

Black Alive and Looking Straight at You: The Legacy of June Jordan

I have been thinking for a long time about poetry and politics through the instructive examples of June Jordan, the woman and her work. What is the “job” or the work of a poem, and what are its limitations? Why would a writer speak in the morning in the poems, in the afternoon their body while teaching or doing other activist work, and in the evening in prose essays? What can each form do that the other cannot? Most specifically, what do we want to protect in poetry if we believe, as I do and as Jordan did, that poetry * is* sacred speech that marks the sacred in our lives?

There are poetry people who think that politics, per se, has no place in poetry. This is silly, and it is amazing how strong a hold this idea has had when it is so empty. For time immemorial, across geographies and peoples, poetry has taken as its subject politics, that is, the affairs of the polis, the community and its people. Some people think of themselves as gatekeepers, defenders of a culture, as though culture is something that can be owned by anyone. Culture is like ambient gas; once it is released, there is no collecting it and bringing it back home. This is a great and magical thing: Culture belongs to the world that occasions it. But we could usefully think about the rich and edifying aspects of form that mark discourses in particular genre. How should a poem attend to the business of its chosen form, the care and style with which the box is made rather than what is put inside the box? Poets do have responsibility to make images that compel, to distill language, to write with model precision and specificity that is what poetry has to offer to other genres. It makes something happen with language that takes the breath away or shifts the mind. For the poem, which is after all not the newspaper, must move beyond the information it contains while simultaneously imparting the information it contains. Jordan’s commitment to poetry was constant, and it is in those words that we find her

simultaneous devotion to the largest possible picture — her keen analyses of the world situation — and to the smallest detail — her tending of language.

Jordan outlines many of these ideas in her book Poetry for the People, which chronicles that movement at U.C. Berkeley where she taught for many years and offers a try-this-at-home handbook for bringing together people across boundaries through the power of poetry in order, quite simply, to make the world a better place through reading, writing, and performing poetry. To be brave and then be braver. To do the work of learning and knowing so that when you speak to the issues of the world you know of what you speak. To travel, either literally or by learning another language and reading what people who think and speak in that language have seen the world. To come together under the umbrella of poetry knowing not only what we fight against but also where the love is that can unite us. “As I think about anyone or any thing,” she wrote, “—whether history of literature or my father or political organizations or a poem or a film — as I seek to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment/possibilities of anyone or anything, the decisive question is, always, where is the love? The energies that flow from hatred, from negative and hateful habits and attitudes, do not promise something good, something I could choose to cherish, to honor with my own life. It is always the love, whether we look to the spirit of Fannie Lou Hamer, or to the spirit of Aghostino Neto, it is always the love that will carry action into positive new places, that will carry your own nights and days beyond demoralization and away from suicide.” (269)

June Jordan lived from 1936 to 2002 and was a poet, activist, essayist, and teacher. She published more critical prose than any other African-American woman writer in the twentieth century, as well as plays, anthologies, children’s books, and the tough-minded memoir, Soldier.

She was a proud African American Brooklynite of Jamaican parentage, but she was not mired in

racial, national, cultural, or ideological group-think. She wrote, for example, that after she was raped by a black man “[i]t became clear to me that I had a whole lot of profound and overdue thinking to begin on the subject of what it means to be female regardless of color.” (80)

Jordan tirelessly advocated for the rights of others both locally and internationally, and her essays articulated far-reaching, integrated points of view on culture and politics. She is perhaps best known as a prolific poet whose lyrical voice linked political struggle with an ethic of love. Anyone who ever met her knew she was a fierce, brilliant, tireless, brave, bawdy, luminous woman who exemplified life force even as — especially as — she fought for many years against cancer.

I first read her poems as a child in the beautiful collection, *Who Looks at Me*, that introduced African-American art to young people. “I am black alive and looking straight at you,” she wrote, which always seemed to me to be a credo for moving through this life and its challenges. Her work, then, has always been with me, as has her example of a committed, productive artist, who was sometimes afraid but was always courageous, who saw herself as a citizen of the world who traveled to Nicaragua and Lebanon and concluded, “The whole world will become a home to all of us, or none of us can hope to live on it, peacefully.” (117) She was simultaneously a pacifist and a fighter who knew that “all war leads to death and all love leads you away from death.” (121) She wrote, in her unsparing memoir *Soldier*, of the Jamaican immigrant father, Granville Ivanhoe Jordan, who brutalized her, his only child, and yet made her a fighter. That fighter is everywhere in her work: the fighter who, as a student at the University of Chicago, knew that the teacher who told her she couldn’t write, who wondered if English was even her first language, was wrong, and would prove him wrong; the fighter who, as a teacher

years later, told her students, “this is not my class, this is our class. I do not want to hear what I think. I need to know what you think.” (282)

I saw her read several times over the years and was too shy to go up and speak to her. I read every flinty word she wrote — on Chilean poetry, the Palestinian situation, bisexuality, any number of issues of justice — and she became an example to me of someone who made a righteous and beautiful life by poems, essays, and deeds and who did not shy away from what was difficult. A few years ago, when I was about to give a reading in her home of Berkeley, California, I wrote to her, introduced myself, and asked if I could visit her. She responded by giving me a long and magical evening that I will never forget, and an email friendship ensued until she died, just a short year after. There are some deaths where you feel the earth open up and leave a physically palpable void, and June Jordan’s death hit me and many others who knew her well and not at all. Her vitality, in word and in person, was extraordinary. Clichés such as “larger than life” and “force of nature” applied. She was utterly beautiful to behold, exquisite and exact and light-filled with an enormous, knowing laugh. She felt like life itself.

In her essay collection Civil Wars she wrote of her year teaching at Yale University in 1974-5, where I now teach: her love for students; the particular challenges of teaching “black studies” in the 1970s to “the descendants of slaves as well as the descendants of the slave owners;” and of challenging what she saw as hegemonic worship of Richard Wright in African-American Studies to the exclusion of necessary voices like Hurston’s. She decried an “either/or” approach to African-American canon formation and political thinking. “It is tragic and ridiculous to choose between Malcolm and Dr. King,” she wrote. “[E]ach of them hurled himself against a quite different aspect of our predicament, and both of them, literally, gave their lives to our ongoing struggle.”

At whichever institution employed her she pressed at the boundaries of the place and challenged the status quo. While at Yale she protested an impending campus visit by pseudo-scientific racist William Shockley, and along with students, she organized the Yale Attica Defense. At the anti-Shockley rally, she spoke questions that still echo for us as a community at Yale: “What freedom does this institution care about? Is it the freedom to maintain traditions based on hundreds of years of genocide, theft, rape, humiliation and hypocrisy? Is it the freedom to protect respectability for the forces of conservatism: social, political, academic conservatism: the conservation of bloody, terrifying, life-denying, arrogant traditions of a self-appointed elite of the world?... Show me the freedom that this University upholds: show it to me in its admissions policies. Show it to me in its financial aid programs. Show it to me in its curriculum, in its required readings, in the color, the sex, the viewpoints of its faculty. Show me this freedom that this institutions holds dear.” She offered an example for learning, living, and questioning in larger institutional contexts.

And she always wrote about love, be it in a whole book of love poems, Haruko, or her constantly asking, Where is the love? Do you know what you are fighting for as well as what you are fighting against? She wrote, “I am saying that the ultimate connection cannot be the enemy. The ultimate connection must be the need that we find between us. It is not only who you are, in other words, but what we can do for each other that will determine the connection.” (219) It was love, in her unsentimental vision, that could blaze a path through a world in which multiple-scale violence is the rule.

I want to read some of Jordan’s poems and some of my own which I feel are in the spirit of her work and example. She wrote, “We need everybody and all that we are. We need to know and make known the complete, constantly unfolding, complicated heritage that is our black

experience. We should absolutely resist the superstar, one at a time mentality that threatens the varied and resilient, flexible wealth of our Black future.” (284) That “we” is the site of Jordan’s poetry, over and over again, real we’s of the individuals and communities she has worked with, and imagined we’s of the difficult but optimistic future that calls for our clear-eyed love and bravery.