

# Words of black activist, writer aimed at helping the oppressed

By Shannon Kelley  
Of the Emerald

Racism, sexism and other forms of oppression are the focal points of June Jordan's words. They are words she chooses carefully and directly; words she uses in the context of not just her experience of oppression, but also of her life in relation to others — the other lives she cares about.

"Nobody questions my credentials as a radical black activist with experiences she had in South Africa. She writes about the African National Congress (ANC), the opposition group in South Africa, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua — two of the most self-determined political groups in the world," she said.

"The problem, it seems, is of a perception, in effect, that helps prevent us from understanding the meaning of the things that we have in common and therefore treat these things in a way that would be validly and durably useful in building, for example, coalitions on various issues.

"A certain degree of a full stomach and comfortable surroundings must exist for one to have even the luxury to think of someone else," she said. Jordan points to the South Africans who were put in the Bantustans.

"They grew up under apartheid, and they have been victimized as much as anyone in the century, and then they turn around and do to their own people what was done to them."

No one has a corner on virtue, Jordan said.

"Oppression does not provide for heroes or heroines morally," Jordan said. "No matter how oppressed I am as a black person, or as a black female or a female human being, it doesn't mean that I'm good," she said. "It doesn't mean that the imposition of tyranny on me has turned me into a superior human being at all. All it means is that I've been tyrannized."

The issues concern all of us, and we need to work together to accomplish self-determination at every level of our existence, she said.

Jordan started writing poetry when she was seven years old. She turned to writing as a result of her father's force-feeding her literature she didn't understand, such as the Bible and works by Shakespeare.

"I didn't know what they meant. I could only absorb the sound of things," she said. "Apparently these words had enormous power because, year

after year, the same words would be repeated and people still would allow their lives to be changed by that. I thought there must be something pretty deep going on and got very interested."

Jordan's poetry is intense and direct. Though her inspirations to write come through different forms, "they all come from real, verifiable life," she said. "None of it is made up because that's part of my task as an artist — to deal in a creative way with the real things that other people besides me care about."

Jordan said the importance of



June Jordan

her work is to tell the truth. The emergence of her political and personal selves has created a "struggle."

"I find writing so difficult and uncomfortable, sitting there for that long. And if I didn't think there was an important reason for being there, I'm sure I would quit and do what I really want to do, which is ride my bicycle."

She said writing helps her to realize other people do not have as an accessible creative release as she does. Jordan said she has "workaholic habits," and when she finally allows for a rest, she is horrified that she is not accomplishing anything.

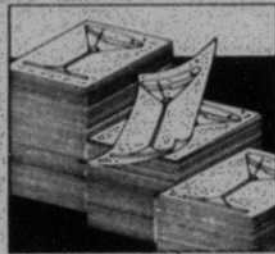
"But no matter how horrified I am, I realize that a lot of people, even if they sat there at their desks, would not be able to get it out. I always have a way to escape and release," she said.

Jordan believes that everyone has an inherent capacity for worldwide power. Everyone has known the intimate expression of powerlessness as a child, and the key to acquiring power is to no longer regard ourselves as victims, she said.

"The question of how much power we have is not a matter of chance," she added. "It is a matter of discovery. We need to discover the means to tap out that power and to make that power manifest."

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