

## FEMALE EMBODIMENT AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN JESSICA HAGEDORN'S *DOGEATERS*

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Entitling her tour-de-force debut novel "Dogeaters" was an especially provocative move on the part of Filipina-American writer Jessica Hagedorn. Considered a nasty slang word for Filipinos, the term is a derogatory reference to a Luzon highland tribe's pre-colonial penchant for eating wild dog.<sup>1</sup> There remains considerable sensitivity in the community over a stereotype that continually hurts and haunts. As the label has ignited Filipino and Filipino-American shame, denial, and outrage at being branded a savage, it has been consistently and emphatically disavowed. Still, in choosing this title for her novel, Hagedorn employs a double-edged irony. Her reclamation of the term "dogeaters" implicitly challenges not only the civilizing missions of the Philippine colonial past, but also the somewhat predictable and emotive nationalist response of the Filipino community itself.

As author Robert Stone has commented on the 1990 National Book Award nominee, "this is the definitive novel of the encounter between the Philippines and America and their history of mutual illusion, antagonism, and ambiguous affection" ("Jessica Hagedorn").

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<sup>1</sup> The American name for a frankfurter was invented at the St. Louis World Fair, 1904. A Bontoc Igorot tribe from the Philippines was one of many ethnographic "showcases" that was imported to the Midwest that winter for America and the world to witness. Much "buzz" and humor resulted from the sensational presentation of the Bontoc Igorot village practice of eating wild dog. "Hot-dogs" were facetiously sold by vendors outside of the Philippine Village pavilion exhibit.

Apart from the regular dog eating, one of the more sensational aspects of the Bontoc Igorot village at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair was the near-nudity of the Bontoc males. The Bontoc male representatives were striking warriors who appeared in only their customary G-strings. As Victorian Americans at the time were as a rule clad head to toe, summer and winter, such display of the body was extraordinary, revelatory, and much photographed.

Set in the turbulent period of the Philippines' late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, *Dog eaters* is a dreamlike world in which U.S. pop culture and local Filipino tradition mix flamboyantly and where storytelling, melodrama, gossip, and extravagant behavior thrive. The novel offers a widely disparate group of characters who are caught in a maelstrom of events which culminate in a beauty pageant, a political assassination, a film festival, and a narrow underground escape. Hagedorn has described her novel as "a love letter to my motherland: a fact and fiction born of rage, shame, pride...and most certainly desire" (*Danger and Beauty* xi).

*Dog eaters* is a collage of non-chronological narratives, news flashes, personal letters, dream sequences, political speeches, and historical documents. The problematic mapping of narrative and of history is the crux of this work. As the real (McKinley's speeches, Jose Rizal's poems, historical documentation, and quips from the Associated Press) is interspersed with fiction, *Dog eaters* persists at conflating our sense of what really was. The result is a montage-style chimera of Philippine society. From its inception, the text is riddled with the question of what is real and authentic and what is false and artificial. This question lies at the heart of the text yet takes on different dimensions and ultimately offers itself as unanswerable. *Dog eaters* foregrounds the connections and discontinuities between a diasporic location and the Filipino nationalism that emerges as a consequence of (and challenge to) Spanish colonialism (16<sup>th</sup> century –1896), U.S. colonialism (1902-World War II), and neo-colonial martial law (1954-1972). The novel is a dense pastiche that brings alive in messy detail a history of particular Asian American inter-penetrations. The reach and grasp of America on the Philippines, as well as the ensuing Filipino understanding and response to such a grasp, is at the center of its inquiry. We come to understand the refracted Filipino landscape as infiltrated and imprinted by U.S. power. Ultimately, what the novel captures is not so much "the Philippines" per se, but the syncretism of global cultural exchange and a particular Asian American (or Americanized Asian) manifestation of it. The collage style of the novel interrupts the development of a distinct national subject, as it places together discontinuous, simultaneous first and third person narratives about a diverse range of characters.

*Dog eaters* resists the leveling of emancipatory politics to a post-colonial nationalism that would operate at the expense of women. The novel's consistent focus on the contours of female embodiment opens up new considerations for the roles women are often conscripted to play in the making of the nation. The multi-plotted narratives of *Dog eaters* vital female characters "bring to life" not only the

constraints often placed on women, but the multiform trajectories of female empowerment. As *Dog eaters* questions the act of representing history, it offers its own version of a post-colonial political awakening that leaves room for the many fissures and cracks that disrupt the nation-as-narrative (or narrative-as-nation). The technique of utilizing various “unofficial” discursive structures as well as recognized historical representations at once seems to undermine history. Yet the approach not only undermines official history, but also interrogates the politics of representation. In the end, *Dog eaters* not only insinuates that the oftentimes “subjugated knowledges” of the popular remain unavailable in official narrative history. Hagedorn’s novel also dramatizes the recollection of history as spasmodic hearsay and as an ongoing process of partial, imperfect recollection.

The reception that *Dog eaters* has had in the Filipino and Filipino-American community is telling. There remains a lively debate as to whether this book has “set back the race,” or has misrepresented and exoticized Filipinos. The novel has been understood by some as a “sell-out” to the West by employing a thoroughly postmodern aesthetic as it ignores the more indigenous modes of expression that might possibly align it with a politics of de-colonization. In other words, some critics have accused *Dog eaters* of reproducing an imperialist sensibility in its approach to the story of the Philippines. But such essentially nationalist critiques have failed to recognize the novel’s central concern with the politics of representation and in particular, with the constraints imposed on women in the act of shaping national history. The pastiche redraws the frame of a postcolonial transnational culture, and it does so from the perspective of the non-subjects of history. *Dog eaters* thus retells the stories of the Marcos years not from the perspective of the political or military leaders, the Western press, or subaltern historiographers, but largely from the viewpoints of Filipina mothers, mistresses, sisters, daughters, and wives. “Rather than conveying the upheaval of the Marcoses’ regime through panoptic, godlike vision, the novel is steeped in questionable recordings and skewed looks” (Lee 78).

Far from being simply an American orientalist portrait of the Philippines, *Dog eaters* is a complex novel that presents a vital portrait of resistance. In particular, it employs a strategy of representation that critiques the discursive formations that normalize and naturalize the relationship between women and nation. While the novel admits a national desire that possesses and controls women, it simultaneously challenges the putative naturalness of discourses of nation that require a rhetoric of territorialization. In this respect, notions of a national homeland are made metaphorically equivalent to female

corporeality. In the context of nationalism, the female body has been traditionally assigned great ideological and symbolic significance. Astutely exploring this particular aspect of the nationalist paradigm, *Dogeaters* weaves several narratives that explicitly link female embodiment to questions of the nation. The novel explores how women become the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history. Jessica Hagedorn's special attention to female specularized bodies sets a particular stage—one that ultimately allows her to explore and question the figurative role of women in the nation. Ultimately, *Dogeaters* addresses the limits imposed on women in the act of shaping a national history by asserting a contradictory and dynamic female embodiment written beyond the restraints of trite national allegory.

### **National Desire & the Erotics of Politics: Daisy Avila**

The chapter entitled “Sleeping Beauty” introduces one of the novel's most emblematic characters, Miss Daisy Avila. In this chapter's opening, Hagedorn takes a rare moment to foreground the psyche of the nation itself. In doing so, she conjoins this pointed reflection with a consideration of what “supreme irony” resides between father and daughter:

The latest national survey reports that eighty dialects and languages are spoken; we are a fragmented nation of loyal believers, divided by blood feuds and controlled by the Church. Holy Wars are fought in combat zones of our awesome archipelago. Senator Avila declares that our torrid green world is threatened by the legacy of colonialism and the desire for revenge. He foretells more suffering in his eloquent speeches, which fall on deaf ears. He is ridiculed and vilified in the government run newspaper. The underground circulates a pamphlet of his writings, “The Suffering Pilipino”: “We Pinoys suffer collectively from a cultural inferiority complex. We are doomed by our need for assimilation into the West and our own curious fatalism. . .” “Fatalism is fatal,” begins another influential essay. He describes us as a nation of complex cynics, descendants of warring tribes which were baptized and colonized to death by Spaniards and Americans, as a nation betrayed and then united only by our hunger for glamour and our Hollywood dreams. Is it a supreme irony then, when such an otherwise wise man as the Senator allows his gullible daughter to participate in a government-endorsed beauty contest run by the First Lady? (101-102)

As the novel consistently offers a gendered critique of nationalism, the text begs a simple question: How are private passions invested with public purpose? How does a wise father sacrifice a daughter unwittingly? The Avilas' story is at once a familial and national, and *Dogeaters* continually stresses how politics impinge upon the intimate

venues of family and desire. It repeatedly exposes the presumptions of the part-public, part-private nationalist narrative.

Daisy Avila, the daughter of a prominent Senator and opposition leader, is introduced as the most beautiful woman in the Philippines. Winning the “Young Miss Philippines” pageant, she is perceived as the hope of the nation, the flower of the archipelago.<sup>2</sup> She is a vision of beauty, the embodiment of nationalist pride. Yet during the days following her extravagant coronation, she is gripped with an unidentifiable anguish, left only to sleep or weep in self-elected hibernation. The postponement of her promotional tour and her cancellation of a cameo role in an upcoming melodrama are cause enough for national crisis. The media is despondent; a “hungry pack of journalists, photographers, and fans maintain a twenty four hour vigil on the sidewalk outside the gates of the Avila property” (107). Their reaction to Daisy’s reclusive depression exposes the salience of her national role as visual object. To see her becomes the citizen’s right. Her body becomes a sanctioned site of national production and government surveillance. Daisy Avila is the screen upon which public desire is projected. By hiding, Daisy defies the traditional role of a Filipina to serve her country through self-exhibition (Lee 91). Daisy’s insult to the nation resides in her simple refusal to be seen (Lee 92). It is in her silence, her unnamed angst, and her inability to articulate her own frustration, that we can recognize a burgeoning feminist consciousness. Although her father cannot understand her withdrawal, her mother is not surprised:

During the days following her extravagant coronation, something peculiar happens to Daisy Avila, something which surprises and worries everyone in her family except for her indomitable mother. Each morning, as Daisy struggles to wake from her sleep, she finds herself whimpering softly. Most of her waking hours are spent crying, or trying in vain to stop. Her eyes are continually bloodshot and swollen. The once radiant beauty cannot pinpoint the source of her mysterious and sudden unhappiness. (105)

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<sup>2</sup> The Filipino fascination with beauty pageants throughout the twentieth century is well represented in Doris G. Nuyda’s “picture book” entitled *The Beauty Book: A History of Philippine Beauty from 1908-1980* (Manila: Mr. & Mrs. Publishing Co., 1980.) Nuyda’s book features glossy photos and personal biographies of most winners in the past century. The Philippines’ principal beauty pageants are of utmost prestige, and most of the crowned “Miss Philippines” have been of mestizo or mixed race heritage, reflecting the national politics of body image and the cultural legacy of colonialism. The pageants have become an important national venue for securing future position, political clout, and power. Many former winners have ascended to prominent roles in society: some have eventually become the first lady or wives of congressmen or senators; and in more recent years, several winners have reached prominent political office in their own right.

This uncertain feeling precedes a later rejection of the role she has been bequeathed in the Philippine national arena. She is paralyzed with a dread that she does not quite understand. Eventually, the angst she suffers metamorphoses into a new feminist consciousness. Only her mother grasps the beginnings of such a transformation.

Cynthia Enloe notes that anti-colonial nationalism rarely takes women's experiences as a starting point for understanding how a people becomes colonized or how it throws off the shackles of that material and psychologized domination. Rather, "nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope." (Lee 90)

In such nationalist efforts, women assume the role of cultural marker for the national agenda. Their patriotic function is to serve as symbolic embodiments of the nation. Such is the explicit fate of Daisy Avila. All those watching, including her own emblematically politicized father, are at a complete loss to understand her seemingly strange behavior. As her father carries the torch for the postcolonial nationalist movement in his country, he cannot understand his own daughter's experience. But Daisy's reaction exposes the blind spot of her father's nationalism. Although he continually critiques the national government's collusion with the West, Senator Avila fails to oppose the state's representation of itself through women's bodies. In her moment of inarticulate depression, the figure of Daisy Avila opens a space for women's struggle and for women's experiences. Her depression and withdrawal from the public eye foregrounds the gap between who she is internally and what she must come to represent externally. Daisy's instinctive retreat points to the overall effect this metaphorical burden has on her literal experience—her body, her psyche, and ultimately her life. In the end, Daisy emerges from her repressed identity as beauty queen, transforming herself into nationalist guerrilla leader.<sup>3</sup> As Daisy comes out of her self-imposed seclusion to claim a new public voice, she resumes center stage to offer a critique of that from which she has emerged. On a nationally broadcast talk show, she denounces the very beauty contest she won

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<sup>3</sup> It is presumable that Daisy's character is inspired after the real life example of two former beauty queens-turned-underground activists: Nelia Sancho and Marita Gomez. In Nuyda's *The Beauty Book: A History of Philippine Beauty from 1908-1980*, Nelia Sancho is depicted: "A few years after becoming 'Queen of the Pacific,' Nelia turned her back on the glamorous life. Her Asian and Pacific travels, she explains today, 'widened my scope of the self and family.' With this realization came her conversion to a radical ideology and association with the underground movement. In 1976 Nelia was arrested for her activities in Cagayan de Oro City and detained, a year ahead of Antonio Lao, the childhood friend who had become her comrade and later her husband. ...."

as a “giant step backward for all women” (109). Daisy Avila comes into her own brand of nationalism through feminism (Lee 91).

In the chapter entitled “Famine of Dreams,” Daisy’s continued story reveals the complexity of the novel’s politics of embodiment. Here *Dogeaters* deconstructs the conjunction between romance, scripted consumer desire, and the violation of woman. Accenting a gang rape with romantic melodrama and catchy commercialism, the novel foregrounds a particular connection between national ideology and violence. Daisy Avila is detained and taken to “Camp Meditation” to be interrogated and raped by the General and army henchmen:

The Colonel who arrested her has a baby face. He speaks to her politely in English.

They arrive in an unmarked car at the recently renovated military complex. It is after midnight. Colonel Jesus de Jesus holds her by the elbow in a deferential manner, as if he were escorting her to a formal ball. “Contemplate your sins and your crimes here at our cozy Camp Meditation,” Colonel Jesus de Jesus chuckles. (211)

Daisy’s arrival at the torture camp is marked by romantic innuendo as well as ironic colonial and Christian overtones. Her name alone is a sardonic reference to Saint Theresa of *Avila*’s ecstatic devotion to Jesus Christ. As an eroticized and exalted saint, or a princess at a ball, she is escorted to her own rape. As the gallant and polite lover, or as the Christ-figure namesake, the Colonel is in reality the rapist.

Throughout *Dogeaters*, Hagedorn repeatedly foregrounds the heightened romantic sensibility of popular culture; as melodrama is woven throughout the entire novel and plays a central role in the national culture reflected here.<sup>4</sup> Doris Sommer, in her book *Foundational Fictions*, considers how romance and national melodrama go hand in hand with patriotic history. She proposes that they fuel a desire for domestic happiness that spills over into dreams of national prosperity. Sommer also suggests that love and romantic sensibility reflect a certain hope for productive union on the national stage. In *Dogeaters*, romantic drama (either fed by popular culture or generated individually) seems to play a central role in every character’s life, no matter from what walk of life. But romance is consistently figured in *Dogeaters* as ironic. Romance is invariably an exposé of

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<sup>4</sup> From the Hollywood movies that play a prominent role throughout the text, to the reappearing radio melodrama entitled *Love Letters*, to the continuing fantasies of the First Lady, this novel is stitched together with the threads of the romantic narratives of mass culture.

the underlying difference between what a character (or a nation for that matter) desires and what really exists.<sup>5</sup>

The country's earlier obsession with Daisy's choice of lover/husband reiterates this paradigm of romance. Who Daisy chooses will automatically hold significance for the citizen's imagination. Romance becomes the vehicle of a particular national inscription as Daisy's mate will either fulfill or fail to satisfy communal imaginings and desire. After her short marriage to the foreign banker Malcolm Webb, she flees into hiding with Santos Tirador, the leader of the guerrilla movement. How does the rhetorical relationship between heterosexual coupling and the hegemonic state function here? As an allegory, each discourse (romantic and nationalist) is grounded in the other: from her endorsement as "Young Miss Philippines," to her seduction by a foreign moneyed interest, to her delivery as heroine of the political underground. Daisy Avila always embodies the constitutive connection between private and political passion. With the characterization of Daisy, *Dogeaters* addresses the compelling power of romantic imaginings and how they inform nationality, sexuality, and gender. Hagedorn points to how these imaginings come to constitute a modern Filipina subject.

This national proclivity for romance is confronted in the episode where Daisy is violated. The chapter "Famine of Dreams" rewrites (or un-writes) the foundational fiction of romantic melodrama as a dangerous and cruel failure. The culmination of Daisy's story can be read as an ironic commentary on the omnipresent romantic will to bridge private and public spheres. National romance is exposed as power play that traffics in women. This key chapter reveals the violence undergirding nationalism, as the final "dance" of this allegory is waged on Daisy. While Daisy is gang raped, the radio melodrama *Love Letters* plays on with heightened intensity. Incessant commercial jingles fill the air. And the General watches and awaits "his turn." The chapter is interwoven with these three distinct discursive threads:<sup>6</sup>

**Magdalzna:** Where have you been? You didn't go to the river again, did you? (Ominous music in the background.)

**Ponciano:** Magdalzna, please. I . . . I don't want to talk about it-

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the episodes involving Pucha Gonzaga's romantic aspirations for Boomboom Alacran, as well as Trinidad Gamboa's obsession for Romeo Rosales, always encompass an incisive yet sympathetic exposition of their romantic delusions.

<sup>6</sup> In this passage from Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* different fonts are used in order to distinguish different narrative voices. The fonts used here remain consistent with the different voices represented in the passage, although they are not exactly the same fonts as used in the original text.



**Rosalinda:** Papa, what are you trying to hide?

**Magdalena:** (accusatory) You did, didn't you? You did it again-

("One of your favorite father's favorite songs," the General tells her, "was 'White Christmas' by Bing Crosby. [...] your father was a stubborn man. He believed in moral lessons. He wanted everyone to be perfect, to consider him as an example. That stubbornness might have contributed to his downfall, di ba?")

**Thirst quencher to the star's.**

**The thinking man's soft drink.**

**After a long hard day at the office or school—TruCola!**

*TruCola Calypso*  
*Ay, ay, aray! Bili*  
*Mo ako nang*  
*Ice-cold TruCola!*  
*Sa-sa-sarap ang TruCola!*

[. . .] Colonel Jesus de Jesus asks to be first. He assaults her for so long and with such force, Daisy prays silently to pass out. Her prayers go unanswered. The other men crack jokes, awaiting their turn. "Lover boy *talaga*," one of the officers grunts in admiration. . . . "My woman," he announces, heaving himself off her. [. . .] He describes the special equipment set up in another room, and a smaller room where the General plans to take her when the men are through. "We can finally be alone," the General says. He calls her *hija* once again, exclaims at her extraordinary beauty. He promises to make her dance. (215)

How might the commercials and serial romances playing on the radio comment on the Daisy's rape? How is commercialism connected to the degradation of the "national body"? The radio commercials at this narrative juncture are reminders of the underlying economy and "hard sell" of the nationalist consumer culture. They reinforce the ubiquitous reality of neocolonial capitalism and the destructive power of this legacy.<sup>7</sup> The free market has yet to engender freedom for the citizens of the Philippines, despite the assertions of the nationalists in power. By linking radio commercials to the physical torture of rape, the text discloses the lethal power of global consumerism in nation making. Romance alongside global commercialism serves here as a central and essential frame for the representation of such sexualized violence. Here *Dogeaters* "plays" on the way the nation is troped as a woman's body—borders are meticulously drawn and resources territorialized (either by colonists or post-colonial nationalists). In

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<sup>7</sup> During the period of unprecedented growth of global capitalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the Western domination of the Philippines that had been expressed through direct colonialism was transformed into a U.S. imperialist project by way of modernization and development.

turn, the brutality, economic exploitation, and civil rights abuses that are condemned when perpetuated by foreign powers, become sanctioned as necessary components of a native nationalist agenda.<sup>8</sup> What Daisy's story illustrates is that the recuperation of violence "from within" the nation situates Filipina women precariously. In the end, it is their bodies that become the open terrain upon which both colonizers and nationalists alike ruthlessly represent themselves.

### **The Ascetic: Leonor Ledesma**

Adding another layer to representations of female embodiment in the novel, Leonor Ledesma brings new meaning to religious piety. Constantly engaging in tortuous acts of self-deprivation, her own bodily disavowal is revealing:

Upstairs, the General's wife tosses and turns on her spartan bed, a regulation army cot she once asked her husband to send over from one of the barracks. The General found her request perfectly understandable, in light of her devotion to an austere, forbidding God and her earnest struggles to earn sainthood through denial. (67)

Leonor's self-imposed asceticism seems a surrogate penitence for the violence her husband the General dispenses. Leonor emphasizes the body as locus of pain and limitation. Her body foregrounds the somatic qualifications necessary in "proving" a woman's piety. Her self-afflicted and penitential suffering is a veiled form of action. She is both world fleeing and world serving. Leonor's religious asceticism, her constant prayer and masochism seeks to expiate the General's perversities. Leonor Ledesma's bodily disavowal seeks to compensate for other female bodily violations (that of Daisy for example). The General is the only beneficiary in such an equation. She will suffer for his sins, and she does so locked in her coffin-like room, "waiting for the ceiling to fall away and seal her away forever." (70)

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<sup>8</sup> Under Ferdinand Marcos' martial-law dictatorship, torture became a significant instrument of state power. Alfred W. McCoy's book entitled *Closer Than Brothers: Manhood at the Philippine Military Academy* provides an important analysis of the *theatricality* of Filipino "salvaging" and the phenomenology of torture (Chapter 6, p. 191): "The torture cell was a play within a larger play. Inside the safe house, Filipino interrogators acted out their script before the victim, their audience of one. If the plot, through twists and turns, ended with the victim's death, then the interrogators discarded the mangled remains in a public place, a roadside or field, to be seen by passersby. Such displays, called 'salvaging' in Filipino-English, became the larger play that made the road or plaza, indeed all public space, a proscenium of terror. Seeing the marks on the victim's body, or simply hearing of them, Filipinos could read, in an instant, the entire script of the smaller play that had been acted out inside the cell."

Leonor's self-privation simultaneously blinds her and relieves her of her spouse's failings (Lee 98). Her characterization is complicated by the fact that on the one hand she is ignorant of the details of her husband's existence. Leonor Bautista was forced into this marriage with the General by her elderly parents. After much initial resistance and the intervention of her parish priest, Leonor Bautista succumbed and married the General. She found life with the much-decorated war hero undemanding and rather tranquil, except for the strangers frequently trooping in and out of her house. She is not expected to accompany the General to social functions he attends; for this she is eternally grateful. The General seems to want nothing from her at all after their marriage. Leonor is in the dark regarding her husband's violent exploits; she has no real understanding of the identity of the strangers who frequent her house. Her marriage is a fortress or prison, where she is simultaneously protected and trapped. And if her own room is more like a coffin, she constantly conflates death with heaven:

She lies in the suffocating dark, waiting for the ceiling to fall and seal her away forever. She imagines that being smothered might be a sweet death; she waits for this death to claim her every night. The yearning for a sudden, painless death is her most selfish desire, her greatest sin. Father Manuel has warned her about this many times, in confession. Female escape in this configuration emerges as grave sin. (68)

Leonor's asceticism is a gothic somatic display of women's social responsibility. Leonor must make her body impenetrable through militant chastity, self-entombment, spiritual exile, and self-imposed clausturation. She atones for Ledesma's fall by enclosing her body in her tiny coffin-like cell. Leonor's body is in turn an instrument of salvation for national history. She atones for the wounds afflicted by her husband. She turns inward to heal the fissures of the corrupted self. But ironically, that "corrupted self" takes on the spiritual/symbolic responsibility for the violence that is reaped on women in general. Her battle against evil as internal struggle becomes a struggle against women's fate. One female bodily violation (Leonor's self-mortification) pays for another (Daisy's rape). Leonor's body is a barren attempt at functioning as a receptacle, exorcising corruption in an act of self-sacrifice.

### **The Female Grotesque: Baby Alacran**

Hagedorn's novel continues to explore the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity, as it considers constraints of female embodiment. Baby Alacran's story suggests

an ambivalent redeployment of taboos around the female body as grotesque and as unruly. Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal work on the carnivalesque and the grotesque body offers suggestive commentary on Hagedorn's writing of Baby Alacran. Bakhtin's discussion of the discourse of carnival moves the issues of bodily exposure and containment, abjection and marginality, and parody and excess, toward a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity. With the carnivalesque as a hermeneutic model, Baby can be read as pivotal to *Dogeaters'* inquiry into the politics of representation. As a model for transformation and counterproduction, carnival refuses to surrender to the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class. In this sense, carnival can be seen above all as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal. The characters of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. As Mary Russo notes, "It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation." (Russo 325) In *Dogeaters*, Baby Alacran is the novel's grotesque body.

Baby is the daughter of the richest and most powerful man in the Philippines, Severo Alacran, and his beautiful and heartless wife, Isabel. The Alacrans are at a loss to understand how their own child could be so awkward, sickly, and homely. They show little feeling or concern for their Baby, who ends up being a source of embarrassment for them:

Baby hangs her head in shame. She has been repeatedly reminded that she is not blessed with her mother's presence and feline allure. She is unbearably shy, soft, plump, short like her father, without any hard edges. Her complexion is marred by tiny patches of acne. Her breasts are flat, her waist narrow, her hips much too wide and out of proportion to the rest of her. Her legs are thick and muscular—"peasants legs," her mother calls them—. (25)

Baby has always suffered from physical ailments. Mysterious and undiagnosed, her ailments come to define her very existence. Her childhood is essentially an extended convalescence. Her body is the site of unchecked excess: from profuse and unnatural sweating, to constant eruptive skin rashes from which she can never recover. This is the source of the family's greatest shame. Her body becomes the family's repressed secret as she spends most of her childhood in hidden seclusion, with only the servants to change her pus-laden dressings. Baby's grotesque body perpetually undermines the Alacran reputation as a social stronghold. As they are at the very apex of

the privileged world of capitalist fortune and power, the domain that the Alacrans occupy is synonymous with that of realized aspirations of bourgeois individualism. But in spite of the fact that Baby is the sole heiress of the greatest fortune in the nation, she literally embodies a consistent family disgrace:

Lately, she's been forgetting to apply the men's deodorant she's forced to use. Mortified, she feels the wetness under her armpits, the sweat darkening the long sleeves of her new dress. She tries to recall if she remembered to spray herself with deodorant this morning, after taking the first of her daily showers. She bathes three times a day, sometimes four, in a frantic effort to ward off the nervous sweat that breaks out automatically in her parents' ominous presence. She is ashamed, sure her mother will make a comment any second. Her mother is impeccable; her mother never sweats. (27)

Baby Alacran's body is continually characterized as the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of excessive becoming, process, and change. Her body keeps her at the fringes of society. There is nothing completed, nothing calm, stable about Baby. A doctor is hired for her constant care. He offers limited commentary on her overall condition. His final condemnation:

It could dry up and vanish tomorrow. It could last a few more months. Think of your daughter's body as a landscape, a tropical jungle whose moistness breeds this fungus, like moss on trees. (29)

Likened to the fertile, fecund, indigenous land that teems with growth, that cannot be contained and cannot be groomed, her grotesque body symbolically mirrors the nation in a new way. The tensions of centuries of colonization in the tropical archipelago erupt on the fertile terrain of her female body-become-landscape. In this context, her ultimate act of resistance is her illegitimate pregnancy. In defiance of the national and cultural codes of respectability, she negotiates a controversial shot-gun marriage, known later as "the wedding of the decade." If making a "spectacle" of oneself is a specifically feminine danger, Baby's sweet revenge is her final performance. From the veiled halls of her childhood convalescence, she appears in her grand publicized ceremony in a spectacular gown of silk and white Chantilly lace, her empire waist unable to conceal her swollen belly. She is simultaneously both decaying, deformed flesh, and the flesh of new life. The body of Baby Alacran reveals a rebelliousness echoed in a Dionysian sense of abandon and sensuality, while its fluidity and resistance to normalisation continues to constitute the "fearful Other." She is the wild card in an ordered and controllable world. She is unchecked and irreconcilable. As Baby Alacran's grotesque body resists easy classification, her existence is dangerous for the national

project—for it makes a mockery of any strict hierarchies, controls, or embodied reason that seeks universal recognition.

## Conclusion

In closing I turn to the last chapter of *Dogeaters*, entitled “Kundiman,” which translates as a traditional Tagalog love song. The genre of the kundiman actually arose under Spanish colonial censorship. As Felipe Padilla de Leon notes, the form derived its force from its “covert and forbidden expression of love for the motherland, translated into the acceptable vocabulary of hopeless love for a woman” (Lardizabal and Legrado 160).<sup>9</sup> This chapter is Hagedorn’s final love song, a poetic tribute to motherland and memory. She writes:

*Our Mother, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done. Thy will not be done. Hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom never came. You who have defiled, belittled, and diminished. Our Blessed Virgin Mary and Most Precious Blood, menstrual, ephemeral, carnal, eternal. Rosa Mystica, Black Virgin of Rhinestone and Velvet Mystery, Madonna of Volcanoes and Violence, your eye burns through the palm of my outstretched hand. . . .*

*. . . . Our Mother, who art in heaven, forgive us our sins. Our Lady of Most Precious Blood, Wild Dogs, Hyenas, Jackals, Coyotes, and Wolves, Our Lady of Panthers and Jaguars, Our Lady of Cobras, Mournful Lizards, Lost Souls, and radio Melodramas, give us this day. . . .*

*. . . . Ave Maria, mother of revenge. The Lord was never with you. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed are the fruits of thy womb: guavas, mangos, santol, mangosteen, durian. Now and Forever, world without end. Now and Forever. (250-251)*

Impassioned ambivalence towards the Philippines consummates this final tribute. From what Jessica Hagedorn herself terms the “exile within” come the tangled languages and lineages that inform the entire novel, a “torrid zone” of mingled memories and dreams (Hagedorn, “Homesick” 186-187). Is this final homage in *Dogeaters* a traditional love song, a prayer, a curse, an elegy to nation? With a sense of a profound longing, this closing “Kundiman” expresses passionate and unfulfilled yearning for the lost and the seemingly

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<sup>9</sup> Padilla de Leon further writes: “. . . the kundiman came into popular existence during the later part of the Spanish regime. It is, by far, the most popular and the most typical of all Philippine songs. Its theme generally portrays the faithful and true, but often hopeless and forlorn pleading of a sincere and devoted lover. The practice of Spanish colonizers of forbidding the natives to utter anything that pertained to nationalism is, perhaps, the reason for the decidedly passionate and ardent emotional feeling contained in the kundiman, which served effectively as the best medium for expressing Filipinos’ love of country changed to romantic love” (Lardizabal and Legrado 160).

unattainable. In this explosive re-writing of the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary”, the novel forges a hybrid, sacro-political interrogation of how history is determined. The kundiman transforms these pious litanies into an anguished love song to a once colonized motherland. With this final invocation (a gesture to the sacred as well as the profane) the many stranded and snarled histories of the novel are exposed at once as personal and political, individual and collective, polyglot and dissonant. Hagedorn’s kundiman weaves varying strains of iconography and imagery, reverent and at the same moment irreverent of the symbols appropriated. What results is an insistence on the lack of cohesion in any civilizing mission, whether it be the church, state, colonial legacy, or nationalist historiography. What endures is effervescence—a bubbling over, an evaporation of image and idea. The effervescing of mysterious things unordered, unregulated, and unconquered.

This *Ave Maria*, curse, love song, and lament opens a hybrid heterogeneous space for resistance to multiple levels of colonial authority, simultaneously subverting what Homi Bhabha calls “the Word of God and Man-Christianity and the English language.” As he puts it, “Blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular. ...It is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation” (Bhabha 225). With “eyes...veiled and clouded by tears,” the “Madonna of Volcanoes and Violence” presides over a “damn history” that even Rio will never resolve or “get straight” (Hagedorn, “Homesick” 248-249). The fruits of Our Mother’s womb compromise a literal catalog of natural abundance—the fruits ever ripe for perpetual plucking. Closing with an echo instead of an “amen,” the prayer and the novel remain open-ended. *Blessed art thou among women, and blessed are the fruits of thy womb: guavas, mangoes, santol, mangosteen, durian. Now and forever. World without end. Now and forever* (251). It is this echo of open-endedness, of indeterminacy, that may be read ultimately as an offering to the power of growth, rehabilitation, regeneration, and interpretive possibilities. *Dogeaters*’ final offering is equivocal, multivocal, blasphemous, and prayerful. Hagedorn suggests there is no singular place of “return” to a place of female/national wholeness, assuming that such a utopian site or subjective state ever existed in the first place (Lee 103). Both the novel’s complex treatment of female embodiment and this closing kundiman undermine the assumption that such a utopian site ever existed. Rather, *Dogeaters* reveals the extent to which nationalism is a kind of theatrical performance of invented community. Ultimately, *Dogeaters* seems to focus on the salient force of nationalism as a

scopic politics, as a politics of certain visibility which subjects women in particular to an especially vigilant and violent discipline.

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