

Feature: Five Qs with Kimberly Alidio

writinglikeanasian.blogspot.com/2014/08/feature-five-qs-with-kimberly-alidio.html



Kimberly Alidio is a poet, historian, high school teacher, tenure-track drop-out, and author of Solitude Being Alien (dancing girl press). Originally from Baltimore, she lives in Austin. Her poetry has appeared in Bone Bouquet, Fact-Simile, Horse Less Review, Esque, Make/shift and Spiral Orb, among other places. She is a Kundiman fellow, alumna of VONA/Voice of Our Nation, Center for Art and Thought Artist-in-Residence, and recipient of the Naropa Summer Writing Program's Zora Neale Hurston Scholarship. She holds a Ph.D from the University of Michigan. Her website is kimberlyalidio.tumblr.com.

(Q1) How did you come up with the title Solitude Being Alien for your collection of poetry?

A friend, Sarita See, shared a 2010 article by the writer Luis Francia on Filipino overseas contract workers in Hong Kong. The phrase belongs to Francia. The full phrase is "solitude being alien to most Filipinos" and he offers it as a possible explanation of why a good number of Filipina domestic workers contracted in Hong Kong are butch, tomboy, masculine-presenting, or otherwise visibly queer. I was also thinking of Marisa González's video, "Female open space invaders," on Filipinas congregating in downtown Hong Kong on Sundays, their only day off. I wrote a poem with the title "Solitude Being Alien" to extend the queer image of migrant workers not as lonely people or people finding freedom from supposed sexual repression in the homeland but as a single space traveler witnessing the femme intimacy of being alien together. The poem as a field of Filipina-futurism, in a way.

(Q2) How was the audience response at your recent performance at the Café Libro Open-Mike? Were there any particular surprises?

The audience response was very Resistencia, fierce and gentle which is the spirit of raulrsalinas, the founder of the venue space. Resistencia Bookstore, which has moved back to Austin's east side, is such a beautiful light-filled little house. I'm so grateful for Lilia Rosas, who runs the space as the home of Red Salmon Arts. My fellow poet, theater, dance and stylist people were there. I was glad to invite my writer friend, Mardee Rosuello, to join me in reading four Joi Barrios poems. Mardee read them in Tagalog and I read them in English (Barrios translates her own work, I believe). I cried a bit, actually, as Mardee read. My intention was to invoke the language sounds and context accompanying my monolingualism, and also to make a diasporic space connected to the global south. Barrios has a recent poem on Typhoon Yolanda/ Haiyan called "Sumpa Ng Kawayan/ The Bamboo Curse." We read that.

Several amazing poets read first while I sat in a low lounge chair right in front of them. Then there I was, standing in front of a room and I didn't want to read my poems as a lecture or as an assignment. The reading was a Friday in the middle of the spring term at the high school where I teach. So what surprised me was not audience response but my own decision somehow not to look anyone in the eye as I read. It wasn't a good performance per se. But that was how to be with language and people at that moment.

After the reading, a woman introduced herself and said that my poems were indeed political. I'd claimed otherwise in my segue from Joi's poems.

(Q3) In what ways does your poetic work inform your approach to teaching?

I've done a lot of experiments. Back in 2005 or 2006, I taught a version of a Filipino American History class by assigning three poets -- Joseph Legaspi, Barbara Jane Reyes, and Patrick Rosal. Patrick was at the University of Texas for the year, so it was great to have him in the classroom. As an adjunct instructor at St. Edwards University, also in Austin, I did in-class exercises in which students wrote letters and persona poems in response to primary sources like Spanish chronicles of the Aztecs and syncretic Chinese Christian iconography. Now as a high school teacher, I give an upper-level seminar that doubles as a sort of creative nonfiction writing lab. I'll talk about that more in my answer to your next question.

The kind of history writing I teach and evaluate is necessarily separate from my poetic writing. It's a product-oriented and properly defended kind of writing that I help to perpetuate as a teacher but don't really practice as a writer anymore. I do find myself focusing on the creative research process of formulating an idea and argument. That's where my poetics come in: the practice of experimental, experiential and social modes of meaning-making.

You can't ever forget the structural power of the grading system, though. I need to think more on how to grade the ineffable parts of creative process along with traditional assessments.

(Q4) On your tumblr account, you have a great syllabus for your course on Cosmopolitanism. How has the student response been to this course and the ways in which they are asked to critique and create travel writing?

Thank you for your response to the syllabus! I put it on my website as a speculative proposal for some future (writing) project. The course definitely reflects some of my scholarly thinking on what I call "colonial cosmopolitanism" in the twentieth-century diaspora resulting from the U.S. empire in the Philippines. There's also some of my dharma practice, as well as my interest in somatic and spatial perception and psychogeography, in the mindful walking and writing assignments. The seminar has a bit of a reputation as "that class where you take walks and go out for lunch" or "that class where you have to make a friend and write about it."

The school where I teach has a large international student program. Its high tuition fees means that most of the students, international and U.S., are upper- and upper-middle class. They already have significant experience with some form of elite cosmopolitan travel, including volunteer trips or voluntourism, so they bring a lot of knowledge from a range of positions to the classroom. I think that the ethic of caring curiosity is challenged and exercised when they read Jamaica Kincaid's scathing critique of the white tourist, for example. But this ethic also acts as a container for looking at the familiar in new ways and documenting those experiments. I get to have honest social-justice conversations with my students about disability and transgender politics, social media, and their relationships on campus.

In a way, travel is about temporality and impermanence. Junior and senior high school students are always being told to prepare for change in several years and to make the right decisions to get to the right college and make the right career. My seminar students teach me a lot in the way they slow down and meet the seminar as an opportunity to learn and reflect from the present moment, their embodied everyday lives. They're still speedy even as they slow down. It makes the selfies that they take on our field trips that much more meaningful. So again: process-oriented investigation.

(Q5) What new works do you have forthcoming?

I just finished revising a poetry book manuscript with a handful of new poems from June and early July that came out of participating in this year's Kundiman Retreat. I sent the manuscript out to friends and will see what will happen. I'm reading a lot now that the revisions are done, and I'm so amazed by what a poem can be and has been.

I have a critical essay coming out in August Espiritu's and Martin Manalansan's anthology, *Philippine Palimpsests* (New York University). I have about a decade-and-a-half's worth of scholarly drafts and notes on early twentieth-century sensations and perceptions of diasporic U.S. colonialism of the Philippines. Originally it was going to be a scholarly monograph but competitive hyperproductivity and heavy service which I experienced as a tenure-track research professor in ethnic studies weren't helping me figure out an approach or frame. Lately, I've been slowly re-reading Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's poems. I have a hunch that Berssenbrugge's long sentences are pointing a way for me to return to prose in a way that's both academic and post-academic. I'm curious to see what kind of writing is possible.