

## Jessica Hagedorn (1949 - )

Kirsten Twelbeck

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# Jessica Hagedorn

(1949 - )

Kirsten Twelbeck  
*University of Hanover*

**BOOKS:** *Four Young Women: Poems*, by Hagedorn, Alice Karle, Barbara Szerlip, and Carol Tinker, edited by Kenneth Rexroth (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973);

*Dangerous Music* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1975);

*Pet Food & Tropical Apparitions* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981);

*Dogeaters* (New York: Pantheon, 1990);

*Two Stories* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1992);

*Danger and Beauty* (New York: Penguin, 1993; enlarged edition, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002);

*The Gangster of Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996);

*Dogeaters: A Play about the Philippines (Adapted from the Novel)* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003);

*Dream Jungle* (New York: Viking, 2003).

**PLAY PRODUCTIONS:** *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon*, by Hagedorn, Ntozake Shange, and Thulani Davis, New York, Public Theater, 1978;

*Mango Tango*, New York, Public Theater, 1978;

*Tenement Lover: no palm trees/in new york city*, 1981;

*TeenyTown*, New York, Franklin Furnace, February 1988;

*Holy Food*, 1988;

*Airport Music*, by Hagedorn and Han Ong, New York, Public Theater, 1993;

*Dogeaters*, San Diego, Mandell Weiss Forum of the La Jolla Playhouse, 8 September 1998;

*Silent Movie*, contribution to *The Square*, Los Angeles, The Actor's Gang Theater, 29 June 2000.

**PRODUCED SCRIPTS:** *Holy Food*, radio, 1989;

*Fresh Kill*, motion picture, Independent Television Service/The Airwaves Project, 1994;

"The Pink Palace," television, 4 episodes, *X Chromosome* series, Oxygen cable network, March 2000.

**RECORDING:** *Crimson Prey for Audre Lorde*, read by Hagedorn, Watershed Tapes, 1989.



Jessica Hagedorn (photograph by Marion Ettlinger; from the dust jacket for *The Gangster of Love*, 1996; Richland County Public Library)

**OTHER:** *Chiquita Banana*, in *Third World Women* (San Francisco: 3rd World Communications, 1972);

Elaine Gill, ed., *Mountain Moving Day: Poems by Women*, contributions by Hagedorn (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1973);

Janice Mirikitani and others, eds., *Time To Greet! Incantations from the Third World*, contributions by Hagedorn (San Francisco: Glide, 1975);

- Fay Chiang and others, eds., *American Born and Foreign: An Anthology of Asian American Poetry*, contributions by Hagedorn (New York: Sunbury Press, 1979);
- Dexter Fisher, ed., *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*, contributions by Hagedorn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980);
- Joseph Bruchac, ed., *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets*, contributions by Hagedorn (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1983);
- Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, eds., *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*, contributions by Hagedorn (Corvallis, Ore.: Calyx, 1989);
- Carol Bruchac and Sylvia Watanabe, eds., *Home to Stay: Asian American Women's Fiction*, contributions by Hagedorn (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1990);
- TeenyTown*, in *Out from Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists*, edited by Lenore Champagne (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), pp. 91-117;
- Tenement Lover: no palm trees/in new york city*, in *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, edited by Misha Berson (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), pp. 75-90, 94;
- "The Exile within/the Question of Identity," in *Asian Americans: Collages of Identities. Proceedings of the 1990 Cornell Symposium on Asian America: Issues of Identity*, edited by Lee C. Lee (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, Asian American Studies Program, 1992), pp. 25-29;
- Garrett Hongo, ed., *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*, contributions by Hagedorn (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1993);
- Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, edited by Hagedorn (New York: Penguin, 1993);
- Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United of California, eds., *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, foreword by Hagedorn (Boston: Beacon, 1997);
- Burning Heart: A Portrait of the Philippines*, photographs by Marissa Roth, text by Hagedorn (New York: Rizzoli, 1999);
- Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home in the World. A New Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, edited by Hagedorn (New York: Penguin, 2004).

- SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—  
UNCOLLECTED: "Mango Tango," *Y'Bird Magazine*, 1, no. 1 (1977);
- "On Theater and Performance," *MELUS*, 16 (Fall 1989): 13-15.

The Filipino American poet, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and multimedia artist Jessica Hagedorn devotes herself to portraying contemporary Filipino identities both in the Philippines and in the United States. Questions of political power, cultural dominance, class, and gender are raised throughout her work. Hagedorn has been praised for her impressionistic technique, unusual imagery, and original use of language. In many of her works she blends several genres and uses more than one narrative voice, creating a collage-like effect. While her subject matter is often derived from her own experiences, the hyperrealistic atmosphere she creates has led Hagedorn to be compared to South American magical realists Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa; she herself cites Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Ishmael Reed, and Bienvenido Santos as major influences. She self-consciously integrates contemporary Western narrative patterns, such as the Hollywood melodrama and the road novel, into her writing. In a 1996 interview with Somini Sengupta she said, "maybe it's the more positive side of appropriation: you take from many different sources, not to steal, but to pay homage to it, to say these are your influences, to add your own thing." Hagedorn began her writing career in the late 1960s; by 1990 she was well established as a poet and playwright, but her real breakthrough as an author came that year with the publication of her first novel, *Dogeaters*.

Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn was born in 1949 in the Santa Mesa section of Manila and was raised to speak English, Spanish, and Tagalog. Her father was mainly of Spanish descent, although his great-grandmother was Chinese; her mother was Scotch-Irish-French-Filipino. This "impurity" has made some of Hagedorn's readers question her "authenticity" as an Asian American. In a 1995 interview with Kay Bonetti she said, "I think for a lot of so-called post-colonial peoples, there's a feeling of not being quite legitimate, of not being pure enough. And to me that's the beauty and strength of the culture—that it is mixed." A plurality of intermingling voices is a central aesthetic device in Hagedorn's writing: she prefers hybrid characters and depicts Filipino culture as multifaceted. Hagedorn has mentioned the maternal side of her family as her earliest artistic inspiration: her mother was a gourmet cook and a painter, and her grandfather was a well-known writer and political cartoonist.

In 1963 Hagedorn's parents divorced, and she, her mother, and her two older brothers immigrated to San Francisco; the brothers returned to the Philippines four years later. While her father was one of the wealthiest men in the Philippines, her mother was forced to take a job as a cook for a rich family. The tension between

the Filipino and white aristocracy, on the one hand, and an angry Filipino and Filipino American working class, on the other hand, is a consistent element of her writing. The association of the Philippines with a rich but indifferent father figure and Filipino America with a disempowered yet beautiful "Rita-Hayworth-like" mother figure echoes throughout many of her poems and her novel *The Gangster of Love* (1996).

In her editor's introduction to *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (1993) Hagedorn recalls her astonishment when she arrived in California, with its "Chicanos, African Americans (still called 'Negroes'), and an incredible variety of white people of various ethnic origins." Hagedorn spent her youth in the heyday of multicultural awakening in San Francisco, a time when, as she says in the introduction to her collection *Danger and Beauty* (1993), "things were uncertain and therefore exciting." Her family's frequent moves from one neighborhood to another enabled Hagedorn to become acquainted with a broad spectrum of ethnic cultures. In her 1989 article "On Theater and Performance" she reflects on the role of writing as a means of salvation for a minority woman: "It was a medium in which I had power and control; I could create my own world as I envisioned it, filled with so-called aliens, 'others', mulattoes, mestizos, outlaws, saints and criminals . . . whatever!"

In 1966 Hagedorn met the poet Kenneth Rexroth and showed him some of her poems. He became her mentor, and at his home she met the writers James Baldwin, Gary Snyder, and Baraka, who at that time still called himself LeRoi Jones. She was one of the first participants in the Kearny Street Workshop, founded in 1972 to offer various forms of creative expression to the Asian American community.

Hagedorn studied music, acting, martial arts, fencing, and mime at the American Conservatory Theater for two years; but "it was already very clear that I would be relegated to extremely limited roles in theater and film; because I was female and a person of color," and she decided to become a playwright instead of an actress. Her first play, *Chiquita Banana*, originally written for television, was published in 1972 in the collection *Third World Women*. A feminist piece about neocolonial power relations, *Chiquita Banana* depicts the revenge of a Filipina prostitute who kills those who have defined her as inferior.

Rexroth published some of Hagedorn's early poetry in the collection *Four Young Women: Poems* (1973). Her poems also appeared in the anthologies *Mountain Moving Day: Poems by Women* (1973), edited by Elaine Gill; *Third World Women*; and *Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World* (1975), edited by Janice Mirikitani.



Dust jacket for Hagedorn's first novel (1990), a story of political corruption and assassination set in Manila between 1953 and 1986 (Richland County Public Library)

In 1975 Hagedorn and the African American writers and artists Thulani Davis and Ntozake Shange founded a band, the West Coast Gangster Choir, that at times included as many as ten people with a horn section, electric guitars, bass, and backup singers. Between songs Hagedorn presented experimental dramatic sketches. Harold Bloom quotes her as saying that "black music really influenced the way I write poetry," and her writing reveals her enthusiasm for jazz and Latin American music.

Also in 1975 Hagedorn published her first collection, *Dangerous Music*. "Easter Sunday," the most rhythmic piece in the book, celebrates poetry and music as means of survival in a world ruled by materialism and the constant threat of insanity produced by the pressures of everyday life: "If I wrote a poem a day / I think I'd be okay," the speaker says, and "if I played my bass / all day / I think I'd be okay." The question of survival is one of the central concerns in Hagedorn's oeuvre; the word *danger* is featured in the titles of two of her poetry collections. Being "in danger" is one of the basic experi-

ences of the racially different subject, especially if she is a woman, as Hagedorn writes in "Solea":

there are rapists  
out there  
\*\*\*  
some of them  
don't like Asian women  
they stab them

In "the loneliest of countries," the United States, danger waits in empty "casino parking lots." It is omnipresent in the Philippines, where, Hagedorn writes in "Song for My Father,"

the nightclubs are burning  
with indifference  
curfew drawing near  
soldiers lurk in jeeps  
of dawn warzones  
as the president's daughter  
boogies nostalgically  
under the gaze  
of sixteen smooth bodyguards.

"The Blossoming of Bongbong," the lone piece of prose in *Dangerous Music*, is about a young Filipino immigrant who moves in with his Nicaraguan American girlfriend. The narrative is repeatedly interrupted by letters Bongbong writes to his friend Frisquito back in the Philippines. As Bongbong tells Frisquito how his American Dream turned into a nightmare, the reader watches him drift into madness. When his girlfriend leaves him, and Frisquito, his last connection to his homeland, vanishes from his memory, Bongbong realizes that he is an immigrant who has "finally forgotten who he was."

In 1978 Hagedorn joined Davis and Shange in New York City, where they re-formed The West Coast Gangster Choir as The Gangster Choir, and Hagedorn participated in the Asian American arts and cultural organization the Basement Workshop. Soon after she arrived in New York, the producer Joseph Papp staged her multimedia piece *Mango Tango* at his Public Theater. Her *Tenement Lover: no palm trees/in new york city*, a stage adaptation of "The Blossoming of Bongbong," was produced in 1981 and published in *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays* (1990), edited by Misha Berson.

Hagedorn's second book, *Pet Food & Tropical Apparitions*, a collection of poetry and prose, also appeared in 1981. In "Motown/Smokey Robinson" a black male voice aggressively addresses a young Filipina: "hey girl, how long you been here? Did you come with yr daddy in 1959 on a second-class boat?" The poem fades out in a song expressing the girl's ambivalent fascination with the melancholy man whose "love is strong now." The

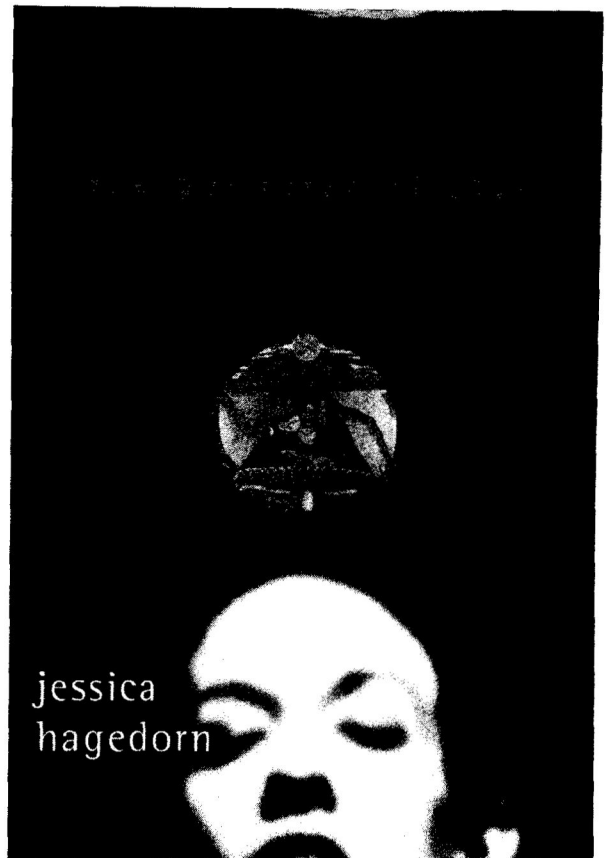
title novella, "Pet Food," is set in the "liberated" late 1960s. Writing makes the protagonist, George Sand (named for the pseudonym of Amandine-Aurore-Lucie Dupin Dudevant, the nineteenth-century French writer and lover of the composer Frédéric Chopin), "feel safe and comfortable" and helps her to make sense of things. She finds herself among a group of eccentrics that includes a white writer who welcomes his guests in a long black kimono (a parody of Hagedorn's mentor, Rexroth); his daughter, Porno, who identifies with her roles in seedy movies; a black musician who houses an orchestra of children; and a rich Japanese who surrounds himself with oriental opulence. She learns much from these people, but in the end she follows her mother's advice and leaves their milieu. Centering on issues of class, ethnicity, and gender, "Pet Food" combines letters, songs, and short scenes into a dream-like dance of words and images to ask questions about individual and artistic independence—about who is the "pet" and who is the owner. Oscar V. Campomanes notes that "this novella's world of maladjusted migrant youths and social deviants" constitute "character sketches for the top, middle, and bottom 'dogs' that populate Philippine society in *Dogeaters*." *Pet Food & Tropical Apparitions* was received enthusiastically by most critics; in *The Village Voice Literary Supplement* (December 1981), however, Barbara Baracks accused her of using homosexual characters "the way some male writers have used women: as a way to talk about vulnerability without talking about herself."

After The Gangster Choir disbanded in 1985, Hagedorn and the African American writers and performers Laurie Carlos and Robbie McCauley formed the performance trio Thought Music to confront issues of class, race, and multiculturalism from a humorous perspective. In 1988 they performed Hagedorn's *Teeny-Town*, a multimedia piece about racism in American entertainment, at Franklin Furnace in Brooklyn. Representative of much of the group's work, it uses an array of media and artistic expression, including a movie and dance. Also in 1988 Hagedorn's play *Holy Food* was produced; it was broadcast as a radio play in 1989. In the latter year Hagedorn was one of the twelve performers in Shu Lea Cheang's video *Color Schemes*, in which writers of color recount incidents of racism, particularly in the entertainment industry.

Hagedorn had begun working on *Dogeaters* after her first daughter was born in the early 1980s. In 1988 she returned to the Philippines to gather material for the project. She was especially interested in what she has called the country's "underbelly"—the poor, prostitutes, and homosexuals. Focusing on those who are often dismissed by official historiography, she learned a

great deal about the highly corrupt Ferdinand Marcos regime that ruled from 1965 to 1986.

*Dogeaters* is set in Manila and begins in 1956 and ends in the year the Marcos regime collapsed—decades marked, as Nerissa S. Balce-Cortes points out, by the consequences of the presence of American military bases in the islands: “prostitution, drugs, environmental hazards (such as toxic nuclear waste), and the plight of ‘Amerasian’ children born to ‘bar girls.’” Fictitious newspaper clippings, quotations from actual Associated Press articles, an 1898 address by President William McKinley on the American invasion of the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, and passages from Jean Mallat’s *The Philippines* (1846) suggest continuities among Spanish colonialism, the American occupation, and the Marcos regime. Hagedorn depicts Philippine society as extremely hierarchical. The traditional upper class is represented by the Gonzaga clan; it is closely entangled with the corrupt regime, which does not hesitate to use assassinations and torture to remain in power. At the bottom are the “dogeaters,” who struggle to survive amid poverty and violence. The two perspectives are juxtaposed via two first-person narrators: Rio Gonzaga, who came to the United States in her early teens and narrates the earlier parts of the story from memory; and the gay disc jockey and prostitute Joey Sands, the son of an African American soldier and a Filipina prostitute. While the story is not narrated from a single perspective, it does have a main character: in “Homesick,” an essay in *Danger and Beauty*, Hagedorn identifies this character as the idea of Manila itself. Apart from the narrators’ own stories, the novel includes many subplots that feature other inhabitants of the capital; among them are Daisy Manila, a former beauty queen turned feminist revolutionary; Rio’s cousin Poucha, who supports the regime; and the actress Lolita Luna, who ends up starring in soft-core pornographic movies. Some characters can be identified with historical figures: “the President’s wife” is clearly based on Imelda Marcos, and the assassinated senator Domingo Avila is modeled on Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, who suffered that fate in 1983. Joey eventually joins a revolutionary group, but Hagedorn told Bonetti that *Dogeaters* is not concerned with character development: “Joey is taught something,” but “he could turn into a really awful person once again.” A central theme of the novel is the Filipino appropriation of American norms and values taken from the mass media; the opening scene takes place in a theater where the 1955 Rock Hudson–Jane Wyman movie *All That Heaven Allows* is being shown. But the novel closes with “Kundiman,” a sort of prayer mixing Catholic martyrdom and feelings of rage that is spoken by an unknown voice; in Filipino culture *kundiman* signifies a tradition of



*Dust jacket for Hagedorn's semi-autobiographical novel, about a Filipina immigrant who moves from San Francisco to New York City and becomes the leader of a rock band*  
(Richland County Public Library)

melancholy love songs. Thus, the ending signals the strong cultural heritage and the inner strength of Filipino society.

Many Filipinos, both in the Philippines and in the United States, were put off by the book: *dogeater* is a highly derogatory term for Filipinos, and Hagedorn was accused of drawing a disrespectful picture of Filipino society. Her use of multiple narrative perspectives that change from first- to third-person and her blurring of fact and fiction have been attacked by critics such as Caroline S. Hau, Leonard Casper, and Epifanio San Juan but defended by Rachel Lee and Giovanna Covi as exemplifying a postmodernist sensibility. The exclusive focus on the Philippines led the critic N. V. M. Gonzales to wonder whether the work can properly be considered an Asian American novel; but *Dogeaters* deals with Filipino society from a decidedly American perspective. The novel was originally constructed from Hagedorn’s personal memories, with details added later from research. *Dogeaters* was nominated for the

National Book Award and received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. It has been translated into French, Spanish, and Norwegian.

In 1992 Hagedorn contributed to Cheang's exhibition *Fluttering Objects of Desire*, in which twenty-four female artists, writers, and performers explored interracial desire. Based on pornographic peep shows and phone-sex services, the exhibition consisted of sound pieces and video clips into loops that viewers played by inserting quarters at seven stations around the room.

In 1993 Hagedorn edited *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, a collection of works by writers from diverse ethnic and generational backgrounds. The forty-eight authors represented include well-established writers such as Gish Jen, Maxine Hong Kingston, Russell Leong, Bharati Mukherjee, David Mura, Fae Myenne Ng, and Amy Tan; there are a little-known piece by Carlos Bulosan, a chapter from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's novel *Dictee* (1982), and short stories by Jeffery Paul Chan and Hisaye Yamamoto. But about half of the pieces are by authors whose work is published here for the first time, including Kiana Davenport, who is of Hawaiian descent, and John J. Song, who was born in Korea. In her preface to the collection Elaine Kim notes that "Americanization" and immigration have resulted in "new crossovers and intersections" that blur the lines not only between Asia and Asian America but also among ethnic groups in the United States: "Cambodians are making doughnuts, Koreans are making burritos, South Asians are operating motels, Filipinos are driving airport shuttle busses." Hagedorn writes in her introduction that she selected the works on the basis of stylistic innovation: "I let it be known that I was definitely more interested in 'riskier' work, and that I was eager to subvert the very definition of what was considered 'fiction.'" Her own contribution is the "Film Noir" chapter from her second novel, *The Gangster of Love*, published in 1996. The changes she made in the final version of "Film Noir" are considerable, and comparing the two offers insight into her creative process. Her play *Airport Music*, co-authored with Han Ong, premiered in 1993.

Hagedorn wrote the screenplay for *Fresh Kill* (1994), an independent feature motion picture directed by Shu Lea Cheang, in which two Staten Island lesbians (played by Sarita Choudhury and Erin McMurtry) are raising a five-year-old girl when a shipment of trendy fish-lip sushi contaminated by radioactive waste lands in New York City. People begin speaking in tongues, pets glow green and explode, and soap flakes fall from the sky. When their adopted daughter vanishes, the lesbians join activists from the Third World in striking back at the multinational corporation that is responsible for the disaster.

*The Gangster of Love* is based on Hagedorn's experiences in the New York City music scene. At the beginning of the novel the narrator-protagonist Raquel "Rocky" Rivera discusses the yo-yo (which was the working title of the book) as a metaphor for Filipino Americans: the toy consists of two halves and fluctuates between two poles; and the word, which comes from Tagalog (the yo-yo was invented in ancient China but was used in the Philippines as a hunting weapon), is also used to refer to "a person regarded as stupid, ineffectual, inept, eccentric"—which is how Filipinos are often perceived in the United States. Rocky appropriates the word as a metaphor for playfulness, fluidity, variation, and constant change.

Rocky's glamorous mother, Milagros Rivera, was "a volatile presence, vampy, haughty, impulsive" in Manila but experiences "a step down the ladder" when she leaves her unfaithful husband and immigrates to San Francisco in 1970 with Rocky and Rocky's mentally unstable brother, Voltaire. She starts a one-woman catering service, Lumpia X-Press, which offers new variations on the Filipino egg roll such as "Mexi-Lumpia" and the vegetarian "New Wave Lumpia." While the mother remains tied to the Filipino past, Rocky listens to the recordings of Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, Kid Creole and the Coconuts, Smokey Robinson, and Miles Davis and tests many of the options and experiences that the United States—unlike "Manila with all its taboos and obligations"—has to offer: she experiments with drugs; contracts gonorrhea from her Chinese American boyfriend, Elvis Chang, whom she meets through Voltaire; and becomes friends with a bisexual female artist, Keiko von Heller, who claims to be a descendant of "the first Japanese trapeze artist ever hired by Barnum and Bailey." Rocky, Elvis, and a drummer named Sly form a rock band, *The Gangster of Love*, and travel to Los Angeles, where Rocky visits her Uncle Marlon, a homosexual actor with AIDS who wants to go home to the Philippines to die. *The Gangster of Love* and Keiko move to "Big, scary, unknown New York," where the band has brief success, and Keiko becomes a popular artist. Friendships slowly disintegrate; *The Gangster of Love* disbands; Rocky gets pregnant by her new boyfriend, Jake, a recording engineer, and finds jobs as a receptionist at an acupuncture clinic and as a waitress at a French Vietnamese restaurant. After giving birth to a daughter, Venus, she reaffirms her cultural heritage. At the end of the novel she visits her dying father in the Philippines, where she encounters a "tropical depression" marked by violence, torture, and malnourished children.

Rocky is the principal narrator of the novel, but at times Elvis Chang takes over to show how Rocky is perceived by a person close to her; sometimes an omni-

scient narrator focuses on Milagros Rivera's history or her hopes; some passages take the form of a play script, complete with stage directions. Dreams, described in italics, play a major role in the novel: "*deserted mariachi plazas in Guadalajara, or deserted hotel rooms in Hong Kong . . . or Paco Cemetery in Manila.*" *The Gangster of Love* also includes jokes that reveal linguistic and cultural misunderstandings between Filipinos and Americans.

More conventional stylistically than *Dogeaters*, *The Gangster of Love* has not received as much critical attention as Hagedorn's first novel. Her use of eccentric characters was a main point of criticism for Stephanie Zacharek, who wrote in *salon.com* (18 April 1996) that "the book strains at quirkiness and originality." The novel was nominated for the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize.

In 1998 Hagedorn's dramatic adaptation of *Dogeaters* was staged at the La Jolla Playhouse under the direction of Michael Greif. In 1999 Hagedorn published *Burning Heart: A Portrait of the Philippines* in collaboration with the photographer Marissa Roth. She collaborated with the movie director John Woo on "The Pink Palace," an animated series of four seven-minute episodes about the adventures of Baby Cruz, an adolescent Filipina immigrant, and her single mother, Queenie, in the Bay Area that was presented as part of the Oxygen cable television network's *X Chromosome* series in March 2000. Hagedorn's revised version of *Dogeaters*, again directed by Greif, was produced at the Public Theater in New York City in 2001.

In 2002 Hagedorn published an enlarged edition of her 1993 collection, *Danger and Beauty*. The book is dedicated to Rexroth and includes work written throughout her career. Much of it had been anthologized in previous publications, including *Four Young Women*; *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States* (1980), edited by Dexter Fisher; *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989), edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly; *Home to Stay: Asian American Women's Fiction* (1990), edited by Carol Bruchac and Sylvia Watanabe; and *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993), edited by Garrett Hongo. All of these books have been highly influential in promoting the work of Asian American women writers.

*Danger and Beauty* is divided into four sections: "The Death of Anna May Wong: Poems 1968–1972"; excerpts from *Dangerous Music* and from *Pet Food & Tropical Apparitions*; and "New York Peep Show: 1982–2001," a compilation of poems, stories, and a play. The book opens with "Autobiography Part One: Manila to San Francisco"; focusing on prostitution and poverty in Asia as effects of coloni-

## DANGER AND BEAUTY

jessica hagedorn



*Paperback cover for the enlarged edition (2002) of Hagedorn's 1993 collection, which includes poems, short stories, and a play (Richland County Public Library)*

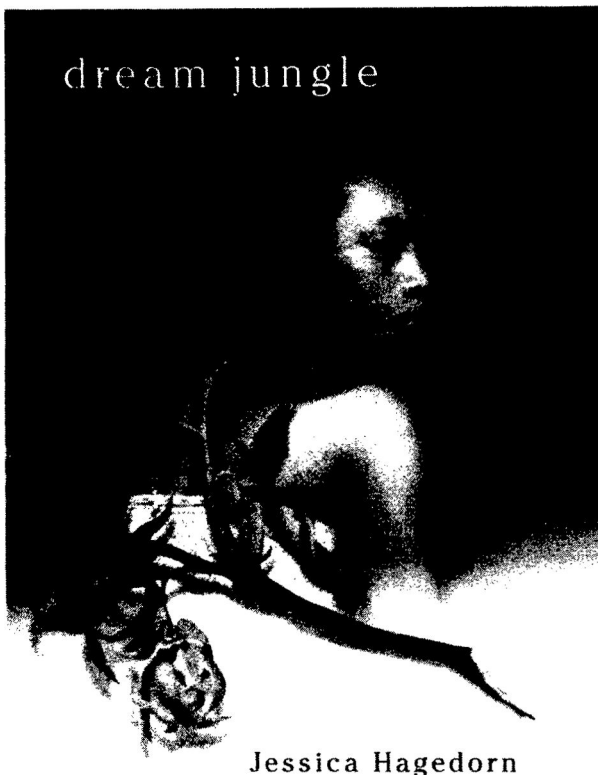
zation; it gives voice to the powerless, whose oppression turns into anger and despair:

I will shoot! I will  
Gun you down!  
But not . . . but not . . . forever . . .  
Not yet.

The final section of *Danger and Beauty* includes the story "Homesick." In the Philippines "I learned a lopsided history of myself," Hagedorn's autobiographical narrator says,

a colonial version of history which scorned the 'savage' ways of precolonial Filipinos. In those days even our language was kept at a distance; Tagalog was studied in a course called "National Language," but it was English that was spoken, English that was preferred. Tagalog was the language used to address servants.

Also included in this section is *Silent Movie*, a ten-minute play that was staged in a workshop version in 1997 by



Jessica Hagedorn

Dust jacket for Hagedorn's third novel (2003), set in the Philippines in the 1970s, about the faked discovery of a lost Stone Age tribe and the making of a movie about the Vietnam War (Richland County Public Library)

the Asian American Theatre Project in Los Angeles and in a full production at The Actor's Gang Theater, also in Los Angeles, in 2000. Sixteen playwrights, including Han Ong, Alice Tuan, David Henry Hwang, and Philip Kan Gotanda, were asked to contribute short pieces to an "epic compilation play" titled *The Square*. Hagedorn's contribution is a rewriting of D. W. Griffith's interracial silent-movie melodrama *Broken Blossoms* (1919) in which the Chinese protagonist "remains offstage the entire time and hence 'invisible.'" Centering on Emma, a politician's opium-addicted lesbian wife, and her Irish servant and lover Lucy, the play parodies the blatant racism of the movie. The last piece, "Notes from a New York Diary," is about the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. The narrator sees "the whole thing go down, bodies falling from the sky" and cannot help thinking "of the troubled Mindanao region of the Philippines, where I have just been. Where the surreal and the real are one and the same. Where the sunsets are the most glorious on earth and acts of vio-

lence are a daily occurrence." She realizes how distant she has become from daily life in the country of her birth: "I thought I lived in the toughest city in the world and was therefore safe. . . . I am cocooned by arrogance and privilege, prone to First World delusions."

The protagonist of Hagedorn's third novel, *Dream Jungle* (2003), Rizalina, is ten years old in 1971 when her abusive father and her brother die in a shipwreck. She comes to live in Manila with her mother, the housekeeper of the wealthy mestizo playboy Zamora Lopez de Legazpi. Zamora has recently made international headlines by discovering a lost Stone Age tribe, the gentle and innocent Tabao (based on the real-life Tasaday), in the jungle of south Mindanao. Two years later Zamora's wife leaves him, and he begins to show a sexual interest in Rizalina; she flees from his home and becomes a prostitute in a seedy nightclub. There, a few years afterward, she meets Vincent Moody, a Hollywood star undergoing an identity crisis who is in the Philippines to act in a Vietnam War movie, *Napalm Sunset* (based on Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* [1979]). The two fall in love, and Rizalina joins Moody on the set of the movie, which is being filmed in the same jungle where the Tabao were discovered. Also on the set is the Filipina American journalist Paz Marlowe, who is covering the making of the movie. Paz begins to investigate Zamora's "discovery" of the tribe, which turns out to be a hoax staged by the corrupt Philippine regime to attract international attention and donations. Once more, Hagedorn fuses fact and fiction in a story of sexual abuse, an insurmountable class system, and a mother's despair over her lost child. A pessimistic narrative in many respects, *Dream Jungle* concludes on an optimistic, albeit grotesque, note that is as ambivalent as the "Kundiman" ending of *Dogeaters*.

Hagedorn received MacDowell Colony Fellowships in 1985, 1986, and 1988; a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Writer's Award in 1994; a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship in 1995; a Sundance Theater Lab Fellowship in 1997; and an NEA-TCG Theatre Residency Fellowship in 1998. She has taught at Columbia University and New York University. She lives in New York with her husband, a Chinese American movie designer and producer, and two daughters, whom she is raising biculturally.

Jessica Hagedorn's writing transcends the narrowly defined category of minority literature. Inspired by various ethnic American authors, by South American writers, and by feminist "spectatorship" film theory, Hagedorn refuses to be defined within one cultural category. In "On Theater and Performance" she insists that "Western culture isn't the only answer and certainly isn't the only perspective we have at hand to approach seeing and being in the world."

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