

CHRISTINE BACAREZA BALANCE

## Dancing to Rock & Roll Poetry

Jessica Hagedorn and the West Coast Gangster Choir

*“‘Hm,’ I know you are all saying, ‘Gangsters.’ Let it be known that we understand the word ‘gangster’ in a positive way . . . We understand gangsters as the underdogs. . . and with the irony of the blues. You know, gangsters are everywhere. Nixon’s a gangster. And Hoover, and Agnew, and the United States military, and the FBI, and the CIA. Gangsterism is the order of the day.”*

—Nashira Priester

*“The poetry reading is a public tuning.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Charles Bernstein

*“breathing poems / so rhythmic / you can’t help / but dance.  
and once / you start dancing / to words / you might never / stop.”*

—Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn<sup>2</sup>

Our Golden State remains home to a long line of gangsters—from the zoot-suited, gun-toting G-men of Capone’s era to the feathered hairdos and heavily lined eyelids of modern-day Eastside *flacas*. On 30 October 1975, Bay Area poet Nashira Priester introduced the latest outlaws to the audience at San Francisco State University’s Poetry Center: the West Coast Gangster Choir. A historical pivot point between 1930s film noir and 1990s gangsta rap, the multiracial ensemble of vocalists and musicians, led by then-emerging poet Jessica Hagedorn, embodied the shifting poetic and political landscape of late 1970s Northern California.

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## I. Setting the Stage

In the wake of a decade of social movements and protest, the term “gangster” best captured the spirit of San Francisco’s underground. Art and politics had crystallized into various popular local forms during the post-war years leading up to 1975. The division between sacred and populist within poetry circles, recalls Momo’s Press editor Stephen Vincent, was reflected in “how and where poetry was performed,” which, in turn, infused the figure of the poet and the form of poetry performance with new meaning.<sup>3</sup> Events such as the 1963 “Freeway” reading at the Old Longshoremen’s Hall in San Francisco’s Tenderloin marked a certain era of West Coast poetry when writers occupied “both the City and the country” and when readings “put the poet back in the position of responding to the City in an *actual* way, letting the poetry move as the City does, responsive to the edges, to the corners, to the voices that flood our City lives.”<sup>4</sup> Dubbed by San Francisco Renaissance poet Kenneth Rexroth as “Beats” at a 1955 North Beach gallery reading, a cadre of young writers including Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, and others became the canonized poets of their time. With their jazz-inflected, Buddhist-inspired, Benzedrine-driven writings, they heralded the City by the Bay as an artistic mecca and helped to memorialize places like Vesuvio café and City Lights bookstore.

By the 1967 “Summer of Love,” a new breed of American youth known as “hippies” tuned in, turned on, and dropped out, christening the corner of Haight and Ashbury as the psychedelic center. It was a paraphernalia-filled haven where trips—momentary breaks from this reality in order to explore others—fueled personal transformations.

During this time, according to Vincent:

The lone poet as performer and evangelist of personal, social, and political change had been replaced by the rock star and the group. Country Joe & the Fish, the Jefferson Airplane, and the Grateful Dead . . . had clearly taken their impetus from the poets. But more than the loss of an audience to music or to the technologies of sounds and rhythms, the new emphasis was on experiences that were essentially nonverbal.<sup>5</sup>

With a musical style that journalists and record companies labeled as “the San Francisco sound,” these bands and their audiences shifted countercultural attention away from

poetic experimentation toward sensory-heavy communalism. Although more commonly associated with the Haight-Ashbury bands, musicians from Mission District—such as Santana and Dakila—also championed this rock style, heavily influenced by jazz and Latin-based rhythms, emphasizing improvisation and freewheeling instrumental solos as a musical antidote to the standard three-minute radio pop ditty.

By the 1970s, however, explosive events such as the student strikes for Ethnic Studies, the Free Speech Movement on campuses, militant nationalist groups’ revolutionary politics, and antiwar demonstrations drew attention back to the importance of language, whether in upholding the status quo or in exacting social and cultural change. In an era of FBI covert intelligence operations and Washington scandals such as Watergate, semantics—words and their meanings—played a crucial role in envisioning a political path and future. And, while a number of self-named “Third World” writers labored to publish their work, such as the landmark *Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World*, it was mainly through the event of the poetry reading—as with the political rally—that minority artists expressed a sense of urgency and need for unmediated presence through live proclamations and performance. With this new generation of writers—Al Robles, Janice Mirikitani, Ishmael Reed, Kitty Tsui, Thulani Davis, and many others—came a new set of poetics and performance styles: bilingual and bicultural poems, declarative or sing-song syncopated delivery, the look and fashion of a new urban bohemia, inspired by the sounds of popular and avant-garde musical artists—from Archie Shepp to Sun Ra, John Coltrane to Stevie Wonder—as well as leading political figures—Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panthers, and the Young Lords. This Third World literary renaissance took shape not only in San Francisco but also in other urban arts centers—New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. “[P]oets made conscious efforts to reach people who listened to music more often than they read books,” writer and critic Thulani Davis remembers, with their “sounds, tones, cries, songs even noises” invoking “recent and distant people and events.”<sup>6</sup> Along with this concern for writing style, however, these Third World poets paid attention to the fact that “(G)ood looks, a certain coolness, and a lot of theater had shaped the appeal of black and brown social movements and their leaders all over the country.”<sup>7</sup>

# Would you believe Smokey Robinson as the inspiration behind a poem about a teen-aged Filipina?

## II. The (Main) Event

Immigrating to San Francisco in 1961 and mentored by Kenneth Rexroth in her early career, Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn found artistic kinship with contemporaries such as Nuyorican poet Victor Hernandez Cruz (who, as Hagedorn remembers, “could read . . . as if he were the notes of a conga drum”) and African American playwright Ntozake Shange (who, in working with musicians and dancers, was also at “a particular time in (her) growth as an artist . . . open to trial and errors”).<sup>8</sup> Each writer brought music and words together in their respective styles of tropicalizations,<sup>9</sup> choreo-poems, and rock n’ roll poetry. As the publisher’s note on the inside front cover of Hagedorn’s first edited collection, *Dangerous Music*, observes, “Her childhood in the Philippines and addiction to rock n’ roll and black soul music made for the tense lyric beauty in poems about her ambiguous arrival and coming of age in America.” Yet, as critic Kathy Mackay’s opening statement—“Would you believe Smokey Robinson as the inspiration behind a poem about a teen-aged Filipina?”—elucidates in her 1976 review of a Gangster Choir performance, even these musical traces do not aid in listening to the oft-forgotten historical relationship between the United States and Philippines.<sup>10</sup>

Filled with scenes of concert-going and radio-listening in cities like Manila, San Francisco, and New York, these early Hagedorn poems serve as a soundtrack for what Martin Joseph Ponce has termed as the “counter-assimilationist immigrant narrative” in her work—a particular trajectory of Filipino immigration, one that rejects “de-ethnicization, upward mobility, and nuclear familyhood” upon arrival, and acknowledges US pop culture and music’s influence as beginning in the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

In “Souvenirs,” Hagedorn paints the capital city of Manila as a palimpsest of indigenous, Latin American, and US colonial histories—a tropical metropolis where “life is cheap” and “perez prado / has a number one hit / with ‘patricia’ / on the radio”—while her narrator reminisces:

n tito puente has a hit /  
n it’s latin night /  
at the coliseum /  
n you don’t know /  
these musicians /  
come from someplace /  
called new york /  
it’s just another major event /  
to you /  
a ten year old child /  
twitching her ass /  
and doing the cha-cha in her seat /  
at the coliseum.<sup>12</sup>

The title suggests that musical memories function as “contraband” and “substitute,” objects stolen and standing in for memories of places and people. As Susan Stewart has so deftly characterized of the souvenir: “(it) speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia.”<sup>13</sup> Published after her first return to the Philippines and Ferdinand Marcos’s 1972 declaration of martial law, Hagedorn’s poem not only gestures toward a personal longing but, perhaps also, to a society’s desire for a time before a political present. Throughout the collection, Hagedorn invokes other Latin jazz and African American musical artists—La Lupe, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Jimi Hendrix, to name a few—and other scenes of listening—to radios in San Francisco, on dance floors in Manila, and in New York bars. The newly immigrated poet does not (and cannot) easily abandon her memories for the promise of assimilation into her new home, especially when the soundtracks of these two places are parallel. Instead, she musically maps an urban itinerary of Filipino America.

Coming of age in 1960s San Francisco, live rock concerts constituted Hagedorn’s informal rock n’ roll curriculum. With easy access to the Fillmore Auditorium and Great

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**"What is the spirit  
that moves us  
UNspoken MAGIC  
WEAVING DANGEROUS  
Colors?"**

You don't read the poetry of Jessica Hagedorn; it takes you in. It's a place of wonderment and truth and music. It makes you feel welcome to be alive.

Lawson Fusao Inada

**cabrillo college  
student center \* AUTHOR OF  
"DANGEROUS MUSIC"**

Dangerous Music event flyer. Cabrillo College Student Center. (BANC MSS 2007/160). COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

American Music Hall, the young writer checked out shows by the day's legendary artists, from rock gods—Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Janis Joplin—to R&B and soul's finest—Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley, Big Mama Thornton, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles—paying attention to each artist's staging and showmanship. Steeped in both this makeshift education and her formal enrollment in the American Conservatory Theatre's (ACT) two-year acting program, Hagedorn began experimenting with poetry performances. At first it was nothing elaborate, she recalls: "it would just be me reciting my poetry and, let's say, a saxophone player or a guitar player . . . or rhythm players, percussionists and such."<sup>14</sup> As time went on, however, the young poet aimed to move away from popular forms of spoken word performance, epitomized in the rhythm-based declarations of performers such as Nikki Giovanni and the Last Poets. Inspired by Sun Ra's staged spectacles and her own collaborations with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Hagedorn began to imagine "something weird and ambitious," a performance style that might effectively synthesize poetry, music, and theatre. In the latter half of 1974, she "started putting out feelers" to her amateur and professional musician friends and, over the next few months, gathered an impressive posse. As she described in a 1977 autobiographical piece:

The concept of the Gangster Choir—shades of the old "Doo-Wop" school, Smokey Robinson, the Flamingos, some Hector Lavoe chanting, always the tropics lurking in the background, the way we sing, the way we put it out there, the message in the music. The poetics of our lives, this is what I am interested in. It's already been monumentalized in what critics snidely refer to as 'pop' music—but very little has been said about poets doing it for themselves. There were those beatniks talking about urban madonnas, but that was an elite and very white cult of people.<sup>15</sup>

Later conducted by jazz trombonist Julian Priester (formerly of Herbie Hancock's band), the band's personnel during that first 1975 performance included Makoto

Hagedorn began to imagine "something weird and ambitious."

Horuichi (guitar), Heshima Mark Williams (bass guitar), Duke Santos (congas/percussion), and Augusta Collins (drums).<sup>16</sup> As the West Coast Gangster Choir's vocal trio, the Gangsterettes featured: R&B singer Ota Pierce, poet and former KPFA reporter Norman Jayo, and Linda Tillery, former lead vocalist of Bay Area rock/soul jam band, The Loading Zone. The process of composing music was mainly a two-way collaboration between Hagedorn and Priester, one that relied on artistic "shorthand" crafted between a determined poet's musical ear and a composer-musician's ability to interpret the lyrics' necessary "moods."<sup>17</sup> The eclectic band secretly rehearsed in Hagedorn's apartment garage with the goal of recording a demo tape, landing a record deal, and eventually producing a "concept album."<sup>18</sup>

Thanks to the foresight of Poetry Center organizers, that very first Gangster Choir performance in 1975 was captured on VHS and cassette tape. Some of the evening's a cappella pieces consist solely of voices—Hagedorn's lilting intonation in concert with the Gangsterettes' three-part harmonies. Others involve more intricate choral and instrumental arrangements—with the poets' "song-speech-acts" riding on top of the musicians' funky bass lines, Afro-Caribbean beats, and vamping piano chords, while the trio's polyvocal chorus echoes some of the poem's most striking words and images. Drawn mainly from poems in Hagedorn's first collection, the songs follow two main thematic trajectories—vivid portraits of her former home, the postcolonial city of Manila, and her keen observations on life in her new home, America. In her poetic imagery, however, there is a thin line between memory and the present, between the "over there" and the "right here." Set to Robinson's "Ooh, Baby Baby," Hagedorn quips to a fellow teenage immigrant who "remembers Quiapo Church and eating roasted pig in Manila," who escaped the rural town of Stockton, California, by running away to San Francisco where she could "go to the Cow Palace and catch Smokey Robinson"—

Hey Nellie . . . you remember the barrios and how it's all the same: Manila, the Mission, Chinatown, Harlem, L.A., Kearny Street, the Fillmore.

Here, Hagedorn's song underscores the Third World movement's trope of "internal colonies," the barrios and ghettos that connect people of color's lives, at home and abroad.

The tensions and commonalities between life “over there” (the Philippines) and life “right here” (San Francisco, USA) are best captured in a call-and-response duet between Tillery and Hagedorn, with acoustic guitar accompaniment. It begins and ends with Tillery singing “Profits Enslave the World,” a poem originally penned by agricultural labor activist Philip Vera Cruz and set to music by Filipino student activist Chris Bautista in 1973. Sandwiched between the sung choruses, Hagedorn performs her “Song for My Father.” The tone of Vera Cruz’s poem is polemic compared to Hagedorn’s melancholic musings, yet both pieces highlight the ironies of immigrant life in the United States—where “beautiful bright pictures painted/were just half of the story/reflections of great wealth and power/in the land of slavery”—and of her return home to a country now living under martial rule. In each poem, with a certain geographic and temporal distance come stark realizations, forms of perspective that animate each writer’s refusal to romanticize life on either side of the Pacific Ocean. Following more traditional forms of poetry performance, whereby a song is sung to complement a spoken word performance, the guitar accompaniment is what thematically unites the performance’s three components: melody, rhythm, and spoken/sung words. For those more familiar with Vera Cruz’s work, the two poem/songs constitute a type of intergenerational conversation. For others, Tillery’s performance of “Profits . . .” incorporates Hagedorn’s own composition so that her poem functions as a more intimate back-story to his poem’s visibly political narrative.

In contrast to this more traditional spoken-word style, “Trying to Pull a Fast One,” the final piece of the Gangster Choir’s inaugural 1975 performance, signals its future artistic direction, more of a synthesis of music and words. Opening with Hagedorn’s dedication to “all the poets” as well as “everyone who likes to sleaze around the discotheques,” the song begins with a simple rock guitar riff immediately followed by layers of bass line, congas and drums, and, finally, tambourine. Hagedorn proclaims the song’s spoken parts as verses:

the search for heritage / grows and grows  
 but what’s the point? / no one really knows  
  
 nostalgia’s the latest rage / for the glitter age  
 knives are more personal / when you try to pull a fast one

while the Gangsterettes respond in unison with a simple chorus—“trying to pull a fast one”—against the layered instrumental tracks. Near the end of the song’s third cycle of verse-chorus, Hagedorn reminds her listeners, both the poets and con artists: “it’s not what you say / it’s what you do.” Throughout the improvised remainder of the twelve-minute song, both Hagedorn and the Gangsterettes take turns singing and speaking, in the round, previously spoken lines of poetry. But first, at the very top of their outro, Tillery offers an invitation:

We want to ask if the people in the audience would like to get up and dance with us to this music . . . You can get up and it’s okay, nobody will say anything . . . you won’t get put in jail like Sam and it’ll be alright. So come on . . . don’t be shy . . .<sup>19</sup>

Slowly but surely, a few brave souls get up and dance right in front of the band, in turn closing the gap between audience and performers and leading Hagedorn to happily exclaim, “This is like disco-poetry!”

Over the next four years, the Gangster Choir continues performing at poetry festivals and readings, community colleges, theatre/performance venues, even North Beach’s Keystone Bar. They eventually record a demo that industry insiders consider a “hard sell.”<sup>20</sup> In 1978, along with her “satin sisters,” Ntozake Shange and Thulani Davis, Hagedorn makes the cross-country move to New York City. With her departure, the group disbanded.

### III. Aftermath/Vestiges

In their new home, Davis, Shange, and Hagedorn continued writing and performing their poems in collaboration with musicians and dancers.<sup>21</sup> Convinced by friends and former members, Hagedorn started up the East Coast version of her band in 1980, simply named “The Gangster Choir,” and performed with them until 1985.<sup>22</sup> In 1997, *The Gangster of Love*, Hagedorn’s fictionalized account of the Gangster Choir years on both coasts, was published. A departure from her debut novel *Dogeaters* (1990)—which portrayed life in Manila under Marcos’s martial rule in a style of postmodern pastiche—the critically overlooked *Gangster* chronicled teenager Rocky Rivera’s immigration and artistic coming-of-age against the backdrops of 1970s San Francisco and early 1980s New York. Whereas

# INTERSECTION

*Poetry & Prose Series*

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FEBRUARY 20

8:00 P.M.

A Poetry & Prose Reading

**JESSICA HAGEDORN**

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**VICTOR HERNANDEZ CRUZ**

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photo by Judy Olausen

JESSICA HAGEDORN

&

THE WEST COAST GANGSTER CHOIR

AT INTERSECTION  
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march 16<sup>th</sup> 1976

8PM

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photo by O.D. Thomas

Jessica Hagedorn & the West Coast Gangster Choir flyer. Intersection for the Arts. (BANC PIC 2007/78).

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*Dogeaters* represented a slice of Third World life in a faraway urban jungle, *Gangster* brought the hallucinatory effects of US imperialism back home. Whereas *Dogeaters* marked the cinematic qualities of Hagedorn's writerly voice, *Gangster* gestured more toward Hagedorn's poetic voice in performance, with its reliance on pop music figures, songs, and places.

Despite having lived in New York for the past three decades, Hagedorn still retains ties to the San Francisco/Bay Area. With each new book's release, she shares her work at San Francisco literary institutions—Modern Times in the Mission, La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, and North Beach's City Lights. In 2010, she performed alongside fellow Third World writers Janice Mirikitani and Ishmael Reed in a literary tribute to writer/activist Al Robles, who passed away in 2009.

Since 2006, she has collaborated with Intersection for the Arts' resident company Campo Santo on a play trilogy, including productions of *Stairway to Heaven* (2006) and *Fe in the Desert* (2007). She continues to mentor emerging artists of all colors but, most notably, has performed alongside younger Filipino American writers at events such as "Tres Generaciones," a 2003 fundraising performance for Bindlestiff Studio, a South of Market Area (SoMA) venue. Keenly aware of California as an important site of Asian American scholarship, in 2007 Hagedorn designated UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library to house her personal archive. For writers and scholars of California's cultural history, personal and organizational archives such as those at the Bancroft, SFSU's Poetry Center, Kearny Street Workshop, and many more, are crucial to remembering the past and imagining the future of performance poetry.

Since the 1970s Third World literary movement, spoken word—like its corresponding musical form, hip hop—has become a popular mode of expression for writers of all colors. Spoken word performance has provided Bay Area literary and performance artists the vehicle for political and artistic exploration.<sup>23</sup> Yet, in a time before the flourishing of female emcees, before spoken word found its way onto Broadway stages, in a time before government-administered and corporate-sponsored multiculturalism, there existed a Third World cultural movement—one with an internationalist perspective on local issues, that did not take freedom of expression for granted. It was during this time that "original gangster" poets like Jessica Hagedorn pushed

the formalistic boundaries of written and spoken word. These artists heard the rhythm of words, crafted them into compositions, choreographed and staged so well that we still haven't stopped dancing. **B**

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.
  - <sup>2</sup> Jessica Hagedorn, "Sorcery," *Dangerous Music* (San Francisco, CA: Momo's Press, 1975), 2.
  - <sup>3</sup> Stephen Vincent, "Poetry Readings/Reading Poetry: San Francisco Bay Area, 1958–1980," *The Poetry Reading: a Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance*, Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig, eds. (San Francisco, CA: Momo's Press, 1981), 23.
  - <sup>4</sup> Vincent, 25.
  - <sup>5</sup> Vincent, 33.
  - <sup>6</sup> Thulani Nkabinde Davis, "Known Renegades: Recent Black/Brown/Yellow," *The Poetry Reading*, 75.
  - <sup>7</sup> Davis, 71.
  - <sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Jessica Hagedorn (24 November 2012).
  - <sup>9</sup> I use the term "tropicalization" as a nod to Frances Aparicio and Susana Chavez Silverman's definition (and work): "To tropicalize [...] means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group or nation with a set of traits, images, and values." See their introduction to the edited collection, *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover and London: Dartmouth College Press, 1997). Likewise, it is the title of an earlier poetry collection by Victor Hernandez Cruz. See *Tropicalization* (New York: Reed, Cannon, and Johnson Communications Co., 1976).
  - <sup>10</sup> Kathy Mackay, "A Diverse and Inspired Group," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle* (8 February 1976).
  - <sup>11</sup> Martin Joseph Ponce, "The Cross-Cultural Musics of Jessica Hagedorn's Postmodernism," *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature and Queer Reading* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2012), 124–128.
  - <sup>12</sup> Jessica Hagedorn, "Souvenirs," *Dangerous Music*, 4.
  - <sup>13</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 135.

- <sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Jessica Hagedorn (10 October 2009).
- <sup>15</sup> Jessica Hagedorn, "Make-Believe Music," *The Poetry Reading*, 140.
- <sup>16</sup> During its inaugural performance, the group also featured a musician named Sam on the keyboards (who Linda Tillery refers to near the end of the last song). Despite my efforts, I was unable to track down this musician's last name.
- <sup>17</sup> As Hagedorn recalls, this shorthand often took the form of simply telling Priester, "Here are the lyrics. I'm hearing something like . . . an ominous groove." (Author's interview with Jessica Hagedorn, October 2009.)
- <sup>18</sup> As Hagedorn realized early on, "'Okay . . . clearly I'm not going to be working in night clubs because we're not a dance band.' You know, this thing was like, such a strange notion at the time . . . so I thought, 'We're not going to get those kinds of gigs, so why not just go straight forward and make a concept album? Shoot, why not?'" (Author's interview with Jessica Hagedorn, October 2009.)
- <sup>19</sup> Jessica Hagedorn and the West Coast Gangster Choir (30 October 1975), SFSU Poetry Center (DVD). Sam played piano/keyboard that night.

- <sup>20</sup> Hagedorn recalled one label executive's comment: "'You know, it's going to be a hard sell because you're not quite this and you're not quite that.' And I saw that as . . . a plus. And he was like, 'No.'" (Author's interview with Hagedorn, 2009.)
- <sup>21</sup> Immediately after their "arrival" in New York City, Hagedorn took the stage of New York's Public Theatre in her one-woman show *Mango Tango* (1978) and in a collaborative theatre piece with Davis and Shange entitled *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon* (1979).
- <sup>22</sup> Tired of the politics and logistics of performing with a band, Hagedorn formalized her ongoing collaborations with theatre artists Laurie Carlos and Robbie McCauley. They titled their trio Thought Music, for "the music inside your head." (Author's interview with Jessica Hagedorn, October 2009.)
- <sup>23</sup> In the context of a late 1990s Filipino American "cultural renaissance," spoken word, as an artistic form, fueled and coalesced in the emergence of performance groups such as Eighth Wonder and the Rhapsodistas, CD recordings such as *inFliptration*, and community interest in publications such as UC Berkeley's *maganda* magazine.