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June Jordan Interview : 09-24-1981

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The Writer's Forum

Presents

June Jordan

Marchant: We welcome June Jordan to the Brockport Writer's Forum, June Jordan who teaches English at Stonybrook. Poet, essayist, novelist, dramatist, environmental designer, and black woman activist. And here to interview June is Adriane Livingston, who teaches literature in the department of Afro and Afro-American studies and Mary Elsie C. Robertson, short storyist and novelist. In Civil Wars in your forward, you said that in your childhood you first learned to fight physically and then you came to the spoken word. I loved words and I hated to fight, you say, but if as a black girl-child in America, I couldn't evade the necessity to fight. Then maybe I could choose my weaponry at least." I wonder how you first came to be a poet and a writer from your earliest years and what were your formative influences in that early progress?

Jordan: Well, I was extremely young when I began to think of myself as a poet and I think I was the consequence of growing up in an extremely religious house where the Bible was something that you had to pretty much memorize as well as hear it repetitively, endlessly on Sundays and also daily prayers in our home. And also the result of my father forcing me to read people such as Pauler and Stunbar and Shakespeare. When I was really too young to understand what was being said. But I was able nonetheless to appreciate the sound of the language and I became very excited about the sound and the possibilities of language.

Marchant: Did you have people to encourage you in school?

Jordan: My contemporaries were other children. I never received any encouragement either from my family or my teachers in school until I guess I was an undergraduate at Barnard. But my friends, playmates, and boyfriends, and what have you, were very excited about what I could do on demand. I used to sell poetry for little things and pick up a little change. You would tell me what kind of thing written to whom

and why and I would, you know for five cents, ten cents, it would buy me candy. So, I felt it was a very profitable thing to do, I mean as a young child, actually.

Marchant: How old were you then?

Jordan: I was about seven or eight. Starting around then I mean was something I could do you know, the way other people could build roller skates, scooter really well, that would go in straight lines the only ones I could build would go in circles. But I could do this. I could turn out what you needed for special occasions.

Marchant: You were an early commercial success.

Livingston: You've written in Civil Wars in one of the essays about your progress as a writer that words and the music of words always did intrigue you. And when you were fairly young, I think still young, you read Shelley the first political poet, and you realized that political poems could be written. And you discuss in that essay coming to feel that collective voice that one time at any rate you did want to speak for black people. And then you moved beyond that to, well, a singular voice. Could you tell a little bit about where you are now with poetry?

Jordan: At this point I feel that the effort to speak with a collective voice in some respects doomed, and would have to be faked. Because whoever you are you are really only one person, and truly. And to try to speak to as many people is not only pretentious but I think it is dangerous and I also think it is dishonest. So, I am more concerned to trust myself, to be ordinary in many ways, many important ways. So that if I can simply try to tell the truth as I know it and I feel it that other people will be able to use what I do for their own purposes. If I am extraordinary I would say that that won't work. But, I think that what you might call a collective consciousness or an effort to keep in your mind let's say all of your people, however you define that, or all of your country, however you define

that. But that doesn't seem to me fake at all but rather that is the undertaking of one person, one person trying to do this. And then when people look at your work they tend to judge for themselves whether you have succeeded or failed.

Livingston: What would you feel you have to do to succeed what is your concept of success when you write, when you reach out for others? What is it you hope to gain from it?

Jordan: It depends on the poem of course, because I write many different kinds of poems, in different voices and so on. But, in the context of, let's say, collective consciousness, for example, I have written recently a poem called "From Sea to Shining Sea" in which I tried to speak about all of the different ways people are threatened right now by Reagan's ascendancy. And that is not only Black people and women but it's people living in missile sights in North Dakota. And to me whether it works or not is something you can test by taking a poem like that to the various constituent groups in a reading situation and they will let you know. People will let you know either that you have mistakenly represented them or they feel that you emphasized something too much. We are not coming from there around here. And the large reading situation for me is the final criteria for my poetry. I mean by that, I revise on the basis of audience response and whether there is a response or there isn't.

Livingston: And what that response is.

Jordan: Yes. Or people come up and say I know what you were trying to do but... I listen to that of course.

Livingston: So the reality of poetry as an event is important to you, as opposed to something to be read.

Jordan: No. Part of the process of creation and an indispensable part for me. In other words I assume that everything that I write whether it is a poem or essay I assume an audience that is to say I assume that interaction. It is not a personal event. It is an effort at conversation at least.

Livingston: And you expect feedback from that.

Jordan: Oh, yes at least.

Marchant: You have a great range. But much of your poetry is political is didactic. Do you feel that your personal poems are a sort of indulgence and that your real mission is to write political poems?

Jordan: Well, I don't know if I accept the usual distinction between political and personal. I think I really believe that everything is political. It is true that I will probably feel more working very hard comfortable in a way, that seems to me if it succeeds may seem useful to many, many people as against a poem will let me feel, me by myself, relieved or finally expressed on subject. That is true. For example last night, I don't think I read anything that is in the conventional sense very personal. But after all, to me it seems that being a poet you are asking people to take their time and listen to you and I don't know why people should want to listen to me talk about myself. It seems to me that at least I have to attempt to be talking about something that clearly may involve more than myself, hopefully many people in the audience, if I am to justify asking for their time and their attention. That is just how I view it on the most rudimentary level. On the second level, the problem is, right now, as I see it, everything political seems to be urgent. I have such an emergency nature that I feel that whatever chance I have to talk with people in large groups, I should really try and express something that has a kind of life and death implication. So, whether that is about South Africa or lunches for school children, or I don't see where I can afford to be what I call trivial because

these are not trivial times it seems to me. I don't mean to be an alarmist or anything, but I really think that this is an apocalyptic moment in our history, American history. It seems to me that unless as many different peoples as possible, within the continent of America, can become heard and can focus themselves on these extremely sensitive issues, sensitive to your survival, the outcome of this apocalypse, it seems to me, unless that can is dismal.

Livingston: June, connected with that, you read a poem last night, a poem that is about police violence, and you write that every time they kill a black boy, then we kill a cop. You think the accident rate would lower subsequently. And in another place you write that you don't object to war. What you object to is losing the war. Now, these two statements taken together bother me a little bit because in a war it is not going to be the blacks who have the weapons, power, manpower, and so on. I feel that the poem is in a sense a call to action, and yet if that action is taken, if there is war, it is going to be a war that is lost, I think. How do you view these two things?

Jordan: I think that you are posing several questions at once there. As regards the poem on police violence, that poem presents some of my thinking on self defense and I feel the black community in America has too long deferred a serious and fearless discussion of self defence. Every other group in this country and every other interest group in this world found the defense department of the United States tot and feels perfectly comfortable to speak in terms of self defense and to do anything at all under that heading. But when black people are concerned, and just say defense; everyone becomes upset and excited and the black people who uttered that phrase themselves become extremely defensive and hasten to say "I mean under these circumstances" and "I'm not talking about violence". I don't see anything wrong with violence in response to violence at all. As far as I'm concerned, it seems to me that a non-violent response to violence has certainly been tested by black Americans in this country, by now. I just wonder when we are going to assess the meaning of that. I think to survive as a people you have to be tactically intelligent. You say, "Well

this is what I want". For example, suppose I want a voting rights act. If we do this and we get this done, then we say fine, that ~~tactic~~ works. Now I say that I want my children to walk the streets unarmed and not to be murdered by the police. We have rallies, petitions, and the policemen who murder our own black children going through the courts and emerging exonerated by the court system, then I say some other tactic is necessary. That is how I look at it. I don't think the concept of self defense and whatever you feel is necessary behind that concept necessarily jeopardizes a minority people at all. On the contrary, I think what it does is to let everyone know, everyone else know, that there limits to what you will tolerate. People respect that. The whole theory of deterrence, for example, you see that in the United States government and throughout the world, is a very respectable theory, a political theory. The idea is that if somebody knows that if he does this to you, he will die as a result of this or somebody in his family will die because of this because your saying that your life or the life of your child is as important as his life. He will think twice. He may do this anyway, but he will think twice. At this point, I am saying I don't know why anyone would hesitate to continue state violence against black life because there has not ever been a conviction of a perpetrator of state violence against black life. There has never been a conviction for manslaughter even. On the context of South Africa, which I said, I am not against war, I am against losing the war.. I would not agree. I think that for sure that the White Africans have maintained military superiority of weapons. But, I would ask you to look at what happened in Cuba and Vietnam. I say that that kind of might is not all determining, evidently. The might of the spirit seems to have some consequence. I believe that in my heart and in my mind that within my lifetime I will witness the liberation of the black people of South Africa. I believe that will happen. I also believe it will not happen except through violence.

Livingstone: Let me say and agree that that will happen and see that as perhaps

a signal for others, blacks in America to take a more defensive position. Do you see that happening, that black Americans are reaching a point where they may decide that these other tactics have not worked, that we fought these battles in this way before and we're going to have to do something different. What do you see as the future response?

Jordan: Well, I'm hoping that black people, and the depressed people in general within this country, poor people and women, would continue to reevaluate your situation in this way. I mean, say "I want this" and "I tried this", "I've done this and I've done that and it doesn't work", so you try something else. Incidentally, I am not talking about people picking up arms and running out in the streets and killing other people. That is not what I'm talking about. When I say self defense, I mean self defense.

Livingston: But, in South Africa it would be more. Well, it is self defense but it would also be taking the initiative. It would not be waiting until being physically attacked.

Jordan: I see no choice in South Africa because the African intention there seems to me unarguably is to maintain an obscenely illegitimate rule of hatred over the majority of the people whose country it is.

Livingston: The only way they could maintain or win the war, it seems to me, is continued help from the U.S. and other places. Even though they have armaments, they are vastly outnumbered. So, they would have to have reinforcements from outside. Do you see a movement in this country and in others that will sort of militate against them?

Jordan: Well, here is an example of something that hasn't been done so far and I don't know why not. I remember, I think it was in 1967, when Israel attacked the Egyptian air bases and people came up to you and said, "A dollar for Israel is a dollar for freedom" and collecting money was on the streets. Well the money was for arms and I don't understand why something is apparently inconceivable to black people in this country, to freedom loving people in this country, to

raise arms; for example, for the people of Angola, I can't understand this, or for the people of Lybia..Why is this such an amazing idea? Why would you have to hide or talk in whispers on the phone? You support this liberation struggle, you feel it is right, you know it is right, you know they need arms. Why don't you raise the money and/or the arms and send them over there? The same thing for El Salvador. This is what I call coming of age. Why are we so hesitant to move ahead? Everyone else does. What is the problem?

Livingston: But, you feel that there really is a hesitancy, that this is not happening or at least not yet.

Jordan: Yes, and I think one of the reasons for this hesitance, not only among lack people, but as I was saying before, all the victims in this country, is that people who have been victimized become habituated to thinking of themselves that way; as victims. And just they just think about it, not exactly wallow but close to it. They kind of just concentrate on what you don't have, what you can't do, what you don't know. Do you know what I mean? To say the least, is rather self defeating. I think it does take an extremely self conscience effort to shake that and to concentrate rather on "What do I have", "What can I do", "What do I know". We have just a public library system alone, for instance in this country of America that is an amazing source of power. It's is unforgettable in this country, when you start thinking about. Compared to the intellectuals in Italy, for example, what we can find out by going with a card is amazing. It's power. I don't have a tremendous amount of money, but I have money. I can use it in different ways. I can support different causes and I think the hesitance comes because if you get accustomed to thinking of yourself as a victim and other people are accustomed to seeing you that way it is mutually reinforcing. What I'm talking about would mean to stop that way of thinking of yourself; and, therefore to stop acting that way; and to say "Well this is what I care about". For example, if I care about my children and I live in Atlanta, it seems to me that instead of grieving, simply, for example,

and huddling fearful, there are very obvious things that I can do to protect my child of children. Do you know what I mean? If I realize, okay in a sense because I'm black and I'm female and I have this disadvantage. But how about compared to the child? Compared to any child in this country, black or white, you know that any one of us is like God. But why don't we act like God?

Marchant: From the way you spoke of South Africa last night in your poems and in your essay and today in the tape, you speak of it with an urgency. Do you think that that's where the center of action is now, for the American black?

Jordan: Yes, I think that what's happening here in this country, consequent to the Reagan administration, is really dire where black people are concerned, where poor people are concerned. It is really dire where everyone is concerned; but the brunt of the programs cut back by Reagan really fall on poor and black people specifically and certainly disproportionately. So that is a center of action for sure. Do you know what I mean? If you don't have a job, if you don't have medical care, if you don't have a means of housing, then this is your center of action. Simultaneously, the South African regime, emboldened by Reagan's support, which is the support of the most country in the world, is acting with greater variegated violence against the black majority in South Africa; it is expanding its hateful aggression on a murderous scale into two countries which do not belong to South Africa in any way; Libya and the People's Republic of Angola. I really think that I know that Americans now are simply overwhelmed; like what is happening, what can we do. Everybody's tendency is understandably to try to take of yourself; cover your back, make sure you have a house, a door for the key. I say that as understandable as that is, it seems to me that we can not afford to divorce ourselves from what is happening in South Africa, for example, or for that matter, what is happening in West Germany, or Poland any more than the Reagan administration divides these issues. I think that the Reagan Administration and people in that; they see everything in global terms. From Brooklyn to Angola is not a big jump for

them at all. I think that unless we, the people, begin to be able, rapidly, to think in the same way, to make these connections, really on a visceral level, I feel for the survival of the species.

Livingston: What are the mechanisms that you see that are in place or that should be brought to place so that people respond in that way?

Jordan: Well, one thing is what I was mentioning before, the power of information. People should avail themselves of information on issue out here. People should know what a neutron bomb is. That is not a white issue or black, that is it. Some people say to me that nuclear energy is a white issue. (Laugh, laugh) No one can afford this. That is a suicidal ghettoization.

Livingston: For most people, the condition in one way or another, when they think about these things, they seem so overwhelming to simply want to forget them or to say "I don't make these decisions and I have no power to control that and some leader or somebody else has to make those decisions for me". I think this whole sort of society is leader oriented that we sort of pass the buck. We say "Okay, these things need to be done, Who are we going to get to see about them? All right, I nominate you. Everybody vote, you go fix that for us. It seems that people aren't individually on their own going to go seek information. There has to be some process by which people become aware of the need to assume individual responsibility. I doubt if that process is taking place anywhere, on any grand scale, or

Jordan: I think, if I may say so, the concept that you just introduced, the grand scale, is part of the problem. I think we need to stop thinking on that level. I hope that doesn't sound contradictory to what I just said before. I don't think that making the connection from Brooklyn to Angola, or affirmative action to the neutron bombs, I don't think that is grand scale thinking. I think that's a rational apprehension of how things are interconnected for your survival or your destruction. That is what I think that is. But, what I mean by not grand scale is talking about this leadership thing. I think really everybody has to. It's

on you, whoever you are. You can't blame anyone anymore, I don't think. It's your responsibility to make yourself knowledgeable about where you are in this very complicated world right now, to the best of your knowledge and capacity to understand things, Then, to act, not on a grand scale, but moment by moment and day by day on that basis, on the basis of what you really understand.

Livingston: But, if individuals are doing that, that becomes grand.

Jordan: But, then it's not fight if many people are doing it. Do you know what I mean? As against somebody, like Jesse Jackson flying in there and saying "I'm explaining where it's at". Nobody should fly in there and tell anyone what to do.

Livingston: But you ^{are} certainly in there getting the message out through poems, through essays. It seems to me this is your energy which is quite enormous and your passionate concern is doing exactly this. You have fereted out the information and so on and you are getting the message across.

Jordan: I'm trying to contribute to the information that is out here. When I read my poetry or whatever, as people respond and I have an idea of what they concur with, what they're indifferent to. That is information for me. I don't want to be out here by myself either. My hope is that then people will pursue whatever it is that has moved them to finding more information about it and coming to their own decision about what he or she wants to do about this exactly. But to do something, for sure, if there is anything that I want to do with my work, it is to encourage them if not kick them, pull, drag, yank them into action. Life is action. Inaction is death. At this time, if you can't see that,,at this specific time in American history, if you can not see that, I think you are all ready gone, not a victim, gone.

Marchant: June, the apocolypse is on us and it is a rough time. But, you suggest a certain optimism. What are your grounds for hope?

Jordan: Well I think that because there is so much information available,

I teach, and I make comparisons, and it seems to me that students representing young people, in a sense, are so much aware of so many more things than ten years ago even. They're just accustomed to thinking in more sophisticated ways than ten years ago. This goes well as far as I'm concerned. I don't have any answers out here, but what I'm hoping for is an informed people will respond. The second thing is because the stakes really are apocalyptic, as I see them. Unless you and I and all of us are suicidal, I have to believe that that being the situation, people are going to choose life, and life and again life.

If that is the case, then why shouldn't I be optimistic?

Marchant: But, there are signs that people are choosing life. You point to Poland and solidarity and in other places in the world?

Jordan: Yes, I think the demonstrations in West Germany against nuclear installations and weaponry of the United States, this is pro life. For sure, this is pro life. The demonstrations in France against nuclear weaponry, this is pro life. I think that beginning with the Washington rally, the A.F.L.C.I.O., 260,000 people coming together; that was pro life. That was pro life. I think we're pro life. How could be against life, unless you are the president of the United States.

Marchant: What are your own personal literary plans, for the next few years?

Jordan: To keep going; I hope to get my first play produced into full production and I hope to write more for the theater and to continue.

Livingston: I was asked by students to ask for you, as a black women writer, do you feel that you contribute or have something special to bring to literature. because you are a female, in particular there is something, simply because of that that you bring to literature that is necessary or whatever; and what that is?

Jordan: I think all of us are used to thinking of people who are persecuted and in some ways, some very serious ways, stifled as minority peoples. Once you understand that the status of women, historically and universally, has been and continues to be what it is, which is that of a despised group, and you

understand that we are talking about 51% of human life on this planet, then I think that you begin to see that there are some possibilities here for the radical change around the globe, at least on the basis of strength.

Livingston: Do you see, for example in this country there has been sort of differences between different communities and the feminist movement. Do you see those differences challenging?

Jordan: I would hope that more and more people, women, feminists, black people, workers, would understand that hatred and power used to manipulate other people, all of our enemies, and to some extent all of us, all of us possess these sins within our own spirits. We have to expunge that from ourselves; our own racism, our own sexism, At the same we have to stop acting like victims in order to stop being victims.

Livingston: I know that you consider yourself a feminist, but I know too that you are somewhat out of sympathy with the feminist movement. True? Reason, just quickly.

Jordan: Well, because of what I was just saying and because I think these are false distinctions. I don't understand why my concern for the freedom and well being of women should be antithetical to my concern for the freedom and well being of my son, or the men of my people. I don't understand that. Why do I have to make those kinds of choices? That's absurd. I refuse to make those kinds of choices. I don't understand. I think that if I'm for the survival of human beings, that is what I'm for. I'm not going to cut myself up in sections and say "Well, that's cool. I can really see where you are coming from, but then again you are male." That is ridiculous. There many more ways in which I am more powerful than a lot of men out here, black and white. I think it is time to be realistic. In a sense, what I'm saying, I feel also that there are some generic ways of not thinking that we have to become more conscious of. I think to some extent, the established feminist movement, as against what I call the

real feminist movement around the globe, is guilty of perpetuating that.

I think any time that you are convinced that you know who the enemy is and the enemy has nothing to do with ~~what~~ you and who you are, I think that you are in trouble.

Marchant: June Jordan, thank you very much for bringing your light and life and energy and talent to us in Brockport. And Adrian Livingston, thank you very much for being part of the conversation. Mary Elsie Robertson, thank you too.

**A Poem about Intelligence for My
Brothers and Sisters**

9/25/81
Jordan,
June

A few years back and they told me Black
means a hole where other folks
got brain/it was like the cells in the heads
of Black children was out to every hour on the hour naps
Scientists called the phenomenon the Notorious
Jensen Lapse, remember?
Anyway I was thinking
about how to devise
a test for the wise
like a Stanford-Binet
for the C.I.A.
you know?
Take Einstein
being the most the unquestionable the outstanding
the maximal mind of the century
right?
And I'm struggling against this lapse leftover
from my Black childhood to fathom why
anybody should say so:
E=mc squared?
I try that on this old lady live on my block:
She sweeping away Saturday night from the stoop
and mad as can be because some absolute
jackass have left a kingsize mattress where
she have to sweep around it stains and all she
don't want to know nothing about in the first place
"Mrs. Johnson!" I say, leaning on the gate
between us: "What you think about somebody come up
with an *E* equals *MC* 2?"

"How you doin," she answer me, sideways, like she don't want to let on she know I ain combed my hair yet and here it is Sunday morning but still I have the nerve to be bothering serious work with these crazy questions about

"E equals what you say again, dear?"

Then I tell her, "Well

also this same guy? I think

he was undisputed Father of the Atom Bomb!"

"That right." She mumbles or grumbles, not too politely

"And dint remember to wear socks when he put on

his shoes!" I add on (getting desperate)

at which point Mrs. Johnson take herself and her broom

a very big step down the stoop away from me

"And never did nothing for nobody in particular

lessen it was a committee

and

used to say, 'What time is it?'

and

you'd say, 'Six o'clock.'

and

he'd say, 'Day or night?'

and

and he never made nobody a cup a tea

in his whole brilliant life!"

"and

(my voice rises slightly)

and

he dint never boogie neither: never!"

"Well," say Mrs. Johnson, "Well, honey,

I do guess

that's genius for you."