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JAYNE CORTEZ  
AT THE RAINBOW SIGN: BERKELEY' 75

by Clyde Taylor

The important innovation in the lyricism of Jayne Cortez is in her reconstruction of the poetic line prevailing among her contemporaries. Her stretch of linear possibilities allows us to say her poetry don't talk, it sings. Other poets have gotten there. But, where she becomes a singular innovator is in singing like an instrumentalist, not a vocalist — like Lady Day.

In the company her poetry keeps, some chat, others chant. Jayne's line hover somewhere in between. The line she holds is the one moving through the poem; top-bottom more than left-right. There is certitude in her artistry striking off a uniqueness, an advance. First the line is maintained, its integrity respected (you can't have music without the line).

The Line of the whole poem, it being a feeling, thought, *sentence* from a widely-compassionate judge. In the process, the syntax is chastened into honesty; stripped, simplified into the forward, uncluttered momentum of usual speech — no cute trick involutions, no pale-mannered subordinations no chatting. (Her poems are seldom reduced to a story, even less a speech.) Then, the words are *chosen*; to fit the poem-line and its total idea.

The effect is like Billie. When Billie sings, the spirit-play is in the ratio between the song as convention lays it down and the instrument-like variation which she improvises. The emotional tension or release may happen on a relatively unimportant word, or between words. The words catch up to the expression.

To look for images, visual phrases, in Jayne's poetry misses the song. Example: "the governor of shellshock." Among its neighboring lines, it has another meaning:

*If you take these football helmets  
towels and broom handle headdresses  
these bullhorn mouths of mace*



*these spinning bullets full of navels and hostages  
If you take these ornamental gifts  
to the governor of shellshock*

But, you have to read the whole poem, "National Security," (*Scarifications*) about Attica, to still get other meanings. So we think we know now who the governor is as a real, live person. But the "shellshock" belongs to the whole poem, the whole society, as well as delimiting the governor's shaky grip.

This innovative art often extends beyond Lady to Coltrane, his longer modal line that includes the chattier riffs of Charlie Parker by fragmenting their pithy, quotable statements over the single overwhelming expression, making it heavier, fuller, leaving behind Bird's topicality. In Cortez, every 3rd, 4th word or so is heavy-laden; sometimes these image-words almost cluster into lists of things the feelings must take account of. But the finest touch is exercised, balancing between the too-chiselled phrase and the too-vague feeling. You *know* what the poem is about (you have lived it yourself.) The line carries the feeling with authority; therefore, the thoughtfully distanced image-words speak faithfully through the entire song, hooking up.

At the Rainbow Sign, the young women of color, poets, feed at her mouth, looking for themselves, their look. The sisterly feeling is fine. The poem is about woman-love. Down. They get down with it. The room is a sensual sound. Do they see that the line that took them out is about trains or watermelons or graffiti, the sensuous power coming from its inclusions and extensions? They imagine a stance, seize it. Hand on hip. Legs apart. Foot pointed. These days, their poems reach for that stance. Ishmael Reed calls it ditty-bop. They've found a look they can hang out with. Their poems celebrate the rite-passage of hangin out with the sisters, riff-reminiscences that parallel young dude poems, hipster poems. Remember when we. . . .?

Jayne influences them. They see the daring, do they see the thing dared? Nobody misses the chained torrent of power. Power aint just no stance, though. The longer, toughened line of Jayne Cortez is the expression of wisdom including wit, vision encapsulating insights. Image is more than quip, and

woman is more than girl magnified and glorified. Her poetry is an advance over most women's poetry (particularly, but most men too) in the inclusiveness of its responsibilities, in the fullness of its feelings. It influences us. It's about being whole, in a shitty, fragmented world.