

## Resilience and healing in the slums of Manila: Merlinda Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker*

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*The Solemn Lantern Maker* by Filipina-Australian author Merlinda Bobis challenges and criticizes hegemonic racist and sexist capitalist tenets sustaining militarized globalization in the aftermath of the attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. Published in Australia in 2008 and in the USA in 2009, the action takes us to the megalopolis of Manila, moving back and forth from the misery of the slums to the luxurious hotels for foreign tourists or the consumerist Christmas frenzy in “the largest shopping center in Asia” (Bobis 2008, 89). The narrative addresses tough realities such as extreme poverty, the prostitution of children, police brutality and political corruption, and it puts these apparently Philippine matters in direct relation to globalization and its *war on terror*. With its recurrent refrain “*I know a story you don't know*”, the novel exposes epistemic violence and belongs with those stories that “inquire after the missing, the deported, the detained, the de-remembered, and the dead” (Dauphinee and Masters 2007, viii).

In the opening pages, a white American tourist named Cate Burns suffers collateral damage in the shooting of a Filipino political journalist. Cate is accidentally injured and removed from the scene by two boys, Elvis and Noland, who take her for refuge to Noland's hut in the slums. This genuine act of protection is immediately labelled by American and Philippine authorities as abduction and terrorism, and Colonel David Lane is put in charge of the rescue operation. Noland and his mother, Nena, dispossessed and traumatized after the killing of Noland's father by the police in their rural village, have been hiding in the slum in Manila to escape political violence and police brutality, becoming, after this act of kindness, even more persecuted. Cate Burns, on her part, is a Ph.D. student of literature at Cornell who has travelled to Manila as a tourist to recover from a failed marriage and now, as a consequence of her shock after the shooting of the journalist Germinio de Vera, also from a miscarriage. The relationship between these three wounded characters, sheltered in the most marginal and miserable hut in the slum, is presented throughout the novel as one of reciprocal nurturing in a context of extreme violence acutely intensified by the intersecting interests of local political corruption and the US-led *war on terror*. Against this hostile setting, Bobis offers through the small community gathered in the slum hut a motivating example of humane deep understanding across gaps of nationality,

race, class or age differences, gaps that are not denied or obliterated but negotiated via reciprocal solidarity.

### MASCULINIST HEROISM: PROTECTION VIA AGGRESSION

The relationships within the micro-community of main characters – Nolan, Nena, Elvis, Cate and Colonel Lane – are set against the background of the intricate ongoing collaboration of corrupt Philippine and American authorities, with deep-seated roots springing from “40 years of American occupation” (Bobis 2008, 85). This collaboration was revitalized after September 11, 2001, under the camouflage of the *war on terror* rhetoric, as the novel registers:

the news moves on to the joint exercises of the Philippine and the United States military in their common fight against terrorism. At efficiently stage-managed press conferences, the countries’ respective presidents affirm current bilateral relations and “our long history of friendship”. But the camera is fickle. It cuts to a veteran activist asking whether this paves the way for the revival of the US military bases, which were shut in 1992.<sup>1</sup> (Bobis 2008, 53)

This “common fight against terrorism” of the American and Philippine governments participates in what Mona Baker has defined as “the metanarrative of the war on terror”, whose rhetoric of fear and retaliation has been violently sustained across the world “rapidly acquiring the status of a super-narrative that cuts across geographical and national boundaries and directly impacts the lives of every one of us, in every sector of society” (2006, 45). Sara Ahmed’s insightful work on the “affective politics of fear” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is especially illuminating on how cultural narratives do not merely register the fear of a given group, but in fact produce and amplify the affect of terror (2004, 74–80). The term *metanarrative* proposed by Baker invokes the kind of larger, systematic, ideological work that hegemonic narratives of the *war on terror* perform, in accordance with Ahmed’s description of the political manipulations of that affect. This is a crucial, instrumental function of the program of military cooperation between the Philippines and the US, called *Balikatan*, which is recurrently exposed in *The Solemn Lantern Maker* as an act of neo-colonial occupation through the journalists’ insistent questions to the military officers:

*Balikatan* means “shoulder-to-shoulder” – but are you sure it’s about our countries fighting the war on terror together? Isn’t it about Washington paving the way to reopen the US bases here? Are you getting nostalgic for the old days? [...] Will your so-called “permanent-temporary presence” in the Philippine territory be more permanent than temporary? How soon before we have stars and stripes flying in Manila’s airspace? (Bobis 2008, 79)

Later, in a different passage, the accusation is expressed even more explicitly: “There is protest against America meddling with Philippine affairs, besides this is a civilian matter, or are we seeing the usual neo-colonialism?” (113) Colonel Lane himself admits this colonial history in conversation with the American consul; while the consul complains: “We gave them democracy, an educational system, we still feed them foreign aid, and what do we get in return?”, the Colonel’s response recognizes the abuses: “Forty years, Bettina. We occupied them for forty years, and

before that, we fought them in a war, and much later, we backed the dictator who robbed them blind for twenty years” (175).

Cate’s disappearance provides a perfect opportunity to reinforce this alliance between American and Philippine forces of control and repression, as Bobis’s narrator exposes: “the machinery is rolling. The police are on the case, and so are the American embassy and the presidential palace” (150). The intimate connection between American neocolonialism and brutal violence against the most vulnerable sectors of the Filipino population – represented in the narrative by the children and women inhabiting the slum – is best exposed in the scene where Elvis, a prostituted 12-year-old boy who admires everything American, is being raped in the shower in a luxurious hotel suite, while on the background the television announces the agreement between Washington and Manila:

The Philippine president commiserates with the American ambassador, emphasizing the friendship between the two countries. She invokes their joint military exercises for an urgent cause: the war against terrorism. The anchorwoman asks, “Is this abduction a terrorist act?”

“Just suck up, that’s deal, okay? Bobby said.”

“You and your pimp want to rip me off? C’mon, don’t make me wait, boy. Turn around. I said turn around, you cheat!”

The shower is steamed up, as if there’s a fog. Behind the glass, two bodies struggle. A boy is screaming. “Fuck you, fuck you!” his body flattened on the glass, his hands held up, as the man grunts. “Yes, I’m fucking you, I’m fucking you. That’s the deal, that’s the fucken deal!”

On TV, again the face of Cate Burns. (Bobis 2008, 119)

The conflation here of the anonymous foreign rapist, the raped boy and the allegedly abducted American woman is both powerful and symbolic. It alludes literally to the abuse of minors in an economy of globalized sexual trafficking massively dominated by men, under the bland euphemism of sexual tourism.<sup>2</sup> Metonymically, it refers to the abuse of civilians funded by the US *war on terror* in the Philippines, since in the name of the protection and safety of American citizens – in the novel staged on screen in global media through images of the white woman, Cate Burns – Filipino civilians were forcefully displaced, tortured and killed under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s mandate (2001–2010), when “the Philippine government included left-wing political opposition, critical journalists, government critics, and local political opposition as targets of violence by the military and the police, [...] sponsored by the US government” (Regilme 2014, 148). Their common interest in the *war on terror* was to squash any revolutionary upsurge and silence opposing voices, such as Noland’s father (a poor peasant about to be evicted from the plot of land that has sustained his family for generations) or the journalist shot in the novel, Germinio de Vera. In this context, as one of the local police officers expresses in the novel, “safe will always be a pretend word” (Bobis 2008, 147). Salvador Regilme has denounced that “[i]n effect, the selection of legal political opposition and activists as targets of US-funded counterterror operations in the Philippines substantially contributed to the increase in human rights violations after 9/11” (2014, 149). This situation is explicitly discussed in the novel through a tele-

vised debate where the “competing regimes of truth” (Zine and Taylor 2014, 14) on the *war on terror* are voiced by a journalist, an academic, and a priest, representing the powers of the media, institutionalized education, and the church, respectively (Bobis 2008, 136–139).

Bobis’s novel thus helps contextualize the events taking place at the beginning of the 21st century within the much longer history of American wars in foreign territories that Salah Hassan has described as “never-ending occupations”:

a repeating pattern from the 1890s occupation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the mid-twentieth-century occupation of Germany and Japan to the early twenty-first-century occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In every one of these cases, the U.S. presence was ostensibly temporary, aimed at overthrowing an unjust dictatorship, yet quickly took the form of a permanent military presence. (2008, 2)

The *war on terror* is portrayed here not as a new era suddenly erupting after September 11, 2001, but as the intensification and global expansion of ongoing colonization, staunchly patriarchal and capitalist, that stems from centuries ago. As Jasbir Puar has pointed out, “[t]he event-ness of September 11 refuses the binary of watershed moment and turning point of radical change, versus intensification of more of the same, tethered between its status as a ‘history-making moment’ and a ‘history-vanishing moment’” (2007, xviii). Similarly, Elizabeth Dauphinee and Cristina Masters sustain that “the war on terror animates particular forms of political violence, while simultaneously obscuring the historical contexts in which these violences have emerged” (2007, vii). For them, 9/11 has become the “‘perfect alibi’ for the evacuation of politics from memory” (vii). On her part, Sara Ahmed has argued that the patriotic discourses of love for the nation that followed the 9/11 events stirred a narrative of retaliation that “*allowed home to be mobilised as a defence against terror*” (2004, 74), which constitutes a dominant trope in this metanarrative, as we could witness in the subsequent responses to terrorism in Europe and the US. In the novel, Colonel Lane addresses this issue when he ironically describes *home* as “that vulnerable place which justifies arsenals, the reason invoked when we go to war. We must protect *our* home; everyone against *our* home is evil; there is no other home outside ours” (Bobis 2008, 189). There is in this discourse a strong notion of masculinist heroism related to the protection of the home/family/nation that has been reinforced despite the incorporation of women to the police and military forces, which demand masculinized women, not feminized men, as this novel clearly reflects. As Jan Jindy Pettman has pointed out, in the war of terror metanarrative “[h]ard’ masculinity was privileged, based on force and power over/dominance relations” (2004, 58).

Bobis contests the hypermasculinization of the war hero through the ethical dilemmas of Colonel David Lane, whose “hard” masculinity is compromised by his consciousness regarding the abuses his country is committing. He is described as “a model soldier, decorated for bravery in Afghanistan, just like his grandfather in the Second World War, *though the old man didn’t crack up*” (2008, 158; emphasis added), which implies that David did break down. After demonstrating his “bravery” in Afghanistan, he is deployed to Iraq, where an incident with a mother in Fallujah

who requests his help first raises his doubts regarding the rhetoric of heroism and humanitarian intervention that supposedly had brought them there, and the reality of abuses and inhumane necropolitics he witnesses, and contributes to, in the war: “Once for him the base was 9/11. He was there the day after, so he went to Iraq. Then, in his heart, it felt right. But has he, in fact, done it wrong? When did the heart become a cog in a wheel that is now impossible to turn back?” (76). To avoid his causing trouble in Fallujah, Lane is then sent “to the tropics” (158), supposedly a milder environment, to perform psychological warfare, because according to his superiors he is not man enough for the “rough and tumble of the field, but he can extricate the truth nicely” (158). In the Philippines, however, David’s unease only increases: “He has grave doubts about this assignment. It’s a civilian matter, for God’s sake” (76). At first he shields his consciousness under patriotic duty: “An American life is at stake, so fly a combat helicopter to show we refuse to be terrorised. Part of operations, and he can’t be accused of being unpatriotic, un-American. Always protecting our own” (77). But this task becomes more and more difficult as he realizes the connivance of the *global war on terror* with Arroyo’s particular purge of dissidents:

What if we’re wrong? What if this “terrorist group” is nothing more than a gang of kid-nappers used to discredit the Muslim guerrilla armies that have fought for self-determination since the seventies? Where does the story begin? Have we asked about the years of dispossession of Mindanao’s Muslims? Do we *know* this country? Have we asked about the endemic corruption of this government, the violence of its military against civilians, and the *even greater violence of poverty*? (172; emphasis added)

Still, he resists the idea of resigning and envisions a possible return to civilian life as a failure, a loss of manhood: “*Come home*. Ah, all these wives and mothers waiting, beckoning, as if we’ve just gone to the corner store on an errand and can easily slip back into their arms, a boy again, enfolded” (161). The return home is, from his perspective, a return to boyhood, to innocence, and to being protected by a woman’s arms. But “[h]e can’t return, because he can’t leave what he has become” (189), and because “[t]hese days his wife despises him, he’s sure of it” (189).

In parallel, we may appreciate a similar criticism of masculinist heroism on the part of the author in the figure of Noland’s father, a poor peasant who takes justice into his own hands. When he is announced that he and his family will be evicted from the land they have cultivated for generations, he goes for the landlord, hacks him to death and hides in the hills. A group of uniformed men harass both little Noland – who, to protect his mother, points them in the direction where his father is hiding – and Nena, who is left with permanent damage to her legs after this violent attack. From this moment Noland will remain mute, and mother and son move to the slums of Manila to escape “the uniforms”, as Nena calls them.

Bobis voices through the character of Lydia de Vera, the widow of the journalist killed at the traffic intersection where Noland and Cate Burns meet, a very different view of this idea of “heroism”, focusing on those who are left behind, often to suffer the consequences of the men’s “heroic” acts:

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. Al-

ways the home is too small. The heroic resides somewhere else. If not the streets, the halls of government, or a war.

Would they have loved them less if they were not heroes? No. They would have loved them longer. (161)

It is these other logics of love, survival and protection of the lives at home that predominates among the women and children in the novel, as will be analyzed in the following section.

## COMMUNITIES OF CARE: HEALING AND RESILIENCE IN THE SLUMS

That the military officers in the novel are men should not distract us from the fact that the figures of political authority in the novel are women: not only the corrupt president signing the agreements with the American authorities (Gloria Macapagal Arroyo) – “the president herself has promised full support for Cate Burns”, her press secretary announces in the novel (139) – but also the American ambassador (Kristie Kenney) and consul (“Bettina” in Bobis’s fictional narrative, probably Bettina Malone, spokesperson of the Embassy at that time). This signals the active participation of women, both American and Filipina, in the war and in the international politics governing these decisions. In contrast, there is a significant emphasis in the narrative on the affects of care, resilience and healing embodied by the women and children sheltered in the little hut in the slum that puts at the center the alternative “shoulder-to-shoulder” forms of cooperation that they practice. This contrast reveals that care and affection, violence and brutality, are not *natural*, innate, gendered characteristics of women and men, but different ideological and ethical positions.

In this regard, it is relevant to clarify at this point that the concept of resilience I am invoking here emanates from the feminist critique of the neoliberal rhetoric of individual resilience that thinkers like Angela McRobbie (2020) or The Care Collective (2020) have undertaken in the context of the Covid pandemic. This concept, resilience, has acquired predominance in intellectual and political circles in the past two decades, becoming especially popular after the international success of Boris Cyrulnik’s bestselling texts, including, in the anglophone world, *Talking of Love on the Edge of a Precipice* (2007), *Resilience* (2009) and *The Whispering of Ghosts* (2010). Cyrulnik’s definition of resilience focuses on the strategies for the overcoming of trauma developed by children and draws on his personal experience as the surviving child of Holocaust victims, as well as on his professional dedication to trauma as neuropsychiatrist. This focus on resilience as an individual characteristic that can be developed with, in Cyrulnik’s vocabulary, the correct tutoring has been unashamedly coopted by neoliberal ideology so that

over the past few decades ideas of social welfare and community had been pushed aside for individualised notions of resilience, wellness and self-improvement, promoted through a ballooning ‘selfcare’ industry which relegates care to something we are supposed to buy for ourselves on a personal basis. [...]. In short, for a long time we had simply been failing to care for each other, especially the vulnerable, the poor and the weak. (The Care Collective 2020, 2)

From feminist flanks, the criticism toward the neoliberal rhetoric of resilience has been sharp to denounce that “[t]he ideal citizen under neoliberalism is autonomous, entrepreneurial, and endlessly resilient” (12). Contrary to this individualist approach, communal care has been vindicated from feminist perspectives as fundamental to the development of resilience, an aspect that Cyrulnik has also underlined in his studies, but which has been vastly ignored in what Hannah Hamad describes as “the logic of neoliberalism that continues to operate under the ideologically disingenuous banner of ‘resilience’” (2022, 318). This Darwinian logic makes the individual exclusively responsible for their own ills, to the point that the most vulnerable due to social discrimination are in fact “dissuaded from questioning context-related adversities like racism and other forms of social injustice. They are, instead, directed towards positive thinking and self-actualization” (Mahdiani and Ungar 2021, 147). Feminist analysis has exposed how resilience is a characteristic most demanded especially of women in times of conflict, disaster and austerity (Bracke 2016, 65–66; Hamad 2022, 319; Martin de Almagro and Bargués 2022, 974), and Sarah Bracke has identified it as “a key organizing principle for all homeland security strategies, programs, and activities” of the post-9/11 context (2016, 52). Paying attention to the development of resilience through strategies of communal care developed by women activists in post-war Liberia, Maria Martin de Almagro and Pol Bargués affirm the need to “mobilise an affirmative feminism to consider how *resilience thrives outside governance structures and the confines of neoliberal policymaking*” (Martin de Almagro and Bargués 2022, 968; emphasis added).

In this section I will argue that Merlinda Bobis illustrates in *The Solemn Lantern Maker* a similar feminist understanding of resilience, as emerging from reciprocal and communal care among vulnerable characters, as well as among strangers. This other form of resilience coincides with Bracke’s definition of subaltern resilience, characteristic of

the subject of the global South who has survived colonization, exploitation, and wars and has been subjected to austerity programs, most often conceptualized in the global North, and other forms of exploitation. We might call this a subject of subaltern resilience, or the resilience of the wretched of the earth, which is born out of the practice of getting up in the morning and making it through the day in conditions of often unbearable symbolic and material violence. (2016, 60)

Noland is a 10-year-old boy suffering post-traumatic stress disorder after having found the bleeding corpse of his murdered father; his name, as his father had explained to him, is a reminder of their destitution, their lack of ownership of the land they have farmed for generations: “*Noland. No land*” (Bobis 2008, 203). The first protective relationship we witness in the novel is Noland’s friendship with Elvis. The two boys help each other in a tough context of sexual and economic exploitation. Although at the beginning Bobby and Elvis use the alluring fantasy of a new family to gain Noland to their business – “Noland grew warm inside when he heard it. *Like family*. Like Christmas gift-wrapped in kind voices” (11) – the two boys soon become like brothers, and Elvis will act as a protector when Bobby shows his intention

to start pimping little Noland: “I’ll do double jobs, I promise, but not Noland” (110). Elvis is merely two years older than Noland, but already an expert survivor in the sex market. When his greedy “uncle” breaks his agreement and arranges a session for Noland with a pedophile (according to Bobby, just for pictures, but Noland comes home in shock after this session), Elvis breaks with Bobby, who then batters him cruelly. Elvis sacrifices himself to protect Noland, and he loses his life in the effort, as the corrupt local police have identified him as a suspect of the American’s ‘abduction’ and finally shoot him to death in a back alley (202). His friendship with Noland puts Elvis at even higher risks than his harsh life already had, but he does not hesitate to take those risks to help a more vulnerable person. On a similar ethical position, Noland puts himself and his mother at risk when he brings Cate Burns to their home and attends to her, prioritizing a stranger’s safety over their own. As Dolores Herrero has pointed out, “Noland’s affection and generosity eventually bring about the miracle of getting together people who, although belonging in different and apparently confronted worlds, can nonetheless transcend all their differences in order to care for one another” (2013, 109). Even Nena, who is well aware of the great danger Noland’s compassionate decision is bringing on them and bitterly complains about it (blaming it all on Elvis’s bad influence on her traumatized son), soon takes the responsibility of nursing Cate, sympathizing with the sad “Amerkana” in her loss. Compassion is the prevalent affect linking these women. In the preface to his *Being Singular Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy provides a long list of the armed conflicts taking place in the summer of 1995, at the moment of writing his philosophical tract: “It is a litany, a prayer of pure sorrow and pure loss, the plea that falls from the lips of millions of refugees every day: whether they be deportees, people besieged, those who are mutilated, people who starve, who are raped, ostracized, excluded, exiled, expelled” (2000, xiii). Immediately after, he provides the following definition of compassion: “What I am talking about here is compassion, but not compassion as a pity that feels sorry for itself and feeds on itself. Com-*passion* is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness” (2000, xiii). I think Nancy’s definition encapsulates what is happening in the novel between Nena and Cate. Drawn together accidentally by the violent killing of Germinio de Vera and the more global violence of the *war on terror*, these two women *are* with each other in the turmoil of their pain. Nena deeply understands Cate’s feelings of loss for the miscarriage and for having lost her husband (abandoned when he expects Cate to have an abortion): “Nena stares into [Cate’s] blue eyes welling with tears. Her own fill too; the tug of grief runs between them, and much more. Pasts so estranged and futures that will never touch again. But here, they are irrevocably bound” (Bobis 2008, 134). Reciprocally, Cate feels the pain of Nena, for the violent loss of her husband, for the traumatic experiences she and Noland have undergone, for the permanent damage in her legs from the “uniforms” battering: “Cate wants to say sorry forever. She wants to weep with this woman for a long, long time” (126). Paul Giffard-Foret has described Cate and Nena’s understanding across linguistic, cultural and class borders as “cosmopolitanism of the ‘wretched’” (2016, 603); I consider the intimate relationship developing



between the two women along the novel an example of transnational feminism, a political and ethical stand that is able to recognize and state the more than obvious differences between a white affluent American tourist and an impoverished and disabled Filipina, without formal education, and yet establish strong bonds of reciprocal care and protection. As The Care Collective have pointed out in relation to hegemonic neoliberal ideology, “[w]e have, for a very long time, been rendered less capable of caring for people even in our most intimate spheres, while being energetically encouraged to restrict our care for strangers and distant others” (2020, 4). In this hostile context, “to put care centre stage means recognising and embracing our *interdependencies*” (5), which constitutes, in my opinion, an outstanding theme in Bobis’s novel.

It is interesting in this regard to remark on the reversal of positions in the novel, which first situates the affluent American woman in need of help from the third world subalterns; however, when these subalterns are accused of having abducted the white American and targeted as “terrorists” – because, as Colonel David Lane says, “after 9/11 any American gets hurt or gets sneezed at in a foreign country and ‘terrorism’ rears its ugly head” (Bobis 2008, 76) – they come to be in need of the American woman’s protection. Cate Burns refuses to occupy the position that American and Philippine authorities and the media have allotted her, the victim of a terrorist cult, and in the interrogatory with Colonel Lane she insists, “I wasn’t abducted, I was rescued. That boy and his mother saved my life” (157), and “they’re not what you think – they helped me, they risked their lives, they saved me” (158). Her main preoccupation is to reciprocally help Noland and Nena: “They took care of me, his mother took care of me. I was sick, and I couldn’t remember – [...] They’re innocent, it’s all a mistake, please help them – they saved my life” (159). Her pleas are dismissed by the American guards as “hysterical” (181) and “delusional” (195), thus following the classic patriarchal “gaslighting” strategy, while she is being kept de facto sequestered in a luxurious hospital near the American embassy where “the suites match those at five-stars hotels” (195). Here she is drugged, even “contained”, without access to a phone or television; under the pretense of keeping her safe, she has now become a prisoner of her American “protectors”.<sup>3</sup>

The novel closes with Cate in a drugged dream in her hospital bed and Noland and Nena in a safe house, after Elvis has been shot by the police and thus the end of “the hostage crisis” has been declared. In a very brief epilogue, Bobis uses the style of the Christmas fairy tale to admonish readers that “[i]t’s time to help” (207). The narrator thus explicitly includes us as readers within this larger community, using the first-person plural pronoun to demand our implication with her request that we draw wings on the designated “all five points of light” (207) in this story – Noland, Nena, Cate, Elvis and Noland’s father. This closing confirms Dolores Herrero’s observation that

one of the issues that *The Solemn Lantern Maker* puts forward is that no excuse whatsoever can free individuals of their obligation to be *ethical*, that is, to engage in an open-ended dialogue with the world and the others, to open themselves to the experience of *alterity* that will let them cling to love and make the most of the redemptive resilience of their spiritual dimension. (Herrero 2013, 110)

## CONCLUSION

As I hope my discussion of the novel has revealed, the *war on terror* surfaces in Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker* as the armed branch of neoliberal capitalism, proving right Alda Facio's statement that "September 11th marked in the history of this planet the unequivocal militarization of the process of globalization of extreme capitalism" (2004, 380). The alliance of exploitative capitalist powers in the novel targets the most vulnerable bodies of street children and grieving women as the underside of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have termed "the global Empire system" (2004, 4), one where the media and political apparatus of the metanarrative of the *war on terror* reiterated the spectacle of mourning for the grievable lives (Butler 2009) of citizens and affluent tourists, and not of those who most suffer the consequences of old and new Western colonialisms. The novel challenges the hegemonic narratives that sustain the kind of planetary violence engendered under the auspices of the global *war on terror* and "succeeds in illustrating how, in spite of this dark scenario, the small story of an insignificant Filipino child can impinge on the powerful world of international politics" (Herrero 2013, 109). Against the aggressive rhetoric of fear and death, Bobis voices, through the character of a Filipino journalist, the wish for "an antidote against unscrupulous self-interest. [...] A drug for decency" (2008, 168). To contribute to the instillation of such a decency drug, the narrative offers varied examples of resilience and healing that rely on reciprocal care, starting with Noland's risky intervention to protect an unknown foreigner, which triggers the network of solidarity built in the novel. *The Solemn Lantern Maker* thus unequivocally defends an ethics of reciprocal solidarity and compassion that may constitute a form of critical intervention in public discourse, a different form of activism, in concordance with Mona Baker's idea that "undermining existing patterns of domination cannot be achieved by concrete forms of activism alone – demonstrations, sit-ins, civil disobedience – but *must involve a direct challenge to the stories that sustain these patterns*" (2006, 6; emphasis added). Bobis's novel does exactly this, offering a compelling and convincing counternarrative to the hegemonic discourse of the *war on terror* from subaltern perspectives (Giffard-Foret 2016, 596). My analysis of Bobis's novel has paid special attention to the gendered inflections of the violence it describes, and to its effects on the material lives of vulnerable civilians, taking into account the increasing degrees of risk at the intersection of race, ethnic, class and gender differences. In *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, Bobis interpellates readers in numerous occasions on the too common fault of convenient ignorance or cruel plain indifference, which has been theorized as intended or active ignorance on the part of the privileged (Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Medina 2013). For example, she has Colonel Lane thinking "We are jostled by too many acts that we choose to forget" (196) or Cate Burns slapping one of her guards and shouting "Don't you even fucking care?" (181), in relation to Nena and Noland's safety at the hands of the corrupt Philippine police. Bobis thus contributes to the struggle for epistemic and social justice, demanding active listening on the part of her readers: "I know a story you don't know, *that you can know*" (117; emphasis added).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> At the time the actions in the novel take place, the presidents of the US and the Philippines were George W. Bush and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, respectively. Both presidents were accused of having used torture and other illegal practices such as extrajudicial executions in their *war on terror*. See Human Rights Watch 2011; Regilme 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> Elvis brags in the novel he can identify all foreign accents, and we may infer it is from his “business” with foreign men: “I know Americans, Australians, Germans, Japanese, yeah man. I know many-many international, but America’s the best” (Bobis 2008, 19).
- <sup>3</sup> I find this comparison with five-stars hotels significant, taking into account that the luxurious suites in the novel have been the scene of sexual abuses of minors by foreign tourists. Like Noland, immobilized by drugs in the hotel, Cate is kept in a drugged dream in her hospital bed.

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## Resilience and healing in the slums of Manila: Merlinda Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker*

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Healing. Resilience. Solidarity. War on terror. Corruption. Transnational feminism.

This article examines Merlinda Bobis's novel *The Solemn Lantern Maker* (2008) with recourse to affect theories on terror and vulnerability. The narrative addresses harsh realities like children's prostitution, extreme poverty, and brutal corruption, and puts these apparently Philippine "domestic" matters in direct relation to globalization and to the so-called war on terror. The analysis of the narrative pays attention to the strategies of resilience and healing developed by vulnerable civilians, taking into account the increasing degrees of risk at the intersection of race, ethnic, class, age and gender differences. It examines how such differences are negotiated in the text via reciprocal care among the main characters in a context of extreme violence.

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