

★ We're On: A June Jordan Reader



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Reviewed by Aja Monet

In defiant black ink marching across the white page, June Jordan (1936–2002) speaks from the eternal front lines of justice: “I am black alive and looking back at you.” Jordan was a lover and liberator. She stood against oppression in all its forms: literary and material, personal and political. Throughout her life, she was fully engaged in movement organizing and activism as a poet and essayist. She was also integral to expanding the analytic framework of intersectionality. Arguing that our work must be ruled by an open spiritual orientation and an intellectual humility, Jordan recognized the only politic that will guide us and free us is rooted in radical love: “The ultimate connections must be the need that we find between us.”

This academic reader spans a lifetime of community witnessing, writing, and doing; it contains many of Jordan’s essays, poems, letters, comments, and

interviews. She wrote on housing development, land reform, gender and state violence, identity politics, economic injustice, international solidarity, and poetics. She wrote odes and dedications to freedom fighters and revolutionaries, celebrating their courage and love. Her essays do not flatter, though they mirror us; they push us toward deep contemplation, an ardent call for risk and action.

She critiques the limitations of our language—“By itself, our language cannot refuse to reflect the agonizing process of alienation”—to expand our linguistic imagination. She wrote to break free, to hold language accountable as a part of her decolonizing method, to attain a deep understanding of our connection and power. Jordan makes the case for poetry as a revolutionary act, “the creation of poems as a foundation for true community: a fearless democratic society.” She dispels the myth of poetry in solitude, encouraging writing in community.

Jordan begs us to trust one another and to tell the truth, to read the world more closely, to learn the wisdom of those who came before, who resisted before, and loved before. She laid a foundation, leaving a revolutionary blueprint for poetry to transform our lives beyond the white gaze and its literary imagination. Writing of the 1980 Miami uprising, which was labeled a “race riot,” Jordan saw black people’s collective resistance to the murder of Arthur McDuffie as a demonstration of love: “Where there is conflict, conscious termination of self-hatred is the only means to rational possibilities for love. Miami was an act of love: love for Arthur McDuffie and love for every jeopardized Black life.”

A collection of this kind is long overdue. June Jordan is an integral part of the canon for black lives and a guide to those who resist. Jordan does not merely “talk back to power,” she acquires it. She uses language to embolden her readers and to shift power to the *people*. This book is not just a collection of figurative words; it is a tool for liberation. (*Sept.*)

Aja Monet is a poet and organizer in Miami and the author of *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*.