



## IN MEMORIAM

June Jordan  
Professor of African American Studies  
Berkeley  
1936 — 2002

June Jordan, born July 1936, died of cancer on June 14, 2002. She is survived by her son Christopher David Meyer, born in 1958, and now an environmental lawyer living in Montana.

An award-winning poet, professor, social critic, and activist, she was a prolific and versatile writer, author of 28 published works, including a novel, a memoir, volumes of poetry and political essays, writings for children and young adults, and two librettos. Some of her best-known books are *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* (2000); *Kissing God Goodbye* (1997); *Haruko/ Love Poems* (1994); *Technical Difficulties: African-American Notes on the State of the Union* (1992); *Lyrical Campaigns: Selected Poems* (1989); *Naming Our Destiny* (1989); *Living Room* (1985); *On Call: Political Essays* (1985); and *Things That I Do in the Dark* (1977). In the 1980s, her play *The Issue*, directed by Ntozake Shange, and the musical *Bang Bang über Alles*, for which she wrote the libretto, were performed. In the 1970s, she wrote books for children and young adults, including a biography of Fannie Lou Hamer (1972) and the novel *His Own Where*, which was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the outstanding books of 1971 and nominated for the National Book Award in 1972. Jordan's writings have appeared in diverse journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *Black World*, *Ms.*, *Vibe*, the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, the *Progressive*, and the *New Republic*. She worked as contributing editor to *American Poetry Review* and *Chrysalis*. Her poetry is found in virtually every major anthology of contemporary poetry in the United States, including *The Norton Anthology of American Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, *Homegirls: Anthology of Black Feminism*, and *The Village Voice Anthology*. She awed listeners when she performed readings on university campuses, before the United Nations and the United States Congress and at the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Walker Arts Center, the Guggenheim Museum, the New York Public Library, and on National Public Radio. Recently, she was featured by the *New York Times*, she appeared on *The Lehrer News Hour* in "A Conversation with June Jordan," and she was, with activist scholar Angela Davis, featured as the subject of a British television documentary, "A Place of Rage." Several of her poems were set to music and performed by Bernice Johnson Reagon of the Sweet Honey in the Rock group. With this in mind, it is also worth noting the inclusion, in her more recent work, of the libretto *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, which was directed by world-renowned director of opera, theater, and television, Peter Sellars.

An artist of extraordinary talent and range, Jordan was the recipient of numerous honors, including Special Recognition by the United States Congress, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Conference of Black Writers, a National Association of Black Journalists Award, and a PEN-West Freedom to Write Award. She received Harvard University's President's Certificate of Service and Contribution to the Arts, the Ground Breakers-Dream Makers Award of the Women's Foundation of San Francisco, the American Institute of Architecture Award for the African Burial Grounds Project, and the Prix de Rome in Environmental Design for the architectural redesign of Harlem with architect R. Buckminster Fuller.

At the University of California, Berkeley, Jordan founded and directed the popular Poetry for the People course, which enrolled 150 students each year for studying and writing poetry. According to fellow writer Ishmael Reed of the Department of English, Jordan was "one of the most popular professors on campus. Like a Renaissance master, she had more than a following. She had a school. For her, every student was a star."

Poetry for the People spawned workshops in area schools, congregations, and correctional facilities. She received the Chancellor's Distinguished Lectureship, the Chancellor's Recognition for Community Partnership, and the Berkeley Citation.

Born in Harlem to immigrants from Jamaica, Jordan grew up in Bedford- Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York. She attended Barnard College and the University of Chicago, though she never earned a degree. Beginning in 1967, she taught English and literature, fighting for the inclusion of Black and Third World studies in college curricula and advocating acceptance of Black English. She taught at the City College of New York, Sarah Lawrence College, and Yale University before joining the faculty of the departments of English, Women's Studies, and African American Studies at UC Berkeley in 1986.

Distinguishing itself in its persistent call for freedom, June Jordan's politically engaged work exemplifies, in her own terms, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America." Whether she addresses questions of writing, language, gender, sexuality, family conflict, social ailment, or domestic and international affairs, June Jordan would not let us turn a blind eye to the underlying connections that link all struggles of liberation across their differences. Thus, following the breadth of her poetic and political praxis, one shifts from the call to act on the "Technical Difficulties" at home ("For My American Family. A Belated Tribute to a Legacy of Gifted Intelligence and Guts," for example), to challenging reflections on world crises from Africa (South Africa, Namibia, Angola) to the Middle East (Lebanon, Israel, Palestine) and Latin America (Nicaragua, Panama, Ecuador).

For Jordan, poetry was first and foremost a gift. Even in her most explicitly political moments, she wrote with no preconceived agendas, no ready- made images, "Bringing it all back home," as she insisted, "for the sake of People's Poetry." It is through her unfailing eye and uncanny ear that the reader is invited to receive the world with all its fresh romances and fearless challenges, as well as in its social injustices and questionable political leaders. "With searing honesty and the ferocity of a child, June Jordan has once again found a way to make the impossible brutality of living a song," wrote the poet Ntozake Shange in her comment on Soldier. What the reader sees at work is what Alice Walker has called "the committed, passionate, revolutionary creative mind" that reminds us — with love and care — of the violence of American life, while emphasizing the always- present potential for change. Jordan- the- poet writes as a powerful intimate of the makers of history, as a fiercely independent mind and decisive actor in significant events. In composing words, she generously gives back to poetry one of the major functions it seems to have lost in today's information age: its capacity not only to unsettle, disturb, and provoke engagement with the reader on humanitarian issues, but also to move, inspire and transform while informing and naming anew. Here, the process of writing is the process of discovering how events are connected, how oppressions are analogous, how lives interpenetrate on the world map.

Pivotal to June Jordan's writing is wit, passion, humor, and a powerful sense of rhythm. Together with the courage and outrage, we encounter the lyricism and the musicality of a word play that never hesitates to venture into the wilds of the heart. Writing on Jordan and on her collection *Haruko/ Love Poems*, Adrienne Rich affirms that this "visionary of human solidarity" is "one of the most musically and lyrically gifted poets of the late twentieth century. Her extraordinary tonal, sensuous poems capture moments or ways of being which might make love — in many dimensions — more possible, more revolution- directed." Many of Jordan's poems are dramatic interior monologues meant to be read aloud. As they are read, they evolve into operatic aria- like public declarations, gathering momentum through the cumulative effects of the voice and the meanings of words and phrases.

June Jordan's self- portrait is perhaps best captured in these last lines of her moving portrait of Fannie Lou Hamer:

one full Black lily  
luminescent  
in a homemade field  
  
of love

Charles Henry  
Elaine H. Kim

