Can the Queer Subaltern Speak?

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In Jessica Hagedorn’s Dogeaters, the only first-person narrators in its dazzling, postmodern pastiche of radio drama, newspaper clippings, nineteenth-century anthropological investigations, tsismis,1 political intrigue, and family letters are encoded as queer. The novel intermittently follows the coming-of-age story of Rio Gonzaga, the mestiza daughter of an upper-class, politically powerful family, who begins the novel with fragmented recollections of her childhood in Manila in the 1950s.2 Joey Sands, the abandoned son of a Filipina prostitute and an African-American soldier, is a sex worker and junkie who joins the guerilla resistance movement. In addition to their queerness, Rio and Joey share two other traits in common: both have inherited a parentage embroiled in the convoluted, often humiliating, history of (neo)colonialism, and both harbor strong identification with the spectacle (radio dramas, cinema, movie stars, entertainment, etc.). In this paper, I discuss the ways in which the interconnection between (neo)colonialism

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1 Tagalog word for “gossip.”
2 Rio sets her childhood memories in the 1950s but frequently alludes to the Marcos regime, which spanned 1965-1976. For a detailed discussion regarding Dogeater’s purposefully anachronistic elements, see Werrlein, “Legacies of the ‘Innocent’ Frontier: Failed Memory and the Infantilized Filipino Expatriate in Jessica Hagedorn’s Dogeaters.”
and the spectacle\(^3\) authorizes social scripts, which oppress and silence queer subaltern subjects. Thus, the sites of struggle for queer subaltern speech that this paper seeks to represent result directly from the Philippines’ colonized history, and the assimilationist projects and martial law capitalism that ensued. In order to track this relationship, my analysis draws upon the following historical contexts: U.S. American colonization of the Philippines, particularly the paternalistic discourse that the U.S. employed in order to justify doing so, and the rhetorically analogous familial structures of power perpetuated by the Marcos regime, particularly in regards to its queer patronage.

I should briefly address why I’ve chosen to use the theoretical signifier “queer” in an article about sexual identities in a Filipino-American text. Why choose “queer” over “\textit{kabaklaan},”\(^4\) considering the concerns that non-western queerness has been problematically subsumed by westernized conceptions of gayness? Judith Butler suggests that the term “queer” should be conceptualized as purposefully indefinite:

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestations, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered \textit{from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes}. This also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. (228, italics added)

Similarly, John C. Hawley observes that queerness challenges the “[w]estern imposition of sexual epistemology,” and writes that, “this ‘queering’ of gay and lesbian studies is both a protest against a foreclosure of possible inclusion and a demand that the liberal (white, yuppified, Western) gay and lesbian establishment recognizes the ‘subalterns’ in its midst” (6). At the same time, it’s also relevant to note that “subaltern” terms such as \textit{bakla} and \textit{kabaklaan} are relevant only in particular cases of gender performativities, and aren’t

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\(^3\) I use the term “spectacle” in the Debordian sense. In \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, Marxist philosopher Debord suggests that, due to our consumer culture, social interactions are mediated by commodities, and defines the spectacle as “the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience” (7). For an article focusing specifically on the spectacle and \textit{Dog eaters}, see Mendible, “Desiring Images: Representation and Spectacle in \textit{Dog eaters}.”

\(^4\) \textit{Kabaklaan} simply means “being-bakla, bakla-ness.” Bobby Benedicto notes that bakla has become “a highly contested term that is sometimes read as a synonym for gay but is more accurately, though no less problematically, depicted as a sexual tradition that conflates homosexuality, transvestism or effeminacy, and lower-class status, and which is embodied by the caricatured figure of the \textit{parlorista}, the cross-dresser working in one of Manila’s many low-end beauty salons” (318).
necessarily useful in describing Rio or Joey (in fact, as I’ll mention again in this paper, the term *bakla* has become extremely restrictive). However, designated as a free-floating signifier, “queer” can encompass the intersecting multiplicities of performance and sexuality, which circumvents the globalized totality of the terms “gay” and “lesbian,” as well as articulates beyond the localized demarcations of *bakla*.

Spanish colonization of the islands we now know as “the Philippines” began in 1565. Although Filipinos began agitating for independence from Spanish rule three centuries later in 1896, the U.S. seized control over the islands immediately after winning the Spanish-American war in 1898. Hagedorn includes in Dogeaters an excerpt from a nonfictional speech William McKinley gave regarding the newly “orphaned” islands, in which he cites paternalistic obligation and economic gain (on the part of the U.S., of course) as the primary reasons to “keep” the Philippines. Lest the burden of self-rule hurl the Filipinos into mass chaos and anarchy, he insists that “there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them” (71).

Regarding the familial tone of American imperialist rhetoric, Debra Werrlein notes the following:

As a paternal protector, McKinley interpolated Filipinos as children in a familial metaphor that equated maturation with assimilation to a patriarchal and white American ideal . . . Paradoxically, they expected Filipinos to accept their own inherent inferiority while eventually assuming the role of “mature” pseudo-parents fit to rule like their oppressors. To become “civilized” under such logic, Filipinos were required to participate in their own erasure [. . .]. (30)

The U.S. thus demanded that Filipinos “mimic” their colonial “father” in order to prove themselves capable of autonomy. However, by benevolently “taking in” the Philippines as a ward to tutor and support, the U.S. also impeded their Filipino subjects from progressing beyond their colonized status as “little brown brothers” (Creighton Miller 167). Unsurprisingly, McKinley’s assimilation project did not “liberate” Filipinos to be more like their benevolent American overlords; it simply produced “authorized versions of otherness” (Bhabha 129).

5 Although William Howard Taft originated this now-infamous sobriquet, it became a commonplace term for Filipinos. Charles Ballantine, for instance, wrote, “Our ‘little brown brother,’ the Filipinos pure and simple, whom we are so anxious to uplift to his proper plane upon the earth, and relieve from the burden cast upon him by heredity and a few hundred years of Spanish dominion, is without doubt unreliable, untrustworthy, ignorant, vicious, immoral, and lazy . . . tricky, and, as a race more dishonest than any known race on the face of the earth” (Creighton Miller 210).
that, according to the current ideology, would always be subaltern in relation to the U.S. Empire.

In addition to being infantilized, it’s important to note that Filipino subjects were also feminized by America’s duplicitously familial rhetoric. Neferti Tadiar has written extensively about what she calls the Philippine-American romance, and observes that the relationship between the American “benefactor” and the Filipino “orphaned child” was also frequently configured as a courtship or marriage—or rather, an exploitative contract between a male customer and a prostituted woman. On that note, Viet Nguyen astutely observes that, “Dogeaters demonstrates not only that melodramatic spectacle is tied to the marketing of the commodity but also that heterosexual romance is a part of this spectacle” (134, italics added). Indeed, heterosexual romance pervades Dogeaters, transmitted by the films and soap operas that the characters obsessively consume—and, as I will discuss later, by Marcosian martial law rhetoric. Thus, the film industry and assorted media outlets function as kinds of Althusserian ideological state apparatuses that project restrictive narratives onto Filipino subjects, inculcating Filipino subjects within a simultaneously imperialistic and heterosexist ideology, which mandated their participation within the broader narrative of American (neo)colonialism.

In a conference, Hagedorn remarked that Filipinos are “brainwashed from infancy to look outside the indigenous culture for guidance and inspiration . . . taught that the label ‘Made in the U.S.A.’ meant automatic superiority, taught that Filipinos are inherently lazy, shiftless, and undependable. Our only talent, it seems, is for mimicry” (quoted in Mendible 291). In Dogeaters, it’s made clear that Filipino mimicry and western supremacy go hand-in-hand, evinced through the American products that the characters own and consume. Rio’s mother regularly goes to Chiquiting Moreno’s salon to tint her hair auburn like Rita Hayworth (82); Andres Alacran treasures his title as the “Fred Astaire of the Philippines” (35); Isabel Alacran models herself after Marlene Dietrich, Jacqueline de Ribes, and Grace Kelly (20); the winner of the talent show Tawag Ng Tanghalan is hailed as the “Barbra Streisand of the Philippines” (76); etc. It’s as though Filipinos can only exist as darker copies of white originals, or not exist.

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6 Tadiar suggests, “the hyperfeminization of certain countries signifies their condensation of the contradictory symptoms of patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism. Thus the hyperfeminization of the Philippines is a historically new phenomenon, which is not to say that this process of objectification did not exist earlier, for it might be argued that the production of the prostitute as a feminine ideal is a cultural corollary to commodity fetishism in the age of capitalism, and feminization is the process of management through investment (such was the new mode of control of the colonies in the age of imperialism)” (229).
at all—or, in Homi K. Bhabha’s words, “as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126).

Similarly, Severo Alacran, capitalist businessman extraordinaire, signifies his wealth and power by monopolizing every imitation-U.S.A company he can: TruCola (which everyone drinks); Celebrity Pinoy Weekly (which everyone reads); Mabuhay Movie Studios (which is almost as good as Hollywood); SPORTEX (the supermarket the characters flock to almost every chapter); etc. Consuming the “Made in the U.S.A” label, or its simulacra, thus signifies civilization (and therefore a right to self-rule), whereas consuming anything else—be it pinakbet or dog—signifies indigenousness, and therefore, savagery.

It’s contestable as to where the queer subaltern subject fits into this spectacle of heterosexual romance and mandatory mimicry. On the one hand, the spectacle routinely idealizes heterosexual romance and conceals the existence of queer love—or even queer people. The omnipresence of the heterosexual spectacle instructs Filipino mimicry, both in terms of the products they consume and the sexualities they are authorized to embody. However, Hagedorn suggests that the film industry nevertheless provides a space in which to challenge this narrative, specifically through Rio.

The first chapter opens with Rio and Pucha, her cousin, watching All That Heaven Allows, enthralled respectively by Gloria Talbott and Rock Hudson. Throughout the novel, Rio and Pucha pay homage to the film industry: they eagerly watch A Place in the Sun, Sabrina, Imitation of Life, I Love Lucy, and West Side Story—all of which feature a central, heterosexual love story. Pucha, “hopelessly boy-crazy,” (85) idolizes Rock Hudson and Montgomery Clift, while Rio’s obsession with cinema allows her to hint at her awakening queerness. In addition to her fascination with Gloria Talbott, Rio reveals, “I am confused by the thought of Elizabeth Taylor’s one violet eye luminous in black and white” (17). When Uncle Panchito gives her a boyish haircut and Pucha demands why Rio didn’t get a perm, Rio nervously evokes Audrey Hepburn’s short hair in Sabrina: “‘She’s beautiful,’ I stammer, blushing” (237). As Bhabha notes, colonial mimicry—with which Rio participates, to an extent—can give way to slippages, or possible sites of resistance that both imitate and deconstruct dominant ideologies (127). For instance, as Rio and Pucha “practice tongue-kissing” (236) together while pretending to be Rock Hudson and Ava Gardner/Sandra Dee, they take part in the Philippine-American romance of western cultural imperialism and idealized heterosexuality at the same time they “queer”

7 “Pinakbet,” is an indigenous meal; “Dog eaters” is a racial epithet, used both by U.S. Americans for Filipinos and by Filipinos for indigenous Filipinos (see Hagedorn 31, 33).
it. Contrasted with Pucha’s loud (if occasionally compromised) boy-craziness and resisting the expectations of Hollywood’s heterosexual master narrative, Rio’s quiet queerness emerges.

Significantly, Rio isn’t content to simply consume the spectacle; she wants to (re)construct it. “When I grow up, I’m moving to Hollywood,” (240) she announces, but quickly asserts that she has no interest in acting. To her male friend that both assumes she wants to be an actress and asks if she wants “a lesson in French-kissing” (241) when she’d much rather talk about film magazines and whether Lana Turner’s daughter really killed “that gangster” (i.e. Johnny Stompanato), Rio retorts, “I’m going to make movies, Tonyboy. Not act in them!” (241). She rejects straight advances in the same gesture that she rejects the idea of reciting a script she didn’t write. Her search for alternative narratives—underscored by her interest in the story about fourteen-year-old Cheryl Crane (who, incidentally, is also gay) murdering her movie star mother’s lover—insinuates her desire to “queer” the sanitized story/spectacle that she’s inherited, despite its underlying threat of familial violence.

Given Rio’s subversive potential, it’s understandable that Nguyen would argue that Hagedorn “appropriately places queer sexuality at the center of the revolution, a move that undermines the heterosexual romance that is an integral part of the cinematic spectacle to which Filipino audiences are subjugated” (134). The revolution in Dogeaters, he argues, is essentially a sexual revolution (138-139). That being said, it’s difficult to account for the fact that Rio’s ambivalent mimicry remains the exception rather than the rule. Far more regularly than they subvert the system, Hagedorn’s queer characters are intimately complicit with the melodramatic spectacle of heterosexual romance as avid consumers, as directors, and even as actors masquerading as straight characters on and off-screen. This problematizes Nguyen’s claim, and deserves to be explored further.

The tension between queer subjects and heterosexual scripts is starkly obvious in the film industry itself, which threatens Rio’s optimistically subversive ambitions. It’s ironic, for instance, that the actors Tito Alvarez and Nestor Noralez are queer: Tito stars opposite Lolita Luna in provocative bomba movies, whereas Nestor and his co-star Barbara Villanueva are billed as “everyone’s favorite sweethearts,” (76) and regularly perform together in Mabuhay Studios’ musicals and in radio dramas. The two maintain a heterosexual script off-screen as well, supposedly engaged to each other but still unmarried. The film industry is thus a site of profound ambivalence, a place that transmits narratives reiterating heterosexual romances and interpellates queer subjects
as straight, but also a place that fosters Rio’s queer awakening and functions as a sort of haven. The remainder of this paper will focus on tracing the fraught interchange between (hetero)sexual spectacles and queer subjects, and will explicate further on relevant details that inform the relationship between the heterosexual, parental spectacle and the nation-state’s martial law, in part to examine why Rio’s potential subversion is not, and cannot be, representative of the queer norm.

In “Patronage and Pornography: Ideology and Spectatorship in the Early Marcos Years,” Vicente Rafael outlines and contextualizes the ideology of patronage that infused the Marcos regime and, I argue, constricts queer identity in Dogeaters. He traces the ideology of patronage to the “expanding capitalist market that characterized the dynamics of postwar Philippine politics,” (295) clarifying these mechanisms in detail in the following excerpt:

Patronage implies not simply the possession of resources but, more important, the means with which to instigate the desire for and the circulation of such resources . . . While it is traditionally defined as consisting of the benign assertion that a hierarchy spanning a long period of time (usually measured along generational lines) will assure those below of benefits from above, it is conversely meant to confirm that those above are the “natural” leaders of those below. Patronage thus mystifies inequality to the point that makes it seem not only historically inevitable but also morally desirable, as it recasts power in familiar and familial terms. (296)

Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos thus fashioned themselves as the “‘Father and Mother’ of an extended Filipino family,” (282) and their glamorous, formulaic romance helped conceal the harsh realities of their oligarchic dictatorship.8 In a sense, the Marcos regime redeployed—or, mimicked—the American discourse of benevolent parentage/patronage, albeit with an insidiously nationalistic intent. Compared to the American colonizers’ patriarchal discourse of civilization and tutelage, oppression generated by the Filipino elite was more convincingly familial, and the intimacy of this power structure secured oppressed subjects to their oppressors in a claustrophobic bond of filial obligation.9

8 “Because Ferdinand and Imelda worked so closely together in getting him elected in office, they could conceive of the public sphere of politics as coextensive with their private lives. Singing together on stage, they turned their private lives into a public spectacle, staging a stylized version of their intimacy. That intimacy was formalized to a remarkable degree and made over into a staple element of the Marcos myth . . .” (Rafael 284).

9 Karnow notes, “Despite its modern trappings, it was still a feudal society dominated by an oligarchy of rich dynasties, which had evolved from one of the world’s longest continuous spans of Western imperial rule” (9).
While Nguyen suggests that the queer characters in *Dogeaters* are at the center of the revolution, it’s equally important to grapple with the fact that, both historically and in *Dogeaters*, they helped construct and existed within the center of the Marcos spectacle. In 1986, Imelda told a reporter, “that she was confident her husband would win the country’s homosexual vote because dressmakers and hairdressers had told her they were afraid they would lose their jobs under a less flamboyant administration” (Mydans np). Similarly, Hagedorn alludes to this assumed loyalty in the headline of a fictional interview with the First Lady: “*Madame reveals*: Her unabashed belief in astrology, the powers of psychic healing, Darwin’s theory of evolution, and loyalty of her homosexual constituents” (217). Due to the patronage that the elite provided queer people working within their designated industries, queer people were thus interpellated into a contractual relationship that demanded their fidelity to the “flamboyant” spectacle that also limited the social spaces they were expected to inhabit.

As a result, the spaces that queer people were allowed to exist within were just as restrictive as the heterosexual scripts they were expected to follow. Nguyen notes that *bakla* generally operate within “a social category with limited options for agency, which in the popular imagination are in the realms of sex, beautification, and aesthetic creation. *Bakla* are seen as being especially prominent in careers associated with the arts or beauty: the movies, dance, fashion design, hairdressing, and so on” (131). The majority of queer people in *Dogeaters*, even if they don’t necessarily identify as *bakla*, fall under these social categories: Chiquiting Moreno owns the most expensive beauty parlor in Manila; Jojo runs a more affordable parlor which Rio and Pucha visit weekly; Uncle Panchito is Rio’s mother’s personal dressmaker, while Salvador is her personal manicurist. In the music, entertainment, and media industries, almost every male is eventually “outed” as queer: the actors Tito Alvarez and Nestor Noralez, as discussed previously; Max Rodriguez, a leftist filmmaker; Andres Alacran, who owns CocoRico (a gay discotheque), and used to perform for Mabuhay Studios; Joey, who DJs and picks up costumers at CocoRico; and even Rock Hudson, the nonfictional American heartthrob whom Pucha (ironically enough) adores. In the sex industry, the most blatant manifestation of queer commodification and the bleakest example of queer patronage, the orphaned boys that Uncle takes in—Joey, Boy-Boy, Chito, Carding—all present as queer. Chito, later revealed to be Uncle Panchito, manages to leave the sex

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industry, but he simply alternates stereotypical occupations and became a \textit{modista}, which further attests to his limited social script. It also emphasizes the point that within the Marcos regime, the definition of “queerness” was limited to specific performativities associated with commerce and occupation, so much so that queer identities were completely dependent on Manila’s conspicuous consumption, and were only drawn into existence when in dialogue with patronage.

Despite the ambivalent benefits of queer patronage, and although the Marcos regime capitalized on the queer vote, \textit{Dogeaters} points out that ultimately, patrons do not protect their queer subjects. Chiquiting Moreno’s career operates at the pinnacle of queer patronage: he provides satisfying services to the elite, and his elite customers (particularly the First Lady) provide his salon with cultural cachet. Rio remarks, for example, “One of Pucha’s goals in life is to be able to afford going to Chiquiting Moreno’s whenever she wants . . . I can't tell what's more important to her: being invited to debutante parties or having Chiquiting lacquer her hair” (56). However, Chiquiting’s economic security doesn’t protect him from structural homophobia. As Joey narrates, at a New Year’s Eve party “[Chiquiting’s boyfriend] and Chiquiting were both beaten up by the President’s son Bambi and his goons, at that boring disco in Makati. Right there, with hundreds of people watching! . . . Chiquiting won’t discuss it to this day. The first Lady is his main client, after all” (134). The fact that the President’s son beat up Chiquiting and his boyfriend indicates that, in the unequal power structure of queer patronage, the people above have the capacity to hurt their clients just as much as they can help them—and that their clients are entirely vulnerable to their whims. Hence, queer patronage doesn’t guarantee anything other than its demand for the products of queer labor.

Consequently, and notwithstanding the fragile prestige that derives from assisting the production of the spectacle either by lacquering the First Lady’s hair, starring in heteronormative musicals, or DJing alluringly for sex tourists, queer subjects in \textit{Dogeaters} are ultimately relegated to subaltern status. Developing the concept of subalternity as a particular category of postcolonial subjects, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” asserts the ethical necessity of challenging imperialistically informed interpretations of history, and suggests that we do so by “[considering] the margins . . . of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (283). Considering the gendered implications of her analysis, Spivak goes on to
write, “both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). I submit that the same critique can be articulated against the ideological construction of sexual orientation, and that Dogeaters demonstrates that if the subaltern Filipino has no history and cannot speak due to centuries of oppression and exploitation, the queer subaltern is even more deeply in shadow.

The structural silence that queer subjects in Dogeaters confront occupies a sort of palimpsest on which the Philippines’ colonized history is also inscribed—homophobia, racism, and reductive attempts to universalize western constructs of “gayness,” are all products of (neo)colonization. It’s noticeable that elite mestizo Filipinos levy the same cultural supremacy—and outright prejudice—against queer subjects that the west levies against Filipinos in toto. Rio adores listening to Love Letters, a popular radio drama, with her Lola Narcisa and the servants, which the rest of her family frowns upon as too “common.” As Rio narrates, “According to my father, Love Letters appeals to the lowest common denominator. My Uncle Agustin’s version of the lowest common denominator is the ‘bakya crowd’” (11). Queerness is immediately correlated with Filipino identity, which brings to mind Sarita See’s assertion that “Filipinos are structurally queer to the United States” (quoted in Ponce 26). Rio goes on to note, “It’s the same reason the Gonzagas refuse to listen to Tagalog songs, or go to Tagalog movies. I don’t care about any of that” (12). According to Rio’s elite family, queerness and Filipino identity are demarcations of the lower class, and both are to be concealed. Both queer and mestiza, Rio’s personal and family history is shrouded in hazy oral traditions, colonial violence, and internalized inferiority.

Exemplifying this colonized mentality, Rio’s paternal family identifies primarily as Spanish, although they’ve all been born and raised in the Philippines. Replicating the Philippines’ bloody history of western supremacy and Southeast

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11 Ponce’s following observation is instructive: “Contesting the view of gay globalization as the Western imposition of sexual epistemology (the binary logic of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual), political strategy (coming out, public visibility, human rights discourse), and capitalist consumption (bar culture, clothing, style, tourism), scholars . . . have explored the (in) congruities between Western concepts of ‘gay’ (which encompasses same-sex attraction, identity, behavior, and, in some cases, subcultures) and Philippine notions of ‘bakla’ (which can connote effeminacy, cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, working-class positionality, and ‘real’ man sexual object choice). At stake is not merely cultural accuracy but political interpretation and possibility, particularly around the temporality of these concepts (modern gay traditional, vestigial remnants of kabaklaan) (182).
Asian suppression, Rio’s Uncle Augustin loudly claims that the Gonzagas are the
direct descendants of Columbus (238), but then destroys evidence of a Chinese
grandmother. Claiming European roots not only conceals Filipino-ness; it also
aligns the Gonzagas with the colonizers, making them complicit with, or at least
supportive of, the attempted annihilation of indigenous people. Amidst erased
genealogical records and Gonzaga family propaganda, Rio reflects, “The only
thing I know for sure is that my mother’s grandmother was the illegitimate and
beautiful offspring of a village priest,” (239) a Spanish missionary whom Lola
Narcisa refuses to talk about. The underpinning violence and intergenerational
trauma in Rio’s family history thus deconstructs the spectacle of benevolent
assimilation, and exposes the hypocrisy of the Philippine-American romance
and its project to Christianize the “savages” and sacralize the nuclear family.
While Rio can reject the colonial narratives that she’s been taught, and while
her interest in directing films indicates her desire to retell these narratives,
there isn’t a clear alternative account from which to draw—she has only
documentational gaps and guesswork.

The parentage Rio has inherited is the colonizer’s account of his own
conquest, and the anxiety of rejecting that account lies in the absence of
another—just as the anxiety of rejecting Marcosian queer patronage lies in
the absence of another form of support. The lack of perceivable pre-colonial
roots, and the need for subalterns to wrest their history from the colonizers,
relates also to Rio’s queerness. J. Neil C. Garcia notes that it’s impossible to
conduct a historical study “that wishes to delineate the various concepts of
gender and sexuality among the natives of the archipelago several centuries
back—without having to rely on Spanish accounts . . . a historian who wants
to do work on precolonial Philippines will inevitably run into the blank wall
which is colonization” (155). In Rio’s case, however, the blank wall she comes
across is gendered as well as colonized—there aren’t representations of female
queerness, other than the *tsismis* surrounding Jojo. Rio, “anxious and restless,
at home only in airports,” (247) is as homeless as she is history-less, her
nomadism reflective of her shadowed lineage at the intersection of multiple
silenced histories. Forced to come to terms with the epistemic violence that
has rendered both her Filipino-ness and her queerness almost unutterable, she
admits, “I am ashamed at having to invent my own history” (239).

Complicating the question of subaltern speech further, Spivak asks,
“With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (285). While Rio’s
queerness emerges as a conscious alternative to the heteronormative script that
surrounds her, Joey Sands “faces a problematic, queer embodiment wherein his
queerness seems to emerge only through the attractive pull of global capital” (Sohn 320). In other words, his queerness is much more obviously inscribed upon by Marcosian systems of queer commodification. From the beginning of the novel, it’s clear that Joey has internalized his existence as a commodity—he even names himself after a casino in Las Vegas, or rather, one of his American customers names him after it. Understandably, given his self-identification as a mutable commodity, Joey isn’t sure with what voice-consciousness he speaks, and frankly admits to his own unreliable narration. Although his clients are always men, for example, he discloses that, “I’m open to anything . . . If I met a rich woman, for example . . . You’d better believe I’d get it up for her, too” (44-45). However, Joey immediately retracts his suggestion that his sexuality is based on available capital: “Maybe I’m lying . . . The truth is, maybe I really like men but just won’t admit it. Shit. What’s the difference? At least Uncle’s proud of me. I know it, though he’d never say so” (45). He thus prioritizes the approval of a paternal figure—Uncle, his pimp and adoptive father—over trying to establish a sense of self-understanding. In doing so, Joey posits himself as an ever-shifting commodity fetish that docilely conforms to his customers’—and employer’s—desires.

Although Joey’s hustling might not initially seem consistent with the Marcos regime’s cultural projects or its familial rhetoric, it follows the same script of “authorized versions of otherness” (Bhabha 129) as queer hairdressers, dressmakers, actors, etc. Prostitution is central to the Philippines’ tourism economy and history of American occupation; for instance, Joey’s first lover, Neil, is an American soldier stationed in Manila, as was Joey’s father. When he meets Rainer, a German filmmaker invited to the First Lady’s international film festival, Joey’s language suggests that he knows he’s part of the Marcosian spectacle: “I’m on display. The German is watching me from the bar” (131). He then frames his actions like a screenplay:

I imagine I’m in my movie. I’m the strong young animal—I’m the panther. Or else I’m the statue of a magnificent young god in a beautiful garden. The old man with elephant skin drools. Maybe he’s God the Father, lost in paradise. He can’t get over how perfect I am; he can’t get over the perfection of his own

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12 For more information about the prevalence of prostitution during the Marcos regime, see Tadiar, “Prostituted Filipinas and the Crisis of Philippines Culture.”

13 Regarding Joey’s character, Jessica Hagedorn said in an interview, “When I was old enough and going back to the Philippines more often, it was the time of martial law when it was very repressive on the surface. At the same time there was a lot of corruption, and pornography was part of life even though you had this regime that was trying to present itself as being squeaky clean . . . I wanted to get to that underbelly because I felt like those were the people who nobody cared about and nobody thought about and they were too easily dismissed” (Diaz 2).
creation. He falls in love with me. They always do . . . I need my own movies, with their flexible endings. Otherwise, it’s just shit. (131)

Everything is meticulously formulized, so much so that it’s difficult to believe that Joey has access to “flexible endings,” any more than Rio has access to alternative narratives. Like Rio, Joey is forced to operate within epistemic (and not to mention physical) violence, to the point that his selfhood and anticipated life trajectory is shackled to capitalist transactions and exploitative scripts.

While scholars such as Viet Nguyen, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Victor Mendoza have argued whether or not Joey’s involvement with the guerilla insurrectionist movement is an affirmation of the revolutionary potential of queer sexuality, I suggest that the conversation would benefit by focusing on the ideological breakthrough Joey undergoes which enables him to undertake an alternate narrative—a flexible ending—which challenges the script of filial obligation and ultimately leads him to the opposition movement. After Joey witnesses Senator Avila’s assassination by presidential employees and attempts to take shelter in Uncle’s shack, it becomes increasingly apparent that Uncle operates as yet another cog in the Marcosian machine of queer patronage: the familial intimacy between him and Joey is a contractual bond, contingent solely on Joey’s capacity to profit his slum-business as one of his many sex workers and petty thieves. Uncle’s occupation as a sex trafficker thus depends on the same commodification (and implied docility and lack of social categorical agency) of bodies that western (neo)colonialism and Marcosian martial law both rely upon and produce.14

Joey comes to terms with the extent of the exploitation he’s suffered at the hands of Uncle once he finally realizes that his only parental figure “was more than willing to sacrifice his surrogate son” (24) to government authorities. Trapped in Uncle’s room and guarded by Uncle’s vicious dog, his traumatic past is forcibly conjured up by the graphic images plastered on the room: “A collage of pornographic centerfolds covered Uncle’s walls, making the room feel even smaller and more claustrophobic. Joey shut his eyes to close out the sprawling, leering images of painted girls and blank-eye boys . . . Joey knew he was one of them—the ominous and holy children of the streets. ‘Scintillating Sabrina and Gigi.’ ‘Boys at Play.’ ‘Bangkok Bombshells.’ ‘Lovely Tanya and Her Sister’” (203). While towards the beginning of the novel he narrates in the first-person,

14 Juliana Chang makes a similar observation: “In the same way that Uncle’s profits from Joey ultimately derive from Zenaida’s (sexual) labor, death, and burial, we can understand neocolonial elites and U.S.-based transnational corporations as profiting from the exploitation and disavowal of subaltern feminine [and queer] labor” (656). Since the “feminine labor” here means prostitution, I don’t think it would be an infringement on her argument to add “queer” to her statement.
pointedly cool and self-possessed—“I take good care of myself, I’m in control . . . I can take it or leave it, break hearts wherever I go” (45)—he succumbs to the dispossessed third-person in the process of contextualizing himself within his own history of abuse and trauma. Realizing that he hasn’t been in control over his life, and that he’s been interpolated as a commodity ever since Uncle adopted him under fatherly pretenses, Joey finally perceives queer patronage without its familial niceties—a realization metonymic of colonial “benevolence” demystified of its exploitative, violent origins.

Once Joey admits that his surrogate parent has betrayed him—and that the old man never saw him as anything other than an investment—he is immediately overwhelmed with the long-suppressed memory of his mother. Redolent of pre-colonial Filipino history, Zenaida’s death is surrounded by silence and near-mythic rumors. Joey knows nothing about her—her last name, the province she was from, her family background—and by extension, his family background—are all mysteries (42). He does not, or cannot, mourn her death until he recognizes that the “home” Uncle raised him in is built on the same unjust system of commodification that profiteered off of his mother’s sexuality before it killed her. Unlike Rio, he doesn’t need to invent his own history as much as he needs to accept what he knows. Still reeling from Uncle’s betrayal, Joey abruptly invokes his mother’s memory:

He had not said his mother’s name in years, and steeled himself against the tears welling up inside him. He was disgusted by his own sentimentality; he had never considered himself capable of self-pity, terror, or yearning for his long-deceased mother. He had always felt cheapened and humiliated by her, Zenaida, and his unknown father . . . Joey’s tears were blocked by the force of his growing rage. He knew he had to escape, somehow . . . (205)

Destroying the piles of pornography and escaping the room by stabbing Uncle’s dog to death, Joey literally pisses on the spectacle of western commerce and sacrifices the symbol of his own subalternity, a gesture of revenge and rejection targeted at the patriarch/pimp that raised him.15

It’s been mentioned before that Joey’s queerness is configured throughout the novel as negotiable, and depicted as complicit with the bourgeois decadence of the Marcos regime. When Joey leaves Manila and joins the guerrilla resistance movement in the mountains, the concept of his queerness-as-commodity is worth revisiting. On the one hand, Sohn suggests that, “the wilderness does not seem able to nurture and develop new configurations of Joey’s queer sexuality.

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15 See Ameena Meer’s interview with Jessica Hagedorn for similar ideas.
In this jungle, he moves from the highly eroticized urban center, with the relationships he shared with his johns and others, to a politically progressive, yet asexualized landscape” (332). Provocatively, Sohn goes on to ask, “Does Joey go into the closet when he enters the jungle?” (338). It's significant, however, that Joey's venture into the jungle is not instigated by his own revolutionary awakening; instead, he joins the guerrillas because his childhood friend, Boy-Boy, has connections with them, and seems to be politically savvy and involved with the revolution himself. This is an overlooked, but enlightening, detail of the novel. 16 I suggest that Joey’s introduction to the guerrilla resistance movement is an attestation of the revolutionary potential of queer solidarity rather than queerness per se, and its juxtaposition with Uncle's betrayal is a rejection of the unsubstantiated familiality of western imperialism and Marcosian queer patronage.

As children, Joey saw Boy-Boy as competition for Uncle's approval: “I was . . . a natural talent, according to [Uncle]. More daring than Boy-Boy, who was two years older than me and cried all the time . . . I was the youngest and the smartest, Uncle's favorite” (Hagedorn 43). Like Joey, Boy-Boy works in the sex industry, albeit as a shower-dancer at Manila's Studio 54. It's a job that Joey dreads even considering: “I don't want to end up a shower dancer like Boy-Boy, working nights in some shithole rubbing soap all over my body just so a bunch of fat old men can drool, turning twenty tricks after that, giving away my hard-earned profits to the goddam cops or clubowners!” (45). However, in many ways Boy-Boy embodies the concept of ambivalent mimicry, and his dehumanized status as a commodity leaves him surprising room for subverting the very system that voyeurizes him. Onstage, Boy-Boy obediently performs silent queer subalternity, going through the same dance routines every night and following the script of sexiness for his audience of other queer performers and actors. Offstage, however, Boy-Boy has both connections with fugitive revolutionaries and the cunning to get Joey, another fugitive from the government, to them safely.

It's noteworthy that Hagedorn draws parallels between Boy-Boy and Zenaida, Joey's drowned mother. As Joey mentions, “They say Zenaida's ghost still haunts that section of the river, a mournful apparition in the moonlight. Boy-Boy claims he's seen her more than once, but I don't believe him” (42). Unlike Joey's actual and surrogate parental figures, Boy-Boy is someone he can both reliably locate and trust—and as his correlation with Zenaida suggests, he represents a relationship that Joey can only form once he confronts Uncle's duplicity. Boy-Boy also occupies a similarly spectral, liminal space, as both a

16 To my knowledge, Boy-Boy's significance as a queer revolutionary has not been discussed elsewhere.
participant in Studio 54’s decadent spectacle and a member of the opposition movement that objects to the Marcos dictatorship. His revolutionary presence thus “queers” Manila’s rigidly categorized “queer norms,” maneuvering a place of resistance at the center of the spectacle. “‘Boy has things to do in the city . . . He’s needed there,’” (227) Lydia, one of the guerrillas, assures Joey. The dichotomy that Sohn attempts to draw between the city and the jungle in terms of their intrinsic revolutionary value, then, is untenable.

Due to generations of epistemic violence, subaltern queerness is impelled to reinvent and to redeploy its own narratives—just as it’s impelled to redeploy the ideological infrastructure that impedes decolonization at the same time it yields to possible subversion. As Boy-Boy urges Joey while they watch the news together just days before Joey joins the revolutionaries, we must “read between the lines” (226) of the spectacle’s official discourse in order to hear queer subaltern speech. By reading between the lines of queer patronage, Hollywood, nationalistic rhetoric, and filial duty, Rio, Joey, and Boy-Boy “queer” the scripts they’re meant to recite, establishing solidarity with the margins and liminalities of society while maintaining an ambivalent relationship with the spectacle. Thus, Hagedorn also “queers” the concept of revolution, revealing its presence in problematic, in-between spaces and in guerrilla camps alike, inviting us to “consider the margins.” Mendoza suggests that, “Dogeaters perhaps ventures toward something of a decolonization of the term queer itself” (837). Regarding what decolonized queerness actually looks like, however, the text provides only flexible endings.
Works Cited


