

**Disturbance of the White Man:  
Oriental Quests and Alternative Heroines  
in Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman***

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For diasporic Asian writers, the project of writing back to Asia mediates and is mediated by co-existing cultural and political trajectories—between claiming the nation and claiming diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Shifting away from a teleological analysis of normative whiteness as destination, novels featuring intercultural encounters in Asia provide an imaginative platform where the local meets the global. In her 2012 novel *Fish-Hair Woman* (*FHW* hereafter), the Filipino Australian writer Merlinda Bobis depicts the Oriental quest theme<sup>2</sup> that typically features Asia as a redemptive locale for white figures to alleviate their identity crises. In its touristic form, the white sojourner acts as an ambassador sent out by Western nations to interact with their Asian neighbours. His encounter with the Asian Other offers a controlling metaphor of imperial expansion and cultural neocolonialism. Although the white man's adventure speaks of an eagerness to learn about cultural difference and to mix with Asian people, his desire to play local is often undermined by an unwitting submission to exoticism that appropriates cultural otherness. In *Fish-Hair Woman*, Tony McIntyre, an Australian journalist-writer, travels to the Philippines during the tumultuous years of the Total War and fancies himself in love with the People's Revolution and the local communist commander Pilar. His passionate commitment to democracy masks a deeper desire to foster a positive self-image. Self-interest stimulates him to romanticise the warring landscape and his love affair as reaffirmation of his white prerogative.

The Oriental quest narrative also functions as a potent signifier of gender semiotics in that the white man's self-realisation is often bestowed with auxiliary rewards of interracial romance with objectified, consumable Asian women. The imagination of Asia as a sensual, spiritual, and nostalgic alternative to Western modernity is paralleled with the mystification—and victimisation—of Asian women. Commenting on racist and misogynist images of Asian women in Australian artistic productions, Alison Broinowski identifies a recurrent representation of an "Illicit Space" that abstracts Asia into a sexualised domain to be colonised (104). In this illicit space, moral taboos for white men can be breached and the hierarchies of male over female and West over East can be resurrected (Broinowski 105). This pleasure zone, at times alluring and repugnant, often speaks of the polarised stereotypes of Asian women in Australian popular imaginary as both child-like Oriental flowers and treacherous femme fatales.<sup>3</sup> The female characters in *Fish-Hair Woman*, such as the demonised Eurasian "Fish-Hair Woman" Estrella and the military heroine Pilar, unsettle this

binary frame of exoticised Asian female persona. Interracial romance in the novel functions as a catalyst to bring out repressive racial and national structures that affect women's symbolic roles and their individual desires. The novel's unconventional heroines embody the multiple and contradictory modes of female subjectivity that are embedded in both localised and transnational forms of agentive power.

In reading the novel's self-conscious deployment of exoticism, I argue that Bobis turns the motif of Oriental quest into a site of confrontation and possibilities rather than merely the white man's adventure in the tropics. The Oriental quest in the novel satirises the myth of a "real" Asia and exposes how exoticism is "a way of seeing" that sustains the imagined cultural centrality/superiority of the viewer (Longley 23). Ironically, the "real" Asia, epitomised in the novel's portrayal of the Philippines in the 1980s–1990s, is characterised by domestic heterogeneity, internal ethnicisation, and postcolonial and globalising relations. Bobis's strategic engagement with the Oriental quest theme functions as a form of resistance to, and capitalises on, the production and marketability of exoticist cultural capital. This engagement with exoticist discourses enables her to rewrite and thus realign Australian national imaginations within which Asia and Asians are simultaneously feared and admired. David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska encapsulate how Australia's periodic (re)discovery of Asia oscillates between "unprecedented" extremes: from "becalmed innocence" to "menace," from "dazzling wealth" to "atrocious poverty," from the "gorgeous Orient" to "monstrous Asia," and from "unchanging" to "changing so fast" that Australians cannot keep up (6). These exhortatory contrasts embody a paradoxical relationship between Australia's national insecurity of being a European outpost on the one hand, and, on the other, its desire for economic visibility and cultural dialogues in the Asia-Pacific.

From the colonial period until the mid-twentieth century, Anglo-Australian representations tend to conceptualise Asia, especially China and a rising Japan as an infiltrating "yellow peril." European Orientalist patterns were accepted and reproduced before physical cross-cultural contact with Asia, a phenomenon which Broinowski attributes to Australia's nostalgic identification as a British outpost outweighing its Asia-Pacific geography (15). From the 1960s onwards, there has been a gradual awakening of Australia's regional identity, especially after Australia's involvement in the post-war occupation of Japan and in the Vietnam War. In post-1960s Australian literature, visiting Asia for young and middle-class Australians in particular constitutes "a finishing school of a kind" and "a consummating individual act" (Gerster, "Representations" 316). Novelists such as Christopher Koch, Robert Macklin, and Blanche d'Alpuget have written of Australians in Asia in search of spiritual prestige and religious enrichment who finally come to "a better understanding of their own identity" (Clark 186). The late 1980s and post-1990s have witnessed an increasing scepticism regarding the earlier idealisation of a spiritual Asia and the tourist experience. The downbeat tone of travel writings by Murray Lawrence, Gerard Lee, and Inez Baranay, as Robin Gerster notes, imagines a dystopian Bali that has been transformed from "Eastern Eden" to "Western dumping ground," and charts the Oriental quest from wonders/inspirations to tedium/horrors ("Bellyful" 354). These antipodean images reinscribe white hegemony through Australia's

assumption of moral responsibility and paternalism towards the failures and foibles of its Asian neighbours. The binaristic imaginaries of Asian women in terms of subservience and monstrosity, as Shirley Tucker suggests, also reveals Australia's double-bind desire to have "intercourse" with Asian economies and its enduring fear of "Asianisation" (152).

The self-interest of Australia's imaginative encounter with Asia points to the regulating apparatus of exoticism and its ideological and political effects upon diasporic Asian literary creation. As Graham Huggan argues, the semiotic circuit of exoticism operates in a reciprocal process such that the mainstream culture constantly rejuvenates itself through the influx of marginalised cultural products while making sure that these cultural differences are politically disarmed and domesticated to keep the dominant system intact (22–23). This industry of domestication and its self-privileging, appropriative machinery creates a dilemma for Asian Australian writers. According to Huggan, ethnic cultural practitioners are caught in a predicament between, on one side, acting as and profiting from being "cultural brokers" for metropolitan mainstream viewers, and on the other, tactfully contending with and challenging repressive systems (33). At the core of the contradiction is a sustained criterion of ethnic authorial agency, that of peddling cultural authenticity—a criterion easily detectable in both mainstream and ethnic literary criticism following the trademark successes of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. In a neoliberal multicultural context, the cultural differences in ethnic literature can be further depoliticised and, as David Palumbo-Liu suggests, taken as an occasion for creating "educated" social subjectivities that understand cultural difference (11). In the meantime, the debate over cultural authenticity within the Asian writer's own ethnic community can further reduce the scope of creative intervention. The Sri-Lankan Australian writer Chandani Lokugé, for instance, has to respond to her own community that accuses her of presenting the unpatriotic and unsavoury sides of Sri Lanka, such as sex-tourism, to the international literary marketplace. She discusses how the guilt of writing about the homeland can clog the free flow of creative inspiration and undermine political activism in literary works (333).

A peripheral position, however, also allows Asian Australian writers a certain autonomy to take a distance from and reflect upon both mainstream and homeland discourses. In *Fish-Hair Woman*, Bobis uses "strategic exoticism" to manage the dilemma of working within exoticist systems of representation and manipulating exotic cultural codes to her own political ends (Huggan 32). The novel demonstrates this in two ways: first, by emphasising the geopolitical specificities of the postcolonial Filipino society and providing a more complicated take of Asian femininity, she disavows a therapeutic Asian journey and displaces habitual misconceptions at both margin and centre; second, through narrative devices of metafiction and folk mythology, she creates "border crossers" who embody alternative forms of intercultural communication that progress from the exterior of cultural difference to transnational empathy.

This strategic exoticism illuminates both the survival mechanism and the operational logic of ethnic literature under the symbolic economy of neoliberal multiculturalism. Unsettling

East-West representational relations, it is also a creative response to the double gesture of exclusion from both Asian and Western readerships. Wenche Ommundsen highlights what she sees as a cultural metacritique in the works of an emerging generation of transnational writers in Australia including Nam Le, Tom Cho, and Alice Pung who paradoxically refuse Orientalist trauma and victimisation yet at the same time tell their own version of that story (“Story” 504–06). These writers’ ambivalent attitude towards expressing personal and collective histories is both a product of the sensitive reception of ethnic literature and their self-conscious response to Orientalist and exoticist representations. As an ethnic minority writer based in Australia and a diasporic Filipina writer enjoying a wide Filipino readership, Bobis incorporates into her works the experience of living across cultures and presents a feast of different voices that diverge and resonate. In rewriting the Oriental quest and the paradigms of interracial romance, Bobis effectively repoliticises the exotic and the macabre in order to “unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness” and to “effect a grounded critique of differential relations of power” (Huggan ix–x).

### **Disturbance of the White Man**

The narrative of *Fish-Hair Woman* dramatises one of the most volatile periods of Filipino history embroiled against the backdrop of corruption, dictatorship, martial law, heightened nationalism, and a serious wealth gap. Militant leftist organisations based on Maoist ideology, such as the New People’s Army (NPA), fought a “protracted people’s war” against the state through developing nationwide guerrilla warfare and a grassroots infrastructure (Thompson 99). After the People’s Power Revolution of 1986 overthrew the despotic Marcos presidency, conflicts between the Aquino government and the communist insurgency resulted in the 1987 Total War. By the mid-1980s, the Philippines held considerable geopolitical significance and international media attention. Local and foreign journalists and correspondents frequented “mountains and jungle hideaways” of NPA guerrillas to gather revolutionary stories (Hedman and Sidel 2).

Set against the war, the novel fictionalises a militarised village, Iraya, which is sandwiched between opposed parties, the NPA and the government. Bobis conjures up a story whilst self-reflexively interrogating the construction of storytelling through a meta-fictional frame. The novel is narrated from a third-person point of view and comprises a story within a story. One sub-narrative begins with the story of Estrella, a half-Spanish, half-Filipino child, who is adopted by the Capas family whose members later are destroyed by the war. Pilar, the sister, becomes a communist cadre of the NPA; her brother, Bolodoy, falls victim to the government; while Estrella escapes the War to join her Spanish father Mayor Kiko in Hawaii, writes a manuscript on the War, and finally commits parricide. Tony McIntyre, an Australian journalist, travels to Iraya and falls in love with Pilar, this resulting in his disappearance and Pilar’s persecution by insurgents. Ten years later, Tony’s son Luke goes back to unveil the mystery of the disappeared lovers. He reads Estrella’s manuscript and completes it. The other sub-narrative is Estrella’s magical-realistic manuscript in which she invents an affair between Tony and the “fish-hair woman” Estrella, whose task is to trawl corpses from the river with

her thick, twelve-metre long, ever-growing hair. This metafictional arrangement makes the various stories/storytelling—present and past, realistic and magical, Filipino and Australian, and reader’s and author’s—collide and collaborate, and thus, become ethically vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>

Built on the interrogation of neocolonial relationships between Self and Other, the novel places the disturbing white man, Tony, at the margins of local history. His ignorance of, and illusions about local culture fuels the narrative’s testimonial unmasking of historical injustice. This arrangement is a displacing intervention in the representational politics of post-1960s Australian journalistic novels set in war-bound Southeast Asia. These novels typically feature narratives of spiritual exile and the rediscovery of Asia by Australians against earlier racist and imperialist tokens. In Christopher Koch’s novel *Highways to a War* (1995), the protagonist Mike is a heroic Australian war photographer whose idealisation of Asia and Asian women leads him to a tragic end in the jungles of Cambodia. The epic tale of Mike, who grows from a Tasmanian farm boy into an empathetic soldier dropping his camera for a gun, testifies to Koch’s persistence in identifying his characters as a particular kind of righteous and warrior hero, a figure he terms “the Beautiful Boy” (Mitchell 9). Epitomising the sensuality and mystery of Mike’s quest, female characters such as the French-Vietnamese Madame Phan and the Cambodian military commander’s daughter Ly Keang, serve as muse figures to boost the novel’s apotheosis of certain macho values: boldness, masculinity, and morality. In reorienting Australian heroics abroad, Koch’s novel is a quintessentially national narrative that appeases the self-doubt in the Australian national psyche. By contrast, Asian women are but the Other denigrated and desired for their physical and cultural otherness, and functioning as a prop for the white man’s projection of a “better self” (Yu 78), and the revelation of the naivety in his quest for authentic culture (Huggan 182).

In *Fish-Hair Woman*, Tony is an Australian journalist who parallels Koch’s eternal soldier in being thrown into moral and ethical dilemmas between head and heart, insider and outsider, being in Asia and being part of it. Instead of creating a hero, Bobis overturns the salvation saga in complicating Tony’s position: that oscillates between being just another tourist-exploiter and do-gooder transfiguring reality, and, acting as a self-serving humanist participating in life-and-death local politics. Revelations of exoticism and white supremacy embedded in the Oriental quest demonstrate how the white disturber is disturbed and crushed by his own inventions. The novel contextualises the war-torn Iraya village as a conjuncture of colonialism, militarism, and nationalism and thus presents a heterogeneous and fragmented Asia. This local Asia is beyond the West’s totalising imaginations and implicates the white masculine tourist in disillusionment.

Tony comes with a “literary caring” for the war-torn village (Bobis, “Weeping” 244). Estrella problematises this neocolonial motive that colonises the stories and lived experiences of the local people: “Tony McIntyre, my lover who had come all the way from the base of the earth to gather our grief into print, so he could purge his own” (*FHW* 6). The emotional urgency of Tony’s quest is filtered through his desperation for creative production: “any story to put on paper . . . ‘This task has to be done’ . . . ‘But why must you write?’ . . . ‘Because I want to

pardon myself” (FHW 41). Implied here is the moral predicament of the journalist writer. As Gerster comments on Australian reporters in Asia: at best the journalist is “a tourist with a job to do”; at worst he is a voyeur, a “Peeping Tom” feeding on the tragedy of others for consumption at home (“Representation” 319). For Tony the war and grief (bad news) become resources (good news) for his war-novel-in-progress, as he self-consciously acknowledges, “Back home, torture in the third world is easily our favoured ‘shock horror’ conversation piece” (FHW 177). As the story unfolds, writing “purges” his grief and “pardons” him in that the Philippines legitimises his self-fabricated fantasy of correcting Australian social malaise and cultural discomfort. In hope of escaping the constraints of Australian culture, Tony is a tourist who projects his gaze onto the enticing realm of racial and cultural authenticity whereby anticipations of Asian otherness are invariably premised upon his desire for purification and enrichment.

Graham Huggan distinguishes two types of tourist gaze in Canadian and Australian Oriental quest novels: “the self-deceiving fantasies of the Western spiritual tourist,” and “the self-destructive antics of the ‘anti-tourist’ tourist” (180). The former is a western dreamer hoping to find physical stimulation or spiritual rectification in a mystified other culture, only to find the limitations of his/her own culture, a culture to which an “enlightened” he/she eventually returns (182). The latter, not dissimilar, is obsessed with the search for authenticity that often ironically essentialises and precludes close cultural contact (194–208). Both kinds of tourist, argues Huggan, are in the category of “fantasists with power,” because in their self-involved quest for the cultural Other, they have perpetuated an opaque Otherness enabling them to hide from a troubled self (208). Claiming to be the anti-tourist tourist while seeking enlightenment, Tony embodies the overlapping and interplay between these two types of tourist gaze. The official and obfuscating exterior of Tony’s undertakings is that his work is for the writer’s cause. Matt Baker, Tony’s old colleague, recalls some raconteur at the Australian embassy in Manila whose cautionary note captures the falseness of Tony’s “anti-tourist” desire, in terms of the writer’s “fancy love”:

Writers are never cautious or discreet . . . Artist types let their hearts out of the bag too soon . . . After a month they fancy themselves “in love” with the landscape. They need to believe this, of course, so inspiration can be sparked.  
(FHW 24)

What the tourist gaze sees, as John Urry and Jonas Larsen suggest, is an “epistemic field” subject to the “discursive determination” filtered through the tourist’s socio-culturally framed “ways of seeing” (1–2). Here Asia is not an external, phenomenological locale waiting to be seen, but an uplifting interior constituted by and mediated through the white disturber’s expectations. Tony’s brother, Uncle Josh, juxtaposes Tony’s fascination with the Orient with his passion for women, so that the creative process evokes a pleasurable bonding with a feminised Orient:

Tony was always in love with different women . . . he always has a novel and a fuck in progress. He was promiscuous, he was glib and incredibly attractive . . . women became vast landscapes, histories, cultures. The Orient, he flew into it, revelled in its stories, caroused with its songs, consumed its strange victuals . . . Australia has become too bland for him, like “unleavened white bread.” (FHW 93)

The Philippines becomes a vague token interchangeable with a remotely inspiring “Far East,” and exoticisation is revealed as being closely related to the eroticisation and gendering of Asian nations. Rita Felski discusses the recurring presence of the Orient in the nineteenth-century popular imagination and observes how the exotic and erotic sublime is intimately linked and gender and race are woven into the linking of the woman and the primitive as “twin symbol of atavistic and irrational forces” (137). Drawing on Felski, Olivia Khoo explicates how the exotic offers a nostalgic outlet to what is the past, to what has been lost, while the feminine operates as “a recurring symbol of the atemporal and asocial,” “an authentic point of origin” (17). The nomadic mobility of the white masculine tourist gaze, nevertheless, is presupposed on the immobility of the local females whose bodies are displayed to those who are mobile and passing by (Urry and Larsen 29). Tony’s pursuit of authenticity privileges the geopolitical landscape and his relationship with Pilar as signifiers of a revitalising alterity. He complains about the individualistic facets of Australian culture and attributes sour relationships among people to the self-absorbedness of family and friends who blame each other for their loneliness: “I was lonely there . . . and always looking for a reason for it. . . . But perhaps I could outwit this bind. I have found my angel and I am going home [Australia]” (FHW 213). This rationale, suffused with an overflow of the first-personal singular pronoun “I,” exposes himself as the same self-absorbed type he criticises and corresponds to his erotically-charged quest for the authentic Other. The critique of his benevolent romanticisation is a major argument of the novel since the whole narrative presents Philippine history as anything but atemporal, and as thoroughly enmeshed in modernity and history as it is enmeshed in Estrella’s criss-crossing hair. The moral complexity of the Oriental quest is further heightened when Tony moves from being a tourist observer to being a humanist activist, expanding the possibility of intercultural empathy and compassion.

The rectification of cultural otherness, as Tony perceives it, cannot be gained by a mere observational stance but from the flames of a real war. In *Highways to a War*, Mike is occasionally reminded not to get involved in the “Cameraman’s Daydream” by meddling in battlefield scenes outside his viewfinder (Koch 118). Not unlike Mike who is unable to shut off his feelings as an indifferent bystander, Tony falls madly in love with Pilar and the people’s cause. His humanist participation is best embodied in his willingness to get “caught up.” For him, the unequal distribution of wealth between places like the Smoky Mountain, a garbage-dump-community, and privileged rich areas ironically called “villages” necessitate and justify the revolution. As Matt remembers, he and Tony differ dramatically in their attitudes towards local issues, illustrated by their reaction to San Mateo Street, one of the

gutters of Manila. While Matt reserves a poker face in terms of the power hierarchy, Tony identifies, reaches out, and takes pity on the downtrodden. Habitually, Matt rushes past the neighborhood, despising drunkards, losers, and despotic husbands, assuming that if he extends compassion, they will perceive him as either the capitalist-imperialist or the capitalist-philanthropist. Tony, by contrast, speaks about “moral responsibility,” smokes and drinks with the impoverished, and hands out candies and medicine. In establishing humanist connection through compassionate kindness, he becomes their merciful “Mister Oz” (FHW 210). The characterisation of gap-crossers such as Mike by Koch and Tony by Bobis promulgates certain moral values and universal emotions for intercultural contact: a sense of justice, mutual understanding, and sympathy for the vulnerable.

Nonetheless, moments of unbarred, empathetic communication are still based on unequal power scales that perpetuate the myths of Western hegemony and the consumption of racial and cultural otherness. The novel’s confounding treatment of the salvation saga rests on exposing how the fascinatingly idiosyncratic white man is trapped by his tourist gaze. For each possibility opened up through his efforts at integration, the narrative directs back to how impossible it is for him to shake off exoticist reveries. Tony is mesmerised by Pilar: “She’s indispensable in this revolution . . . You should have seen her in action, Matt, a modern day Joan of Arc!” (FHW 212). His admiration for Pilar alludes to her potency in being masculinised and her vigour in being sexualised, so that as a powerful Asian woman, she becomes the exotic symbol of his erotic desire. His desperation to be part of the romance is highly conflicted since the romanticisation of war and trauma is premised on his taking the moral high ground, looking down at the life and death of local people. Matt recollects Tony’s self-absorbed earnestness and gullibility, noticing that he is “too ensconced in the vertical pronoun ‘I,’” that is his egocentrism, to the extent that there is no place for the stories of anyone else, and even the Total War revolves “around him, his own outrage” (FHW 212). The inherent contradictions in Tony’s dual position collide head-on in the narrative as he loves Pilar and fights for her cause but does so paradoxically under the patronage of Kiko who tricks him into spying. When months of research notes and interviews with communist soldiers fall into the hands of Kiko who immediately launches military retaliation, Tony is accused of being an informer and Pilar is persecuted. Disillusioned and heartbroken, Tony confesses, “In the hills I did not find the cause, Matt. Just myself” (FHW 213). The escape of Tony to Hawaii and his subsequent disappearance gives the narrative a layer of mystery, strengthening the ambivalence he represents.

The predicament of Tony as both the disturber and the disturbed demonstrates how, in Oriental quests, dissatisfaction with being the mere tourist could transfigure reality in imagination. Estrella constantly criticises his neocolonial illusions: “Tony, I want you to hear my history. I want you to know my village beyond your brief, foreign idyll into war. To know the heart of terror and grief, of love—not yours, but theirs” (FHW 137). The feverish attachment of Tony to Pilar and the war cloaks his goal of renegotiating idealised Australian masculinity, as the gratifications gained as a “saviour” helping the needy disavow his complicity with the situation (Degabriele 111). In the meantime, the fact that Australian

culture is what he escapes from but also to what he eventually returns exposes the futility of his quest. Tony's bewilderment at Estrella's fishing of corpses makes explicit a subconscious turn to a civilised West—"You're crazy, your village is crazy, this is mad, a nightmare . . ."—and he appeals to the "light" of Australia: "I'll take you back with me, back to the light. And we will cut that hair" (*FHW* 15–17). His disenchantment with and secularisation of the metaphysically cultural Other evokes an interesting inversion of the relationship between Western rationality and Eastern spirituality that initiates his voyage of self-fulfillment. The idealisation of the Orient, as Felski argues, inevitably affirms the defining power of the imperialising gaze and reinscribes the hegemonic European centrality it seeks to escape (140–41).

Exoticist projections of cultural otherness, epitomised in Tony's quest for a better self by escaping home and abandoning his son and wife, who despairingly drowns herself in a bathtub, invite Australians to reflect on their own immaturity in relation to Asian cultures. The novel allows for a literary regurgitation of an Australia that, as Brian Castro notes, has to define itself and project its own image against others because it is constantly in the grip of its own fear and loathing (143). As long as the presupposition of superiority does not change in Australians' attitudes towards Asia, as Broinowski notes, their pursuit of self-interest will remain distorted (205), or rather the pursuit of self-interest will always distort the engagement with a diverse Asia. John Frow investigates how preconstituted knowledge informs experience, making the reality "figural rather than literal," so that disappointment plays a "structural role" in the tourist experience (125). The enthusiasm and bewilderment of Tony invokes Orientalist images of an Asia that is simultaneously manageable and threatening. What concludes his frustrated Oriental quest is not merely an overwhelming sense of loss after a "true" Asia is demystified, but also the awareness that there is no monolithic, uplifting "Asia," but Asian nations, and Western nations as well, characterised by internal complexities, divisions, and flexibilities. Implicated in Bobis's dismantling of exoticism is an ethics of otherness that favours real and equitable cross-cultural interaction. Such interaction is dynamised in the asymmetry of space and time and complex sets of relationships and differences, a possibility that is carried out through the story of Tony's son, Luke.

Where Tony fails, the Luke story provides an ethical alternative. The arrangement of implicating the Australian body and the Filipina local in "a shared mourning," and bringing Luke and Estrella together to co-write a novel, strategises the concept of fluid transnational empathy. According to Bobis, this creative and critical empathy is not only about understanding one's context, or establishing transitional kinship, but about "making room for differences and tensions that will never be reconciled by kinship" (Bobis, "Weeping" 250). Transnational empathy is evoked through the transformation of Luke and his initial racial misconceptions—he first dismisses Estrella's story as "love crap," finds the local crowd "engulfing," and thinks the Filipino chatter jarring and "bird-like" (*FHW* 21)—to finishing and publishing Estrella's story while recognising that otherness can never be internalised. After years of living with the story of the "fish-hair woman," Luke acknowledges nonetheless: "I know I can never capture the currents of her river, her village, her history, and most

especially her grief. True, I have been undone by it . . . In my own grief. I am and will always be an outsider” (*FHW* 302). Also highlighted here are parallel texts and the spiral of writing positions presented by Tony, Luke, Estrella, and Bobis. The story is as much a critique of the diasporic author and the enunciation of her interstitial position, a critique made evident through the novel’s characterisation of female characters. Bobis decentralises the bourgeois masculine logic of self-fulfillment with the blurred and liminal feminine perspective that embodies human imagination and acts upon multiple desires. Invocations of ancient Filipino mythology and the uncanny combine the familiar and the unfamiliar and are played up in the character of Estrella whose monstrosity and discrepant allegiances subvert exoticist representations.

### **Alternative Heroines**

Interracial encounters in *Fish-hair Woman* function as an external prop to tease out internal restraints over Asian femininity. On a public lecture occasion when most of the characters meet—Estrella, Luke, Matt, and Estrella’s former best friend, Inez—the poet chants a poem dedicated by a Filipina mail-order bride to her Australian husband that ironises the stereotype of subservient Asian femininity. Matt, however, rejects the patronising concept of the Filipina as always the poor victim, and describes the exploitation between the wife and husband as a reciprocal process wherein possibilities for a better future are mutually promised and compromised. In Tony’s Oriental quest, female characters such as Pilar and Estrella are represented as less the white man’s consumer object than unconventional and independent women guiding readers to understand racial and sexual prejudices existing in the local society. The complicity and betrayal on the part of these women, as embodied in their crossing racial borders and breaching gender categories, indicate heterogeneous and nuanced forms of agency by women who, as Anne-Marie Hilsdon argues, “fall outside of the parameters of dominant notions of womanhood” (“Introduction” 127). The containment of alternative heroines by patriarchal and neocolonial discourses demonstrates the historical situatedness of female agency as well as testifying to a postcolonial Filipino nostalgia for independent ethnic and national identity that is built upon a masculinised ethos.

Pilar, Estrella’s adopted sister and Tony’s lover, is one of the gallant revolutionary heroines whose transgressive acts challenge the multiple oppressions of women and their bodies across dimensions of gender, class, race, and militarisation. Hilsdon argues that in the Philippines the discourses of womanhood are underpinned by religiosity, with iconic Christian representations of the chaste Madonna and Virgin Mary legitimising martyrdom and the virtues of domesticity (“Transnationalism” 175). Additionally, political and economic issues often subsume the personal desires and needs of women so that gender subjugation becomes a matter of less urgency (Hilsdon, *Madonnas* 12). It is from such localised contextualisation, rather than through an emphasis on universal gender hierarchies that we can interpret Pilar through her disruption of the national wife and mother figures. Jacqueline Siapno highlights this disruption in Filipino revolutionary literature as a powerful form of political resistance that is eclipsed by imperialist history and male custodians of culture (221). Undomesticated

and vigorous in character, Pilar elopes with her lover Benito, a communist cadre, and becomes “Kumander Pilar,” “the most wanted amazona [guerrilla]” and “a dead shot.” Her passion for the leftist movement is a result of its guaranteed liberation of women, and of peasant women in particular, from domestication. She proudly announces her democratic dreams on a secret visit to Estrella: “Up in the hills, everything is fair, completely democratic, everyone works equally, men and women . . . I don’t have to be the suffering kitchen maid or wife or harassed daughter—I don’t have to try so hard to win anyone’s love” (*FHW* 172).

The downhill visit, however, results in her being captured, interrogated, and gang-raped, resulting in a miscarriage. Pilar then escapes from the prison and returns to the hills. When Benito abandons the war for politics, Pilar meets and falls for Tony and his ardent “love” for the revolution, due to which she is discredited as a traitor, a “dangerous fool” whose morale-undermining scandal compromises the people’s cause. The heart-stirring story of Pilar impresses readers with her bold pursuit of individual desires and autonomy, yet her tragedy also exposes the formulations of war and politics as causes dominated by male authority. The sacrifices the war demands from her—family, motherhood, and finally love—echo the culturally sanctioned antithesis that Jean B. Elshtain distinguishes: that of man as Just Warrior and woman as Beautiful Soul (xiii). Elshtain claims that women have been cast as collective nonviolent beings “embodying values and virtues at odds with war’s destructiveness, representing home and hearth and the humble verities of everyday life” (xiii). The feminisation of certain spheres of social life has both constrained and empowered women who are required in return to perform, affirm, and be justified by that social definition. Pilar’s leadership in the war breaches such conservatism about femininity, but her access to power and agency through the war and politics is accorded on the premise of being masculinised. Admiration for her by fellow comrades focuses on the fulfillment of the NPA’s dogmatic ideology, reviving old myths of martyrdom: “the Kumander’s integrity, her courage or irrational boldness during combat . . . her repudiation of family in favour of the cause . . . Nothing is too precious to not give up for your country” (*FHW* 237). Bodily violence—the rape and abortion—that Pilar undergoes during the war, brings back her biological vulnerability, revealing the corporeal limitations and punishment as to what the female body can and cannot do.

Miscegenation, on the other hand, discloses that the agency endowed by a purportedly democratic enterprise is dependent upon upholding assumptions of timeless racial purity. Love and interracial encounters are a political and aesthetic strategy wielded in the novel. Villagers overgeneralise the influence of Pilar and Tony’s affair and make accusations based on his racial difference: “One mistake and she fell . . . All for a white man” (*FHW* 273). The devastating effect the affair has on Pilar’s reputation, manifested in the contrast between her images as a national warrior and a fallen woman, lays bare racial and gender boundaries that are reinforced by the regulation of the body’s physical and social intactness. The transgression of such boundaries, however, carries with it the force to (re)conceptualise community. As Rey Chow suggests in the case of the Negress and the mulatto:

The ultimate danger posed is . . . not their sexual behaviour per se, but the fact that their sexual agency carries with it a powerful (re)conceptualisation of community—community based on difference, heterogeneity, creolisation: of community as the “illegitimate” mixings and crossings of colour, pigmentation, physiognomy . . . (21)

The assumption of agency by the woman of colour would in effect “invalidate her and deprive her of admittance” to the community (Chow 21). Pilar’s assumption of sexual agency not only defies racial sameness, but also exacerbates xenophobic sentiments. The hostility by the people of Iraya reveals nationalist tensions over contesting forms of womanhood for the postcolonial nation, in that women’s chastity, fidelity, and motherhood are symptomatic of the construction of national identity or the reaffirmation of local masculinity, especially in times of democratic transition. Xenophobic sentiments of the Filipinos against foreigners, and the internal mistrust within themselves, disclose a postcolonial nostalgia for the restoration of communal intactness and national unity. Caught between the political ambitions of the government and communists, the village viscerally experiences nostalgia. The people of Iraya have been squeezed in every possible way—land grabbing, fraudulent election practices, and ever-growing casualties in the river—mostly by the the power-abusing Mayor Kiko, a Eurasian of Spanish lineage. Nostalgia works through the dimensions of an enforced survival strategy, of being content to remain simple peasants when all profits go to the Mayor’s pocket, and through an enduring soreness of pining for a lost past which can only be compensated for by retrieving the dead bodies of family members and restoring the river to its original sweetness.

The connection Bobis has made between the potential of miscegenation to reconceptualise the community and the community’s yearning for racial cohesion is fleshed out through the real and mythologised character of Estrella, who gains entrance freely into and out of her community on the bases of both race and sexuality. The child of Kiko and his poor Filipino mistress, Estrella as a Eurasian, a *mestiza*, is a reminder of both patriarchal and imperialist discourses and simultaneously embodies the liminal space of racial difference. As a mixed-blood woman, Estrella occupies a “murky” and “dirty” category whose very presence threatens rigid boundaries between the West and the East (Degabriele 111–12).

In Ouyang Yu’s critique of the representation of mixed-blood women in Australian literature, the white blood of the hybrid women is always depicted as superior to the coloured, whereas the coloured blood corrupts and threatens the white (84). Such ethnocentrism is exacerbated through the phallogentric politics dramatised in the novel, as is illustrated by the villagers’ dissimilar attitudes to Kiko and Estrella. While the male mestizo Kiko is admired because of his Spanish lineage: “we basked in awe . . . we gawked at these mestizos, translating their ‘verryr whiteness’ into beauty, into honour” (*FHW* 42), Estrella is received with irrepressible gossip on her birth: “that poor orphan with such a dark heritage, that bastarda” (*FHW* 33).

Ironically, Estrella is bald until five and speculations about her being cursed because of her fallen mother point at patriarchal and neocolonial discourses that blame the children for the mother's "indiscretion" while pardoning the white coloniser Kiko who quickly finishes his affair.

Miscegenation is hence demonstrated as implying both the risks of exploitation and the rewards of liminality. Estrella, like Bobis, thus occupies the borderzone of in-betweenness and she is empowered with the capacity to maintain and disrupt loyalties. For ethnic women mired within multiple affiliations, Leslie Bow argues, "betrayal can constitute subversion of another kind, a subversion of repressive authority that depends on upholding strict borders between groups and individuals" (3). Estrella Capili becomes Stella Alvarado after she goes to Hawaii, an act of selling out to the coloniser, a betrayal that turns her into an ingrate abandoning those who raised her like their own. In the words of Inez, her friend has turned against her family, her country, and her heart, and in sum, has turned "white" (FHW 227). Yet although Estrella finds refuge in her father's privileges, the fact that she does not relinquish loyalty to the village subverts the mentality of colour fixation and reveals the Filipino history as always already hybrid. In the novel's metafictional design, Estrella's magical-realistic manuscript writes herself imaginatively back into history and back to her community. The love affair between Estrella and Tony carries with it the doubleness: it narrates the love story in the place of her dead sister Pilar; it is also the love story of her with Pilar, the sister who she has always loved but can never woo enough to have her love returned.

The metafictional confounding of dichotomies is also displayed in the novel's discursive use of the uncanny. The figure of the fish-hair woman and her ever-growing hair break down the binaries between the real and the magical, monstrous and nourishing, and *heimlich* (familiar and homely) and *unheimlich* (unfamiliar and uncanny). Estrella the fish-hair is a "babaylan," a sorcerer, and a shaman in the local culture. During times of serious illness, the babaylan, as the folk healer, "performs rites for the dying, invoking the powers of the *anitu* [the souls of the ancestors] to help and accept the dying to become one of them" (Veneracion 2). Her endless treks to the river perform the ritualistic homecoming of those lost and the completion of communal integrity. Bobis demonstrates here how magical realism, itself a Western aesthetic tool, can be used to express Indigenous Filipino beliefs and their cosmological realities. As a trope of memory, the ever-growing hair<sup>5</sup> retrieves the history, grief, and mourning of her people. According to Freud, the uncanny can signify what is unfamiliar, but also what is familiar but kept hidden (132), and in the monstrous figure of Estrella, the uncanny is resurrected in her carrying out the repressed power and force of Filipino women. The familiar and unfamiliar meet in the duplication of Estrella's child-like mother, Carmen, whose long hair puts her in a vulnerable position of being taken advantage by Kiko, into an empowering and prophetic Estrella whose hair has salvational capacity that challenges exoticist images of Asian women as treacherous and immoral. Estrella thus embodies the doubleness of Asian femininity in that the homely and the unsettling haunt each other and become one. Moreover, the figure of the fish-hair woman brings in the image of the fish, a

creature that enjoys the privileges of having fins and wings to escape. The fish mirrors Estrella's privilege in being able to escape the war, but also makes explicit who her manuscript really addresses, those who cannot escape and are drowned: "Bolodoy, Pilar, Raymundo . . ." (FHW 201)

In creating a parody of doubleness, Bobis's use of magical realism transforms the novel into "historiographic metafiction"—a self-conscious narrative that disturbs seemingly coherent historical events (Hutcheon 5) and demands of the reader both "detachment and involvement" (Hutcheon x). A double narrative structure situates readers both inside and outside the novelistic frame so that Estrella's metafictionalisation of her Self in relation to the Other—first home, the white man, and the West—becomes a self-reflexive process. Bobis presents the process as a "continuous argument" with herself, a tension between making "testimonies" and colonising "lived story" ("Conversation" 307). The same tension underlines the dilemma of Tony over the appropriation of the villagers' grief and Estrella's attempts to unfold historical injustice in stories. The book's metafictional structure thus invites the reader to interrogate the multiple storytellers *in* and *of* the novel as unreliable narrators, and to participate in displacing binary rhetorics of Self and Other, insider and outsider, and *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. In making the space between the familiar and the unfamiliar her playground, Bobis enacts within the novel's readers a "distant reading," which, according to Ommundsen, calls on "a certain openness, a willingness to suspend disbelief, to postpone judgement, and to acknowledge the limits to one's own cultural literacy" ("Transnational" 4).

These issues point to a representational dilemma of Bobis as a migrant writer writing back to her first homeland. Writing from this interstitial position leads to a literary voyage of being translated and translating between a Filipino sensibility and the demands of an Australian audience. The self-critique of the diasporic writer is made through the satirical comment of Estrella's friend Inez:

Eroticising violence, making our grief literary . . . I don't like those who take because they can, because they don't have to answer for the taking . . . The worst are our own expatriate writers, those . . . return as vultures to feed on our despair. (FHW 225–26)

The comment hints at authorial agency and cultural hijacking. This diasporic Othering parallels Bobis's position within the Australian literary environment, confining the ethnic writer to being doubly marginalised. Bobis demonstrates how such interstitial positions can be productive and, simultaneously, self-interrogating. The exoticist relations in the novel provide a channel for Bobis to claim diaspora without mystifying her ancestral homeland. By telling a "local-global" story, she successfully engages the "multiple difference and connectivities" in the novel "'in sympathy' with each other" (Bobis, "Confounding" 146).

The unsettling force of *Fish-Hair Woman*, and of Bobis's other works, embodies an "unterritorialised" writing space that she terms the "transnational imaginary":

“As-yet-unfigured” and therefore unterritorialised, the transnational imaginary is a liminal space of agency which can serve a decolonising function as it facilitates the creative collision-collaboration of diverse cultural identities—and consequently the infinite imagination and re-imagining of cultural products and culture itself. In the creative process, the transnational imaginary is a sensing space before it is constituted into a fixing sensibility, a fixed culture, a fixed story/discourse. It is disruptive and expansive. It has latitude. It is open to play between Self and Other. (Bobis and Herrero 231)

Such a “sensing space” is a refusal of the despondency of exile and nostalgia, and an active assumption of migrant liminality to defy social structures. In an interview, when asked the inevitable question as to whether she identifies herself in a binary frame as an Asian Australian writer, Merlinda Bobis acknowledges the forceful, gravitational pull of her ancestral home in her work while admitting that she can play with Western aesthetics to create political critique and subversion (Zong, “Interview”). The ethics of otherness and difference Bobis explicates in the novel is a productive collision zone of cultures and peoples that substitute oppositionalities with dialectical collocations of Self and Other, home and away, the familiar and the unfamiliar. In working the “transnational imaginary” into her works as a way of expressing Asian Australian literature, Bobis has manifested how exoticism can be strategically redeployed to present a multiplicity of voices and reflect back to Australians the ways that they have never seen themselves.

## NOTES

1. Claiming the nation confers literary recognition to minority Asians’ civic and cultural rights of citizenship in the nation-state, whereas claiming diaspora recognises homeland connections, diasporic sensibilities, and cultural alternatives. See David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* 185.
2. Graham Huggan uses “Oriental quest” to refer to novels set in Asia featuring the white traveller’s tourist gaze. See *The Postcolonial Exotic* 182. I invoke this term to describe the cultural tradition and literary trope of visiting non-Western, here being Asian, nations and cultures.
3. Rita Felski has a similar argument on how the East is imagined as a fantasmic realism that allows the release of libidinal desires free of social regulation and the expression of a pure masculinity or femininity not possible in the West. She focuses on how white feminine subjects find the sexually empowering stereotype of the femme fatale appealing. See *The Gender of Modernity* 136–41.
4. I owe the point of “ethical vulnerability” to Merlinda Bobis who writes in her feedback to an earlier version of this article: “To speak about the artefact of representation, i.e., literature, is to speak about the act of representation. And how both are received. Magical realism and metafiction are my very conscious tools of repoliticising the realist discoursing/storytelling about Self and Other. I had to make various stories/storytellings ‘pit’ against each other and make each other’s story vulnerable (in ‘an ethical vulnerability’—to puncture the hegemony). I wanted even the reader to be othered/disturbed/disrupted in relation to the whole novel, and made ‘ethically vulnerable,’ questioning his/her positionality in relation to what is read/what is lived.”
5. In cases of grief and mourning, people’s hair usually turns grey overnight or people may lose their hair. Bobis here subverts the conventional by inventing the “fish-hair woman” whose hair grows longer whenever she grieves. The ever-growing hair thus becomes both a reminder of history and a salvation tool.

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