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In Pursuit of *The Gangster of Love*

E. San Juan, Jr.



The Gangster of Love. By Jessica Hagedorn. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

Jessica Hagedorn's first novel *Dogeaters* (1990) enjoyed a brief notoriety as an afterimage of the Marcos dictatorship interlude in Philippine history. This is the pretext to pose questions that have now occupied centerstage in the debate on multiculturalism, identity politics, the existence of a "common culture," nationalism, racialized ethnicities, and globalized borderlands—themes and motifs rehearsed in current postcolonial exchanges. The commentator Russell Jacoby (1995) censures postcolonial discourse for its obscure and solipsist grandiosity, its banal politics, its jargonized language, its tiresome and infantile self-obsession.

But certain questions are raised by Edward Said and others about the Orientalized construction of the Other by western knowledge-power, about the legitimacy of representations of indigenous and subaltern subjects and their capacity to speak for themselves, about the nature of agency and the possibilities of critique and transformation of world-historical inequalities. These questions—rather than purely formal questions of aesthetic form—are the framework around which I will structure my remarks on *The Gangster of Love*.

The Gangster of Love

The story is simple. Brought by her mother to the United States on the year Jimi Hendrix died, Raquel Rivera (together with her brother Voltaire, who eventually returns to the Philippines) grows up in the milieu of the sixties, meets a felicitously named partner Elvis Chang, and forms a band with him called "The Gangster of Love." She then befriends a versatile woman, Keiko Van Heller, and plunges into a series of somewhat *deja-vu*

adventures with her as well as with a host of other idiosyncratic characters like Marlon Rivera. She moves to New York City from California, then teams up with Jake Montano with whom she has a child, then goes through scenes of her mother's death, which is a turning point in her life. She then returns to Manila to visit her dying father (the concluding episode is named after him) whose philandering, an index of the patriarchal regime she is revolting against, led to the dissolution of the family. Does the ending imply a return of the "prodigal" daughter, a reconciliation, a bridging of the gap between the homeland that had just witnessed the turmoil of the February 1986 uprising against the U.S.-backed Marcos dictatorship and the metropolitan power that offered a refuge to the despot in Hawaii? Even if that is so, the dead Jimi Hendrix is not resurrected and the "Gangster of Love" remains defunct.

Part Four indeed carries the heading "To Return." But that rubric is undermined by the duplicitous meaning of the yo-yo, the toy which serves as an icon of Filipino ethnicity, which (Hagedorn instructs us) means not just "to return" but also "to cast out." At the beginning of Part One, she provides the slang definition of the yo-yo—a person regarded not only as stupid and ineffectual but also eccentric. More apropos of the narrative design of the novel—a bricolage interweaving of scenes using interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness, parody, lyric transcripts of memories and dreams, etc.—is the colloquial sense of yo-yo: fluctuating, variable. If the postcolonial text is usually categorized as a pastiche of styles and idiom, a montage of heterogeneous materials that syncopate linear plot with a polyphony of voices, tones, and rhythms, then Hagedorn's invention fits the bill.

Thus, we are in the presence of a classic postmodern artifice. The causal narrative of the modern realistic novel inherited from 19th-century bourgeoisie Europe is articulated with a picaresque mode reminiscent of feudal times, recurrent snapshots of grotesque characters symptomatic of an atomized industrial society, scenes of ribald festivity, sexual encounters, tableaux of recollections, quotations from the mass culture of Hollywood and the pop music industry, and introspective diarylike notations. This hybrid fabrication tries not only to capture the past and present but also intimate the emergence of the new, of future forms of life that escape the fatal cycle of the yo-yo and the reproduction of the seemingly eternal round of the "return of the repressed." This work attempts to render the experience of transition, of what it means to live in and through the collision of contradictory modes of production in a historically determinate social formation defined by the colonial nexus between the Philippines and the United States. That experience of uprooting, struggle for survival and reconstitution of "family" or some analogue of traditional consanguinity in an alien environment, and with it the construction of a new identity, is usually designated as the archetype of the postcolonial experience.

Anticolonial Novel

My own argument, however, is that this is not postcolonial but anticolonial, or if you like, counterhegemonic and oppositional in motive and telos. This is not the surface intent of the novel, of course. I call it the "political unconscious" of the text, which goes beyond the exposure of the spurious "civilizing mission" of Anglo-Saxon white supremacy. What makes Hagedorn's text transgressive is its supersession of the countercultural cult of the superstars of the Sixties and its alignment with the social memory of the Filipinos in California, as crystallized by the illness and death of Raquel's mother. In this itinerary of exile, the narrative begins to assume a modality of resistance to the commodifying power of late-capitalist culture and ideology. One may even suggest that its "unconscious" project, sublated in the variegated texture of the prose, is to mobilize the submerged and hidden resources of indigenous, anarchic, subaltern forms of life for a collective goal of popular-national liberation. This goal is indivisible with sexual and gender emancipation.

To illustrate my thesis, let me point to the fundamental contradiction in the details. Rocky Rivera, a Filipina woman of mixed ancestry, seeks to chart her life in a society dominated by the rational rigor of business and individualist competition. What is her point of departure? Food and language. While the temper of postmodernist art is to refuse universals and exalt the particulars, we discern a fascination with spatial ordering that becomes a surrogate means of cognitive totalizing. There seems to be a fetishism of place (a tropic geography of culture, moods, and enigmatic personalities) that tries to compensate for the secular uniformities of industrialized society. Rocky knows that a rupture has taken place—her body and psyche have been transported in time and space—but pretends that it hasn't happened: her mother and relatives cook and eat the native food, talk the same language (now exoticized or defamiliarized), and carry on their customary ways, with some minor adjustments. But all the same this pretense is grounded on the recognition of the truth of separation, of distance; the brother's return confirms this. I locate this fetishism in the "Prologue," an epitomizing testimony which celebrates the sheer incongruities, absurd juxtapositions, seemingly gratuitous coexistence of idioms, lifestyles, artifacts and that belong to different geological strata of Philippine social life:

There are rumors. Surrealities. Malacañang Palace slowly sinking into the fetid Pasig River, haunted by unhappy ghosts. Female ghosts. Infant ghosts. What is love? A young girl asks.

Rumors. Malicious gossip, treacherous tsismis. Blah blah blah. Dire predictions, arbitrary lust. The city hums with sinister music. Scandal, in-

nuendo, half-truths, bald-faced lies. Adulterous love affairs hatched, coups d'état plotted. A man shoots another man for no apparent reason. A jealous husband beats his wife for the umpteenth time. The Black Nazarene collapses in a rice paddy, weeping.

I love you, someone sings on the omnipresent radio.
Soldiers in disguise patrol the countryside.
Love, love, love. Love is in the air.
Background, foreground, all around.

But what is love? A young girl asks.
A fatal mosquito bite, the nuns warn her.

Rumors. Eternal summers, impending typhoons. The stink of fear unmistakable in the relentless, sweltering heat (Hagedorn 1996, 1).

This opening landscape is a multimedia composite of elements with dissonant matrices and contexts. Location is not random nor contingent but deliberate. Organized around a metonymic axis are the seat of government; the Pasig River that meanders through Manila, the urban center, news of domestic violence carried by newspapers and radio, the religious icon of the Black Nazarene suffering an accident, the presence of the military in the countryside, and so on. This collage is cut through by a refrain, a deflated query about love. What sutures this series is the metaphoric cluster of "rumors" and the extremities of the climate. How to make sense of this seemingly unintelligible conjuncture of permanent features of the natural surroundings, of ubiquitous rumors whose reverberation is punctuated with violence, and religious codes trying to put a lid on the explosive mixture? This crux, this bundle of contradictions, is what the novel will try to resolve on an imaginary plane. In other words, Hagedorn will attempt to grasp the deformed, uneven, fractured social landscape of the Philippines with the apparatus of a self-reflexive aestheticizing consciousness, one which is itself a product of the phenomenon of imperial violence it is trying to master.

In my opinion, however, her attempt fails. In the section "Tropical Depression" toward the end of the novel, Hagedorn restages the landscape with a revealing dramatic variation: the appearance of a mythical Black Virgin functions to sublimate all the incongruities and discordances, permitting the force of Nature to normalize the phenomena of crisis. This occurs at the time of her return after her mother's death, an event signifying the loss of the preOedipal anchor or center for her self-identifying explorations. On the terrain of chaos and unpredictability emerges a unifying and centralizing image. After the August typhoon subsides, the city is ravaged by epidemics:

Strange scenes of violence and grieving occur without warning. Grown men weep uncontrollably. Women run amok, hacking at everyone in their path with any weapon they can find—bolo knives, scissors. Infants

are born with webbed feet. The general mood of despair is alleviated by frequent sightings of the Black Virgin. She wanders the countryside, seeking to comfort those who cannot be comforted. A young woman wearing a blond wig has herself crucified in a public ceremony. Her spectacle of sacrifice draws thousands of believers, showy penitents flogging their own, mildewed flesh with dainty, custom-made whips. Blood flows, the only vibrant color in this black sea of waterlogged depression. In Manila, phosphorescent crocodiles and moray eels lurk in the aquatic ruins of a submerged mega-shopping mall on Epifanio de los Santos (290).

The sight of the flooded megamall on the highway where the February 1986 revolution took place may suggest either the futile and inchoate level of industrialization, symptom of the inadequacy of the Filipino comprador bourgeoisie; or the irresistible power of the past, the archaic, that which escapes rational and systematic control. In any case, the presence of the Black Virgin may be interpreted as symbolic of the enduring hold of mythical and magical thinking in the neocolony amidst a rationalizing and secularizing business environment. Ironically, this ruse is available precisely because Weberian disenchantment and commodity-fetishism have not completely dominated, something that escapes the narrator's avant-garde sensibility and secretly assists its desire to ground the imagination in mutual and reciprocal recognition. I think that is the point of the meeting at the end of the novel.

Uneven Development

On the level of political significance, this staging of hybridity and "in-between" confluence of signs, objects, and happenings signifies uneven development, the most fundamental characteristic of the kind of experience shared by subjects in most colonial formations. While the preponderant number of characters may be viewed as walking cyborgs or amphibians, two characters function as microcosms of unevenness: Keiko and Marlon. This unevenness prevails in the sociocultural level as an effect of the diverse modes of production (and its social relations) co-existing together. Underlying the complex social formation of a peripheral, dependent region, we find the juxtaposition of various precapitalist or archaic modes of production, the tributary or feudal and artisanal ones together with assorted capitalist modes, the most visible of which are mercantile or trading and comprador business. Absent of course is an industrial fraction—that is, the space of the transnational corporations, as well as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. What is dominant, however, is a combination of the bureaucratic and comprador capitalisms to which everything else—semifeudal and pettybourgeois operations and class fractions—is subordinate. This

synchronic combination produces specific effects on the diachronic plane which explain the concrete forms taken by the juridico-political institutions and ideological-cultural practices of all classes.

It is within this perspective of unevenness and overdetermination that we can grasp the singularity of the literary/aesthetic mode of production represented by Hagedorn's work. In spite of the fact that Hagedorn produces chiefly for a First World audience and more narrowly for a limited multicultural audience in urban centers, the practice she exemplifies is defined by the uneven social formation that is precisely the condition of possibility for her kind of writing.

Postcolonial orthodoxy mandates that essentialism or any quest for roots be proscribed in the same breath as syncretism and hybridity are valorized and made obligatory. Gayatri Spivak, for example, congratulates herself for reopening the "epistemic fracture of imperialism without succumbing to a nostalgia for lost origins" (272) and urges us to attend to the "archives of imperialist governance." Refusing to do such a hermeneutic task, Hagedorn instead presents an anatomy of the Filipino colonized formation as an archaeology of multifarious signs alluding to several periods or stages of the development of the capitalist world-system. I don't mean here a recapitulation of the evolutionary phases of the transition from feudal or precapitalist structures to modern industrial capitalism. What seems to transcend the binary opposites of the politics of blame and the politics of compassion—for Sara Suleri, the "commonality of loss" that masks colonizer and colonized as complicitous binary opposites—is precisely the novel's drive to curb the vertiginous excess of heterogeneity by questioning its feasibility for the Filipino subject-on-trial. That would mean perpetuating uneven development, even glorifying the hybrid and syncretic wretchedness produced by global capitalism and its local agencies.

I have already noted the text's offering of the postmodernist options to Rocky Rivera's search for a community that would substitute for the extended family her mother left in the neocolony: the first is Keiko with her chameleonic masks—"one day she's Japanese and black, the next day she's Dutch and Hawaiian" (44). She mimics the role of the performative self, as in some kind of unintended parody that harbors a half-serious and half-mocking resonance: "Yesterday I was Josephine Baker....Tonight I'm Edith Sitwell, and Rocky's Marpessa Dawn. We can be them forever. Anytime we want" (117). The second option is Marlon Rivera, a Filipino gay who claims to have played "Elvis Presley's happy-go-lucky sidekick in *Blue Hawaii* and also as a nonspeaking waiter in a Chinese restaurant in Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*." In the section "Film Noir," Marlon Rivera, who rechristened himself after seeing the film *The Wild One*, proves to be the only character who grasps his niece's implacable obsession: "She was reinventing herself moment to moment, day by day" (87). Rocky Rivera can only make sense of the craziness of Isabel L'Ange and oddities like her by juxtaposing them

with movie stars and celebrity films of the past: Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Dorothy Dandridge, Anna May Wong. This is self-identification achieved by metonymy and metaphor, the effect of linguistic mechanisms working on commercial, mass-produced culture in the United States and substituting for kinship and community devalued in the periphery.

Mass-Mediated Images

We are in the realm of simulations and mass-mediated images, a space like New York which, aside from being a real place, is for Rocky "a source of intense inspiration, a daily barrage of worthy movie moments" (98). The move from San Francisco to New York signals a shift from the mother/kin-centered milieu that mediates between the semifeudal periphery and the core metropolis to the arena of anomic individualism, between the locus of ascription and the site of performance and social action. Before the second migration eastward, the breakup of Rocky's relation with Elvis Chang prompts Rocky's rejection of the two options as incapable of dealing with pain:

May be I'd rather fuck in my imagination. I allow myself to run wild and wallow in my own private kitsch. I dream of hermaphrodite angels with bronze skin floating alongside the naked, bleeding perfection of my tormented Saint Sebastian....My mother's right. I am just like everyone else in my family. I believe in heaven and hell, the pleasures of denial, and the rewards of sin....I enjoy this only because it's forbidden (129-30).

Whatever the seductions of border crossings and other boundary violations, the protean pleasures of the cyborg, and the free-floating hubris of indeterminacy afforded by consumerism and the liberal marketplace, Rocky Rivera knows that it will be an ordeal to shed the markers of subordination and dependency. The stigma of Otherness persists. She cannot put aside "unbearable questions" such as "What's Filipino? What's authentic? What's in the blood?" Before she moves east and separates from her mother, Rocky meditates on this reprise of the first uprooting:

I am unable to leave, overcome by helplessness in the face of family, blood, and the powerful force of my own reluctant love. Family sickness, homesickness. Manila, our dazzling tropical city of memory. The English language confuses me. What is at the core of that subtle difference between *homesick* and *nostalgic*, for example?... "Ties to the spirit world, fierce pride, wounded pride, thirst for revenge, melodrama, fatalism, weeping and wailing at the graveside. We're blessed with macabre humor and dancing feet—a floating nation of rhythm and blues," Voltaire answers, repeating what this old guy known as the Carabao Kid used to say: "We're our own worst enemy" (57-58).

This passage reveals both the allure of imperial exoticism and the impulse of critique, skepticism and sentimentality, even the presence of the Manichean duality once described by Frantz Fanon in the period of the Algerian revolution. Evocation of the neocolony as the archetypal locus of incongruities and dissonances, a microcosm of opposites like the sadomasochistic figure of St. Sebastian, may be a tactic of eliding the discrepancy between the homeland and the place of exile. This may be called for by the yo-yo trope that seeks to define the method and design of the whole narrative. But the tactic is not an endorsement of postcolonial multiplicity or "interactive mutuality" between master and servant. It is, I think, an attempt to transcend the symbolic economy of fetishism that denies what is absent and by that token affirms it.

A telling instance of the novel's allegorical rendering of conflated modes of production may be found in the treatment of Carabao Kid, a figure as legendary as the grandfather who invented the yo-yo. The section describing Rocky's encounter with the Carabao Kid is a recollection that occurs after the birth of Venus, Rocky's child. The Carabao Kid links the first generation of Filipino farm workers, the Manongs (whom Carlos Bulosan wrote about in *America is in the Heart* [1948]), and the post-1965 influx of professionals. He was then considered the "unofficial spiritual leader" of the Filipino arts movement in San Francisco, whose emblem was the water buffalo. Even though the Carabao Kid was leading civil-rights demonstrations and rallies against the Vietnam War, he was still a migrant worker (he dies before shrimping in Louisiana); his residence, Watsonville, evokes the anti-Filipino riots of the thirties. Rocky asserts at the end that she doesn't need him anymore—for her, he symbolizes the mawkish sentimentalism, humility, and need to suffer that afflicts the Filipino sensibility—so that the snapshot of the community at the end of Part Two turns out to be the sacrifice of the father at the altar of the preOedipal mother. We confront here the pettybourgeois Filipino of the sixties and seventies using a pretext for dissociating themselves from the working-class struggles of Bulosan, Chris Mensalvas, and Philip Vera Cruz. Hagedorn's tribute to this generation is instructive as a gesture of solidarity and of demarcation:

Ah, the Carabao Kid and what he taught us. *How to be a F(P)ilipino*. Voltaire's idealized father figure. And mine too, I suppose. He was this Pinoy poet from Watsonville with the sleepy, wise face of a water buffalo, a man totally obsessed with the Philippines who'd never been there. In hushed tones, he'd describe the fiery sunsets, swaying coconut trees, and white sand beaches, sounding like some romantic tourist brochure. Kinda ironic and laughable, except the Kid thought it was funny too. "Oh yeah, sister, I forgot—I've never been *there*." America was here: vast, inhospitable, and harsh. The Philippines was there: distant, lush, soulful, and sexy. He made constant jokes out of what

he called his "carabao dreaming" and wrote a series of self-deprecating haikus called "Existential Pinoy Paralysis," questioning his fears about returning to the homeland. "Maybe I just don't want to be disappointed," went one of the more quotable lines of his poem "Maybe." Another ditty was called "EXpat vs. EXile." The fact that Voltaire and I had actually been born in the Philippines had earned us his lasting admiration (199).

This portrait explodes the model of hybridity as one based on a fabric of fetishes, half-truths and stereotypes. The dreaming carabao cannot distance itself from the illusion that the Philippines and the United States are on equal footing, autonomous, geopolitically independent from each other. References to the colonial situation abound (one example is the scene with the Puerto Rican taxi driver Eduardo Zuñiga). The sections "Lost in Translation" seem like satiric spoofs on the postcolonial idea of translation as a way of negotiating the distance between oppressed and oppressor, a gap acerbically brought home by the "Joke Not So Lost in Translation": "Why did the Filipino cross the road? Because he thought America was on the other side" (70).

The enunciation of apparent similarities and affinities as deceptive may be Hagedorn's warning that postcolonial erasure of conflict may be a disservice to people of color, not praise for their adaptive resourcefulness. Crossing the "road" from the Philippines to the United States is an act of cognitive mapping of present-day neocolonialism, also called globalization. For Rocky, the symbolic yo-yo enacts this mapping in terms of an easy compromise between exile and return. She visits the Philippines in 1992 to say goodbye to her father whose terminal cancer he has endured for at least 10 years. The yo-yo as "jungle weapon" also reaffirms a certain native ingenuity and resilience that distinguishes his life under western surveillance and dictat. This implicit nationalism, however, finds itself sublimated in the themes of youth revolt and the artist's education and struggle to forge an identity outside of the ethnic/racial and class determinations of her origin.

The Jimi Hendrix Emblem

The figure of Jimi Hendrix finally offers us the key to specify the project of this anti-postcolonial text—if one may so categorize it in its generic impulse. Hendrix (together with Janis Joplin and later Jim Morrison) may be construed as emblems for the rock festival of the sixties, the occasion providing the experience of community that the music expressed aesthetically. This experience is a renewal, if not recreation, of trust, of the sense of possibility, the harmony between public and private life, the sense of honesty and authenticity. Simon Frith comments on the value of this event for its audience: "Rock performance...came to mean not pleasing an audience (pop

style) nor representing it (folk style) but, rather, displaying desires and feelings rawly, as if to a lover or friend. The appeal...of Jimi Hendrix rested on the sense that his apparently uninhibited pursuit of pleasures was on show, for all of us to see and share" (66). Hendrix was one of the cult stars who proclaimed a utopia without struggle, founded on the immediacy of pleasure and solidarity. In this context, Rocky Rivera's band "The Gangster of Love" seeks to imitate that aesthetic, though now informed with a somewhat cynical toughness and punk 's psychedelic playfulness: "Congo today, money tomorrow" (245).

In "Our Music Lesson #1" in the first Part, Hendrix is worshipped as a historical charismatic figure. Rocky salutes him with "flames bursting out your skull. Salvation funky. Redemption funky." But here Rocky also confesses a certain distance. When Hendrix begs her to "Fuck me, then. Save my soul," Rocky retorts: "I know all about you. I was fourteen when you died, but I'm not stupid" (77). She would not—as she puts it—"suck King Kong's dick " to get to him. In "Our Music Lesson #2," Hendrix's ironic pathos is "appropriated and dissolved in 'Pilipino blood,' so that his "LSD-laced, corny cosmi-comic mythology" becomes indigenized, so to speak. For Hagedorn's generation, Hendrix represents the young martyr dying young, the doomed outsider who performs the ritual sacrifice to propitiate the gods of order. After Hendrix's death (at which point Hagedorn's narration begins), Todd Gitlin observes the decline of youth counterculture into the privatized monadic egocentrism of John Lenon: "Woodstock Nation's symbols peeled away from their Aquarian meanings and became banal with popularity" (1987, 429). In a sense, Hagedorn's novel is one long elegy to the demise of rock-culture's internationalism as a strategy for overthrowing U.S./Western imperial hegemony over the oppressed and exploited masses.

The Return of Rocky Rivera

After fifteen years, Rocky Rivera dismantles her band and bids farewell to the illusions of the sixties. "We F(P)ilipinos can imitate, but this audience [in Zamboanga, a city in southern Philippines] prefers the real thing" (245). Considered "postmodern, postcolonial punks," Rocky's band had to flee the irate natives, "condemned to exile as second-rate, western imperialist, so-called artists," seeking refuge in the "safety of Motown memory" (246). Deprived of that *ersatz* community, Rocky Rivera, now a mother, recuperates the memory of her mother's life before her move to the United States—a labor of unfolding the genealogy of her deracination so as to derive meaning from that process. It is an act of constituting experience that is coeval with the narrative (for Hagedorn's reflection on the substance of this experience, see Aguilar-San Juan 1994).

When she returns to the Philippines, Rocky Rivera is no longer just an isolated individual. She becomes a collective presence, holding in a composite and synthesizing trope the dispersed and fragmented lives of generations of Filipinos whose chief claim to distinction is (to paraphrase the Carabao Kid) their unrelenting pursuit of happiness and their equally inexhaustible capacity to suffer. We are already beyond the postcolonial economy of complicity and guilt, of narcissism and paranoia, of Manichean dualism and the metaphysics of difference and ambivalent identity that Hagedorn syncopated in the adventures of her group, "The Gangster of Love." There is no nostalgia for a return of an idyllic and innocent past. There is no easy route to Arcadia or a remote classless utopia. We are in the zone of accounting for difference as a symptom of unequal power relations between the hegemonic imperial power and the colonized, this time transcoded into the decline of patriarchal authority whose emblem is the dying Francisco Rivera) and the anticipated empowerment of the "mothers." This eventuality takes place in the "weak links" of uneven development, precisely where the layers of temporalities do not coincide and dovetail, where ruptures and breaks and discontinuities persist in reproducing conflicts, asymmetries and discords that open up the space for grassroots popular intervention. This novel presents us with an allegory of how such a space can materialize in the interstices of alienation, displacement, and defeats.

The carnival of the dispossessed and the conquered is just beginning.

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