Journal of American Studies of Turkey
38 (2013): 65-82

"I am she who will be free": June Jordan's Transnational Feminist Poetics

Julia Sattler

In her poetry, the late African American writer June Jordan (1936-2002) approaches cultural disputes, violent conflicts, as well as transnational issues of equality and inclusion from an all-encompassing, global angle. Her rather singular way of connecting feminism, female sexual identity politics, and transnational issues from wars to foreign policy facilitates an investigation of the role of poetry in the context of Transnational Feminisms at large. The transnational quality of her literary oeuvre is not only evident thematically but also in her style and her use of specific poetic forms that encourage cross-cultural dialogue. By "mapping connections forged by different people struggling against complex oppressions" (Friedman 20), Jordan becomes part of a multicultural feminist discourse that takes into account the context-dependency of oppressions, while promoting relational ways of thinking about identity. Through forging links and loyalties among diverse groups without silencing the complexities and historical specificities of different situations, her writing inspires a "polyvocal" (Mann and Huffmann 87) feminism that moves beyond fixed categories of race, sex and nation and that works towards a more "relational" narration of conflicts and oppressions across the globe (Friedman 40).

Jordan's poetry consciously reflects upon the experience of being female, black, bisexual, and American. Thus, her work speaks from an angle that is at the same time dominant and marginal. To put it in her own words: "I am Black and I am female and I am a mother and I am a bisexual and I am a nationalist and I am an antinationalist. And I mean to be fully and freely all that I am!" ("A New Politics of Sexuality" 2239). As an American, regardless of nationalist or antinationalist attitudes, Jordan is clearly a "western" poet rooted in and shaped by "western" political and religious ideas. At the same time, her work does not prioritize what could broadly be labeled as "western" thought or ideology and shows ideas

that clearly go beyond such thought. Rather, Jordan's poetry highlights (global) instances where (equal) rights are violated and where injustice is committed against a weaker *Other*; her poetry is a form of lyrical resistance against subjugation and unfair treatment of the powerless everywhere and regardless of sex, race, or class. When including groups outside of her own context, she steps beyond the established hierarchies and categories that even feminism oftentimes falls victim to, marking her as critical of the "western" tendency to appropriate the *Other* (Mohanty 18). Her active attempts to deconstruct "western" concepts such as colonialism and imperialism show a non-hierarchical approach to the *Other* and her ability to move beyond the reproduction of established discourses of what constitutes the "norm." The incorporation of poetic forms, such as the Japanese *haiku* or *tanka*, and the reflection of Buddhism and Islam in her poetry, also make clear Jordan's engagement with cultures outside of the "western" context.

Despite these broad engagements, Jordan certainly does not ignore her own situatedness in the African American community. Rather, it is this very perspective that enables her to relate to struggles elsewhere. Her poetry not only addresses an experience that is larger than the experience of being an African American woman, but it also gives voice to those who are voiceless since their suffering is not always accessible to a more general audience despite, for example, news reporting. Her work is always written from a personal angle that does not always represent the standpoint of all African Americans or even all African American women. Thus, her voice, as a black woman's voice, "both authenticates and limits her perspectives: she insists upon an individual voice that speaks from an African American perspective rather than speaking for all African Americans" (MacPhail 64). At the same time, it becomes evident in her poetry that there are different levels of suffering, that her suffering as a black American woman is not the same as the suffering of a woman in Somalia who has lost her family members. As Jordan herself stated in a 1987 interview:

> I have a tremendous instinctive aversion to the idea of ranking oppression. In other words for nobody to try and corner misery. I think it's dangerous. It seems to me to be an immoral way of going about things. The difficulty here is the sloppiness of language. We call everything an

> oppression, going to the dentist is an oppression, then the word does not mean anything. Revisions in our language might help and it might also steer us clear from saying something as useless as, but mine is this and yours is that. If I, a black woman poet and writer, a professor of English at State University, if I am oppressed then we need another word to describe a woman in a refugee camp in Palestine or the mother of six in a rural village in Nicaragua or any counterpart inside South Africa. (qtd. in Parmar 63)

In her poetry, Jordan verbalizes suffering, places different sufferings in dialogue, but does not confuse them with daily necessities that may be described as "oppressions" in an inflationary use of the word. Her poetry establishes a dialogue among the oppressed without banalizing the suffering of the individual by emphasizing the humanity of each human being. It is significant that her poetry is not judgmental and does not convey that one suffering is worth more than another. Her politics of empathy for the *Other* challenge the established language that tends to be used in situations of war, violence and suffering.

This, alongside her feminist engagement, places Jordan in a complicated relation to African American intellectualism and to black feminism. The proclamation of a "black" nation was, for example, used to (and often continues to) silence women. Since neither movement, meaning neither Black Nationalism nor feminism or its black variety, is traditionally suitable to address a wider, global, transnational audience because they remain very much focused on one single community instead of addressing a larger, global audience, Jordan cannot be firmly located in either context, and, as a global poet, does not want or need to be. The focus of her poetry, at most, puts her in line with third wave feminist ideas which started to move beyond the nation-state while taking into account differences between groups (Mann and Huffmann 66).

The lack of attention and the silence on the part of the local as well as the global communities — power-hungry politicians — in the face of suffering is a recurring motif in Jordan's work. Established borders of race, gender and nation are transgressed. The humanity of the *Other* is

established in an inclusive manner: I did not say male/or female/I did not say Serbian/or Tutsi/I said/what tilts my head/into the opposite of fear/or dread/is anyone/who talks to me ("Poem for a Young Poet" 25-34). The idea of *dialogue* in Jordan's poetry, which is evident in this short passage from "Poem for a Young Poet," encourages communication across borders which traditionally defy such crossings. While it is certainly possible to argue that overcoming such limitations to address a community that is larger than a nation is one of the qualities that makes Jordan as a "transnational" poet, transnationalism in itself can assume many different meanings in this context and is "not always associated with dialogic energies and interstitial identities" (Ramazani 31). As Jahan Ramazini argues in his study on *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), transnationalism can also connote neoliberal ideologies, but in its literary version, it "may suggest a different disciplinary model of 'citizenship': instead of replicating the centripetal vortex of the nation-state or its dilated counterpart in unitary migrant communities, cross-cultural writing and reading can, if taken seriously […], evoke non-coercive and nonatavistic forms of transnational imaginative belonging" (31).

Jordan's poetic oeuvre connects the personal, the literary, the political, and the global. It calls for nonviolent forms of activism that unite people in their suffering, creating a new community to engage against injustices committed in the name of ethnicity, religion or ideology, all of which fail to recognize the humanity of the *Other*. It gives a voice to many marginalized groups and finds fault with what oftentimes comes across as modern-day American imperialism. It counters oppressive policy against minorities in the United States and abroad, and contests the media representation of global disasters by giving voice to the victims of war and oppression instead of merely describing these victims and the daily injustices with which they are confronted. While each instance of violence and oppression is specific, her poetry also addresses the idea that in the face of global struggle and oppression, it is necessary to look beyond the limiting binary of "white/Other," even within the United States (Friedman 23).

June Jordan's poetry goes far beyond mainstream reporting on current events and beyond the public negotiation of oppression and humiliation of the *Other*. Jordan inscribes herself into global conflicts and disputes which have nothing to do with her own heritage and legacy, even instances

of violence which tend to be defined as "white," such as the Northern Ireland conflict, or the war in Bosnia, or the debate around abortion. This allows her to deconstruct the traditional scope of African American writing and transcend borders, creating a community of the oppressed on a global scale. While on the one hand this shows the potential of relational narratives to connect people despite their different contexts and histories, it also gives credit to the idea that racial othering and oppression are not unique to the United States or the "western" context at large. Moreover, it illustrates that "[w]hen power is at stake […], people often resort to ethnic and racial othering to justify conflict. Whether as cause or effect of conflict, colonial, racial and ethnic division is a global phenomenon where people compete for resources. Such global instances of othering shatter the fixity of the white/other binary as exclusive explanation for all racial and ethnic conflict" (Friedman 26).

Overcoming established borders has also been important to Jordan as a person and as an activist. In 1991, Jordan, who was also known as a playwright, essayist, teacher, and composer, founded the "Poetry for the People" program in the African American Studies Department at the University of California at Berkeley, a project which is still vibrant today. The project, which aims to empower through the study of poetry, specifically by connecting art and activism, established a dialogue between the larger Berkeley community and the university. A lasting legacy of Jordan's work, it continues to encourage exchange where there was previously silence. The establishment of this program, which is in direct connection with Jordan's poetic oeuvre, exemplifies her focus on activism instead of "sit[ting] inside our sorrows, […] describ[ing] things to death," which she perceives as "a kind of vanity or decadence" (qtd. in Parmar 62).

Jordan's audience, while encouraged to empathize with the oppressed and the suffering, is clearly a "western," English-speaking and probably American one. This becomes evident in the specific ways in which this audience is addressed and incorporated into the text. Even though the content of the poems oftentimes travels far beyond the United States or developed nations as a whole, readers, in many cases, connect to the suffering *Other* despite their own privileged status. This is achieved by strategies in the poems which avoid othering and, instead, focus on the common humanity of all people. These strategies include: the use of *dialogic* patterns of writing, linking one event to another within a global context

or creating an interface against which similar patterns of oppression across different cultures and contexts become evident; concentrating on people who are impacted by an event; and blending different poetic forms, which allows the audience to see their own culture from a new angle. Of course, these strategies are usually applied individually, and not concurrently in the same poem.

All three strategies can be linked to the framework of transnationalism Shelley Fisher Fishkin established in her essay "Mapping Transnational American Studies." Fishkin has termed the three categories which characterize recent work in Transnational Studies as "*broadening of the frame,*" "*cross-fertilization,*" and "*renewed attention to travel and to how texts travel*" (31). The first category elucidates that the United States is not a vacuum and that its history is closely intertwined with other, smaller and larger, histories. This enables the recognition of larger contexts of suffering and oppression (Fishkin 32). It also underscores that a decision that is taken in a developed country may have far-reaching consequences for people living elsewhere. By the same token, the same is true for decisions not taken, be it out of the non-recognition of the seriousness of the situation, or out of ignorance. The second category focuses on the influence of one culture on another, and vice versa. Cross-fertilization is thus a mutual process and can result in the emergence of new stories or new literary forms which incorporate ideas from many cultures (Fishkin 37). The third category — the focus on travel (literally) and the travel of texts — looks at transnational connections and cultural knowledge that can be acquired via travel, which involves leaving one's familiar context (Fishkin 40).

A very impressive and much contested example of a "blending" or "interfacing" of oppressions is found in "The Bombing of Baghdad." In this poem, Jordan links the struggles of the Iraqi population to the suffering of the people in the Middle East, which is caused by American foreign policy — through the "bombings" delivered by the US army despite their essential helplessness — to the erasure of the Native populations within the United States. The poem blends three different perspectives: the speaker's view on the situation in Iraq, her reflections on her own situatedness in the American context despite her opposition to the "bombings," and her perspective on Custer's attacks on the Native Americans and: their fragile/ temporary settlements/for raising children/dancing down the rain/and praying for the mercy of a herd of buffalo (48-51). While there are three

different stories told in the poem or three different narrative levels, they are directly linked to each other: this was Custer's Next-to-Last-Stand/I hear Crazy Horse singing as he dies/I dedicate myself to learn that song/I hear that music in the moaning of the Arab world (41-44). In the final stanza of the poem, the three narrative levels merge into one, illustrating that there are parallels in the way the US army is engaging in violent acts against an innocent population to whom they feel superior — And all who believe only they possess/human being and therefore human rights/they no longer stood among the possibly humane" (73-75), but that essentially, the "Bombing of Baghdad" represents the same kind of violence that was delivered to the Native American population in the name of peace: And this is for Crazy Horse singing as he dies/because I live inside his grave/And this is for the victims of the bombing of Baghdad/because the enemy traveled from my house/to blast your homeland/into pieces of children/pieces of sand/And in the aftermath of carnage/perpetrated in my name/how should I dare to offer you my hand/how shall I negotiate the implications/of my shame? (94-105).

The speaker in this poem is clearly speaking from a "western" perspective, as an American, when she recalls that: we bombed Baghdad/ we bombed Basra […]/we bombed everything that moved/we bombed everything that did not move (4-12). She clearly includes herself in the oppressive group which committed "these bombings/these 'sorties'" (24) in her name, too. However, it becomes evident that she does not agree with the way her fellow countrymen are dealing with the perceived terrorist threat in Iraq. Instead of supporting the population, they commit "a terrorist undertaking" (85) or "an American/holocaust against the peoples of the Middle East" (89-90) that essentially leads to destruction of Iraqi society and infrastructure. The speaker also claims to recognize a pattern of violence against fragile populations that do not present any danger to those who feel superior and who are predestined to decide their fate.

Poetry has the power to address the specific pains that go along with war, to expose the wrongs committed by an oppressor, and to reveal the specificities of a disaster that cannot be documented in the media. This is especially true because "[t]he news media tend to report, even sensationalize, racial and ethnic violence and to ignore efforts at building bridges across cultural divides" (Friedman 25). Poetry's potential to engage in a different type of narration becomes evident, for example, in Jordan's

"Bosnia Bosnia": Too bad/there is no oil/between her legs/that 4-year-old Muslim girl and/her 5-year-old sister/and the 16-year-old babysitter/and the 20-year-old mother of that four year-old/that Muslim child gang raped/ from dawn to dark to time becomes damnation/Too bad/there is no oil/ between her legs/Too bad there is no oil/between Sbrenica and Sarajevo/ and in-between the standing of a life/and genocide (1-16). Later in the same poem, connections are made to Somalia as well as to South Central L.A., the situation of homeless people, and drug-addicts — circumstances where people are suffering because there is no interest in their situation.

Poetry, and specifically political poetry, disrupts the mainstream narrative about an event and its coverage. However, as this example suggests, it also has the potential to make connections that would not only be hard to recognize, but also problematic to voice in the wider political arena. "Bosnia Bosnia" makes evident that questions of survival, of genocide, of ignorance, of the global community looking away when wrong is committed, are oftentimes determined by issues of finance and profit instead of by examining how these forces affect people globally. The argument in this poem is that since there is no monetary profit in intervening in hunger in Somalia or racial violence in the United States, there is no intervention; had there been oil (or a different resource, for that matter), the situation would be much different. Certainly, the powerful metaphor of the oil between the little girl's legs demonstrates the potential of poetry: something unspeakable is being conveyed here, and it is being expressed with a power of words that could never be reached by mere media reporting. This is not to say that media reporting generally avoids discussing issues such as rape or even violence, but rather, that poetry makes the true dimensions of the unspeakable event visible and tangible. It shows the intersections between the personal, the political, and the interests of global powerbrokers who are increasingly focused on profit in ways that cannot be achieved in an impersonal, quasi-objective, news report.

The first lines of the poem establish a connection between a small child and its family and the larger conflict in Bosnia, making it very clear that ignorance has consequences, very real consequences, not only for the region as an abstract construct that may not mean much to an outsider, but that the region in fact stands for its people, for people who are suffering, little girls who are being raped in the absence of international interest in a

conflict that does not involve "oil." The statement that it is just: Too bad/ there is no oil/between her legs (1-3) makes evident that the international community is making decisions about situations by measuring economic benefit. There is no awareness of the fact that people — women and children — are being affected by these actions. If one were to recognize and take seriously the humanity and precariousness of those affected, overlooking these consequences would not be possible.

In the poem, metaphors fuse two radically separated realms of experience. Whereas a political explanation of the connection between oil interests and human rights can explain such dependencies rationally, the metaphor makes it apparent, in fact exemplifies, the interdependency in one single line. The absence of oil — a coincidental fact that cannot be influenced by the people — literally becomes the reason for the rape of the girl. This strategy of connecting the personal, unspeakable dimensions of the event with larger, international economic interests is impossible in mainstream media reporting. Through her poem, however, Jordan makes the humanitarian catastrophe of the war in Bosnia immediately and most painfully understandable.

The creation of solidarity among women plays a special role in Jordan's oeuvre. This means that women and women's fates are often addressed in her work, such as in "Bosnia Bosnia." She speaks directly to women, as mothers, sisters, and wives. She tries to establish a community of women who recognize each other's humanity, each other's pain, and each other's losses in the face of oppression, regardless of their ethnic, religious, national, or sexual identity, and encourages them to organize in nonviolent protest to fight oppression. This is an important characteristic of her work, not only because feminist thinking is useful in economic and political struggles for freedom (Mohanty 1), but even more so because traditionally, "western" feminist thinking also does not differentiate enough between women from different backgrounds, signifying an appropriation of the *Other* that conflates women's concerns and hinders solutions to the problems and struggles of women (Mohanty 17). From Jordan's work it becomes evident that it is possible to do both at the same time, to speak to women on a transnational level, but to still understand that there are differences between different women in different settings and at different times.

Jordan thus adds a female, and decidedly feminist, angle to the notion of a transnational poetics of 'defying oppression." In an interview conducted during her first visit to Britain, she critically evaluated her own perception of identity politics at the time, stating that

> We have been organizing on the basis of identity, around immutable attributes of gender, race and class for a long time and it doesn't seem to have worked […]. We as black people have enormous problems everywhere in the world and we women have colossal problems everywhere in the world. I think there is something deficient in the thinking on the part of anybody who proposes either gender identity politics or race identity politics as sufficient, because every single one of us is more than whatever race we represent or embody and more than whatever category we fall into. We have other kinds of allegiances, other kinds of dreams that have nothing to do with whether we are white or not white (qtd. in Parmar 61).

These ideas, along with her perception that "the Politics of Sexuality is the most ancient and probably the most profound arena for human conflict" because it is "deeper and more pervasive than any other oppression, than any other bitterly contested human domain" ("A New Politics of Sexuality" 2238) places Jordan, as an African American feminist and "global poet," in an interesting place with regard to black intellectualism and African American art and poetry. All three notions, Jordan as a "global," transnational poet, as a black intellectual, and as an African American writer, must be considered while contextualizing her as an all-encompassing voice of our time who transcends heteronormativity as well as oppressive policies against the voiceless.

That being said, even though women across the world are implicated in her work, her audience remains "western." The poem "What great grief has made the Empress mute" explicitly addresses a *New York Times* headline regarding the Japanese Empress Michiko and her nervous breakdown. While this was a taboo subject in Japan at the time, and there

was much debate about whether the Empress's silence was of physical or mental origin, the poem gives voice to a whole list of reasons why she is unhappy, why she is essentially an oppressed woman, and why nothing that is being offered to her, and why none of her privileges as Empress, will console her in the long run. The poem is in fact a collection of statements that present possible answers to the initial question: Because it was raining outside the palace/Because there was no rain in her vicinity/ Because people kept asking her questions/Because nobody ever asked her anything/Because marriage robbed her of her mother/Because she lost her daughters to the same tradition (1-6). This poem once more clearly speaks to a "western" audience, and one that is not necessarily familiar with Japanese tradition or marriage custom, but one that is probably familiar with *The New York Times*'s headline asking the same question as the poem, which addresses the causes of the Empress's silence. The poem's structure is rather simple — it does not present complex reasoning or speculation as to why one would suffer from mental distress. However, it does underscore the suffering involved with the Empress's existence as a person and the burden of tradition, specifically the burden of having to fulfill so many expectations connected to her status.

The fact that her poetry includes, and is directed towards, the oppressed and voiceless — in the United States, in Somalia or Japan — certainly places June Jordan in line and in productive dialogue with other poets who have been described as (and have perceived themselves as) "global," including as Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda. This is a context in which Jordan situated herself, stating that:

> I too am a descendent of Walt Whitman. And I am not by myself struggling to tell the truth about this history of so much land and so much blood, of so much that should be sacred and so much that has been desecrated and annihilated boastfully […] We do not apologize because we are not Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, or Elizabeth Bishop. If we are nothing to them, to those who love them, they are nothing to us! Or, as Whitman exclaimed: "I exist as I am, that is enough." New World poetry moves into and

> beyond the light of the lives of Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, Agostinho Neto, Gabriela Mistral, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, and Edward Brathwaite. I follow this movement with my own life. I am calm and I am smiling as we go. ("For the Sake of a People's Poetry" 78)

Jordan here sees herself as part of a very specific context, namely as a descendant of other "global writers." She also expresses her feeling of rejection by, and rejection of, writers with a more aestheticist poetic approach, which she embraces since she is interested in being understood by the people instead of experimenting with poetic form, to connect different places across the globe, and to help individuals recognize the power they possess to resist oppression. Jordan speaks from her own stance as an African American woman and as an activist for human rights, which adds to the complexity of her poetry. She wages "War against War" with poetic weapons, offering "a model for poet-activists attempting that difficult balance between working at the art of poetry and contributing to the effort to resist war and violence" (Metres 171). This "poetics of resistance" plays out in her writing, her defiance of oppressive traditions, and in her dialogic attempts to address questions of justice from a feminist, African American and transnational stance.

This is also true of Jordan's attitude regarding religion. Overall, while African Americans tend to be organized around liberation theologies both Christian and Islamic, Jordan deconstructs religion as an ideology of power and exploitation. This is also something that makes her unique with regard to African American religious beliefs. Jordan's rejection of heteronormativity and traditional versions of Christian and "western" thought is most forcefully expressed in one of her later poems, "Kissing God Goodbye." This poem appeared in an eponymous collection of Jordan's poetry written between 1991 and 1997 which contains examples from most of Jordan's poetic genres. It features love poetry as well as explicitly political poems; there are texts which criticize US foreign policy and military involvement abroad as well as reflections on the problems of contemporary American society and what could be described as "western" thought at large, namely poems addressing "western" cultural as well as religious beliefs. *Kissing God Goodbye* thus combines all of the different facets of Jordan's poetic work.

The title poem "Kissing God Goodbye" is a "Poem in the face of Operation Rescue," responding to the anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality movement. The focus is clearly on the rejection of same-sex love based on the supposed biblical argument that the Christian God denied same-sex love due to the procreative imperative which can only be fulfilled in a relationship between males and females. In the poem, the Christian God is revealed as a ridiculous, cruel, brutal manipulator who cannot be taken seriously on any issue, including abortion and homosexuality. In this case, Jordan chooses to attack the Christian God, who is widely used to justify the oppression of the *Other*.

The speaker in the poem responds to the conservative and reactionary adherents of a movement, such as "Operation Rescue," who construct their God as almighty and revengeful against everyone who differs from what is considered to be the "norm." Thus a very specific and reactionary fantasy of the Christian God is depicted in this poem, and the speaker wants to eliminate such an oppressive ruler. The poem is therefore not a rejection of all religious beliefs; rather, it is a refusal to accept the way God is constructed via "Operation Rescue."

The poem employs wording that is not just uncommon, but usually considered heretical in a Christian religious context. The God described in the poem is called a: big mouth/woman-hating/super/heterosexist heterosexual/kind of a guy guy (9-13) […] someone/who invented a snake/ an apple and a really/retarded scenario so that/down to this very day/it is not a lot of fun/to give birth to a son of a gun (24-29) and who had "some serious problems/of perspective" (36-37), as He had no help in the process of the world's creation. The speaker rejects the notion of the world with all its evils, with: alleyways of death/and acid rain/and infant mortality rates/ and sons of the gun/and something called the kitchenette/and trailer trucks to kill and carry/beautiful trees out of their natural/habitat (15-22) […] a world created by a/single/male/head of household (49-51) as claimed by fundamentalist streams of Christianity who take the biblical story of the creation literally. The God who is described in this poem is not a loving father, and not a respectful character, but rather someone who enforces the suppression of women, the suppression of the marginalized, and who forces people to victimize their own children.

The cruelty of this heterosexist God is countered by instances of loving behavior in the world, by people taking care of and loving each

other "in the middle of this lunatic lottery" (93). The examples given from the Bible in this poem are David and Jonathan, and Ruth and Naomi. This notion of love is contrasted with a repetition of the idea that this "heterosexist heterosexual/kind of a guy guy" (186-187) apparently still believed that "he decided who could live and who would die" (188). The poem then turns into a lengthy list of names, naming those "who love" (192), listing first the men — including David and Jonathan — and then the women, including Ruth and Naomi. The listing of these names, emphasizing that "our names become/the names of the dead" (228-229), creates a community of homosexual lovers, of men and women who are equal to each due to love and respect. At the same time, it is a community of the oppressed, of those who die for loving the "wrong" people.

With regard to a different poem by Jordan, "Poem about my Rights," Peter Erickson has observed that it testifies to "the connection between naming and identity, to the power of language to deform the self" (221). "Kissing God Goodbye" deploys a very similar mechanism by naming of those "who love" (192), who are no longer anonymous in this poem, but who are enumerated and thus personalized by their first names. They are no longer members of the "tribes of the abomination" (233), they become "us": our brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and neighbors and co-workers and friends. Despite individual differences, this notion suggests a universal community of those who "love" and who are unjustly accused of loving the wrong people.

Certainly, while it can be argued that the poem speaks to an "American" audience, it is also possible that it addresses the global community of oppressed *Others*. Around the world, people are threatened because they are perceived as *Other*, as marginalized because of their sexual orientation, and this oppression is justified by claiming that "God" did not want them to be different in this way. The fact that "Kissing God Goodbye" opposes the "western" context becomes especially shocking because the "West" usually perceives itself as "liberal" and "advanced." Yet, outdated practices of *Othering* are still firmly in place and must be overcome even within the American community. Understanding that this struggle takes place globally, uniting people across national borders in order to end discrimination, will, however, only become possible if individuals recognize that they are not alone in their pain, that there is a community of "those who love" that transcends borders of nation, race, and religion.

While the poem first creates an "imaginary community" including past and present people "who love," the poem also assumes a decidedly feminist stance with a first person speaker who proudly announces that: my name is not Abraham/my name is not Moses/Leviticus/Solomon/Cain or Abel/my name is not Matthew/Luke/Saul or Paul/My name is not Adam (235-238), referencing the men upon which the biblical community was established according to Christian tradition, then proclaiming that "My name is female/my name is freedom" (239-240). In an almost chant-like pattern, the speaker describes her own attributes, showing her capacity to resist the idea that a cruel male makes decisions for her. It openly suggests the speaker's decidedly female attributes, which boastfully allow her to reject that someone else — God — decides over her life: He cannot eat at my table/He cannot sleep in my bed/He cannot push me aside/He cannot make me commit or contemplate/suicide (256-260). Instead of allowing this male who is "not [her] Lord" (276) to decide her life, the speaker claims that "I am she who will be free" (269), and that while her name "is the name of the one who loves," "his name is not the name of those who love the living/and the dead" (281-282), building a stark contrast between the community she created earlier in the poem through the act of naming and "him" who cannot control their lives.

The poetic community of those "who love" reaches from the past into the present, thus transcending time, place and nation. It is a community of men and women who share their losses and grief and who should not allow a heteronormative Christian God to exert any kind of control over their lives. The community constructed here emerges out of the shared experience of being declared illegitimate. Yet, the poem also conveys a qualitative difference between the experiences of being male and female. The situation of women differs from that of men because women are oppressed regardless of sexual orientation and their life choices. According to the ideology of the Creator as perceived by the speaker, women are beaten by the fact that they are female. They have to bear the pain of birth, they are perceived as unclean, and from birth they are worth less than a male child. This struggle unites women despite their ethnic, religious and sexual differences. In other words, whenever a woman suffers oppression by a man, all women are included in this act and therefore must unite in order to defy it.

The poem pays tribute to different experiences related to gender and to what Jordan referred to in a 1991 essay as "male subjugation of human beings because they are female" ("A New Politics of Sexuality" 2238). The poem specifically empowers members of a marginalized community and women at large. The ideas in "Kissing God Goodbye" are echoed in "A New Politics of Sexuality," especially with regard to her own experience as a bisexual:

> If you are free, you are not predictable and you are not controllable. To my mind, that is the keenly positive, politicizing significance of bisexual affirmation: to insist upon complexity, to insist upon the validity of all the components of social/sexual complexity, to insist upon the equal validity of all of the components of social/sexual complexity. This seems to me like a unifying, 1990s mandate for revolutionary Americans planning to make it into the twenty-first century on the basis of the heart, on the basis of an honest human body, consecrated to every struggle for justice, even struggle for equality, every struggle for freedom. ("A New Politics of Sexuality" 2241)

Many of the issues addressed in this essay and in "Kissing God Goodbye" are still relevant; her poetry can still serve as an inspiration for creating transnational feminist communities based on the acceptance of inherently different backgrounds and perceptions. The line "I am she who will be free" acquires a larger meaning in this context: only if individuals step beyond their immediate worlds and unite as humans, in solidarity, in the face of oppression, war, and violence can freedom become a reality. Jordan's poetry encourages its audience to recognize both, the humanity of the *Other* and the power of language in the nonviolent global fight against oppression by highlighting connections that go far beyond the "western" context. By relating to women's global struggles, her poetry makes it possible for women to find common entrance points into a discussion that transcends local activism to show that solidarity can be achieved despite differences in ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation. It thus

points towards creating a dialogic version of feminism that is not only transnational in terms of its outreach, but also in terms of overcoming "western" privilege.

Works Cited

Erickson, Peter. "The Love Poetry of June Jordan." *Callaloo* 26 (1986): 221–34. Print.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Mapping Transnational American Studies." *Transnational American Studies*. Ed. Udo J. Hebel. 31–74. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012. Print.

Friedman, Susan S. "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse." *Signs* 21.1 (1995): 1–49. Print.

Gates, Henry L., Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton, 1997. Print.

Hebel, Udo J., ed. *Transnational American Studies*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012. Print.

Jordan, June: "For the Sake of a People's Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us." 1979. *Lyrical Campaigns: Selected Poems*. 69-79. London: Virago Press, 1980. Print.

-----. "A New Politics of Sexuality." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. 2238–41. New York: Norton, 1997. Print.

-----. *Kissing God Goodbye: Poems, 1991-1997*. New York: Anchor Books, 1997. Print.

MacPhail, Scott. "June Jordan and New Black Intellectuals." *African American Review* 33.1 (1999): 57–61. Print.

Mann, Susan A., and Douglas J. Huffmann. "The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave." *Science & Society* 69.1 (2005): 59–91. Print.

Metres, Philip. "June Jordan's War against War." *Peace Review* 15.2 (2003): 171–77. Print.

Mohanty, Chandra T. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke UP., 2003. Print.

Parmar, Pratibha. "Other Kinds of Dreams." *Feminist Review* 31 (1989): 55–65. Print.

Ramazani, Jahan. *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2009. Print.