

## Local Myths in a Global World: Merlinda Bobis’ ‘White Turtle’

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Listen:

*Ako ang simong duyan  
Napasagid  
Sa puting kurales ...*

I am your cradle  
brushing  
against white corals;  
porous bones  
draw in  
your bubblebreath  
humming.

(Bobis, ‘White Turtle’ 41)

If only we all had porous bones, and thinner skin, when listening to a tale. Such is one token offered by Merlinda Bobis’ prismatic short story, ‘White Turtle’, which harnesses the uncanny in an intercultural meeting of the ear<sup>1</sup> and tongue.<sup>2</sup> ‘White Turtle’ is a story inside a story, as Bobis’ character, the Filipina chanter Lola Basyon, sings in her native language to conjure a white turtle that ferries the dreams of dead children in the presence of an Australian crowd at a Sydney writers’ festival.

I’ll dream you a turtle tonight;  
cradle on her back  
bone-white.

I’ll dream you a turtle tonight. (37)

Lola listens to the applause for the translation of her chanted story and thinks, ‘they must like the story or turtles or dreams, or the sound of dreams in their own tongue’ (37). Like Lola, Bobis arrived in Australia ‘with a fully formed sensibility shaped by Philippine culture and languages’ (‘Asian Conspiracy’ 2). It is Bobis’ transnational perspective, her engagement of the global/local dialectic through mythmaking across national borders, that allows for imaginative play with the Other. *Porous bones draw in your bubblebreath humming*. In a mysterious intertwining of imagination and reality, storyteller and listeners, writer and readers, ‘White Turtle’ enlists our bodily response to uncanny circumstances in order to bridge conceptual gaps between subjectivities shaped by nationality and history, our ‘place’ (or places) in the world. Since ‘White Turtle’ has been insightfully examined by theorist Dolores Herrero through the framework of magic realism and postcolonialism,<sup>3</sup> those

elements will not be discussed within the scope of this article. Instead, my analysis focuses on the potential of the uncanny<sup>4</sup> to be employed in storytelling as a device for negotiating alterity—or otherness—between psyches, bodies, and territories in the broader context of transnationality<sup>5</sup> as demonstrated by the title story of Bobis' collection. Although other stories in the work address transnationality and subvert conventional expectations regarding Otherness (such as 'Earnest Parable' and 'Fish-Hair Woman'), I have focused my analysis on 'White Turtle' because of its inherent suspension of the state of the uncanny and, more significantly, because of its *doubling* of the power of story through positioning the act of storytelling within the transnational tale itself.

A mythical tale—once the turtle was small and blue-black, shiny like polished stones. It was an unusual creature even then; it had the most important task. It bore on its back the dreams of Iraya's dead children as it dived to the navel of the sea. Here, it buried little girl and boy dreams that later sprouted into corals which were the colour of bones. After many funerals, it began to grow bigger and lighter in colour; eventually it, too, became white, bone-white. (Bobis, 'White Turtle' 40)

Lola's translator, an anthropologist, is confronted with an uncanny, bodily reaction as Lola chants her story; 'he felt as if the white turtle had somersaulted into his eyes. That night of the readings, it dived into him again, down to the depth of his irises' (40). Another writer at the festival (dubbed 'Oriole') was 'engulfed by the chant, lulled into it, falling into the sea' (41). The uncanny nudges the senses, it is ingested by the body and thus collapses Self and Other (Bobis, 'Asian Conspiracy' 6). Even Lola, also enthralled by the story, is vulnerable to the uncanny's tremulous lure as she is 'transported back home, close to the forest and the sea' (Bobis, 'White Turtle' 49) through language and sound: tongue and ear.

The uncanny seizes us, entering through our spine, our gut, transporting us into discomfort, into a 'labyrinthian space' (Cixous 525), a moment of flirtation with the unknown. 'The warmth in her stomach made double-ripples as she began to chant again, filling her lungs with the wind from the sea. ... Her cheeks tingled sharply with saltwater.' With enigmatic dexterity, Lola's throaty chant becomes 'three harmonizing voices [that] reverberated in the room with more passion this time, very strange, almost eerie, creating ripples in everyone's drink' (Bobis, 'White Turtle' 49).

'Strange' and 'eerie' belong to the domain of the uncanny, if we are able to categorize it as a domain. Cixous calls it 'impossible to determine yet variable in its form, intensity, quality, and content' (525), as it is a 'concept whose entire denotation is a connotation' (528); it perpetuates strangeness. According to Nicholas Royle's full-length treatise on the uncanny in literature, the uncanny is always inextricably conjoined with that which is 'canny'—its etymological roots conveying a sense of knowing, of comfort, of homeliness (which becomes more obvious when translated into the German *heimliche* and *unheimliche*).<sup>6</sup> Thus, an 'abiding attachment to the familiar', a 'grounding in the rational', is needed 'to experience its trembling and break-up' (25). The uncanny, above all, is pervaded by that which is mysterious, involving feelings of 'uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced' (1).

Indeed, as 'White Turtle' progresses, the boundaries of reality become more uncertain, increasingly undulate in form: 'creating ripples' across the room. This peculiar commingling with the supernatural is witnessed, and lodged, first and foremost within the body. 'By the time the main door was pushed open from outside by a wave of salty air, the whole foyer was hushed. An unmistakable tang pervaded it—seaweed! ... The little girl saw it first, its bone-white head with the deep green eyes' (Bobis 49). The uncanny encounter with the Other becomes a tactile, visceral experience as the turtle joins Lola's polyphonic chant and the 'skin around everyone's ears tingled' while 'all bodies began to lean ... raring to catch each of the six voices. This pose ... was almost like a prelude to a petrified dive or dance' (50). In this moment the turtle, Lola, and the crowd are all in shivery orchestration; the oscillating of borders and bodies through the portal of the uncanny has allowed for a convergence of people to join in a 'choreographed' dance with the Other, a plunge into unfamiliar, yet shared territory. As Royle describes, the "'un-" unsettles time and space, order and sense. It overruns, disordering any field supposedly extraneous to it' (2).<sup>7</sup> The uncanny's ingress is through the body, where it reacts disquietingly with our senses, altering us, inducing us to conceptually reconsider reality, our position in the world; it triggers intellectual exploration yet evades complete understanding. "I wish I could tell you how I feel about the burial of dreams of dead children", a young man says to Lola after her first chant. "How I really feel about your story—here", he said, cupping his hand to his chest. "Story ... sad ... happy." She scanned her head for more English words. "Sad-happy, you're quite right, and very disturbing", he told her' (Bobis, 'White Turtle' 47).

The uncanny 'disturbs' the body and mind, opening a space within, an initially 'unrecognized and unrecognizable sphere' (Cixous 527) bearing the potential to shift our perspectives, calling into question apparent boundaries and fixed assumptions about our identities and the way we live. The uncanny lives in everyday life—indicated by a shiver on the neck, a trail of gooseflesh, the double-take, déjà vu, a tingling spine, skittishness in the dark—and is thus transported into our stories; it is 'intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world' (Royle 2). So the uncanny, 'entwined in language', moves into the tongue, compelling us to elucidate our experience into a narrative, into our stories. In 'White Turtle', the act of storytelling is the conduit for the uncanny. It is also the channel through which separate cultures momentarily surge together: a salivating meeting of tongue, ear, and imagination – the space between the ears. As anthropologist Michael Jackson states:

Without stories, *without listening to one another's stories*, there can be ... no overcoming of our separateness, no discovery of common ground. ... [Stories are] one of the ways we can escape the intellectualism ... that has always dogged our discipline, and foster a pluralism in which otherness is not reduced to cultural identity or knowledge, but is seen in terms of lived experiences that, with imagination, anyone anywhere may find a way of understanding. (105)

The uncanny acts as a vehicle for the story to emotionally and intellectually unsettle its readers; it is the 'lived experience'—a vexing, sensory response, an embodiment of sorts—which intensifies the story's impact. Returning to our analysis of 'White Turtle' (our nested story), 'the older writer, sideburns strangely tightening against his cheeks, peered from his spectacles and Oriole sensed the salt-sting behind her eyes' (Bobis 50) while listening to Lola's chant. The uncanny is not just a state of *being*, it is a process of *becoming*<sup>8</sup> nearer to the Other, an emotional movement toward something thus far unrecognizable and

indeterminate. Storytelling, also exercising this force, is a catalyst whereby the potential for us to experience the uncanny increases; the story possesses the ability to magnify its effect. Cixous states of fiction:

Through the invention of *new forms of Unheimliche*, [it] is *the very strange thing*: if one considers the *Unheimliche* as a fork of which one branch points in the direction of an anxiety, one sees, at the extreme end of the uncanny, fiction pointing toward the unknown. (547)

As the roomful of Australians were captivated by the unknown—held ‘still’ by Lola’s story—a little girl wanting to touch the turtle ‘wriggled free from her mother’ (Bobis, ‘White Turtle’ 50), who then instinctively yanked her child away from the creature. The girl began to cry; the ‘spell was broken’ (51). Anxiety set in. The doorway of the uncanny—which allowed a harrowing release of the boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar—pulls shut, disintegrates. ‘Everyone started moving and speaking in unison, some in wonder, others with the deepest unnameable emotions, but a few murmured their doubts. Dreams? Dead children? ... The crowd began dispersing’ (51). There is no more tingling skin around the ears of the strangers in the room, no more ‘porous bones’ drawing in Lola’s breath. Instead, the crowd reverts to a default stance, attempting to rationally and logically explain the event through their own systems of reference, their cultural anchorages. Concerns are voiced, ‘cruelty to animals. ... It was probably flown all the way here. Part of the act? ... An endangered species, no doubt. But what if it had been smuggled in?’ (51). During this penultimate scene, the turtle’s chant is drowned out by a clamour of voices; engagement with Lola’s story ceases. Intellect is void of empathy. Thus, the glimmer of a shared ‘transnational imaginary’—created by this transference of local imagery into a global atmosphere—is ephemeral in this circumstance. ‘In the din, the turtle stopped singing and Lola Basyon swallowed her voice’ (51).

Throughout ‘White Turtle’ we find emphasis on the tactile nature of the body, suggesting a metaphorical representation of interconnectivity with the Other through ‘touch’, despite obvious ideological and cultural differences. Certainly Bobis is pointing at something here: she offers a hint to her readers as to how this ‘collision-collaboration’ (‘Border Lover’) embracing both divergences and resonances might be encouraged on a transnational platform (in lieu of combativeness). Specifically, I refer to Aihwa Ong’s definition of ‘transnational’ as

the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translation*, and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited ... by the changing logics of states. ... [It is] the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space. (4)

Transnationality ensures a meeting with the Other is inevitable. Like the uncanny, it creates a liminal atmosphere, a place of overlap merging two separate spheres—Self and Other, the familiar and unfamiliar—where opposing ideas brush up against each other to potentially converge into something new, like Lola’s *sad-happy* story. This ‘condition of in-betweenness’ is what Bobis enters to ‘talk from different angles, and thus ... bridge the gap (or else to bring to the fore) the discontinuities that separate one world from another’ (Herrero 111). Transnational stories intensify this potential to ‘transgress boundaries of age,

gender, space, time, and being' (Jackson 28) and thereby blur established borders of Otherness. But we must approach this entrance into another 'world', this meeting with the Other, in a certain way, through 'a courtesy or a tact of heart, a tact of sensibility and of intellection' (Steiner 149), or, more simply, through Bobis' gesture of 'open palms' and ears; in this way unease may be converted to empathy.<sup>9</sup>

In 'White Turtle', the potential for discordance is rife from the moment a regional Filipina oral storyteller enters an urban Australian writers' festival without holding a 'book or even paper to cling to' (Bobis 38). Fingers and palms are mentioned on nearly every page; the hand as nexus between the 'eyes', 'heart', and a sense of 'home'; what is grasped or barred indicates attentiveness towards or away from the Other. After her first chant, Lola 'bowed politely to the crowd, hand on her heart' (37). When feeling anxious, she 'hid her hands' (38), then 'rubbed the fabric of her *tapis* between her fingers for luck' (39). Later, 'Cowboy', the novelist in the room who regards Lola's chanting as an inferior form of artistic expression, runs 'his fingers over the crisp pages of his book, almost lovingly', his eyes never leaving it (38). Conversely, an eager listener in the room, the young man who 'placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled' (43), contributes to Lola's feeling of 'warmth rippling in her stomach then invading her arms, flushing her hands to their fingertips' (40). After the chant, the young man twice 'opens his hands' (47) toward Lola, then also cups his heart, reminding her of her favourite grandson. An enamoured little girl who 'tugs' Lola's skirt, asks, 'Big turtle?' while drawing 'a large circle with her little hands' (48). Lola 'opened her arms towards the girl' but the child, suddenly shy, 'clung to her mother' (48), who later, protectively, grabs her daughter's hand in the turtle's presence. During Lola's second, impromptu chant, at the moment when the uncanny is most intense, as everyone in the room tastes the sea salt breath of the giant turtle, 'all bodies began to lean towards the two chanters ... arms stretched out, palms open' (50) as if in greeting. This analogy of interconnectivity through body language akin to a 'handshake' may seem simplistic, but that is its beauty: we all have bodies, through the body we have a constellation of 'lived experiences' that brings us closer in our relationships with the Other. This, then, is why the uncanny is such a powerful tool in transnational storytelling; it allows us to negotiate alterity much more intimately, by encountering these moments of uncertainty—the unfamiliar seeping into the familiar—through our bodies, through the 'goosebumps growing' (51) on our arms. Through Lola's chanting, this shivery uncertainty is doubled in Bobis' 'White Turtle'; the act of storytelling itself—the emotive meeting place of Self and Other—is replicated and thus examined within the written work. As George Steiner writes, 'in a wholly fundamental, pragmatic sense, the poem, the statue, the sonata, are not so much read, viewed or heard as they are *lived*' (147).

The uncanny, then, can be generated as a narrative device to evoke a bodily alteration, unsettling our 'skin', resulting in an intellectual uncertainty that invites us to question the imposed parameters of our world.<sup>10</sup> It asks us to have 'porous bones' when reading or listening to a story. In doing so, it teaches us how to receive a narrative that doesn't sit within our cultural milieu, subject positions, or conceptual reservoirs bound by scientific inquiry. 'But logic is not all, one needs one's heart to follow an idea.'<sup>11</sup>

The uncanny murmurs the heart.<sup>12</sup> It infiltrates the entire body just as migration does: that movement of body, voice, and story, that transformative entrance into the territory of the Other, as epitomized by Lola's arrival to Australia. Lola has a gift to share, a story that risks misinterpretation, rejection, due to foreign sensibility. Like Lola, Bobis challenges preconceived notions, those intellectual fences that ensnare the imagination, when story-making outside her native country: 'If the gatekeepers cannot deal with me through the

conceptual', she writes, 'as its cultural/linguistic timbre is too alien, they can deal with me through the body, which will ferry the conceptual' ('Asian Conspiracy' 6).<sup>13</sup> Likewise, as we have established, the uncanny resides first within the body, then the mind. Yet its oft-indecipherable nature does not necessarily demand resolution. Intellectual uncertainty, as Royle writes, is not 'simply a *negative* experience, a dead-end sense of not knowing. ... It is just as well an experience of something open, generative, exhilarating (the trembling of what remains undecidable)' (52). It is the gravity of this certain strangeness that has the power to snag our bodies out of our habitual orbits. This, perhaps, is the crux of the uncanny's relevance to story-making across boundaries<sup>14</sup>—its potent capability to beget self-interrogation,<sup>15</sup> the way it offers new 'ways of thinking in less dogmatic terms about the nature of the world' (3).

In 'White Turtle', the moment of 'uncertainty' lapses when the crowd vacates the room—yet soon rekindles. 'When the police arrived, they found [the turtle] nestling its head on the old woman's lap beside the table of books. They were dumbstruck. What whiteness, what extraordinary, beautiful whiteness' (Bobis 51). The turtle, invoked by Lola's chant, is so peculiar to the police that they too are affected by its bone-white presence. It is here, in this encounter with the Other through the enchantment of story, that expectation is defied, unsettled. The police are indeed 'moved' by the manifestation of transported myth: the turtle and its dreams. Lola, concerned for the turtle's safety, wants to ask them to treat it gently, but is worried about being understood in her own tongue. Yet in her silence the story speaks for itself. Here, in this uncanny place, an internal shift occurs. 'Gloved hands steadying the creature, the police wondered about the unnameable emotion that stirred in their wrists, a strange, warm ripple of sorts' (52). This tactile, 'body-to-body' connection is a compelling initiation into the unknown—that mingling of familiarity and unfamiliarity—which, like storytelling, carries such a weight in our world. 'They lifted it with utmost tenderness as if it were a holy, precious thing. It was as large as the table, but oh so light' (52).

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<sup>1</sup> As Nicholas Royle states of Jacques Derrida's *The Ear of the Other*: 'The ear is uncanny, for example, because it is double: it can be at once open and closed; receptive and unresponsive; source and destination. The ear is the ear of the other' (64).

<sup>2</sup> Bobis calls this type of exchange a 'tongue-ear conspiracy': when 'both bodies are not only infiltrated by the other's story but also implicated in the story-making' ('Asian Conspiracy' 5).

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of those topics, see Dolores Herrero's 'Ay, siyempre, Gran, of course, Oz is—Multicultural'.

<sup>4</sup> The semantics of the word 'uncanny' were first explored by Ernst Jentsch (who wrote the first neuropsychiatric essay on the condition), and who concluded that 'the uncanny' was loaded with a feeling of intellectual uncertainty; and, of course, through Sigmund Freud's later paper on the *unheimliche*. It is my intention to move beyond these origins and discuss the present connotations of 'the uncanny' as applied to literature and daily life.

<sup>5</sup> What Dissanayake and Wilson define as that 'as-yet-unfigured horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence' (6).

<sup>6</sup> In the German language, *heimat* means 'home'.

<sup>7</sup> This can be seen on both the physical plane of the story's landscape, and in its literary analysis, as the realm of the uncanny overlaps into the provinces of the fantastic and magical realism genres, as suggested, for example, by the momentary 'hesitation' along the 'continuum' posited in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic*.

<sup>8</sup> 'Being is a potentiality that waxes and wanes, is augmented or diminished, depending on how one acts and speaks in relation to others' (Jackson 1998: 13). It is 'not only a belonging but a becoming' (Jackson 2006: 13) as quoted in Jackson's *Politics of Storytelling* 13.

<sup>9</sup> This reception is related to the openness that Levinas implies in *Totality and Infinity* when he writes: 'The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain' (51).

<sup>10</sup> That which is uncanny to one person is not necessarily uncanny to another; sometimes it simply doesn't 'translate'. Herein lies an opportunity for identification of difference, a pinpointing of the nature of the collective unconsciousness shaping cultures, or the historical progression of ideologies. In *The Female*

*Thermometer: Eighteenth-century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, Terry Castle writes, 'The 18th century in a sense 'invented the uncanny' ... the very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment—the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch—also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse' (8).

<sup>11</sup> The uncanny resides in the realm of science—which is analogous to story-sharing in that it unceasingly engages with territories steeped in the unfamiliar. As the physicist Richard Feynman said 'Western civilization ... stands by a great heritage. The adventure into the unknown ... the demand that the unanswerable mysteries of the universe remained unanswered; the attitude that all is uncertain; to summarize it—the humility of the intellect. [This] heritage [is] logically, thoroughly consistent. But logic is not all, one needs one's heart to follow an idea'. The source of this quote is an interview with Richard Feynman made for the BBC television program *Horizon* in 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Nabokov would add that the act of reading is also an endeavour of the spine—in its 'telltale tingle' (64).

<sup>13</sup> These national 'gatekeepers' may be in fact denying the publication of transnational work that would be emulated for the same reason: its distinctive voice. As Harold Bloom claims, a 'strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange' is what makes a work or author canonical. 'When you read a canonical work for the first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations' (458).

<sup>14</sup> May they be geographic, psychic, cultural.

<sup>15</sup> To take this further, as Adam Bresnick states: 'The Uncanny ... would not merely be something a given subject experiences, but the experience that momentarily undoes the factitious monological unity of the ego' (117).