In both Danger and Beauty (1993)—reprinted from her Dangerous Music (1971) and Pet Food and Tropical Apparitions (1981)—and in the anthology of Asian American Fiction, Charlie Chan Is Dead (1993), which she edited, Jessica Hagedorn has promoted the image of herself as "performer." Particular stress is put repeatedly on her role as founder/leader of, and chief lyricist for, her West Coast Gangster Choir which she claims to miss now in New York despite knowing that "we will eventually regroup in this scaryplace." Her publicity photos (chin defiantly high; spiky hair; occasionally, motorcycle jacket) clones that outlaw pose.

Philippine literature has often tried—with difficulty born of hybrid, sometimes conflicting heritages—to define the "Filipino experience." Only gradually has the overseas Filipino experience been attempted. As mestiza abroad, Hagedorn’s contributions to crosscultural enrichment have been noteworthy and complex, although the danger is always present that, especially to non-Filipinos, the few examples will be misunderstood as representing the 70 million Filipinos at home and the several million around the world. Her own crisis of identity is profoundly apparent in the visions of Metro Manila as Sodom and, now, of New York City as Gomorrah. From Hagedorn’s piecemeal memoirs or from autobiographical elements visible in her alter egos, one can begin to sense ambivalences conveyed directly in the title, Gangster of Love (1996), as well as indirectly from the novel’s "body language." Francine Prose (New York Times Book Review, 15 September 1996) worries that "there are moments when her jazzy rhythms, quick cuts and shotgun delivery seem to suffer from a literary form of attention deficit disorder," though Prose does try to praise this hyperactivity as brave resistance to linear narration. Such experimentation may also be symptomatic of
author/narrator's wandering through wasteland expanses, driven by the felt presence of so many absences. Equally, one can recognize in that body language the importance of performance, as a demand for definition beyond mere critical recognition of achievement: the need for self-stimulation from crowds, themselves vibrating hopefully/hopelessly under waves of electronic sonic booms, pallid imitations of the Bigger Bang of cosmic creativity.

Like her character Raquel/Rocky, Jessica came to the States with her Filipina mother, abandoning father Hagedorn to his business interests and other distractions/dalliances. If the term “gangsta rap” hadn’t already existed, for romanticizing violent resistance to other people’s violence (make love, not war), Hagedorn would have invented some such term for self-justifying youthful indulgence in the face of family/society’s expectations. Rebel? Outlaw? No longer trendy enough. But whatever term might be substituted for “gangster” rejection of civil conventions and codes, the words of Elvis Chang in this novel summarize the attitude of the sanctified drop-out: “Whoever lives by breaking the rules, lives.” Jessica already resented the standard imposition of Western literature (Hawthorne, Melville) on her early years in the Philippines and seemed embarrassed by being a Catholic in a country so predominantly measured by Church rules. Like her character Rocky, she identified with the recorded “outlandish, funkified beauty” of American rock stars such as Jimi Hendrix who, in turn, hoped to be identified with the “black liberation movement.” By 1963, her mother had moved with her to San Francisco (she graduated from high school in 1967), in the midst of student riots and Third World immigration growth.

Poetry as Outburst

Poetry as outburst came as easily as the clanging of chords on electric guitar; and Orientalist Kenneth Rexroth helped her into print. These were still the years of the Beat Generation—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg—who refused to be part of the so-called Gray Flannel Suit corporate mentality and, later, the military-industrial complex. (See especially John Tytell’s Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation, 1976.) At Columbia, William Burroughs turned them onto the “joys” of hashish and LSD, further “transcendentalized” by free-form, spontaneous poetic “readings,” supposed counterparts to the expressionistic creation of jazz improvisations. As inspiration
proved to be inconstant and too rarely rich in nuance and as danger-
ous psychedelic drugs became illegal, the most notorious "pot poets" decided that Beat must mean not deadbeat but beatific and, as pseudo-Buddhists, they began to sublimate their intended meanings through borrowed Zen glossaries and rituals. (J. D. Salinger, recognizing that none of them seemed to understand Zen or to be capable of its strict disciplines, mocked them in his own fiction, and withdrew into silence away from self-described drop-outs who actually enjoyed the role of paid entertainers at hanging gardens of corporate Babble-on. They looked to "radical chic" patrons such as Leonard Bernstein to applaud their "independence" and sometimes co-opt their ethical relativism.

Although Hagedorn seems immune from the spiritual pretentious-
ness of the Beat writers at their worst, she was young enough during their zenith years to be influenced by the movement's enjoyment of the forbidden and the ease of their serial discard/reinvention of self (rapid change in "hairdos") as onstage spokespersons for the everchanging voice of current songs. It is one of the ironies of literary history that, having proved her rightful ascendance as a Filipina/Philippine-American writer with Dogeaters (1990) and having used that marketable reputation to edit a commercial academic success such as Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction (1993), she still required reprinting of her less mature work, Dangerous Music and Pet Food and Tropical Apparitions.

Whether any of these early lyrics might ever serve a purpose other than self-advertisement would depend, of course, on what music was provided to match them (in The Gangster of Love this becomes the basic source of a running quarrel between Elvis Chang and Rocky: who really leads the band, the instrumentalist or the lyricist?); and would depend also on the voice or mood of the singer, along with the attitude of the audience (beyond the group-flicking of Bics)—all these are missing. Many of the poems therefore, without a resonating context, seem disembodied. Even so, the lyrics are superior to almost all her little dadaist narratives, soft-porn scenes, on the edge of desperate sadism—an embarrassing bag of grosseries. Both Jimi Hendrix (in a fable/fantasy) and Milagros, Rocky's mother, say to her on different occasions, "Why you try so hard to be a man?" That is the performance role that the author herself likes to project in her formal photos: as tough as Pet Food episodes of voyeurism pretending intimacy: non-living tableaus in which delusion has become an addiction. Hagedorn as gun moll? Lyricist of Mickey Mouse music?
Surfer waiting for waves that never come? Depravity offered as colorfulness and therefore sleazy?

Yo-yo (a Filipino invention): an inertial toy, as in “walking the dog.” Available for referring to Filipinos as party animals—as a result of the unappeasable hunger left in the marrow of bones after centuries of colonialism and feudalism; referring also to the ease of assimilation within the master’s plans, or at least of imitation (ironically, this “passing” marks less a struggle for equality or recognition than a noncompeting weariness, a despairing wish: just tell me what you want me to be, and I’ll be it...Becoming grotesque in the process of seeking dignity. No wonder Filipinos eat so much and so often. It’s not just the result of wartime impoverishment but of all the confusions-by-deprivation; and no wonder (as in Dogeaters) their hunger sometimes escapes control, so that they eat one another...Gangsters of love.

Rhythm and blues become the surface matter of Hagedorn’s novel because, answering a personal obsession, she must have thought that she could provide authentic insight into Rocky’s similar preoccupation. That transference works both ways. Rocky is probably speaking for some element in Jessica when she says, “Rock’n’roll’s such a boy’s club”—meaning that it expresses machismo but also that a woman has an equal right to join that hard-charging club. Equality has often been confused with interchangeability, in gender, in race, in power-distribution; and if males in a given culture or profession expect admiration for their reckless use of sexuality, then women may declare some universal right to the same degree of irresponsibility, without realizing that in the name of getting attention, they have merely reproduced the vices of the predominant gender and thereby devalued a divine gift and their own uniqueness. That self-inflicted mutilation can find instructive analogies wherever a colonized people think it necessary to rise in personal as well as public regard by, at first, collaborating with the abusive power structure and then replacing it nominally by revolt while actually replicating colonial abuses through a cosmetic change of master/change of hairdos. (The Marcos years epitomize, without exhausting, this tendency to take on the worst attributes of one’s enemies/masters. The Gangster scenes of Imelda Marcos on trial in New York cleverly intimate the debased values shared by Madame and the bakya galleries.)

It is possible that Hagedorn intuited some of the self-destructive aspects of excessive sexual desire (reinforced by rock music’s intensity) from the experience of her friend Oscar Hijuelos’ novel, The
Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love (1989) after it was made into a movie. Hollywood emphasized only the unfortunate, frustrated love of the younger Cuban-in-exile for the woman he was forced to leave behind. That situation's pathos is quietly played out and whatever vitality is necessarily missing because of banality and the risk of sentimentality is offset by masterful drumming and dancing. But Hijuelos' novel is much more concerned with the older brother's unflagging devotion to his seemingly endless (and purposeless) sexual self-abuse. Machismo is mocked by his tediously repetitive masturbat-ion, until even he tires of his mindless addiction to maleness.

The Gangster of Love

Rocky Rivera, in The Gangster of Love, asserts her right to be as liberated and self-expressive as any man; but slowly recognizes the scars carried by a sexual outlaw. In her youth she rebels against Catholic advisories favoring chastity, although along with her mother Milagros—who is capable of dancing on tabletops during her honeymoon but not of forgiving her husband's adulteries—Raquel prefers imagined romance to actual sex. Somewhere in "a young girl's body" was still a "withered nun," so that "the less I was touched, the better." She can define love as anxiety and longing, desire and regret, because in fact her relationship with Elvis Chang doesn't earn her the appreciation she needs as a lyricist, and because Elvis is basically remote, not romantic. Sly Stone is willing to be her surrogate lover; but as a drug pusher, he is at best an avenue for her to "feel high," rather than to rise. Only Viet veteran Jake Montano, father of her child, shows her the kind of caring that she needs: not multi-decibel sound; not drugs; just real and lasting respect, for her, not just her body. In her own way, Hagedorn helps define, with Hijuelos, the deadly force in misdirected "love."

What of the sociopolitical application of the old folk warning: be careful what you wish for—you may be granted it? Many of the dark details in Dogeaters portray Metro Manila as a modern Sodom. In Gangster Hagedorn pursues a longstanding joke turned sour: Why did the Filipino cross the street? Because he thought America was on the other side. The United States has sold that image of its being the ultimate Mega Mall/the material Mecca. San Francisco and New York City, expected to be sanctuaries for fantasied escape, turn out to be Gomorrah. The wonderfully wild world of pop music is a drug
unsuccessfully masking unworthiness and, yes, such evil that when Sly is shot to death after a drug deal sours, it is hard to feel surprise or sorrow. The connection between drugs and music preceded the Beat Generation: only the hairdos have changed. In 1996, while Hagedorn’s novel was in press, “gangsta rapper” Tupac Shakur was shot dead in Las Vegas. Biggie Small’s murder shortly afterwards bordered on copycat comedy. Others, hip-hopping on The Edge, have followed. Do Hagedorn’s two novels simply recapitulate what her youthful lyrics already signaled? In “Natural Death” a Cuban refugee seems satisfied with dreams of cosmetic splendor, though warned about abandoned bodies in saran wrap on a California beach. Yet the Philippines remembered (“Life is very cheap”) in “Sometimes” is equally less than desirable. A plague on both your houses, then? Sorry, there is no better place to hide: welcome to hell? Is the only defense against complete insanity to be found in passionate outcries of song (as “Sorcery” and “Easter Sunday” argue)? Do these paired novels represent yo-yo cynicism, with no yearning at all after yin-yang?

In her introduction to Danger and Beauty, Hagedorn said of the eighties, “During this period I also write a novel, Dogeaters, which I later describe as a ‘love letter to my motherland: a fact and a fiction born of rage, shame, and pride...’ and most certainly desire.” Could she say the same thing about Gangster of Love? Is it too a love letter—to the Great American Bazaar which provided, to her at least, power through print and reprint and maybe a screenplay and, who knows, a top-ten record some day? What might she say to those attracted to the obscenities in her work, the thick-skin nonrelationships, the perversions living off thrills, the confusion of pleasure with joy? What is the going price of voyeuristic popularity? What would she say to anyone arguing that the function of great art is to instill a state of grace?

In the annual “family spirit” issue of USA Weekend, Nov. 22–24, 1996, she adds to the mystery by presenting another face instead of the carnivorous one in publicity photos. This is an open face, forming a triptych of contentment and mutual enfolding and genuine promise with her young daughters, Paloma and Esther. Not a Jose Garcia Villa face: have come, am here; I made it, you didn’t. This one is neither somber nor shaken, but solid. This is not “outstanding woman of color” portrait, as in the series of icons in the Filipinas ads carried in Philippine-American papers. (Just as well: melanin after all is only skin-deep; and color-coding, however intended, is always inhibiting, insultingly reductive.) But maybe this is just a spare
face and will never appear on a dust jacket. Ask the novel itself. Yo-yo? Or yin-yang?

The principals in *Dog eaters* never really find closure for their unhappiness, whether in the conventional hills of guerrilla-land or abroad; and at first reading the same seems true in *Gangster of Love*. In a period of history loudly proclaimed as working out the theme of “crossing boundaries,” East and West provide mirror images of the same sad truth: barriers exist in society because we impose them on ourselves, on our intelligence, on our affections, on inherited wisdom. The postwar Republic was not genuinely postcolonial. Filipinos simply learned to be their own brutal masters. Millions of overseas Filipinos, whether enslaved as ill-treated, racially inferior workers in foreign societies or, as in the case of Raquel cum Rocky, addicted to the host-culture’s insatiable greed for ego success. This is not liberation; it is not even service; it is servitude. Dreams of boundless freedom can dizzy the unwary, distract, delude, destroy. In the meantime they can also provide a ghastly attraction: music can literally deafen; sensationalism, deaden the senses.

Is there a measure of maturity anywhere in *Gangster of Love*; a clear sense not of agenda but of transpolitical mission, enough to warrant continuing faith in the rule of divine love? Even in Gomorrah, according to Scripture, negotiations with God ended with a vague possibility that a few good souls—ten or less—might be among the masses of the damnable. Though all would die together regardless, their differences could be sorted out in the afterlife. What would the nuns who instructed Raquel say about Rocky’s “band” pictured on Hagedorn’s East-West, Fil-American murals of dynamic demonism? Could they argue that some of Gomorrah’s inhabitants might yet be saved from Gehenna?

Milagros Rivera, in true Filipino style, feeds the body as if feeding the soul. Her lumpia-express catering service is more than a means of self-support in San Francisco. The food is “home” for the homesick and the homeless. Rocky’s elder brother Voltaire, though sometimes lost to black moods, welcomes derelicts and other street people without condescension and eventually he repatriates himself. Uncle Marlon, former bit player in American movies, stays in touch with earthy reality through gardening and making adobo. His kindness toward the elderly widowed neighbor, Isabel L’Ange, structures both their lives. Auntie Fely Cruz, “bewildered immigrant in perpetual cultural shock,” seems untalented and ordinary when compared with rock musicians Elvis and Sly; but while these latter are
bent on battering themselves into insensibility, Fely is a nurse warmly extending her sense of family to those in need. Even Keiko Van Heller, an unstable *hapa* (mixed Scots-Dutch-Japanese-Hawaiian), occasionally reveals flashes of being better than the celebrity/hustler which is her usual "hairdo." Arnaldo Ruiz, her intermittent husband, serves as a kind of anchor whenever she drifts too far, too fast (her famous out-of-focus photographs typify the graffiti on the inner walls of her self, which an adoring public perceives only as her royal "mystery.") When Elvis and Rocky move from coast to coast by truck, Keiko and Arnaldo drive that distance by deluxe car instead, in order to see the "real America" (but unfortunately this heartland is never shown to the reader). All of these persons lack perfection; yet they are human, not humanoid, and at their best seem offered more to be admired than mocked. Wise, protective old-timer, the Carabao Kid (reminiscent of people in Carlos Bulosan or Bienvenido Santos) would be a flowering growth in any wasteland. Though the Kid has never been in the Philippines, the Philippines so to speak has always been in him; and Rocky considers him a father figure.

Most significant, as a testament to the author's intent, is Rocky’s marriage to Jake, the father of their child Venus. His profession is less flamboyant than those connected with the onstage antics of guitarist, drummer, or vocalist. Yet his principal task, as sound engineer, is to regulate, suppress, and balance the sounds of all those others so that music can rise beyond screaming exhibitionism, and performance become interiorized and so surpass/outlive the fractional intensity experienced by Beat instantaneity.

Early in *The Gangster of Love* Raquel asks Voltaire what it means to be Filipino. "What’s authentic? What’s in the blood?" He wisecracks that "We’re blessed with macabre humor and dancing feet—a floating nation of rhythm and blues"—surely a superficial, if not unexpected generalization. Later it’s suggested that Filipinos love to suffer. The entire novel, in fact, toys with multiple definitions/examples of Filipinism and especially the Philippine experience in America. Whatever composite image might be discoverable in that process, family must be its matrix: *family extended* beyond blood lines and even ethnic identity. The band as surrogate family fails, as the cyclic, broken relationships between Rocky and her lovers implies. Continuity/stability is established when Rocky refuses to abort Venus and when she marries Jake. When Voltaire repatriates himself, the absence of details after his instinctive return to Manila makes it impossible to judge the wisdom of his decision. Perhaps that fact only
helps illustrate the possibility that the Philippines—its idealized traditions raised as (unreachable?) goals—is in the heart, as it seems to be with the Carabao Kid. Rocky herself is "repatriated"/redeemed when she attends the dying days of her mother, in America, and of her father in the islands. As a parent herself now, Rocky does not have to play-act love; she can will it; mean it. She is needed. It is love-beyond-duty, beyond-custom, which brings her to the bedside of Milagros and, later, to her father. Unless such scenes are designed merely as melodramatic expressions of sentimentality, they demand to be interpreted in conjunction with the birth of Venus, the choice of Jake above Elvis, the grace of goodness in concealed dimensions of so many other persons (such as her old yaya Emy, carrier of the collective unconscious). What else could be on the author's mind and the minds of such characters when they ask one another, so often: would you really want to grow old in New York? would you really want to die in the States? Yet, dying is principally what they have been doing, in Gomorrah.

Family in all its variations is seen as more central to defining Filipinism than any nationalism based exclusively (see Epifanio San Juan) on Political or Economic Man. If this perception has any validity at all, then those reviews of Gangster which praise its relevance to universal issues of identity crises in our globalized village are avoiding the human particulars that always justify meditation on the truth of fiction. And other reviewers, seized like children by the light-and-sound shows of their own pop-rock outings, may be directing their readers to precisely what Hagedorn did not want to be her most mature "take" on the music/human industry.

**A Novel of Deep Affection**

Jill Gidmark's comments on The Gangster of Love (Pilipinas, Spring 1996) are exceptional inasmuch as she at least can see that, beyond its function as exposé, it is "substantially a novel of deep affection," in spite of everything (as true love, entertaining forgiveness, always moves beyond judgment). However, she pauses at the threshold of realizing what differentiates the tender portraits of Rocky's family and the sorry attitudes of those with eyes on the wrong prizes, who therefore are rejected (or who withhold themselves). An article in that same issue, "Structures of Imperialism and the Exploitation of Women and Children in the Philippine 'Entertainment Industry'," by Robert
L. Youngblood and Miki Caul, detailing the history of sex tours especially for foreign pedophiles, illuminates much of the cannibalistic subtext in Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*. Perhaps if Gidmark had had access to such documentation while organizing her review, she might have seen the relevance of the exploitation of Filipino “entertainers” even to such persons of talent and ambition as Raquel/Rocky Rivera. What such “entertainment” usually has meant was dramatized powerfully in Eric Gamalinda’s *Confessions of a Volcano* (1990), through the price tragically required of a Filipina to work and remain in Japan. The overseas experience of Hagedorn’s middle class Rocky is more subtly presented. Yet as an example of the potentially fatal attraction to Filipinas of America’s entertainment industry, it is indicative of Hagedorn’s development, her perhaps personal wrestling with related temptations, and the effort to bring Rocky to a kind of existential closure, secure from further corruption.

The last words of the novel—“See, amor? Didn’t I tell you? She’s here.” resemble the ending of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. After hours of excruciating experience of others’ deaths, at the end of her day Mrs. Dalloway is completely composed when she appears at her evening party. She simply is. For Woolf that is the only and sufficient cause for celebration. Rocky too, after years of diffident straying among distances both domestic and alien, not only has survived but has found her truer self through her mother and now her father. After many absences, she is present. Wholly here. No need to “perform.”