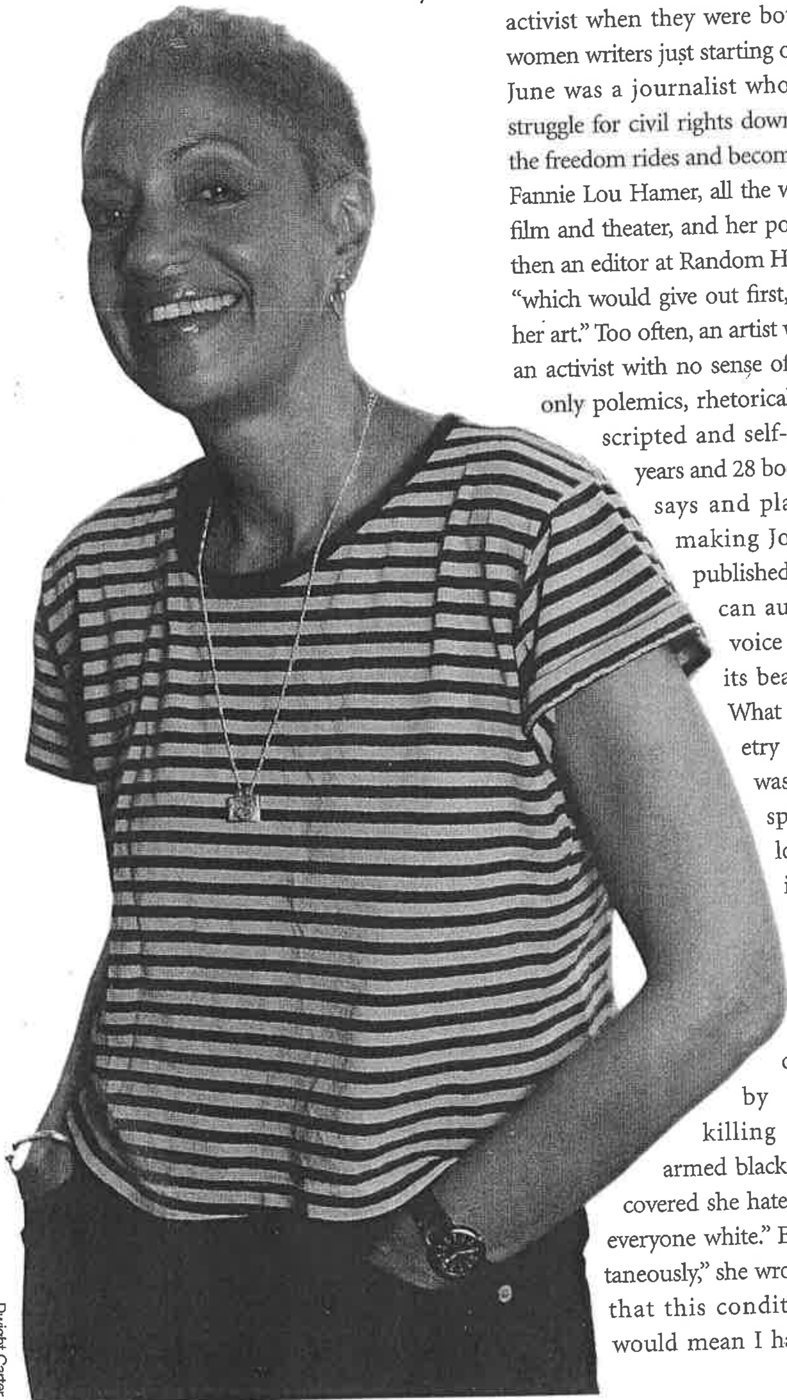
tribute

The Faithful, Fighting, Writing Life of Poet-Activist June Jordan 1936 – 2002

By Angela Ards

I have fought a good fight,
I have finished my course,
I have kept the faith.
—II Timothy 4: 7


Dwight Carter

Two years ago at a reading for *Soldier*, a poetic if unsettling memoir of June Jordan's childhood, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison described meeting the poet-activist when they were both young black women writers just starting out in the 1960s. June was a journalist who'd covered the struggle for civil rights down South, joining the freedom rides and becoming a protégé of Fannie Lou Hamer, all the while writing for film and theater, and her poetry. Morrison, then an editor at Random House, wondered, "which would give out first, her activism or her art." Too often, an artist who's political or an activist with no sense of grace produces only polemics, rhetorical outrage that is scripted and self-serving. But 40 years and 28 books of poetry, essays and plays later—thus making Jordan the most published African American author ever—her voice had lost neither its beauty nor its fire. What sustained her poetry and her activism was an indomitable spirit stoked by a love so fierce that it could have easily gone the other way.

After the Harlem Riots of 1964, provoked by another police killing of another unarmed black man, Jordan discovered she hated "everything and everyone white." But "almost simultaneously," she wrote, "it came to me that this condition, if it lasted, would mean I had lost the point: not to resemble my enemies, not to dwarf my world, not to lose my willingness and ability to love." This stance was self-interested to be sure, not some turn-the-other-cheek goodness but necessary self-defense. And so she says she, "resolved not to run on hatred but, instead, to use what I loved, words, for the sake of the people I loved."

She deployed her words, lyrical and passionate missives that unfailing spoke truth to power, with the precision of the poet and the fierceness of a freedom fighter, which is to say that she said what she meant and meant exactly what she said. Jordan became an activist in, what she later described as "every sphere of voluntary—and involuntary—concern to me." That meant exploring literature, poetry, city planning, theater, teaching and breast-cancer awareness. Who would constitute "the people I loved" grew beyond simplistic identity politics of "blackness" and "sisterhood."

Hers was a community forged "not according to ideology," she said. "Not according to group pressure. Not according to anybody's concept of 'correct.'...I will call you my brother, I will call you my sister, on the basis of what you do for justice, what you do for equality, what you do for freedom, and not on the basis of who you are." That each and every person—woman or man, Jew or Arab, gay or straight—can be freely and fully self-determining is at the heart of her writing.

"Poem About My Rights," perhaps her most well-known, and certainly most anthologized work articulated a model of personal and political resistance that infused her work, whether she was writing about rape, civil rights rollbacks, the sex police, terrorism or war:

"I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name./ My name is my own my own my own/ and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this/ but I can tell

you that from now on my resistance/ my simple and daily and nightly self-determination/ may very well cost you your life."

Though she railed bitterly against "misbegotten American dreams," Jordan considered herself an "American dissident poet and writer"—a descendant of both Phillis Wheatley and Walt Whitman—"completely uninterested to run away from my country, my home." She spoke out unrelentingly about the country's failures of principle, because she so faithfully believed in the promise of its "democratic experiment."

Her voice and vision is the best tribute to her faithful, fighting, writing life

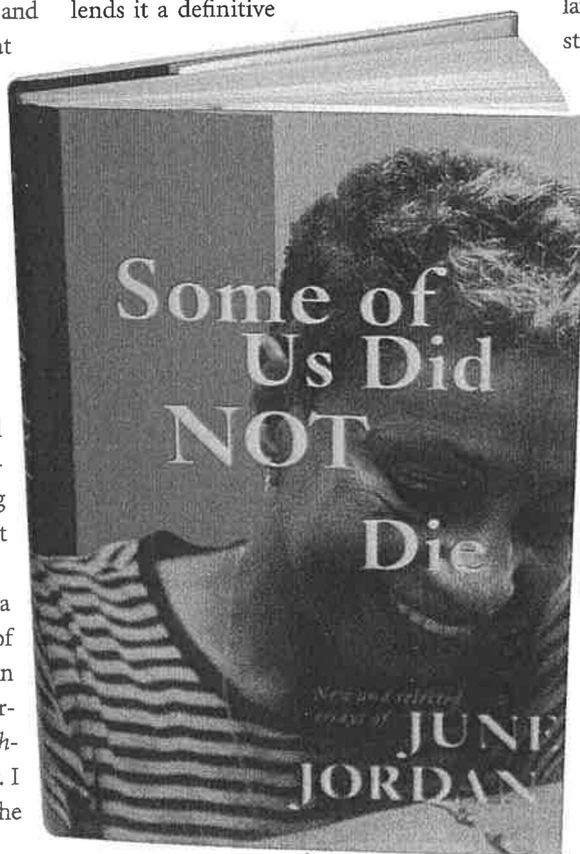
The daughter of West Indian immigrants, she wrote, "perhaps there are other Americans as believing and as grateful and as loyal, but I doubt it." She was born in Harlem and raised in "Do or Die" Bed-Stuy, a black neighborhood in Brooklyn. "I grew up fighting. And I grew up and got out of Brooklyn because I got pretty good at fighting. And winning." A favorite uncle provided pointers on pugilistic defenses against bullies—namely her father, who was the first regular bully in her life. His nightmarish abuse and the misguided yet undeniable love that motivated it were detailed in *Soldier*. She came to believe that one must abandon "American delusions of individuality" to win an unfair fight against a bully, whether Congress or bodily disease or sociopathic hatred:

"If we would name and say the source of our sorrow and scars, we would find a tender and a powerful company of others struggling as we do.... We would undertake collective political action founded on admitted similarities and grateful connection among us..." It's the spirit of the fight that connects us and transcends us.

I came to New York wanting to be a writer like June Jordan. Within months of my arrival I was one of dozens crowded in a Greenwich Village bookstore to hear Jordan read from her then-latest works, *Technical Difficulties* and *Haruko/Love Poems*. I brought every Jordan book I owned at the time, which—after prompting me gently for my name, which I forgot overawed in her presence—she signed simply, "in faith." Later, in 1999, I profiled her for *MAMM*, a magazine dedicated to raising awareness and finding a cure for breast cancer.

"I call my own fight with breast cancer 'a good fight.' What I mean by that is that it is big," she said. "I feel the same way about it as I feel about justice, meaning that's a good fight, that's big. I might not win it—meaning we may not win it—but it's unimaginable to me that I wouldn't try to be a part of that fight."

The title of Jordan's last collection of essays, *Some of Us Did Not Die*, comes from an essay about September 11. It is both a rallying cry to the faithful and a warning to the enemies of freedom that our ranks are deep. It reminds friends and foes alike that, despite the devastation of terrorism, breast cancer, and all else that threatens the sanctity and joy of our lives, the fight for justice is still on. There are 40 essays in this volume, one for every year of her writing career. That this collection was to be her last lends it a definitive quality.



Jordan included tributes to Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston; Anita Hill ("the African beauty of her earnest commitment to do right and to be a good woman: a good black woman in this America"); and Mike Tyson ("I'm Black. Mike Tyson is Black. And neither one of us was ever supposed to win anything more than a fight between the two of us."); and two tributes to Martin Luther King Jr. ("he was not a saint, yet he lives on, miraculous: a mountain of a life.")

The essays are assembled in reverse chronological order, beginning with her most recent—on September 11, the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl, a young friend taking up the mantle of activism—to "greatest hits" from her previous four volumes of political writings: *Affirmative Acts, Technical Difficulties, On Call*, and *Civil Wars*. The very last essay in this volume is what had been the first: the introduction to *Civil Wars*, Jordan's first collection of political writings. The consistency, clarity, and in essence faithfulness of her voice and vision over forty years is the best testament and tribute to her faithful, fighting, writing life:

"My life seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle. You begin with your family and the kids on the block, and next you open your eyes to what you call your people and that leads you into land reform into Black English into Angola leads you back to your own bed where you lie by yourself, wondering if you deserve to be peaceful, or trusted or desired or left to the freedom of your own unfaltering heart. And the scale shrinks to the size of a skull: your own interior cage. And then if you're lucky, and I have been lucky, everything comes back to you. And then you know why one of the freedom fighters in the sixties, a young Black woman interviewed shortly after she was beaten up for riding near the front of the interstate bus—you know why she said, 'We are all so very happy.' It's because it's on. All of us and me by myself: we're on." ■ ■