




BROWSE



 **June Jordan: July 9, 1936-June 14, 2002**

Jewelle Gomez

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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June Jordan

July 9, 1936-June 14, 2002

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"... I got the idea that poetry could be useful."

June Jordan once recounted her Cyrano de Bergerac-like early literary career in an interview that both illuminated the depth of her artistic and political concerns and revealed her youthful entrepreneurial skills. Interviewed by David Barsamian for Alternative Radio in October of 2000 Jordan related how the child poet June used to reinterpret the emotional needs of her neighborhood friends—whether they were falling in or falling out of love. She would then, for a small fee, construct an effective poem that conveyed their heart's desire. In some ways this is what poet, essayist, and activist June Jordan did so successfully all of her career. She opened herself to our society's social needs and to the yearnings of the heart, then transformed them, most usefully, into cries for justice and celebrations of the human spirit.

Born in Harlem in 1936 June Jordan grew up in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, and the rhythm of those two communities was often the back beat in her writing. She was the only child of Granville and Mildred Jordan, both immigrants to the United States—he from Jamaica, she from Panama. The distinct musicality which would have characterized their speech also underscored Jordan's work, lending her poems a sometimes unexpected lyricism and infusing her essays with the cadence of oratory.

Despite her childhood roots in traditionally Caribbean American and African American communities, Jordan often found herself making her way through institutions and situations that were dominated by non-Black cultural influences. She attended Northfield School for Girls in Massachusetts and graduated from Barnard College in 1957. While there she married a fellow student, Michael Meyer, and later, in 1958, gave birth to her son Christopher. **[End Page 715]**

Her early career, like that of many authors, was a panoply of work experiences and her longest path led her through the halls of academia. Over the past 30 years she taught at Yale, City University of New York, Connecticut College, Sarah Lawrence College, the State University of New York at Stony Brook and most recently at the University of California at Berkeley, where she was a professor of African Studies.

Her first book of poetry, *Who Look at Me*, was published in 1969 and established the tenor of much of the work to follow. It held up to the light the harshness of Black life using unadorned verse that rang true. Jordan's insistence on looking and not turning away shaped everyone's perception of June Jordan and her work throughout her career.

She was called "the consummate tough girl" in *Black Issues Book Review* in 2000, in part because of her adept use of the vocabulary and rhythms of Black Urban America, but perhaps more because of her unflinching examination of the physical and psychological damage wrought by the *isms* that infect the United States.

But the toughness was not in Jordan, but rather in the situations she described. In her piece "Poem About Police Violence" (1974), she presages the anguish people of color would feel repeatedly in the coming decades with this question:

Tell me something
What you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop
you think the accident rate would lower
subsequently?

The shock of the question is deliberately provocative. But the poem's power lies in its status as inquiry. It's an intellectual hypothesis demanding we follow the corollaries out to the edge of the page. The result is a not-so-modest proposal that chills the blood.

Jordan's devotion to writing about the dangers inherent in a culture which tolerates the *isms*—racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism—might be seen as a direct outgrowth of her bi-cultural/outsider roots. Her parents' bi-cultural home, as well as her early interracial marriage provided her with a panoramic view from the richly diverse...



Photo by Lynda Koollish

JUNE JORDAN

July 9, 1936–June 14, 2002

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2715 North Charles Street
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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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