

8 Questions With...

Jasmine Ann Cooray



By Crispin Rodrigues

Jasmine Ann Cooray is a poet from London, of British and Sri Lankan heritage. She works with young people as a mentor and workshop facilitator, developing confidence through poetry and performance. She aims to create spaces for voices all of kinds to speak out. She is currently the writer in residence at the National University of Singapore, which is a yearly 6 month residency offered to international artists. She is also training as an integrative psychotherapist.

Jasmine is known for her vivid images, inclusive performance style, and storytelling through personal experience. She is often moved to address the taboo issues through her writing, and has performed in a variety of spaces in the UK, Singapore and the Philippines. Her debut poetry pamphlet 'everything we don't say' was released with Tall Lighthouse Press in 2009 and awaits reprint with Math Paper Press in 2014. She is working on her first full collection. She never gives a substandard hug.

I was first introduced to Jasmine's poetry by the poet Pooja Nansi, who enthusiastically remarked to me over Facebook that I had to check her out. And indeed I did at Artistry during a session of Speakeasy in November. Witnessing her poetry on stage definitely taught me about expressing personal experiences, from poems on waitressing, to poems about her mixed heritage. Piqued with curiosity and amazement regarding her writing process, I had the wonderful opportunity to meet her at the tail-end of her NUS-USP residency and decided to ask Jasmine to be our interviewee on the first "8 Questions With..."

1. What are some of your literary inspirations?

There are some poets I always come back to. I love Rumi. I also love Ellen Bass for her delicate images, Terrance Hayes, Charles Bukowski for their sense of play; Philip Levine, Anne Carson, Sharon Olds for balance; Kayo Chingonyi and Warsan Shire for their grace, humility and honesty.

I also am influenced by the new generation of poets in London and Singapore because they are so fiercely hungry to learn and experiment, and to see people writing in such a free way, not congealed into one style or subject is really inspiring.

2. How much has your background as a mixed-race person influenced your writing? Do you see yourself falling into any category of any particular race or seemingly more inclined towards one race?

In all honesty I did not start out engaging with race in my work. I am mixed, so there is an invisibility or fluidity that means there are many spaces I occupy, and for a while I did not think that such an 'open passport' entitled me to write about race. However, I also occupy no spaces. I am home everywhere and nowhere. What I want to explore in some of my work is the exoticism and others' sense of entitlement that comes with being viewed as Other, but Other in a way that holds so much possibility for the beholder. *What are you?* or as I like to translate: *'What kind of brown is that?'* But even in that realm of curiosity, you cease to exist, and it is that process of annihilating intrigue that interests me, because it interferes with one's sense of belonging. I have biological family in England, Holland, Sri Lanka...but I have emotional ties all over the world, so when you ask where my leanings are: my leanings are towards the people and places that I connect to and connect with, regardless of where I fall on the colour chart or what language I speak. There is culture, and then there is humanity.

3. Family obviously plays a big role in your poems, and you have a really interesting father! Care to share how your family and their ideologies have influenced your writing?

Every single member of my family has a big personality and one of the reasons I began to write was to forge a space to express my own take on things, my own anger, sadness, criticisms- and I am grateful for that because the process of pushing through resulted in creativity. I was an angsty, chaotic and rebellious teenager but once I stopped fighting it, I realized that the love of my family is actually very supporting and this makes it easier to pursue what I love. My father was this passionate Trotskyist barrister, teacher, human rights activist and my mother is from a working class family, and of course when they got together they experienced racism because this was the late '60s and people were not ok with an inter-racial couple. So we grew up with a lot of stories, and an awareness of inequalities in the world, and intolerant of oppression and persecution- on both large and small scale. I think the main way that influences my work is that fundamentally, I want to talk about the stories, the emotions, that are not told, and I want to be honest in a world that tries to us say that everything is ok when it is not. And I don't want to romanticise - there is also a lot of painful grappling with home that my poems come out of: the disappointments and grievances within family, the closeness and distance. I needed to make sense of all these things through poetry, to carve from it understanding, and eventually, empathy.

4. The writer Philip Roth once commented that he wasn't a Jewish writer but a writer who happened to be Jewish. This year, you performed at ContraDiction IX: An Evening of LGBT Literature. Do you see yourself as a queer poet or a poet who happens to be queer?

I identify as Queer- I have relationships with both men and women- but in terms of my writing, I do not set out to explicitly document a 'queer' experience, because it is not universal. I make the work that comes through me, and sometimes it has a clear feminist angle, sometimes there are references to queer intimacy, inequality, persecution, and I guess the politics exist in the work in these ways. But I don't force myself to write about queer issues just for the sake of 'representing', because for me that alone as a motivation will produce hollow poems. If I am moved I will write. And I am open about who I am and always have been.

5. Your poem "True Colours" was inspired by working in coffee shops and having to answer silly questions. Do you think that poetry should be built on experience rather than just reading a book or watching the telly?

I don't know about 'should'- I can only speak for myself, and for me, my go-to is personal experience. It feels more accessible to me creatively, it feels less like telling a 'story'. The gloves are off. However, I love the possibilities of imagination, the places we can leap to that are outside our known world of existence, and also the intangibles. I am currently exploring what happens when I write from an entirely different point of view. We live in ourselves and ourselves only, yes- but I think poetry is also about learning to play close

attention to what is going on around you in people and places. If I can write accurately and respectfully- that is, with an awareness of the limitations of my own view, then I don't feel that only the deeply personal can hold authenticity.

6. What, in your personal opinion, is the difference between spoken word or slam poetry and written poetry?

People often ask about this distinction and in all honesty I think that the 'branding' is sort of unhelpful and serves to deepen the chasm between approaches to poetry. Loosely, when people say 'page poetry' often they mean poetry that is more likely to be published and less likely to be shared aloud. And vice versa with spoken word. Spoken word artists often create a different public persona for themselves and share their work in media other than books, magazines or journals, and can participate in competitions called 'slams'. Often, the differences between 'spoken word' and 'page poetry' are used to denigrate rather than honour the different experiences of reading work and hearing work in front of you: 'page poets are boring, dry and impersonal/performance poets are slack-edited crowd pleasers.' I feel that there is space for everything, but what I try to do and encourage the young people I work with to do is share the poem in the way that best suits it- whether subtle or loud and dynamic. I like what storytelling revivalist Kamini Ramachandran says about spoken word, which is that it is often delivered 'at' and not 'to' the audience. I think bringing the focus back to communicating with others and telling story - the original oral tradition before literacy - is useful for keeping work human and memorable.

7. How do you find the Singapore poetry scene?

Singapore has a small but incredibly vibrant poetry scene. There is a diversity that means people can occupy different spaces according to what they connect to. What I have found nourishing here is the openness and generosity with which I have been welcomed and included. It has nudged me to share more of my work and push myself to experiment and develop. There is an incredible amount of talent here and the upcoming poets are very sharp and passionate. It is not a utopia and nor should it be- every place has its divisions and tribes but that is natural. But it feels like there is enough space for different styles of work to be appreciated.

8. Any advice for aspiring poets out there?

Read what you can, observe your surroundings with as close attention as possible. Write from the place in you that wants to speak and feel and be alive, not the part of you that wants recognition or gravitas or Facebook likes. You have an opportunity to be real about experience, so be truthful - don't be tempted to produce propaganda for an ideal, perfect existence. We have advertising for that. Write to connect with yourself or others or both. Be aware of when you are posing as a writer to yourself, and keep the performance in check. Don't slave drive yourself if it scares the poem into hiding or stiffness. Play. And if you are going to commit to saying something, say it, and accept that you are doing so.

You can read Jamine's blog at www.jasmineanncooray.wordpress.com.

True Colours, her latest handmade zine of ten new poems stocked at Artistry in Bugis and The Arts House, and further stockists will be announced on her blog. A reprint of her first pamphlet, 'everything we don't say' will be out in 2014, and the full collection is on its way slowly.

She did her very last feature set at SPORE Art Salon, Artistry Café, Tuesday, 17 December. Thus far, there are no upcoming events for her return to London yet but follow her blog and it will keep you posted.