

Nothing Is Off-Limits

On Teaching Jayne Cortez

JOANNA FUHRMAN

I'VE BEEN TEACHING JAYNE CORTEZ'S POETRY since 2000, when I first started working with teenagers in the New York City public schools as a visiting poet. Her poems were my secret weapon, immediate proof that poetry wasn't what the students expected. I could always rely on a Cortez poem to be bawdy, lively, funny, and bold. The defiant spirit, overt musicality and wild imagery in her work appeals to inner city high school students who feel oppressed and bored by their school's predictable rigidity. To teach a Cortez poem is to send a message to your students that in poetry nothing is off limits.

Jayne Cortez, often associated with the Black Arts Movement or Jazz Poetry, has been publishing her poetry since the late 1960s. She came to prominence in the early 1970s when she founded her own press, Bola Books. For the last forty years, she has been traveling the world performing her poems with

her band, The Firespitters, and recording CDs. Her work combines surrealist images with wordplay, chant-like repetition, and political outrage. Unlike much overtly political poetry, there's an unpredictability about the way that Cortez smashes words together that takes her poetry out of the realm of sloganeering and into the realm of great art.

Over the years, like many other teaching artists and creative writing instructors, I have taught one of Cortez's most famous poems, "I Am New York City." It usually evokes hollers from the students. "Did she really just say that?" they ask, referring to the marijuana references, sexual innuendo, and a farting allusion. When I bring in the poem, it's my way of telling the students that the expectations I have for the poetry program are different from those of a normal school day; I want to open the door to a more free and creative atmosphere. Unfortunately, in the current educational climate, the teachers in whose classrooms I am a guest have become less comfortable with me bringing in poems like "I Am New York City" or "New York New York." (A poem that addresses New York as

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a dirty man “fine-tuning your capitalistic cock.”) Often teachers are judged by how quiet and “well behaved” their class appears when an administrator walks by the door so a poem that evokes yelps from the students also evokes anxiety in the teacher. Whenever I bring in a Cortez poem I make sure to clear it with the classroom teacher beforehand. More often than I care to admit, I lose my nerve completely and end up choosing poems that I know won’t make anyone uncomfortable.

It’s a shame because there’s really nothing in the poems that’s any racier than what high school kids are exposed to in their daily lives. Cortez’s “I Am New York City” knocks kids out because the sonic effects in that poem are so visceral; it’s impossible not be physically affected by the thick assonance and rich internal rhyme of “my grime my thigh of / steelspoons and toothpicks” or the full and odd rhyme of “goatee” and “glue-me.” When I teach the poem, I ask students if there are any sounds in the poem that particularly appeal to them. They’ll respond by trying to figure out what in particular makes the sound so juicy, whether it’s the repetition of a consonant or vowel sound or the use of slant rhyme. I also might ask the students what images they like and then talk about what makes these images so arresting—or, as a student might put it, “weird”—and how sometimes Cortez picks words as much for their sound as for their meaning.

After discussing the poem, I’ll have the students write a group poem inspired by Cortez’s model. I’ll say that Cortez imagines herself as New York City, but we could also see ourselves as another city, neighborhood, or place. The class will brainstorm ideas, and I’ll write them on the board in my poet’s scrawl or have the classroom teacher transcribe them. In “I Am New York City,” Cortez divides the construction of the self into body parts; she starts her poem by creating metaphors for her brain (hot sauce) and her teeth (tobacco). For our group poem, I usually ask students to follow that structure. I’ll ask one student to call out a part of the face and another to call out a metaphor we might use to describe it. After we finish the group

poem, I’ll ask the students to write their own poems imagining themselves as a place and perhaps using Cortez’s method of metaphor creation.

In one of my favorite student examples inspired by “I Am New York City,” a ninth-grade student, Naeemah, starts by listing all the places she is not:

I am not Texas in the middle of nowhere
 I am not Albany, the capital who has nobody
 to talk to
 I am not quiet like the library
 I am not clean like the roads after the
 garbage people pick up the garbage
 I am kind like mothers are to their children
 when they get good grades

She then compares her contradictions, in Whitmanesque detail, to Brooklyn:

I am a borough
 I am huge like the mansions that rich people
 have
 I see people litter on me
 I see cars speeding to get to work on time or
 hurrying up so the sale won’t be finished
 I hear babies crying for toys they can’t get
 because their parents said no

I love all the exact details in her poem, the way she provides the reader with a fresh way of looking at places and the way the poem embraces the speaker’s complexity. I worked with Naeemah for many weeks after school on this poem, encouraging her to keep adding to her wonderful imagery.

This past spring, I taught the same poem to my poetry class at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. One of my students, Georeen Tanner, wrote the following poem in response to “I Am New York City.”

Brick by Brick
GEOREEN TANNER

I am Newark,
 your unproud whore
 the good time gal you’ll never take home

you talk about me you laugh about me
 pretend around me that you love my "urban
 charm"
 say you only want what's best
 while my sun starved children hide under
 their beds
 praying the bulletstorm stops
 my streets are littered with your wide-eyed
 gasps
 at my close-mouthed good mornings, at my
 pit bull saunters
 I see you shaking on a deal
 lining me with BroadandMarket cop cars
 hoping no one will stick a pin in your painted
 facelift
 I taste your whispers
 you say I wallow in fried chicken, ketchup,
 and french fries
 for breakfast
 —with a gum wad side.
 you say I wash it all down with Passaic spit
 streams
 wipe my mouth with a rat behind 99 cent
 curtains
 watching the thugs go by
 close your eyes when you kiss me
 loan me to your pearly pals
 let them see the sights as '67 riots rage
 inside
 they won't see my despairing sparrow tears
 you'll powder them with pseudo-Samaritan
 make-up

Georeen has a real knack for wordplay and visceral imagery. I especially like the line about "breakfast / —with a gum wad side." There's something about the sound of the word wad in one's mouth that's almost onomatopoeic, the word "wad" actually feels like a wad in one's mouth. I also love her use of assonance and the dense extravagance of her imagery. Like Cortez, she twists images multiple times within a line. The pin isn't just going into a facelift, but something even faker than a facelift—a painted facelift. Like Cortez, Georeen also uses nouns to modify verbs: the poem's "saunters" are "pitbull."

When Cortez's book *On the Imperial Highway: New and Selected Poems* was released this year, I was excited to try to bring in one of her newer poems for the freshman and sophomores at Science Skills Center High school, where I'd been teaching once or twice a week for the last six years through the College English Preparation Project. In addition to teaching in an after-school writing club, I was working with two English classes. They were two of the more difficult classes I've worked with in my decade as a teaching artist, full of students who were really struggling with the basics of literacy. They seemed skeptical about the value of poetry and, to be honest, me. I thought they would like the anti-authoritarian tone of Cortez's poem, "I Was Dreaming," about a conversation the speaker has in a dream with a pigeon. While the pigeons in one of my favorite Cortez poems, "New York City Pigeons" are major annoyances, quivering "cancer-like moans . . . waiting for the death of humankind," the pigeon in "I was Dreaming" is almost a stand-in for the poet herself.

After I read the poem out loud, I started by talking about the tone or attitude of the pigeon in the poem. In retrospect, I would like to have brought in the lyrics and a recording of Gershwin's "Summertime," because none of the students in the class were familiar with it and I think the lyrics of that song inform the poem's subtext. It might not have mattered for my purposes, as I wanted to focus more on the tone than the meaning (or meanings). The students quickly picked up on the annoyed tone of the pigeon and then we tried to figure out where this tone is located in the text. We also talked about how the poem was arranged on the page, how Cortez used spacing instead of standard punctuation, and how a noun can sometimes be used as an adjective (for example the phrase "umbrella ladies").

After briefly talking about the poem, I handed all the students a blank sheet of paper and asked them to draw a picture of an animal they might meet in a dream. Many of the boys drew snakes or panthers while the girls drew kitty cats or unicorns. Almost all

their own poems starting with that phrase or a variation, and imagining a conversation between themselves and the animal on their paper. One student had become stuck when asked to draw. Despite being one of the best writers in the class, he was so insecure about creating something visual that his piece of paper was completely blank. I told him to write about a conversation with an invisible animal. Another student drew something without thinking and then she couldn't decide if it was a cat or a dog, so she made it a "cat-dog."

I find her final poem really touching; the idea of a "catdog" works as a powerful metaphor for all the things that one is in-between and confused about as a young person, how what one really wants is in conflict with what others think one should desire. I also like the way the poem, like Cortez's, oscillates between earnestness and humor. The catdog's odd name lightens the poem's tone without diminishing its pathos.

I Dreamed

LINDA PEREZ

I saw a catdog and the catdog said,
 "I'd rather have nine lives than one."
 I asked the catdog,
 "What do you mean by that?"
 She said: "I'd rather be a cat
 than a dog." I asked,
 "What's your name?"
 She said, "Esmerdyn."
 I asked, "What are you
 doing here alone?"
 She said, "I want to look up
 at the stars and wish
 to be only a cat."
 I said, "Oh can I help you?"
 She said, "You can take me
 to a place where I can see
 more stars." I said,
 "Oh. Okay. Let's go."

Endnotes

Cortez, Jayne. *On the Imperial Highway: New and Selected Poems*. Brooklyn, New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2009.

Cortez, Jayne. *Jazz Fan Looks Back*. Brooklyn, New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2002.