

Artistic creativity, form, and fictional experimentation in Filipina American fiction.

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Stories by Filipina American women often use metaphors of art and creativity as a language in their own right, in a manner that not only disrupts established generic forms, but that actually engenders specific Filipina American forms. In this essay I will explore three contemporary Filipina American writers' experimentation with different modes of narrative signification. Each of these examples demonstrates the manner in which artistic creativity and alternative modes of discourse by women come to be validated as a form of cultural and personal expression in a uniquely Filipina American way. Each writer blends feminist and/or historical writing with experimental and transformative modes of narration, which are themselves sources of creative and oppositional energy.

M. **Evelina Galang's** short stories often make use of images of artistic creativity, as well as other forms of non-verbal communication, to make a whole lexicon of signification, one that sometimes runs counter to verbal understanding. In the story "Figures," which appears in her 1996 collection, *Her Wild American Self*, **Galang** pits the language of color against the verbal mis-communications that occur between the central protagonist, Ana, and her fiance, Harold. The story tracks the development of the couple's relationship from fledgling lovers to married-couple-to-be, and simultaneously traces Ana's growing unease with the gradual restrictions that her new life inflicts upon her creative existence as a portrait artist. When her attempts to communicate her discomfort to her fiance fail, she almost unconsciously begins to speak to him in the language of paint colors. "Cobalt. Cobalt blue, cobalt green, cobalt violet. Purple" (103), which metaphorically articulate her distress to both reader and character, where verbal understanding fails. The short story's movement through the color spectrum becomes the very means by which the narrative itself progresses.

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's novel, *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* (1991), makes use of a tradition of "talking-story" as a structuring device. "Talking story," as its name suggests, is a female practice of telling stories, often from one generation to the next. In relation to Maxine Hong Kingston's use of this device in *The Woman Warrior*, King-Kok Cheung notes: "[the] recourse to talk-story--which blurs the distinction between straight facts and pure fiction--accomplishes two key objectives: to reclaim a past and, more decisively, to envision a different future" (120). Here, Brainard uses this method as a means of imagining both different kinds of writing and the experiences that writing communicates. Brainard's historical novel, set during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, sharply contrasts the horrors of guerrilla warfare and the hardships of itinerant existence with the quasi-dreamworld inhabited by the ancient cook, Laydan, as it is communicated via "talk-story" to the young protagonist, nine-year-old Yvonne. In this manner, Laydan's "talk-story" functions as both an escape from reality and also offers the young girl stories to live by. "Talk-story" becomes almost a counter-narrative as it cuts across the historical narrative with more whimsical and optimistic versions of life experience at strategic moments in the text.

Jessica Hagedorn draws upon gossip as a central resource, in her depiction of Filipino society during the Marcos regime, in her well-known novel, *Dogeaters* (1991). Although Hagedorn's novel tells the stories of a whole range of characters, representing the class spectrum of society in the Philippines, she favors the stories of the disenfranchised fringes. Hagedorn experiments with the form and function of her novel through explorations of different ways of representing her characters. She juxtaposes the discourses of history with popular genres like radio melodramas and movies, and the discursive form of gossip, in order to destabilize established generic and discursive registers. In Hagedorn's writing, *tsismis* (Tagalog for "gossip," sometimes spelled *chismis*), in its very leakiness as an uncircumscribed narrative (it is described in *Dogeaters* as a form that "ebbs and flows," 101), and as a narrative that is often exaggerated, comes to typify the discursive transgression of much Asian American women's writing. Gossip in the text is ultimately posited as a valid genderlect and is pitted against official versions of events. In this

sense, rumor, gossip, dreams, and fictional forms like film, become the central medium of understanding in the novel, and Hagedorn blends together what has been called "reel/real life."
(1)

The Art of Silence/Speaking Creatively/Re-visiting History

These three Filipina writers intersect with a wider Asian American women writers' tradition of foregrounding the artistic and creative as metaphor. R. A. Sasaki's short story, "The Loom" (in which the central character "speaks" through her knitting), Hisaye Yamamoto's famous short story "Seventeen Syllables" (in which the female protagonist articulates herself via her composition of haiku), and the edited collection *The Forbidden Stitch*, to name but three examples, all posit creativity as a female language of resistance and self-validation. (2) King-Kok Cheung has written of women's narratives:

Women's writing is said to be characterized by silence, both as a theme and as a method. As a theme, silence speaks for the many barriers to female expression. [...] The art of silence, on the other hand, covers various "strategies of reticence"--irony, hedging, coded language, muted plots--used by women writers to tell the forbidden and name the unspeakable. (4)

In the case of the narratives under scrutiny in this article, silence is less a symptom of stifled self-expression or creativity, or even of passivity, and more a form of resistance in its own right. This is an acquired art, and one that co-exists with other forms of communication. For Ana Sandoval, the character in **Galang's** "Figures," speech is simply not the medium through which she chooses to connect with others. In both *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* and *Dogeaters*, the question is not of whether to enunciate, but in what language this enunciation should take place. For each writer, language is after all a bicultural idiom. Furthermore, the form of this communication is central: in *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, for instance, "talk-story" becomes a subversive genderlect that cuts across, through, and below, competing versions of past and present, as well as providing a lexicon in which to envision a future. As such, "talk-story" in Brainard's novel becomes an idiom of female strength and hope.

These three contemporary Filipina American writers also continue to feel an acute burden of historical representation: "They puncture received historical, legal, or cultural 'verities,' [...] the three writers reinvent the past [...] by decentering, disseminating, and interrogating authority" (Cheung 170). What King-Kok Cheung has to say here about Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, and Hisaye Yamamoto is equally true of Brainard, Hagedorn, and **Galang**. Filipino critics and writers N.V.M. Gonzalez and Oscar Campomanes and have noted that "many Filipino writers characteristically use and manifest various modes of ambivalence [...] as sources of creative and oppositional energy" (76), such as subversive language, form and genre, and thematics such as displacement. Since the majority of fiction published in the US by Filipino writers to date has emerged out of the period of so-called "neo-colonial dependency" (1946 onwards), it is clear that many of these writers may start from an oppositional standpoint to protest against what Cecilia Manguerra Brainard has called the "Americanization of Filipino culture" (qtd. Gonzalez and Campomanes 65). To be sure, Brainard and Hagedorn, and to a lesser extent, **Galang**, explore the convergences between US and Filipino culture, society, and politics, and especially the on-going vestigial effects of US influence in the Philippines.

But it is evident too that the poetics and politics of Brainard, Hagedorn, and **Galang** are equally driven by a feminist credo. As Gonzalez and Campomanes have claimed, in their delineation of Filipino American literature, these three writers' "'feminist' historical fiction align[s] U.S. Filipino writing with the transformative publishing currents signified by U.S. minority writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan" (76). That is to say, as Campomanes notes, although "it is [...] Filipina writers who recognize that the relationship to the inherited past and its cultural legacy has been rendered problematic by the violent interference of colonial and imperial history" (70), what is also at stake is the structural, entrenched features of gendered oppression.

There is also something of a generational gap at work here. Both *When the Rainbow Goddess*

Wept and Dogeaters were published in 1991, and so were written in the wake of the collapse of the Marcos regime. Both could be described as historical novels, and are oriented towards a re-examination of Filipino history and culture. Of this era, Susan Evangelista writes:

Filipino-American consciousness, as an American-based ethnic movement, was just beginning to blossom [...] when martial law was declared in the Philippines by the then-President Marcos and a small group of political exiles, intellectuals, and Philippine-based writers gathered in San Francisco. [...] These exiles had a great deal of political understanding and sophistication and [...] they refocused attention on the internal politics and living situation in the Philippines. The work of the women writers in this post-1972 era is most interesting. (46)

In contrast, although **Evelina Galang** has asserted her determination to "use literature to document the Filipino voice and experience," her work could be said to primarily be concerned with the conflicting cultural pressures that are exerted upon the Filipina American woman in the United States. (3)

M. **Evelina Galang's** Her Wild American Self: "Figures"

"Figures" opens with an invitation to imagine and feel, rather than speak, as the artist Ana Sandoval meditates upon her practice:

Ana Sandoval closed her eyes and imagined the bodyscape, round and full, dimpled and ripe. She liked creating delicious shapes, circular, free-flowing shapes. She had designed a series of nudes--fat men, newborns, tarts and naked cats, bowls of exposed fruit. None of the paintings looked like her subjects. Even a vase full of daffodils looked nothing like the original. Ana distorted the petals so that they'd hang full-lipped, so that the leaves on the window sills would bleed earth green. (87)

The story is poised on an axis of signification around which alternate meanings of the word "figure" rotate, both as noun and as verb: 1) external form and shape; 2) a person shown in distinct outline although not identified; 3) appearance and representation of human form in drawing; 4) image or likeness; 5) a numerical symbol; 6) to appear or be mentioned; 7) to imagine or picture mentally; 8) to symbolize or represent. These many meanings refract around the story as if in a hall of mirrors, and in so doing, establish a matrix of connection: woman-body-art. At the outset, the central female character, an artist called Ana, experiences difficulty in drawing herself, in creating her self-portrait, precisely because she only "figures" in the mirror:

She stood on a platform in the middle of the studio, completely naked. Three giant mirrors lay flat against a wall, reflecting her easel, a white canvas, an old-fashioned bathtub with four brass legs, and Ana. She wanted to define the shape of her body, but all she could see was a gathering of cellulite at the upper reaches of her thighs. (87)

Two levels of expression operate in the narrative. The everyday world of verbal communication is eschewed by Ana, who prefers to inhabit a quasi-silent internal world. She expresses herself via the creative avenue of art, so while her daily verbal utterances may be muted, she "speaks" through the far-from-muted vividness of her portraits. Ana's response to unwelcome external pressure and interruption is always to become quiet, while simultaneously silently responding in the lexicon of color. For instance, when Ana's friend Hildy telephones her to persuade Ana to meet someone for a date, Ana responds with blocks of color: "Ana ran her hands up and down the cords of her phone, twisted her fingers in the telephone wires. Indigo, cobalt, vermilion, she thought to herself. Hildy was like her mother, only younger. They were always trying to get her married off. Domesticated" (88).

This is the vocabulary of resistance and evasion. Yet it is more than simply silent protest to the

unwanted interference of a friend, though. Paint color is used in "Figures" as a hyper-sensory language of communication, which is at once sensual, sexual, and emotive. Ana's chromatic world is pitted against the dull monochrome of conventionality--marriage, domestication, the everyday nine-to-five--and becomes the very source of energy, creativity and expressiveness both for Ana as character and the central leitmotif of the story. Throughout the story, Ana's emotions are tracked through the paint colors that she contemplates: "If her parents knew about their relationship, they'd try to break them apart. Lamp black, mars black, umber" (94).

As Ana develops a relationship with Harold, so they begin to communicate through the color spectrum. Harold woos Ana not with words, but with paint colors: "He started bringing her presents--art supplies. Brushes, oils. He gave her a different tube of paint every week--cerulean blue, thalo green, viridian. Ana enjoyed Harold's company, but his compliments made her feel both flattered and uncomfortable" (92). While Harold's words are received with ambivalence, the gift of color is accepted unconditionally. Of his compliments, though, Ana says that "she wasn't sure how to react" (93). Harold's physical gestures gradually escalate, until they become full-blown sexual contact, which is communicated in the story via vivid and prismatic description:

And when two weeks later, at the end of the night, Harold leaned to kiss her, not goodnight, but hello, she dissolved slowly, sinking down, letting her posture go, letting everything go. She let herself breathe and imagined herself in one of those British films where the woman, who has been holding back, has suddenly been swept from some French painter's pallet onto his oatmeal canvas. That night was a drapery of colors, prussian blues, thalo green, manganese, peppered with a rose madder that somehow deepened into a rich spray of alizarin crimsons, cadmium reds and flashes of cobalt. She feared she was falling in love. (93)

As Harold and Ana's relationship progresses, she begins to feel increasingly stifled, and that her individuality is disappearing--in short, that she figures distinctly as an individual less and less. With these sentiments, her attempts to paint her self-portrait, which involves a self-consciousness of her own distinct image, becomes ever more difficult, as this section shows:

Since Harold had moved in, she was finding it harder to get the shapes the way she wanted them. She couldn't get her arms to flow from her shoulders into her torso and down around her hips and she couldn't picture the shape of her belly. She'd stare into the mirror for hours and then at the canvas--the lines would not move with her hands--it was as if the brush had a mind of its own. (96)

As Ana's distinctiveness how she figures in her relationship, in her world, and in the mirror to herself--blurs, she cannot represent--that is, figure--her likeness upon the canvas before her. Gradually, her subjectivity and her creativity become increasingly interdependent as they begin to dissolve. This is also inextricably linked to her identity as a woman since it is through her very gendered interaction with Harold, her heterosexual relationship, that her female subjectivity comes under threat.

"To figure" is a phrase of embodiment too, and this also underscores the importance of bodily identity in **Galang's** story. Women's identity is frequently reduced to bodily appearance: one's figure becomes metonymic of female sexual attractiveness, as physical appearance is an index of assuredness and achievement within a male sexual economy:

Often she'd watch the women shopping at Bloomingdale's or Saks Fifth Avenue and their exaggerated features--the heightened arches of penciled-in eyebrows or the slope of a reconstructed nose. She studies the round butts and the carrot-shaped thighs of suburban women as they walked away from her and her basket of perfume samples. She'd remember these bodies and she'd render them at home--watermelon bodies, pear-shaped faces, luscious rose-petal lips. (96)

As Ana's confidence in her own relationship, and through it, her identity as a woman, wavers, so she increasingly begins to copy, both draw and emulate, the figures of women around her who seem to have the security of womanliness that she seems to feel that she lacks.

A feature of Ana's obliterating subjectivity is the loss of her distinctiveness as she appears to herself in reflection (her ability to figure). The women she sees in the shops, in contrast, figure in an exaggerated and artificial way. As the narrative progresses, Ana and Harold's relationship continues to disintegrate until Ana attends a "body in art convention" in New York. This proves a pivotal moment: as Ana surveys the many free-form bodies figured at the exhibition, she becomes convinced of her own shortcomings as an artist. Upon her return to her life with Harold, she finds herself almost unable to paint. Harold tries unsuccessfully to resurrect the previous intimacy of their relationship through rekindling their courtship through color: "He brought her a bouquet of paint brushes, a giant-sized canvas--white as a snow storm in Alaska--a dozen boxes of European chocolate and a thousand promises" (106).

While Ana has been unable to draw herself as she begins to see things in their true colors, Harold has conversely become colorblind: he is no longer able to present to her the gift of hue, only the blank and hollow monochrome of an empty canvas. Ana realizes simultaneously that she needs to reject both marriage to Harold and her adherence to form and outline in her painting. She says to him that "I'm starting to think that my voluptuous bodies are what makes my paintings" (106), and this proves to be both a catalytic and cathartic moment. The story ends with both lying together sprawled on a bed, as "Figures, waiting to be arranged" (107).

In the collection *Her Wild American Self*, M. **Evelina Galang** uses the short story "Figures" as a comment upon her own feminist textual practice. "Figures" gestures towards a feminist creative poetics since **Galang's** very privileging of the figurative--the metaphorical, the representational, the emblematic in the story braids so tightly with her emphasis upon female expression and survival, which is the organizing theme of the collected stories. In the story "Figures" the figurative actually becomes the feminine, which in turn is often allied with feminist resistance. Through "Figures," **Galang** enacts several feminist maneuvers: she politicizes subjectivity; she foregrounds sexual difference; she recycles and revises stereotypes of women as homemakers (since in "Figures" it is Ana who resists domestication and Harold's homemaking efforts (4)); she largely avoids the representation of women's identity as relational to significant others (Ana, for instance, clearly fares best alone (5)); her characters assert personal and social agency (6); and finally she depicts creative practice as a valid and effective form of oppositional (that is, anti-patriarchal) endeavor. (7)

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*: "Talk-Story"

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard has said of her work that she is especially concerned with "the concept of 'writing voice.'" (8) *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* both writes individual voice and reconstructs collective history. It is a historical novel set during Japan's occupation of the Philippines between 1941 and 1945. The story is narrated by a nine-year-old child, Yvonne Macaraig. She describes how her family--her engineer-turned-guerillero father, her cousin Esperanza, her mother, family friend Nida, and the ancient family cook Laydan--are forced to flee from the fictional city of Ubec (Cebu) into the jungle to escape the Japanese. Along the way, Yvonne is mercilessly introduced to the full horrors of warfare and encounters scenes of raw and brutal violence: family friend Doc Menez's family are murdered as they sleep, Nida is forced to offer her body to the Japanese for sex, and the hardships of itinerancy cause her mother to miscarry Yvonne's baby sibling.

The antidote for this induction into violence comes from an unexpected source. Yvonne's spirit takes refuge in the Philippine folktales and epic stories related to her by Laydan. These are narratives of resistance, of courage and resilience in the face of overwhelming odds, of the accomplishment of marvelous feats in the face of adversity, and blend mythic and magical elements in quasi-fairy tale fashion. They are more than simply fables to bolster a young girl's resolve. Brainard first published the novel under the title *Song of Yvonne*, and it is evident that as much as it is about a national struggle of war, this is an individual girl's coming-of-age story, and

is intimately bound up with Yvonne's emerging voice.

Although *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* is written in English, it renders the cadences of Filipino dialects and pays homage to a Filipino tradition of orality through the narratives that are relayed to the young girl:

The epic songs impart a sense of roots, a sense of respect, a sense of realization that these people have been there for centuries and centuries and centuries, long before the documented histories. This was their way of passing on their history and their culture. And it feels good--especially coming from a place like the Philippines that has been colonized by the Spaniards and then followed by the Americans--to realize that there were rich cultures that had been here centuries before. (Hubler 4) (9)

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard formally studied the history of Filipino oral epic in preparation for writing the novel, firstly by taking anthropological transliterations of epic stories and converting them into children's tales, then by using them as mythic material for Laydan's fables in the novel. For Brainard, these epics are actually the transmitters of Filipino culture.

Since it is women who share these songs and impart these stories, the burden of transmitting culture falls to them. Laydan's stories become the medium through which the older woman teaches the younger defiance, strength of spirit, and resistance against all forms of subjugation. She tells Yvonne that she is "the epic" (215), and Yvonne asserts, "how could any person forget Laydan's wonderful stories? Her stories were part of my soul; they sustained my spirit" (123). Laydan's communication to Yvonne via therapeutic mythology and fable has its parallel in Maxine Hong Kingston's use of "talk-story" as inter-generational dialect in her 1977 novel, *The Woman Warrior*. Like Kingston's novel, *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* utilizes a child's voice and perspective to relate distinctly adult themes and subject matter, which lends a startling emotional force to the text's impact. In *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick has written that "storytelling at its best enables children to adapt, edit, and invent life stories they can live with" (98). By narrating the events of the Japanese occupation from Yvonne's perspective, Brainard engenders a powerful juxtaposition, between the adult world of war and collision, of the necessity of survival and political activity, and the compelling yet immature visionary and mythic realm of storytelling. At the same time, Yvonne's storytelling inheritance from Laydan provides the means by which she is able to rationalize and process the inexplicably violent events of her daily life in the manner suggested by Ruddick. (10)

"Talk-story" is no direct form of discourse in the text, but is tangential, coded, and often non-linear or non-objective. It is also a potentially highly subversive female language of community and inter-generational connection. In Wendy Ho's definition, "talk story" "includes women's experience and imaginative stories [which] retell traditional stories and/or invent subversive stories" (28). As Ho goes on to discuss, "talk-story" potentially offers a whole gamut of different functions: "Women's talk is social; it accesses a nuanced range of emotions, desires, and intentions. In gathering to talk-story, they console, advise, argue with, critique, delight, and support each other. These stories are vital to their bonding as women and allies and vital to the political mobilization of community" (104). This is not to say that either Laydan's or *Brave Orchid*'s "talk-story" is consistently clear, positive, or unambivalent. As *Brave Orchid* often seems to the young Kingston to offer her contradictory tales of womanhood, so Laydan's tales induct Yvonne into the unfairness and harshness of life at war. The communication that occurs between Laydan and Yvonne is also often spoken askance, away from the prying ears of the other family members. It is only after Laydan's death that Yvonne shares her "talk-story" with others and it becomes a truly communal experience.

It is significant, too, that after Laydan's death, the story-telling mantle passes to Yvonne, whose task it becomes to continue the tradition of "talk-story." By means of "talking-story" herself, Yvonne also memorializes Laydan and her legacy of strength:

I missed Laydan, her stories, her constancy, her soothing presence.

Her absence made me feel askew, like a blind person without his guide. All my life there had been Laydan. [...] She had always been there for me to observe, to follow around. And so in the silence of my imagination, I brought Laydan and her stories back to life. [...] These imaginings were the one thing that no one could ever take away from me, and I guarded them jealously. The Japanese could storm into our house and kill everybody, including me--there was nothing definite in our lives, life was riddles with uncertainties--but Laydan's beautiful stories, and her memory, would always be with me. (148-49)

At the point when Yvonne begins to continue Laydan's "talk-story" legacy, she comes of age. It is with surprise that she notes that "I remembered all of Laydan's story [...] I told it well. Laydan would have been proud of me" (97). In a parallel moment to *The Woman Warrior*, where the young Kingston begins to "talk-story" in her mother's footsteps, but simultaneously to speak in her own voice, here Yvonne realizes that "I knew someday I would have to tell still another story, and this time in my own words [...] we had all experienced a story that needed to be told, that needed never to be forgotten" (97). Significantly, soon after this point, when the war has ended, Yvonne begins to menstruate, and so symbolically also leaves the world of childhood behind.

Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*: Tsismis/Gossip and Community

Although often construed as frivolous and inconsequential, of gossip, Patricia Meyer Spacks observes:

female gossip [...] functions as a language of feeling, as a mode of personal development, as an evasion of external restriction [...] it becomes a means of discovering selfhood, of declaring the self an expressive, judging consciousness [...] gossip, "female talk," provides a mode of power, of undermining public rigidities and asserting private integrity, of discovering means of agency for women. (170)

This observation about the function of gossip is pertinent to an analysis of *Dogeaters* since Hagedorn's novel utilizes the whole gamut of discursive modes: history (Jean Mallat's *The Philippines*), movie-speak and news (Celebrity Pinoy magazine and *Girl Talk* show), slang, rumor/hearsay (*The Metro Manila Daily*), as well as gossip/tsismis. (11) The very title of the novel, "*Dogeaters*," refers to a pejorative slang-term for Filipinos. The novel is episodic, and instead of providing a continuous, developmental narrative, provides a series of vignettes in which a wide cast of characters, from the privileged to the culturally marginalized, offer individual points of view on, and snapshots of, life in the Philippines during the Marcos years. Nerissa S. Balce has noted that this lends a "dreamlike textuality" to the novel, which in turn emphasizes the themes of "illusion and reality, symbolized in artifacts such as news reports, gossip, and Hollywood movies" (54). Rocio G. Davis has also observed the centrality of soap operas, movies and dreams in *Dogeaters* and suggests that this underscores "the importance of fantasizing for the Filipinos" (123).

The whole spectrum of utterance--as anecdote, artifact, and mode of cultural exchange--is foregrounded as the central medium of communication and understanding in the text, both between characters, and between text and reader. I want to suggest that of these epistemological forms, gossip/tsismis assumes a central significance. (12) Indeed, the character Pucha describes it as "the center of our lives" (66). The novel has no central plot; rather it presents a range of characters that are affected to varying degrees by the corruptions of the Marcos regime, in both positive and negative ways. Some, predominantly the securely wealthy, are deeply invested in maintaining the Marcos regime; others like the poor young prostitute Joey Sands, simply suffer at its hands; still others, the opposition leaders, plot to bring about its demise. Although there is no central character, the well-to-do young woman Rio Gonzaga is often identified by critics as a unifying presence; it is from her circle of friends, family, and acquaintances that the intrigues and tsismis/gossip tend to emanate.

Tsismis has several functions in the text. In the quotation opening this section, Spacks notes that gossip can serve both a social purpose as a mode of power that can challenge public or "official" assumptions or opinions, and also can provide an individual or private means of affirming subjectivity. In this sense, it has "special value as a resource for the oppressed or dispossessed," insofar as it may provide a "language for an alternative culture" (Spacks 15, 46). It is also a mode of interpretation, which can penetrate the boundaries of authority. In *Dogeaters*, tsismis is almost always engaged in by women, and it becomes a means of connection within the female community; in fact, it could even be said to create the female community. As one female character invitingly says to another: "sit down let's make tsismis" (55). Gossip as a discursive practice is traditionally--and often stereotypically--associated with women. Rather than denigrate it as such, as often occurs, I want to suggest that gossip/tsismis in *Dogeaters* is in fact a valid and important gendered discourse, with a whole range of subversive and creative possibilities. Rachel M. Brownstein notes that "gossip, like novels, is a way of turning life into story. Good gossip approximates art" (7).

Gossip/tsismis is thus an art form, an intimate, oral tradition that embodies the fictional and creative; to participate in it is to reflect upon ourselves and others, to make sense of our world, to offer a creative vision of the universe, to understand and interpret the past and present events of our existences. In this sense it bears many similarities to talk-story. In *Dogeaters*, it is only the female characters, notably Rio and her cousin Pucha, and their mothers, who participate in gossip about leading political and cultural figures in Manila. It becomes a counter-narrative, and spreads news faster than any other form of communication, as the character Daisy Avila observes: "Tsismis quickly circulates in Manila" (107). Men, even powerful ones, do not--indeed cannot--participate. Even the powerful character General Ledesma laments that "tsismis [...] this country thrives on misinformation" (175). Through this, Hagedorn actually effects a reversal of plot emphasis. Although gossip, the spread of movie news, and activities such as the Manila Film Festival or the beauty contest would normally become sub-plot in a novel, subordinated to the primary narrative concern with all things politic, here they are the primary focus, set against the textual background noise of political maneuvering and activity. Consequently, the traditional stuff of "female" plot is foregrounded over those stereotypically "male" arenas of politics, power, and general officialdom. Gossip thus becomes not just a counter-discourse, but the primary lexicon of power in the text. (13) It also becomes the connective tissue between the disparate plot elements of the narrative: what links two characters or scenarios may only be that they hear of each other via tsismis.

In her discussion of *Dogeaters*, Lisa Lowe suggests that gossip "is a discourse that interrupts and displaces official representational regimes (113). (14) What I have suggested in this essay is that Lowe's characterization of Hagedorn's novel is equally germane to an analysis of other Filipina American texts, notably Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's use of "talk-story" in *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, and the whole color-based signifying system to be found in M. **Evelina Galang's** story "Figures" in *Her Wild American Self*. In identifying a commonality of genderlect in these texts, I suggest that here we can locate the workings of a feminist Filipina American aesthetic practice; and that together these writers are formulating an interesting and experimental mode of gendered signification in their work. By utilizing the metaphors of artistic experimentation and creative discourse as resistance, each writer affirms that aesthetic experiment is always a political act. As Jessica Hagedorn has written: "the language(s) we speak are not necessarily the language(s) in which we dream" (Charlie Chan xxx). In an article for a special issue of *The Literary Review* entitled "Am Here: Contemporary Filipino Writing in English," Bino A. Realuyo heralded a "new generation of writers" engaged in promoting a "new vibrancy of language [...]" contemporary Filipino writers in both the U.S. and the Philippines are taking ownership of the English language" (299). The works by **Galang**, Brainard, and Hagedorn discussed here, in adopting and adapting forms of creative oppositional discourse, certainly attest to this new era.

Notes

(1.) See Balce's discussion of the use of the cinematic in *Dogeaters*.

(2.) The forbidden stitch was a highly complex, layered knot-stitch, which was so hard to

embroider that it frequently blinded the stitcher, and thus was forbidden. The editors of this anthology adopt the stitch as a metaphor for the challenges and artisanship of historical female Asian (American) creativity and expression. Since those who sewed it also engaged in a subversive practice, they became, in Maxine Hong Kingston's words "outlaw knot-makers," and this too is used in the anthology as an emblem of female creative expression.

(3.) See the de Jesus website.

(4.) We also see the rejection of female stereotyping in the stories "Rose Colored" and "Baby Lust."

(5.) The exception to **Galang's** eschewal of relational identity is the story "Baby Lust," where the central female character mourns a lost child after miscarriage.

(6.) The assertion of agency is especially a theme in the title story "Her Wild American Self."

(7.) **Galang's** feminist practice here is also color-coded. "Figures," like other stories in the collection such as "Rose Colored" and "Talk to Me, Milagros," also thematizes inter-racial issues. Although these remain relatively muted in the story, Ana and Harold's interracial relationship is clearly troubling to her parents, who note that he is neither Catholic nor Filipino, and this seems to have also affected Ana subliminally: her responses to Harold occur against a backdrop of white (canvas), which threatens to literally blank out her coloring.

(8.) See Brainard's "Introduction" (Fiction 8) for a discussion of the "elusive Filipino voice."

(9.) See Hubler for an extended exploration of Brainard's interest in Filipino orality.

(10.) Laydan's oral narratives work in the same way that the "talk-stories" of the mother-figure, Brave Orchid, function in *The Woman Warrior*. Both elderly women are able to offer the young girl in their care the benefit of their lifelong experiences as women in a patriarchal world. Each woman chooses to accomplish this by offering anecdotes, sayings, myths, and parables about life experiences as "talk-story," which each girl must then decode and interpret for herself.

(11.) Hagedorn is well-known for the experimental features of her writing, and her "multimedia" style has become a trademark of her fiction.

(12.) Furthermore, Davis notes that "In *Dogeaters* the subversion of the referentiality of fiction is deliberate [...]. The past as representation is therefore no more 'accurate' than any fiction" (125).

(13.) It is not just the case that Hagedorn simply reverses the woman=gossip (trivial) versus man=political discourse (important) binary. Neither is she guilty of essentializing gossip as female discourse since she is actually challenging the stereotype of female discourse as non-rational, less-serious, without consequence: many of the events of the text are propelled by gossip, which cuts across "official" versions of events.

(14.) Lowe's exploration of gossip in the *Dogeaters* is excellent, and has informed my own reading of the novel here. However, more than Lowe, I view the workings of gossip in the text as a particularly gendered phenomenon, and find it to be the primary form of female insurgency in the text (Lowe 117-120).

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