

Cheryl Julia Lee. “A Reading of Merlinda Bobis’s Fish-Hair Woman Corpus”

The archipelago as conceived of by Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel serves as an apt metaphor for thinking about the ways in which Southeast Asian writing speak to global aesthetics. Not only do countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines exist as literal archipelagoes, the violent recent past of the region (and the present in some countries), coupled with the increasing influence of globalization, seem to suggest that the modern concept of a Southeast Asian region is coming apart at the seams.

In this paper, I examine the idea of the archipelago in relation to the small corpus of texts built around Philippine-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis’s fictional myth of the Fish-Hair Woman. The Fish-Hair Woman is the protector of Iraya, who uses her hair to trawl the river for the victims of the total war waged by then-President Aquino’s administration against the Communists from 1987-89. The first incarnation of the myth was in the form of a short story; it was then reworked into a radio play, a novel, and a dramatic adaptation that has since been staged in various incarnations internationally. Like the hair of the titular mythical figure, Bobis’s world of the Fish-Hair Woman stretches far and wide, recalling traumatic histories and seeking new possible ways of telling old impossible stories about the dead, the lost, the marginalized, and the silenced.

I examine the ways in which Bobis enters into dialogue with the magical realist tradition and argue that, drawing on the legacies of Spanish colonization and her own transnational experiences, Bobis remakes the tradition in the image of the Philippines. True to a Filipino form, Bobis’s use of magical realism in the corpus of Fish-Hair Woman texts speaks to an alternative model of articulating experience, which lacks ‘coherence’, but which is held together by the body and lived experience.