

Eric L. Martinsen

Reading Torture and Tortured Readings in Barthelme's "Indian Uprising" and Hagedorn's
Dogeaters

Donald Barthelme's 1968 short story "The Indian Uprising" and Jessica Hagedorn's 1990 transnational novel *Dogeaters* each depict scenes of brutal torture within fragmented, multivocal texts that foreground the hermeneutical process. Each text also forces its readers to acknowledge their role in shaping the text's meaning, holding together disparate and contradictory elements in an effort to make sense of these text-worlds. My paper examines how representations of torture in postmodern texts can be read as allegories of globalization as they play out on the individual level the anxieties and power relations evident in a globalized economy. One dimension of these uncertainties is the crisis of interpretation that often results from the relativizing of culture and tradition in an increasingly interwoven world. Cultural practices that once appeared "natural" are now acknowledged as constructed, and so, cultural systems for making meaning no longer carry the force of absolutism. As a radical challenge to the ideal of universal human rights, torture represents one response to this global crisis of interpretation. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry writes, "In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power" (18). In cultural homogenization, economic exploitation and torture, one worldview is forcibly inscribed upon another, and human pain is transformed into such a "fiction of power." The fiction of Barthelme and Hagedorn figures the motivation to torture as a frustrated desire to understand, or to read, the other. However, at the same time, it is a desperate drive to inscribe the other into a meaning system that is knowable by the dominant culture, and readers are implicated in this translation of power through their attempts to reclaim the otherness of these postmodern texts.