

Acclaimed Poet and Professor Lauren K. Alleyne, On Poetry and PhDs

By Richard Milby

Photo by Erica Cavanagh

How does a person figure out “what kind of being one is, what one can become, what names one can claim or be claimed by, and how one translates oneself” from context to context? Poet Lauren K. Alleyne attempts to do so through the words of her award-winning 2018 collection, *Honeyfish*. Perhaps not surprisingly, the poet who asks such questions does not confine herself to a single public role.

An Associate Professor of English at James Madison University, Alleyne also happens to be an English PhD student at UVA, with a strong interest in Caribbean and African American poetry and poetics. So, while establishing herself as an important voice in contemporary poetry—a voice engaged in the process of naming, in bearing witness, and in how we conceive of our bodies and our homes—Alleyne has also been taking classes, studying for orals, and brushing up on her French to pass the foreign language mastery exam.

For now, Alleyne claims, her writing “has slowed to a crawl.” But you likely wouldn’t know it by the list of recent projects that speaks to her formidable drive, nor by the way her poetry has continued to leap to the top of critic’s awards lists.

From the dual island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, she is an award-winning poet and writer who collected her MA from Iowa State, her MFA from Cornell, and is still hungry for more. Alleyne is the author of two books of poetry—*Difficult Fruit* (2014) and *Honeyfish* (2019)—and was recently nominated as a finalist for the Library of Virginia Awards for *Honeyfish*. That collection has already won the Green Rose Prize in 2018, an award which only adds to an already impressive—and still growing—list of nominations and awards. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, *Guernica*, *The Caribbean Writer*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, among others.

Alleyne is as accomplished a PhD student as you’ll find. She will tell you that she’s always wanted to get her PhD, “but each time the opportunity arose, I made a different decision. I went to the MFA instead after my MA, because an advisor said a PhD would train me out of writing poems. When I applied and got into my dream programs back in ’08, I also landed my first tenure-track job and the choice between yet another student visa and a job that offered permanent residency was a no-brainer.”

For Alleyne, though, “‘Student’ is one of my most cherished identities.”

“When I took the job at JMU, I was prepared to leave that dream behind, but I took a long-shot and approached UVA, and the department’s generous flexibility with my proposition to matriculate on a part-time basis meant that I could pursue that dream (altered, but attainable version of it).”

Altered, but attainable describes more than just Alleyne’s balanced duties to both her institutions. When she took on the role of Assistant Director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center, the nation’s first academic center for Black poetry, she was, in her words, “unprepared for what the loss of my summers would do to my writing. That, plus adding a PhD program ‘on the side,’ has definitely challenged me.” Alleyne is also editor-in-chief of Furious Flower’s literary journal, *The Fight & the Fiddle*, and co-editor, along with Joanne V. Gabbin, of the 2019 anthology *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*.

Nevertheless, Alleyne remarks, “I’m less worried about not writing than I used to be—I am a poet, and I’ll always write poems. Even if my focus is elsewhere, it just means I’m gathering material—learning, making memories, having experiences—that will feed the poems when they’re ready to come and I have the time and energy to receive them.”

Likely we are all struggling to have new experiences in the age of distance learning and quarantine protocols. But one unique opportunity has arisen out of this new paradigm for Alleyne:

“My mother, who lives in Trinidad, was going stir-crazy quarantining alone, and so I started taking her as my “Zoom date” to virtual events so she could get a taste of what it was that I was always running around doing. She loved it, and now signs up for all kinds of readings—with or without me!” Alleyne’s mother had only been able to see her read a handful of times before.

“The other day, I called her after a pretty big reading I’d done; she was beaming, and said, simply, ‘I get it now.’ It was one of the most joyful moments in my life.”

Alleyne’s poetry itself ranges in its explorations from the most joyful to the most painful areas of experience. In one of her recent elegies for Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old African American boy shot by police, Alleyne writes of seeing video of his killing:

I want to say wait
 but in the distance
between the urge

and the utterance
 between lung and lip
(one-a-thousand; two-a-thousand)

he is gone.

The whole poem is here: <https://tinhouse.com/play-or-an-elegy-for-tamir-rice/>. To hear Lauren K Alleyne read and to discover more of her work, visit her website.