's comic strip is also the narration of the reunion of the members of his family/home. Each of the boxes includes drawings of angels that illustrate both past and present-day events in this family. Noland's vignette six (together with the epilogue) symbolizes the universal cycle of birth and rebirth, in other words, the story of his family's eternal life.

Conclusion

The Solemn Lantern Maker can be read as a fictional account of land dispossession and rampant corruption. The novel denounces the economic and political power of politicians and the landlord class, together with the lethal legacy of the Spanish *encomiendas*. The figure of Senator GB evinces the corruption of Filipino politics: he makes the most of illicit enrichment, coercion and his control over the media and the police to boost his political career. The parasitic tenure system implemented since colonial times is the source of anguish for Noland's family, the squatting tenants, who are evicted from the land, even though they have *de jure* rights over the hacienda because they have been farming the rice plantation for generations. Noland's father hacks the owner to death because this land stands for the blood of his ancestors and descendants. As a consequence, Noland and Nena are compelled to migrate to Manila, where they become diasporic subjects marked by an acute sense of loss. They struggle to find enough resources to survive, but nonetheless live in utter poverty. This ten-year-old boy's life is heavily burdened as a result of his lack of means: he must work as a lantern seller in an intersection and collect discarded material in public dumps. To make matters even worse, Noland's human rights are further violated when he is sexually exploited by a Japanese man. Nena and Noland are once again evicted from their house when the authorities discover that they keep Cate Burns, an American tourist, in their hut. It is their neighbour, Helen, that squeals on the police, thus breaking with the ingrained concept of *utang na loob* or kinship bonds out of sheer fear. The novel also explores the feelings of the village people who were left behind. To give but one example, Mang Gusting and his daughter Mikmik long for their absent wife and mother,

who went to Hong Kong to work as a maid, thus echoing Bobis's earlier short story "The Sadness Collector," included in her collection *White Turtle.*

Bobis's novel can also be interpreted as an anti-imperial discourse that evinces the futility of the US War on terror. Cate Burns's case mocks the successful rescue of Jessica Lynch by US forces in Iraq. The US rescue mission is intended to be seen as an act of heroism to save an innocent female American citizen, kept captive by an ASG cell. This operation entails the deployment of military forces, and is fully and carefully reported by the media. The absurdity of the mission is evinced when the allegedly dangerous terrorists are nothing but a screaming handicapped woman and her little mute boy. The US War on Terror is also put to the test by including the character of David Lane, a disenchanted American colonel. For her part, Cate Burns's trip to Manila also allows her to embark on a spiritual journey of self-discovery. Cate is mesmerized by the mysterious and exotic Otherness of the Filipino Christmas atmosphere. However, her stereotypical image of Manila is subverted at the traffic intersection, which can be seen as a trope of the city border, straddling the poverty of the slums and the wealthy area of the city.

Merlinda Bobis's novel positively depicts nomadic identities that are able to embrace the Other in all of its multiplicity and difference. The figure of Elvis is a case in point: he is a homeless orphan who must work for Bobby Cool, the pimp, prostituting himself here and there in order to earn his living. His cap, his toy gun and his frequent use of swearwords are the only self-defense mechanism he has got against the injustice of society. However, his friendship with Noland, another destitute boy, is exclusively based on a ligature of responsibility and care. Elvis embraces Noland as his younger

brother, giving him money and food, showing him different parts of the city, and trying to protect him from sexual exploitation. Elvis does not hesitate to fight Bobby when the pimp takes his young friend to a pornographic photographic session. He then returns to the traffic intersection because he needs to make sure that Noland is fine, but instead he is shot dead by a police officer because of his alleged involvement in Cate Burns's case. Noland also becomes a nomad when he and his mother are forced to move to the city when they lose their farm. His squatting position at the feet of his dead father might be understood as showing his outlaw status, but also the equilibrium between despair and hope. The decoration of his hut (in accordance to some past memories and stories told to him by his parents) signals his rhizomic identity, mainly because he is able to make his home in any place. Noland's identity can only be understood when considering it to be part of a web of kinship and affection, of which his mother, his father, his friend Elvis and the recently met Cate Burns partake.

The Solemn Lantern Maker also contests oppressive global narratives by discrediting the alleged fluidity of information and by questioning the much celebrated free mobility of capital and people. The figure of Lydia de Vera gives voice to the anti-global discourse. This widow blames her husband for caring more about other people's rights than his own family's well-being. On the other hand, the novel brings to the fore the benefits of care and understanding in the intimate sphere, as Nena and Cate's encounter shows. The two women inhabit a liminal space that allows for a privileged emotional atmosphere to reach out for the Other. If Nena is depicted as a monstrous/deformed woman (thus breaking with the Orientalist image of the irresistible eastern woman), Cate Burns's miscarriage and possible infection in her vagina also turn her into an abject figure. This common wretched condition bridges the divide between

the two women: Nena nurses the American woman using her own curative methods in a desperate attempt to calm her pain. On the other hand, Cate's fever might be interpreted as signalling her adoption of a rather more ethical stance. She is deeply affected by Noland's touch and care, a connection she never before experienced. Although she initially sees her host as a negative, abnormal and dangerous woman (Cate is looked at and scolded by a rather aggressive Nena), and tries to bribe her with money, the two women eventually learn how to open themselves up to each other, mainly because they are just as vulnerable and share a similar pain of loss. Cate is irrevocably bound to this family when she learns that Nena's husband was killed by the military. The care and understanding that are propitiated by this intimate encounter ultimately shake up Cate's principles, to the point that the I/Other boundary is definitely done away with.

Language also plays a central role in *The Solemn Lantern Maker*. Official discourses only privilege those who hold power and are willing to perpetuate it. Thus, David Lane is silenced when he does no longer uphold the US War on Terror, and Cate Burns is sedated when she tries to defend Nena and Noland's innocence. Similarly, Germinio de Vera is silenced for good as a result of his attempts to expose the Senator's corruption, and reporter Eugene Costa runs the same risk. Bobis also includes Bikol in order to show the resilience and solidarity that exists among the Filipino destitute, and to marginalize Cate Burns (the westerner) in her encounter with Nena (the Other). Moreover, Noland's dumbness propitiates the use of body language, which also breaks with the hierarchical power structure represented by the English language. Noland's body language allows him to communicate with his mother, but also to transform Cate Burns, who can now become aware of the unspeakable nature of true care. Noland's

outstanding ethical dimension challenges Western values and practices, particularly individualism, greediness and alienation.

Finally, Noland's notebook provides a privileged space to articulate and voice the story of a subaltern family. The tabloid clipping with a photo of young Nena, holding Noland as a baby in her arms, is the visual representation of a home/family. Noland's drawing of a five-pointed star illustrates a family map, made up of all the people he loves (his father, his mother, his friend Elvis and Cate Burns). On each of the points of the stars, there is a photograph pasted. Moreover, the pentagram symbolizes the family's eternal cycle of birth and rebirth. Noland's comic strip, made out of six vignettes, is also the narration of the reunion of the members of his family. His comic strip is a complex, entangled narration of the latest events in his life. The field, the hill and the sky become powerful symbols in the boy's last sketch. The hill functions as the ladder or mediator between heaven and earth, while the fields of rice stand for the generations of ancestors erased from his land, but also for life and hope. The epilogue vignette illustrates Noland's family reunited and ascending together to the sky, thus suggesting Noland's story of birth and rebirth.

The Solemn Lantern Maker has been read as a postcolonial text that creates a space where the voices of the subaltern can be heard. The novel allows for the expression of the wretched condition of the people living on the margins and suffering from dispossession and an acute sense of loss. The postcolonial nature of Bobis's novel can also be seen in the different ways in which it subverts the War on Terror discourses. *TSLM* calls for a postcolonial reading since it fosters multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances among individuals, as is the case of Elvis and Noland. Global

hegemonic narratives are contested by questioning official language, institutions and power. The novel also privileges the intimate cross-cultural encounter between two monstrous women in a hybrid space. This encounter results in Cate Burns's active transformation and understanding of alterity, in other words, her need to embrace the Other. Noland's bodily communication allows for the articulation of the unspeakable nature of true care and love, both for his mother and the American woman. The boy's notebook can be read against the grain, that is, it can be seen as a powerful site that encodes a subaltern story that challenges conventional perspectives on the ethics of writing and reading. Noland engages in the act of speaking for himself, thus propitiating the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth of his family and eradicating his marginal condition through a story of bonds that make an eternal home.

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