



# Jayne Cortez

“ *MAYBE LIBERTY JUSTICE EQUALITY  
MAYBE IN THE 21ST CENTURY  
MAYBE ON ANOTHER PLANET  
MAYBE IN OUTER SPACE MAYBE MAYBE MAYBE  
NO EQUALITY NO JUSTICE NO LIBERTY  
WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY IS THIS?* ”



## Biography

Poet, musician, activist, and entrepreneur Jayne Cortez is an accomplished woman who uses her work to address social problems in the U.S. and around the world. Over the last 30 years, she has contributed greatly to the struggle for racial and gender equality.

Jayne Cortez was born in Fort Huachuca, Arizona and raised in Los Angeles. After graduating from an arts high school, Cortez enrolled in college, but was forced to drop out due to financial problems. From an early age, Cortez was heavily influenced by jazz artists from the Los Angeles area. In 1954, at the age of 18, Cortez married the rising jazz star Ornette Coleman. The two had a son, Denardo Coleman, two years later.

In the 1960s Cortez embarked on several endeavors, including participating in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, traveling to Europe and Africa, and organizing writing workshops in Watts, California. Cortez landed in New York City in 1967, where she still resides when not teaching or performing around the world.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1936
- \* African-American poet, singer, and activist
- \* Has recorded nine albums with her band, the Firespitters

This page was researched and submitted by Lucy Corbett and Licia McMorrow on 4/17/03 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 10/24/04.



# Jayne Cortez

## Biography continued

In 1964 Cortez founded the Watts Repertory Theater, and in 1972 she established her own publishing company, Bola Press. Cortez has written ten books of poetry, her most recent being *Jazz Fan Looks Back* (2002). Her work has been highly praised by black contemporary artists such as Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka. Cortez has taught and presented her work in many countries around the world, including Paris, South Africa, Brazil, and Berlin. Furthermore, her work has been translated into 28 different languages, and she has been published in well-known journals such as *Presence Africaine*, *Black Scholar*, *Daughters of Africa* and *Mother Jones*. Cortez received the Langston Hughes Award for excellence in the arts and letters, the American Book Award, and the International African Festival Award, among others. Cortez also serves as the president of the Organization of Women Writers of Africa, which she founded in 1991 with Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana.

With her band, the Firespitters, Cortez has recorded nine albums. The group's eight members, including Cortez's son, create a unique sound of jazz/funk beats which accompany Cortez's spoken word poems.

Many of Cortez's poems embrace the values of the Black Arts Movement of the 60s and 70s. Her razor sharp imagery and directness leave no room for questioning the intent of the author. Cortez's excrescent language and her ability to push the acceptable limits of expression to address issues of race, sex, and homophobia place her in a category that few other women occupy. *Coagulations: New and Selected Poems* (1984) clearly depicts her stylistic approach to political poetry. This collection is divided into four sections, with each section addressing specific aspects of her political agenda. In the first section, entitled "Scarifications," Cortez gives poetic animation to New York City and the cultures it represents. She speaks of New York City as a "brain of hot sauce." She writes: "new york city never change never sleep never melt" ("I Am New York City"). She begs the city in smooth tempo, "new york/ won't you confess/ your private affairs" ("Bowery Street").



# Jayne Cortez

## Biography continued

The second section in *Coagulations* is “Mouth on Paper,” where Cortez turns to descriptions of people who have shaped the political atmosphere. She cites poets Christopher Okigbo and Henry Dumas, teenager Claude Reece Jr., dancer and singer Josephine Baker, jazz musician Duke Ellington, the students in Soweto, and all the silent masses of black people who add to the racial conundrum that is the United States. She writes of “bloodthirsty people/ brooding in North Dakota with grenades in their hands”; a militant force of people anxious for equality, but “brooding beyond the deadline” (“Brooding”). This section reveals Cortez’s fiery poetic style. She strongly denounces racism when she writes:

“*Give me the black on the red of the bullet  
 . . . for the blackness of Claude Reece Jr. the blackness called dangerous  
 weapon  
 called resisting an arrest  
 call nigger threat*

*I want to make justice for the blackness of Claude Reece Jr.*

— “Give me the Red on the Black of the Bullet”

”

Her use of bluntness and sexual reference calls the reader to attention and gives signature to her intent. She makes no effort to confuse the reader; her message is clear:

“*When I shove brown glass  
 through skull of a possum  
 and pass from my ears a baptism of red piss  
 when I cry from my butt like a jackal  
 and throw limbs of a dying mule into the river  
 . . . somewhere along the road cry hard  
 and let this night train sink its  
 rundown rectum of electric chairs into heaven  
 and say f\*\*\* it*

— “Nightrains”

”



# Jayne Cortez

## Biography continued

The third section in *Coagulations* shares the name of Cortez's band, "Firespitter." In this section, Cortez adamantly dismisses misogynist practices in her poem "If the Drum is a Woman":

“  
“  
*If the drum is a woman  
then understand your drum  
. . . your drum is not invisible  
your drum is not inferior to you  
your drum is a woman  
so don't reject your drum  
don't try to dominate your drum  
. . . don't be forced into the position  
as an oppressor of drums  
and make a drum tragedy of drums  
if your drum is a woman  
don't abuse your drum.*  
”  
”

In "Firespitter," Cortez introduces a variety of forms of political and social discourse. She attempts to bridge the gaps between black people by unifying their dissent within the current atmosphere of American society. She advances this position when she says, "The ruling class will tell you that/ there is no ruling class/ as they organize their liberal supporters into/ white supremacist lynch mobs" ("There Is Is").

The last section of *Coagulations* is a selection of new poetry called "On All Fronts." Cortez's new poetry covers a variety of topics. In "Stockpiling," Cortez comments on the decadence of majority society, calling people to come forward to make change "before the choking/ before the panic/ before the apathy/ rises up." Cortez defines further problems with mainstream society and its pressure to conform when she says, "They want you/ to be product/ consumer/ and public authority/ all together in one package/ without choice/ without change/ without a human transforming action/ Just enter/ emulate & exit" ("Plain Truth").



# Jayne Cortez

## Biography continued

In another selection, Cortez comments on the easy route to complacency taken on by those who do not open their eyes to atrocities of the world. She harshly criticizes the marginality enforced on everything that is not part of dominant culture. She writes, “Everything is wonderful,” then follows with a series of “except fors,” tying in many modern world conflicts that are easily overlooked by those who are blind to them. In a poem titled “Expenditures: Economic Love Song I,” Cortez uses rhythmic repetition in order to delineate the disastrous effects of increased military spending in the world.

*Coagulations* is appealing in the sense that it remarks on everything that is unappealing in today’s mainstream American society. It calls into question many things that are considered casual practice, such as everyday comportment in social situations and democracy in the United States. Cortez relays her perspective and provides convincing, eye-opening agendas for discussion by all who are willing to listen.

Cortez’s *Poetic Magnetic* is a collection of poetry from two of her recorded albums of poetry music technology, *Everywhere Drums* and *Maintain Control*. In this compilation, Cortez remarks on a number of issues. She reminisces on the origins of jazz and the influence of the great pioneering musicians. She marks the influence of African cultures on the constantly reforming African-American culture as well as the lack of equality faced by marginalized populations in America. She attempts to describe the themes behind blues music, the myths behind the American dream, and the constant search for validation by the dominant masses. She delivers her political views on apartheid in South Africa and Nelson Mandela’s response: “They told him he’d better capitulate to oppression/ But Mandela refuses to be brutalized into submission” (“Nelson Mandela is Coming 2”). She speaks of an urgent need to identify problems before attempting to make a change. She questions why black people kill each other and why Africans are not noble to other Africans. She expresses an adamant non-complacency with war and violent attacks and the lasting images and memories they leave: “the sound of the human voice in its calmness/ in its shrillness/ in its monumental invention of pitches/ is better than war” (“Tell Me”). *Poetic Magnetic* is a virulently alluring collection of poetry that gains even more appeal when spoken, shouted, and expressed to varying rhythms and beats.

Cortez makes no mistake in her approach; she is constant and firm in her opposition to oppression, racism, and cultural marginality. She calls for a swift end to imposed dehumanization, and demands the creation of order and equality in our society.



# Jayne Cortez

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

#### Books

- Jazz Fan Looks Back* (Hanging Loose Press, 2002).  
*Somewhere In Advance Of Nowhere* (Serpent's Tail, 1996).  
*Fragments* (Bola Press, 1994).  
*Poetic Magnetic* (Bola Press, 1991).  
*Coagulations and Selected New Poems* (Pluto, 1984).  
*Firespitter* (Bola Press, 1982).  
*Mouth On Paper* (Bola Press, 1977).  
*Scarifications* (Bola Press, 1973).  
*Festivals and Funerals* (Bola Press, 1971).  
*Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (Phrase Text, 1969).

#### Music

- Taking the Blues Back Home* (Harmolodic/Verve, 1996).  
*Cheerful and Optimistic* (Bola Press, 1994).  
*Women in E Motion* (Tradition & Moderne Musikproduktion, Germany, 1992)  
*Everywhere Drums* (Bola Press, 1990).  
*Maintain Control* (Bola Press, 1986).  
*There It Is* (Bola Press, 1982).  
*Unsubmissive Blues* (Bola Press, 1980).  
*Celebrations and Solitudes* (Strata-East, 1974).

### Works about the author

- Anderson, T.J. *Notes to Make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry* (University of Arkansas Press, 2004).  
Bolden, Jayne. "All the Birds Sing Bass: The Revolutionary Blues of Jayne Cortez" (*African American Review*, 2001).  
Brown, Kimberly N. "Of Poststructuralist Fallout, Scarification, and Blood Poems" in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (University of Illinois Press, 1998).



Jayne  
Cortez

## Selected Bibliography continued

### Works about the author continued

Labrusse, Hughes and Jean Migrenne. *Poètes de New York: mosaïque* (Amiot Lenganey, 1991).

Melhem, D.H. "A MELUS Profile and Interview: Jayne Cortez" (*MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 1996).

Nielsen, Aldon Lynn. "Capillary Currents: Jayne Cortez" in *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (University of Alabama Press, 2002).

Nosaka, Masashi. "Burakku Amerika no genzai" (*Language and Culture Studies Series*, 1997).

Santamaria, Ulysses. *L'Amérique noire* (Les Temps Modernes, 1986).

## Works in languages other than English

Joans, Ted and Jayne Cortez. *Merveilleux coup de foudre* [poetry en français of Ted Joans and Jayne Cortez], trans. Ms. Ila Errus and M. Sila Errus (Handshake Editions, 1982).