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Jessica Hagedorn: Pinay Poet

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Notes and Comments

Jessica Hagedorn: Pinay Poet

SUSAN EVANGELISTA

Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn is unmistakably a modern poet, a poet of the seventies and eighties. Born in the Philippines, she is considered in the United States to be an ethnic writer, and indeed much in Hagedorn's work marks her distinctively as Filipino, or, more precisely, as *Pinay*, as a Filipina immigrant living in the United States. Her work marks her even more strongly as a women's writer, but even this identity is dependent on her ethnicity, as she offers particular insights into the lives and joys and fears of Third World women making their way through First World experiences.

Hagedorn is also a totally outrageous writer, stringing together a glittering array of gold lamé jump suits, blue wigs, heroin addiction, rape, Smokey Robinson songs, and verbal obscenities which blend into each other, interchange, and emerge in startling new combinations like a grand hallucination. She writes what Dolores Feria calls the Literature of Refusal, refusing to be bound not only by racial, sexual, and class stereotypes, but by the niceties of 'polite' society as well. And yet, perhaps because she is Filipino, there is a lightness to her protest writing, as she finds life and joy (and humour) in the grimmest of situations; even her most militantly antiimperialist, antichauvinist work is clever instead of strident, airy instead of glum. She comes from perhaps the only culture in the world in which revolution can become fiesta, and the dictator is still overthrown.

Jessica Hagedorn was born in 1949 in the Philippines to the Visayan Hagedorn family. She immigrated to the United States as a twelve year old in 1961, living in San Francisco and New York, where she was deeply influenced by black soul music, black culture, rock and roll, and a group of black and Chicana women.

She was one of the four women featured in McGraw-Hill's early collection of ethnic women's poetry, *Four Young Women: Poems*. She has published in various Asian-American collections and magazines: *Liwanag* (1975), *Time to Greez* (1975), *The Greenfield Review* (New York, 1975), *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian-American Poets* (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1983), etc. She has also published two books of her own: *Dangerous Music* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1975), and *Pet Food and Tropical Apparitions* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981). She also does some professional acting and leads a band called *The Gangster Choir*.

FILIPINA POET

Hagedorn writes, then, about Filipinos of her own generation, teen-age immigrants of the sixties, and she does so against the background of sixties music: Smokey Robinson, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Jimi Hendrix. There is a certain seediness in the environment in which her characters move here, but the musical background serves to relate the immigrant of the age to the rest of his generation, to the movement of the music which represents the refusal of a whole age-group to participate in the Good Manners and Right Conduct of the last great period of conformity.

It was an interesting age, the time of "flower power," drugs, and musical excitement — which Hagedorn sums up in a description of a hitch-hiking trip to see a new singer at a Pop Festival in Monterey:

He was Jimi Hendrix — sticking his pretty pink tongue out at all the women in the audience, maybe even the men. 1967. Flower power time. Not the time for ambiguous sexual dilemmas [sic]. (p. 39)

It was an age, however, that was followed by "ambiguous sexual dilemmas" and other forms of alienation and loss, as the flower children of the sixties grew up and got on with their lives. The assertion of Third World consciousness, and the advent of Asian-American literature, comes right *after* this, in a sense in response to it, and in Hagedorn's work, the music and feel of the sixties, and what followed in the next decade, are very evident. She is therefore a child of her times. But her temperament and her language are her own — quick, slicing, irreverent, feminine without being inhibited, and Filipino in their liveliness and sense of fun.

"Smokey's Getting Old," a poem which brings together the

music of the age and the ethnicity of the Filipino in America, centers on a fairly typical *Pinay* character named Nellie, and shows what life in the U.S. is likely to be for the lower class immigrant. Nellie went to the U.S. in 1959, unwillingly, because as a young teen-ager she didn't want to leave her barrio friends and the simple pleasures of wearing orange lipstick and going to movies on Sundays and eating roasted pig. She lives in Stockton, one of the centers of early Filipino immigration to California, until her father tries to marry her off to a fifty-eight-year-old bachelor, immigrant of the earlier age. At that point she runs away to San Francisco where she rats her hair (this is the early sixties), hangs around Woolworth's and sees Smokey Robinson at the Cow Palace. Ratted hair and Woolworth's seem very much on the same level as orange lipstick and Sunday movies. Nellie is, today's teenagers would say, "trying hard"; but the Cow Palace and the rides on the ferris wheel with blond sailors, and harmonizing "Be My Baby" by the Ronettes with a friend, add up to everything in the world Nellie could possibly want: "Life's Never Been So Fine! ." At this point she is in love with Ruben, apparently a Mexican, whom her father can't stand "because he's a Spik." Even as a Filipino transplanted to the multicultural United States, Daddy wants his daughter to marry a Filipino.

More explicit comments on Filipinos and class come out in the novella, *Pet Food*. This is a wild story about an immigrant Filipina, a writer, called George Sands; Boogie, who is George's long-time friend, gay but bordering on straight, being kept (and kept high) for a long time by a Japanophile named Prince Gengi; Silver Daddy, an art-lover-slum-landlord from whom George rents a flat; Silver Daddy's daughter called Porno, after the movies she makes, the storylines of which she relates in explicit detail at the dinner table; and Auntie Greta, George's transvestite uncle who is eventually murdered by one of the young men he loves so. George's mother doesn't like her friend Boogie because he is gay, he is an "American-born Pinoy with no class," and he "smells":

'Boogie doesn't smell,' I retorted. 'He wears tangerine oil.'

'That boy smells like a fruit, all right,' my mother said smugly.

In a sense George and her family, because they are upper class, are less foreign, less immigrant, than Boogie's family. In a conversation about foreign status, this interchange takes place:

'How do you know? You were born in America. You've never been home,' I said.

'All I have to do is listen to my father talk in his broken English,' Boogie said, wearily. 'Look at his worn-out hands. See my mother's shy and frightened face whenever she gets on a bus. They're permanent immigrants in this lousy place. . .'

The observation of the father's broken English is almost a cliché among immigrant groups and matters less and less as standard English loses ground — although the issue of parent's accented speech continues to bother American-born children—but the observation of the mother's shy and frightened face when she has to deal with the outside world is much fresher and more telling. And when we think of the high class Filipino tourist in the department stores of New York or Chicago, looking anything but shy and frightened, the class element in the situation of Boogie's family is all the more evident.

George's own class orientation shows up in a recurrent nightmare which comes to her everytime she is home in the Philippines visiting her father: guerrillas come to the house and kill everyone in it, with the exception of her totally helpless grandmother who prays incoherently but seems to inspire a bit of respect. George is home only by chance but nevertheless feels that such a death is her destiny. She does not fight. Her killer is good-looking, looks much like her boyfriend Boogie, and for a moment as he leans over her, she thinks he is going to kiss her, but he slits her throat instead. She seems to feel that her death is right and proper, necessary for the revolution, and in some sense an expiation of class guilt.

Hagedorn's feelings about the Philippines, to which she does return rather frequently, seem to be colored by heat, lethargy, and an intertwined fertility and decay. In "Song for My Father," a return poem, she cannot resist a few snide personal comments:

the president's wife
has a fondness for concert pianists
and gossip is integral
to conversation

Later on in the same poem she is more explicitly political, while still managing to convey the same more-or-less romantic tone that we ourselves may associate with Latin-American revolution but which American readers would surely regard as exotic:

dope dealers are executed
 in public
 and senators go mad
 in prison camps
 the nightclubs are burning
 with indifference
 curfew draws near
 soldiers lurk in jeeps
 of dawn warzones
 as the president's daughter
 boogies nostalgically
 under the gaze
 of sixteen smooth bodyguards
 and decay is forever
 even in the rage
 of humorless revolutionaries

"Souvenirs," one of her major poems, again deals with Philippine politics and society in general. As social criticism it again creates a rather romantic picture where life is dominated by the Church ("sanctity and piety/are their names") and a lush, slow-moving, Hispanized culture in which "life is very cheap," and yet "It's so sweet sometimes" — when it's Latin Night at the Coliseum and there are musicians from New York and she is the ten-year-old child "twitching her ass/n doing the cha-cha in her seat," or when the same child dreams of her first Donald Duck movie, or when she wonders who this beautiful woman, her mother, is — in contrast to this silent woman who has been bathing and feeding and kissing her "on behalf of" her father and mother, before she gets sent off to a convent "for some French culture." In the same rather decadent atmosphere created in "Song for My Father," once again the dictatorship functions:

in Manila
 the president's wife
 dictates martial law
 with her thighs
 sanctity and piety
 in her name
 as she sips tea
 in Madrid

Hagedorn doesn't make explicit political statements but manages, when writing of the country of her birth, to convey an atmosphere

of such lassitude, such lethargy that she seems to be making a statement about the political atmosphere, the lack of control that people have over their lives, by default. She seems not to be interested in explicitly political situations at all, but to have an eye instead for the tone and feeling of the situation.

Oblique political referents in the U.S.-centered works as well reflect tone more than they do content, although here Hagedorn takes a different stance and tends to be considerably lighter, more ironic in her approach. Her poem entitled "Ming the Merciless" is a perfect case in point: Ming, like Hagedorn, is an Asian, presumably an Asian in America, and an entertainer of some power. But Hagedorn's refrain in her song to Ming, which occurs twice, snips away at all the white establishment's ready-made clichés for stereotyping Chinese, from conservative to liberal:

you are the Asian nightmare
the yellow peril
the domino theory
the current fashion trend

Ming, merciless Ming. . .

This would seem to be a fairly complete catalogue of all the white American attitudes towards the Chinese, with the addition of a nerve-tingling sensuousness, sexual imagery which slices through skin, glides like a rocket that becomes a bullet — and is thus violent in a rather subtle, restrained way:

Sing, ming, sing. . .
blink sloe-eyed fantasy
and touch me where. . .
- ming, merciless ming,
come dancing in my tube
the silver edges of your cloak
slice through my skin. . .
o flying angel
o pteradactyl
your rocket glides
like a bullet
and touches me where. . .

This particular poem is often anthologized in Asian-American collections, no doubt because in it a Filipina reacts to a Chinese male

(and in a way that directly counters the white stereotype of the sexless Asian male), thus bringing together various Asian-American currents.

WOMAN POET

But in addition to being a Third World writer, an ethnic, non-white writer, Jessica Hagedorn is rather definitely a woman's writer. She sees and feels with minority women and all women, understands their alienation and desperation, but does not miss the inner joys and the sense of self that women of spirit are able to create and hold on to. She herself seems to find joy in the ways women assert themselves and fight back, whether inwardly and quietly, or outwardly, with violence.

Nellie, in "Smokey's Getting Old," is a case in point. After her dream-life of sailors and ferris wheels and Smokey Robinson shows at the Cow Palace, with Smokey glittering in a gold jacket ("Life's never been so fine!"), Nellie "gets laid" at a party, finds herself pregnant, marries Ruben, stops harmonizing, and even begins to sleep without dreams. She is then in a state where she remembers the barrios but sees that reality everywhere is the same: "Manila/the mission/Chinatown/east L.A./harlem/fillmore St." This marks the ultimate alienation of a character who can't even think of a better place to be! Besides, she's "gettin' kinda fat and Smokey Robinson's gettin' old." Two different versions of the poem present two different redemptions: In one, "Smokey's gettin' old. . . but he still looks good!!!" In the second, "Smokey's gettin' old/ but your son has learned to jive/to the Jackson Five." Life goes on but somewhere else.

"Pearl" is again a young woman who finds her life in music — this time dancing — and the outer trappings of rouge on her cheeks and satin dresses with rhinestones straps. Pearl's mother used to beat her with a bamboo cane for wanting to be a dancer, but when she was nineteen, she married a young man named Alfonso who also danced, and would take her to the Queen Bee cabaret, where she thought they looked like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. ("Life's never been so fine!") But then Alfonso got bored with all this and took a mistress, who was older than Pearl and didn't even know how to dance, but "had eyes like japanese almonds/n a voice so throaty it made you shiver." Despite the

dancing and the fancy clothes, Pearl's relationship with Alfonso is sterile — they are childless — and now Pearl is left alone and turns her creative energies to needlepoint designs, which quickly became more and more fantastic: "pagodas n clouds on satin/colonial figures on brocade wearing rainbow dresses/mandrills making love to gypsy virgins." The women who bring her blouses and gowns to have them embroidered giggle behind her back, no doubt gossiping about her husband's other woman. But Pearl still finds a hint of a Song within herself: "Sometimes/when there wasn't much sewing to be done/she would dance in the stillness of her living room/fabrics scattered on the floor around her feet." She is essentially a dependent creature, and when she is really lonely, she sings to herself: "lover man/where can you be." But even in her longing for love, she is still a person for herself: "she began to resemble Dorothy Lamour/n wore hibiscus in her hair/even when she was alone/in the great/big/empty house."

For women who dare to leave their houses and participate in the life of the world, there are many dangers. Hagedorn's world can be a violent one:

there are rapists
out there
some of them
don't like Asian women
they stab them. . .
there are killers
out there
some of them
smile at me (Solea)

And there are other dangers too, more subtle forms of violence done to the soul. These show up in "Natural Death" in direct contrast to the glitter and "grandeur" of the superficial environment. La Lupe is a Cuban woman who left her home country after the revolution (which she refuses to discuss on the Dick Cavett show) and went "to America/to live in her dream/gold lamé jumpsuits/and rhinestone cloaks . . . O the grandeur of it." The images of America which follow this opening, again, startle (young girls with mustaches painted on their faces, young men wearing yellow satin dresses, and all of them eating starspangled sandwiches) but then intensify into "telephone calls/from anxious mothers" and

a whole list of things that these mothers warn their daughters to beware of:

beware of nightclubs
 and Cuban names
 beware of the street
 beware of doorbells and abortions
 beware of pregnancy
 beware of public transportation
 beware of frozen meat
 and strange men
 and rabid animals
 beware of strange colors
 strange smells
 strange sounds
 strange feelings
 beware of loneliness
 and the rhythm
 of your heartbeat

This sudden internalizing of the fear at the end so that the daughters are being told to beware of themselves, of their own living, is presumably the natural extension of the other fears that lead so inevitably to "Natural Death."

The same sort of play on the fears and advice of anxious mothers, generated by the real and imagined dangers of the world, occurs in "a quiet sweet kind of despair":

start the day right/with a good breakfast/avoid typewriters n telephones
 at all costs/make a fresh pot of coffee/avoid television sets n theaters of
 all kinds/particularly your own mirror/

But this time there is a solution, albeit a qualified one:

visit a shallow friend/get high/that's always a good idea/it makes you
 think you're having a good time/and the anger subsides/

The only other solution is poetry, and the compulsion to give voice to craziness:

if i wrote a poem a day
 i think i'd be okay
 when you're crazy
 it seems like you should sing about it
 all the time!

This too, however, has limitations:

sometimes i lose my voice
i get a sore throat
i get laryngitis of the soul

"Love," drugs, and material objects might also possibly intervene:

maybe even get married/to a hip dentist/who drives an XKE/n has access/
to a lotta cocaine/i could serve it in an arty dish . . .

"The woman who thought she was more than a samba" fights back against fear, alienation, and sexual stereotyping by simply refusing to consider herself limited to the narrow role and function of one sort of dance — i.e., a samba. She is more than this — so much so that other people respond to her with the characteristic reaction to a strong personality. "It's a shame you aren't a man . . . You have so much man in you." The young men she knew, however, were not very "manly", and danced/with each other/consumed by/ambiguous dilemmas." The samba lady fell in love once, and although she lost out in the end (in the language of war, he always "won" and left "traces of blood as souvenirs" in the "combat zone"), she still had "her own take on things", her own version of the story, her own viewpoint:

the woman who thought
she was more than a samba
rode underground trains
dressed up for dancing
as usual
never mind
that she looked good
succulent like peaches
tattoos on her skin
enough to make
most men sigh
rats
strung out on methadone
rode underground trains
with her,
rats in a trance
scratching
balancing oblivious children
on their laps.

After her love affair, she carries her solitude around with her, consciously, "in pouches made of Chinese silk," demands that her lovers be above all graceful on the dance floor, and wishes that she could be her mother doing a tango.

Another woman is named Nada, and in "Canto de Nada," she is nothing, but also everything, all women, especially all oppressed women: "daughter of ainu and t'boli/igorot and sioux/sister to inca and zulu." She is also all male stereotypes of women, from "the brand new bag" to "the dragon lady's baby," "the punk," "the dancing girl." She is also — and here the interplay of categories jolts the mind again — "the divine virgin/waiting for a trick/on the borderline/between emeryville/and oakland." She is nothing except music, but she is still all women and all things *for herself*. In that sense, "she is the real thing."

Probably the most charming "woman in her own right" of Hagedorn's creations is Chiqui of "Chiqui and Terra Nova." Chiqui is thought strange because of her friendship with Terra Nova, an equally charming transvestite who goes around in technicolor crocheted doily shirts." Chiqui is curious about transsexuality, because she is a "young and fascinated woman," and Terra Nova tells her to think about Frankenstein and all the possibilities that man-made miracle opens up. (On his own sex Terra Nova says he is glad not to be exclusively one or the other — "one never knows" — he is changeable like the weather, and infuriated when the weather is predicted five days in advance; "how could they know? ".) Chiqui and Terra Nova also assert their selfhoods through singing and dancing; when Chiqui had some extra money, she bought for her friend a royal peacock blue wig, which delighted Terra Nova, and the two of them went to Washington Square Park, where they danced and sang Stevie Wonder songs out of tune, and where their spirits could not be dampened by the giggling crowd or the pouring rain, as they strolled together "like tropical apparitions/only visible to a few."

Chiqui asserts herself by simply *being* herself, going her own way, as do the dancing girl called Nada, the woman who thought she was more than a samba, and Pearl, who dances in her living room amidst the embroidered blouses. Some women more actively fight the male version of the world, sometimes in remarkably sexual and overtly violent terms.

But Hagedorn's militancy is more overt in a very short one-act play called "Chiquita Banana." Here the main character

is Carmen Miranda, a prostitute entertainer, who wears "her inevitable banana lady costume" and who is later to refer to herself as a militant banana. Cesar Romero, bartender and pimp, is eagerly awaiting her arrival and all but kow-tows to her. A white woman drug-pusher named Jean Harlow is also there, is also patronizing (and presumably represents the patronizing segment of the white community, those who may hope to profit from the likes of Carmen), and offers Carmen some pure cocaine. Carmen is rude to both these 'hangers-on,' refusing the coke (she has her own stash and doesn't need "that bitch's"), and refusing to sing.

Then Carmen's mother Miranda enters, with her younger daughter Ruby Delicious who is in a drugged stupor. Miranda sings:

love for sale
 appetizing love for sale
 love that's fresh and still unspoiled
 love that's only slightly soiled
 love for sale.

Ruby is, it turns out, pregnant, and the mother has decided to simply sell her off to the highest bidder. Immediately the lone two white men in the place start dealing with the mother for the daughter, and it looks as if Ruby is to be auctioned off to Mr. Milktoast. Carmen, however, intervenes, demanding vitriolically of Milktoast ". . . do you think we're in some sort of zoo for your amusement? Do you think we'd make good wives because we look like your Mama's maid back in San Diego? Or do you think we're gonna do the mambo for you in bed? "

Carmen then produces a gun, and hands it to her sister Ruby, who shoots the two white men and returns it. Carmen then shoots Cesar Romero, shoots Jean Harlow ("the ultimate parasite"), shoots her mother, and then turns towards the audience and shoots her absent father, presumably as being any man there, or even as being the whole audience in a collective sense. There is a blackout, and Carmen's soft voice is heard singing:

the militant banana. . . .
 peeled his Chiquita sticker
 and split saying:
 I'm not no chiquita freak banana
 i gits browner and better
 sweeter and cheaper for de people!

Here we have feminist militancy which is Third World and political (Banana republics and wax-like Chiquita perfection) all graphically expressed in phallic terms with a great deal of dramatic pizzazz. Overripe bananas *are* browner, sweeter, cheaper, and more for "de people." They are also more Third World, more Asian, more Latin American that way.

And that, it would seem, is the clue to Hagedorn's work: Her sense of life, her joys, the highs that she creates are the highs of the people, specifically of Third World people, men and women, functioning in First World situations. They are constructed from people's music (Jimi Hendrix, Smokey Robinson), ferris wheels and glittering gold clothing ("Life's never been so fine"), sex, drugs ("Oh, the grandeur of it! "). But Hagedorn puts together a world of these things with such imagination, such verve and verbal adroitness, that the reader reaches an intellectual high. This may be people's poetry, but it is anything but common!