

The Power to be Your Creative, Individual Self

Jayne Cortez on Her Poetry

JOANNA FUHRMAN

Joanna Fuhrman: *What do you think is the role of poetry in schools?*

Jayne Cortez: Poetry is a way of extending and exploring language. How poetry is made is up to the person writing. How poetry is taught is up to the teacher. Many images and ideas are transmitted through poetry. It's a way of communicating.

JF: *When did you write your first poem? How and when did you decide (or discover) that you were a poet?*

JC: I don't remember when I wrote my first complete poem. I remember keeping notebooks of notes and drawings as a young girl and writing many poetic lines when I was a teenager, but there is no special

date, no discovery. It was only a gradual, evolutionary part of growing up. I started reading my poetry in

public in 1960 and reading with music in 1964 in Los Angeles, California.

JF: *You do a lot of collaborations with your band the Firespitters. Does working with music ever change your poetry on the page? Do you ever revise a poem based on something that happened working with your band?*

JC: I don't write words to music but in rehearsal with the band or during a performance I may improvise and modify various lines or change words and maybe that version will end up on the page. An example would be my poem "I See Chano Pozo," published in *Jazz Fan*

Looks Back. (Chano Pozo was a great percussionist



Jayne Cortez. Photo courtesy of Hanging Loose Press.

from Havana, Cuba.) I remember responding to the drummers in rehearsal by adding five lines at the beginning of the poem.

JF: In what ways do you think poetry is similar to jazz? How is it different?

JC: Sometimes I read my poetry with musicians who play in the various streams of the modern instrumental art music called jazz. Poems consist of words and rely on language. Music is about sound. They have in common rhythm, repetition, translation, and the use of the subconscious. But they are distinctively different arts and it is not easy to put them together. It requires a person who is highly developed in both music and poetic language.

JF: Many presses have always wanted to publish your work, but you made the decision to self-publish some of your earlier books. What went into that decision?

JC: My work is widely published in anthologies and literary magazines. I'm not against publishing collections with other publishers. I formed Bola Press in the early 1970s [because] I wanted to see my poetry in print right away; I wanted to be independent and control my own images and copyright.

Publishing my poetry has been enjoyable and has allowed me to experiment, and to be free of routine, formulas, and censorship. It is immediate. And that immediacy helps me to deepen my imagination and move the work in different directions and be more productive.

I think other poets should follow and trust their own instincts. Being a poet is not a career. It is not about sacrificing who you are to please critics. Being a poet gives you the power to be your creative, individual self. There is a big difference between the commercial business of literature and the art of poetry.

JF: Do you feel like your poetry has changed over the years? If so, how?

JC: It is very difficult to return to what you were thinking or doing yesterday. Your poetry changes when you change. I started going to a gym in 1972. I used to run five miles on a corked indoor track, then use certain machines. I wrote a poem about my experience. Now the machines have all changed and my body has changed. My timing is different, and the track is a treadmill. I'm sure I would write another kind of poem. The gym is a reality in life and a metaphor for my own development.

JF: Could you talk about some poets who have influenced you?

JC: I have never been dominated or under the spell of another writer or artist. I have been inspired by musicians such as Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker and by the poet Leon Damas. I liked their creative attitude, their self-assertion and confidence.

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JF: I want to ask about your poem "I Was Dreaming" one of the newer poems in On The Imperial Highway. I've been teaching the poem to high school students this spring and I think they relate to the poem's defiant tone.

JC: When I was thinking about what to write for my collaboration with composer and musician Fred Ho, the pigeons started their commotion on my windowsill. As I started hitting the window I entered the world of the pigeons, and the poem started. The voice is the pigeon's voice and not the pigeon's voice. I am acting upon the situation, which is an ongoing experience with the birds of New York City.

JF: Does poetry change the world?

JC: Poetry does not change the world. It changes the writing space and living in the world. ☺