"Can I Get a Witness?:" Writing with June Jordan

With June Jordan’s voice lodged inside my head, I traverse history and the here and now as queer immigrant scholar/teacher of color via a transnational critical optic, alert to the ravages of power. I write using experimental form to break the hold of dominant (white) rhetorical traditions that are failing us, intertwining my words with Jordan’s words amidst ongoing assaults on our lives/imaginations.

Yes, and the body has memory.
—Claudia Rankine, Citizen: An American Lyric

1.
The mothers of the three US citizens apprehended in Iran are in Iran to plead for the release of their children. Their children, they claim, accidentally strayed across the border while hiking. Their heartfelt pleas are reported sympathetically in the international media. I hear the anguish in their voices and think immediately of the mothers of the men detained in Guantanamo. I can’t imagine the mothers of the men detained in Guantanamo being allowed to visit the United States to plead for the release of their sons. I can’t imagine the mothers of the men detained in Guantanamo getting such media sympathy in the United States.
2. I fall madly in love with her even before I see Pratibha Parmar’s *A Place of Rage*. Thereafter, there is no turning back.

3. I circle around her famous words, “I was born a black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian,” trying to understand what it is she means.¹

4. I hear the sadness in her voice about the boy.

5. From the safety of my middle-class refuge in the Third World, the living room window of an apartment in a high rise, I notice the new boy attentively washing cars, a daily early morning ritual for the cars of the wealthy. I wonder about this boy whose job it is to make the cars shine. Even though he appears to carry the weight of the world in his eyes, the boy cannot have been much older than me. Perhaps we were the same age, born in the same year? Perhaps we shared a birthday? Perhaps we shared more than just a birthday?

6. “On the roof of our house itself there was one boy, for example, named Jeffrey Underwood who was really cute and I liked him a lot and the police went up on the roof after Jeffrey and just beat him mercilessly, I mean everybody knew Jeffrey and his family, and you know his parents were friends with my parents and so on, this was really shocking, and permanently disfigured him in what was later explained as a kind of a case of mistaken identity and to see this boy I idolized, who belonged to us, you know, in the sense of our block and all of us, disfigured by these strangers who came in with all this force, and license to use that force, was really terrifying, and you know also it hardened me, I would say early on, I mean, in a kind of place of rage actually.”²

7. Extraordinary frizzy black hair frames the boy’s deep dark eyes. The effect of the boy on me is instantaneous.
8. I imagine us laughing madly as we dance together singing along with Madonna as she implores, “open your heart, I’ll make you love me.” I am not surprised when I read later about how much she, too, loves Madonna.

9. I wake up with her words in my ears: “Where was Willie Jordan?”

10. The doorbell rings. I open the front door. The boy with the extraordinary hair is at the door with a package from a neighbor for my mother. I am startled, too startled to speak to this boy I have been content gazing furtively at. The boy appears to be surprised, too, but returns my desiring gaze unabashedly. Does his spine tingle when our fingers brush casually as the package exchanges hands? I like to think it does. I don’t see the boy again. Soon after, I leave Bombay. “Soon” after, Bombay becomes Mumbai.

11. “When I saw him I knew something hideous had happened. Something had hurt him and scared him to the marrow. He was all agitated and stammering and terse and incoherent. At last, his sadly jumbled account let me surmise, as follows: Brooklyn police had murdered his unarmed, twenty-five-year-old brother, Reggie Jordan. Neither Willie nor his elderly parents knew what to do about it. Nobody from the press was interested. His folks had no money. Police ran his family around and around, to no point. And Reggie was really dead. And Willie wanted to fight, but he felt helpless.”

12. When the violence in Bombay doesn’t abate quickly, I call my mother. They are safe, yes. But it is terrible. They are going after Muslims, she says. Your sister’s friend’s parents are staying with us, she says. They are deaf, she says. They are terrified. We are terrified, she says. All names on the board at the building’s entrance have been whitewashed, she says.
13. The scars don’t heal. When I visit my mother now, I scrutinize the names on the board at the building’s entrance: not a single Muslim name appears on the board.

14. “Certainly, I felt shame, you know, that this had happened and particularly on the roof of the house where I lived and that somehow we had not and I had not been able to stop it. He had done nothing, nothing. But the disfigurement that he sustained at the hands of the police was permanent, you know, the physical disfigurement, and then, you know, the maiming of his spirit, I mean, who knows if he ever recovered from that.”

15. She looks away when I bring up reading about Shabana Azmi’s recent attempt to purchase a condo. “I wanted to buy a flat in Bombay and it wasn’t given to me because I was a Muslim.”

16. “Where is Abu Fadi?”

17. Where are the Reshamvalas, the Bakris, the Iqbalis, the Naqvis, the Alis, the Merchants, the Lokhandvalas, the Pathans? Where have they gone? What has happened to the boy?

18. I ask my mother if she remembers the boy with the frizzy hair who used to wash the cars. She remembers. What was his name? She can’t remember. Do you know what happened to him? She hesitates. She says she doesn’t know. It was a long time ago. Later, she says, it was horrible, they got him on the main road on the way to our building, they pulled his pants down. They had machetes, he was hacked, she says, he was hacked to death. The police disappeared, did nothing. You can see the main road from the living room window.
19. The kettle whimpers.

20. "I need to talk about living room because I need to talk about home."8

21. The main road we have to use to get to my mother's place is soaked in blood, the nameless boy's blood.

22. "Can I get a witness?"9

23. Insha Mushtaq loses vision in both her eyes after being hit by pellets by security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir. As reports confirm that "a bloody summer of protest in Kashmir has been met with a ruthless response from Indian security forces who fired hundreds of thousands of metal pellets into crowds of civilians, leaving hundreds blinded," The Guardian asks, "is this the world's first mass blinding?"10

24. "There are few 'issues' as endemic to Black life as police violence."11

25. Insha Mushtaq's father says, "the sight of her blinded eyes kills me everyday."12

26. I need to talk about living room because I need to talk about home.

27. I am on the slow inefficient First World commuter train on my way to the campus where I teach. The boy sitting across the aisle from me looks distressed. I want to say something to the boy. I don't say anything. The boy
holds in his hands a piece of crumpled paper. An officer from the sheriff’s department comes around asking for tickets, as is customary on these trains. When the officer reaches the boy, he asks, eyeing the paper in the boy’s hands, just got out of juvie? The boy mumbles a response. The officer says, don’t mumble boy, look at me, I asked you a question, look at me when you answer. The boy says nothing.

28. The day after I participate in a teach-in that colleagues and students organize on my campus about Michael Brown and police violence, a colleague stops me in the hallway and asks, what do you make of reports indicating that Michael Brown was a thug?

29. I am not surprised to read that an Amnesty International report confirms that “for Palestinian children in the occupied West Bank, 2016 was the deadliest year in the past decade.”

30. “I am tired from this digging up of human bodies no one loved enough to save from death”

31. The cliché comes alive on the train. The white officer says to the young African American boy, stand up. The boy asks why he has to stand up. The boy asks, what have I done? The boy says, I have done nothing. Are you resisting, boy? the officer asks. You are resisting, boy, stand up straight. The boy says, I am not resisting. I see that the boy is not resisting, that the boy is holding out his slender arms. Officer, I say, it doesn’t look to me like he is resisting. You are resisting, boy, I am going to cuff you . . . you are resisting. The officer places handcuffs around the boy’s wrists and orders the boy to sit still while he finishes his rounds.

32. The “children were killed on their way to class, or coming home from a pool party. Several were shot dead while protesting the occupation. A brother
and sister were killed in their Gaza home when their neighborhood was hit in an Israeli airstrike.\textsuperscript{15}

33. I want to stay with the boy, to affirm that the boy was not resisting. But as my stop approaches, I think of the classes I have to teach and the students waiting for me. I tell the boy I will be your witness as I drop my business card inside the boy’s shirt pocket and get off the train. I know I should have stayed with the boy to attest that the boy was not resisting, to say loudly to anyone who would listen that I was there, that I witnessed the injustice done to the boy.

34. My lover leaves me a note with the newspaper: make sure to check out the front and back pages of the main section. The day after the verdict, the front page of the venerated \textit{Los Angeles Times} features a story about a multimillionaire whose application for another Ferrari was denied. A small news story about the Philando Castile verdict is tucked away on the back page.

35. In class, I am agitated, distraught, ashamed, unable to stop thinking of the boy, unable to stop thinking about my own failing, my failure to stand beside the boy. I shelve the lesson I have planned for the day and decide to tell my students about the injustice that I was witness to and about my failure to stand beside the boy on the train. The students are kind, forgiving. We spend class time studying June Jordan’s work.

36. “18 cops in order to subdue one man
18 strangled him to death in the ensuing scuffle
(don’t you idolize the diction of the powerful: subdue and scuffle my oh my) and that the murder that the killing of Arthur Miller on a Brooklyn street was just a ‘justifiable accident’ again (Again)”\textsuperscript{16}
37.
Uninvited, a colleague joins me at lunch in my campus cafeteria and rails against the Black Lives Matter protests. A waste of time, my colleague professes, these protests won’t bring about change, students will be better off focusing on their studies, not on protesting, protests are a remnant of the past, they are no longer fruitful. I want to say in that case I must waste a great deal of time. Instead, I say I think of protests differently. I tell my colleague that when the bombing of Iraq began my lover and I rushed to join a spontaneous candlelight vigil and protest. I tell my colleague this, that even if protests fail to bring about the change we deserve, we come together in protest to stand as witness to the horrors that we did not consent to.

38.
“The gods of the white Western world . . . What have they done for me? Show me one life saved by any of these gods! Show me one colored life!” I think to myself as a speaker of color extolls the virtues of a classical education and suggests only education can save us. At the end of the eulogizing, a colleague of color asks, isn’t education often the problem? Doesn’t education habitually sustain the status quo? Afterward my colleague and I go out for a drink. We laugh madly as we recollect the speaker’s unswerving faith in the classics, presumably to civilize us rowdy folx of color.

39.
We watch nervously, my neighbor and I, on a laptop in my living room, as Rachel Jaentel testifies in defense of her murdered friend Trayvon Martin at his murderer’s trial. My neighbor rightly worries that she will be discredited for using Black English. This is why, my neighbor says, we need you to make sure to teach students of color to write and speak standard English perfectly. The specter of another African American woman testifying in standard American English and being discredited lurks in my memory. I keep the thought of Anita Hill to myself. My neighbor seems to read my mind. My neighbor says, I know, it is going to take much more than a facility with white English for us Black women, women of color, to be heard, really heard in this country . . . in the world. My neighbor feels impotent, powerless. I feel impotent, powerless. But we memorize what we witness, my neighbor says, it will motivate.
I look for the boy’s face in the passing parade of faces.

I agree to join a panel convened by the gay and lesbian caucus at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. I am the only person of color on the panel. I note that given the conference’s location in Florida I was expecting many panels to focus on Trayvon Martin and the ongoing quest for social justice, and I am dismayed to find none. A co-panelist remarks that the conference’s focus on first-year writing would make that difficult. I think maybe the co-panelist is being facetious. Surely, the co-panelist is being facetious. I don’t know whether I should confront my co-panelist. I say nothing, but the remark rankles, continues to rankle.

"To live means you owe something big to those whose lives were taken away from them."\textsuperscript{18}

200 Iraqi civilians are killed in a US airstrike in Mosul. Mainstream media attends carefully, sympathetically, to the five people killed in a home-grown attack in London.

These words of hers come to my mind when I see the footage of the excessive force used by law enforcement officials against the Dakota Access Pipeline protesters: “Some of us sit in front of a young man, a member of the Creek nation, and we hear his voice break and we feel his hands trembling and we avoid staring at the tears that pour from his eyes as he tells us about the annihilation of his ancestors, about the bashing of babies’ heads against trees, and about the alternate, nearly extinct world view that his forefathers and foremothers embraced. Between convulsions of grief, he speaks about the loss of earlier, spirit relations between his hungering people and the foods of the earth.”\textsuperscript{19}

Who were the dead in Mosul? Whom did they love? What did they love to do?
46. Yes, “freedom cannot be qualified . . . Certainly the sphere of your heart should not be something relegated to a peripheral issue. My heart is not peripheral, to me.”20

47. My mother asks if I have heard about the Indians arrested in India on charges of sedition for supporting the Pakistan team in a cricket match between Pakistan and India. She says, they have gone mad. I misunderstand. Mad for supporting the Pakistan team? No, madness that they have been arrested.

48. “There is available to me a moral attachment to the concept beyond gender and race. I am referring to the concept of justice, which I am prepared to embrace and monitor so that justice shall equally serve the young Black man and the young white woman.”21

49. I forward the Open Letter from the MLA Members for Justice in Palestine calling on the MLA membership to endorse a resolution in support of the boycott of Israeli academic institutions to all the friends and colleagues I can think of who are members of the organization and strong advocates of social justice. Only two add their names to the Open Letter. One emails back, “support it of course,” but doesn’t, I notice, actually endorse the Open Letter. Could this have anything to do with this colleague being up for tenure and promotion, I wonder.

50. It doesn’t amaze me when I read that “during the 1980s, she was ostracized by much of the literary community for her political stances. Large presses that had once published her would no longer take her work; famous poets who had been her friends turned away. She attributes these rejections to fallout from her public condemnation of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and her continuing support for Palestinian rights.”22 It doesn’t amaze me that she doesn’t abandon her moral outrage or principled positions.
51. After the question and answer period following Harriet Malinowitz’s talk on “Rhetoric, Zionism, and Propaganda” at my university is derailed by Zionist faculty members and has to be abandoned, my dean says to me that the lesson we can learn from this is to be careful about the speakers we invite to our campus in the future.

52. I am not sure if I know how to save myself from self-destructing with rage as I collect observations chronicling the ongoing assaults on our marginalized lives and disenfranchised communities.


54. At home, in my living room, unable to calm down after reading about the murder of Charleena Lyles in her home at the hands of the Seattle police as her four children watched, I hear her words in my head: “and what / in the hell is everybody being reasonable about.”

55. Darren Wilson says famously, “it looks like a demon.”

56. I fear I am losing focus. I hear a voice in my head pestering me, warning me not to lose focus, to stay on track. But, I write, thinking of Shereen Inayatulla’s phrase “queer unplottable immigrant temporalities,” knowing that this emphasis on focus, on coherence may be what keeps us from noticing what is around us, may be what prevents many of us from writing.

57. “My career was completely jeopardized by my stance in 1982 . . . There was a huge smear letter-writing campaign in the feminist community, saying I was trying to divide the women’s movement because of my ‘anti-Semitism.’”
58. Jewish scholars who disrupt dominant Zionist narratives routinely face severe scrutiny and punishment. Long Island University denies its long-time professor, activist/scholar Harriet Malinowitz a sabbatical for a research project on “Zionism and Propaganda.” After she protests and the faculty union takes on her case, the university offers her a deal: take the sabbatical, but also agree to retire. The university’s allegiances become clear. It will grant this long-serving member on its faculty the sabbatical she has earned only if she agrees to permanently disappear, so the university is not seen as sanctioning research that may offend its donors, its stakeholders.

59. An old friend proclaims, you have lost your sense of humor.

60. “I have evolved from an observer to a victim to an activist passionately formatting methods of resistance against tyranny of any kind. And most important, I think, is this: I have faced my own culpability, my own absolute dirty hands, so to speak, in the continuation of injustice and powerful intolerance. I am discovering my own shameful functions as part of the problem, at least.”

61. I notice her bright pink scrubs the moment she gets on the subway, before she finds the vacant seat next to me. She wants to talk. She has had a difficult day. Most days, she says, are difficult days, today was a really difficult day. She says they brought in a fifteen-year-old in handcuffs and with dog bites all over. She says she had to ask the police officers to remove the handcuffs. She says the fifteen-year-old was in bad shape. She says, the fifteen-year-old tried to run when the cops stopped him. They let the dogs loose. The fifteen-year-old needed twenty-seven stitches. The fifteen-year-old was scared. She says, I stayed with the fifteen-year-old as long as I could. She asks, what do you do for a living? She asks, we are privileged, you and me.
The sculptor carving and selling meerkats made of Jacaranda wood near Greenmarket Square in Cape Town is grateful for my business. He says, you are my first customer of the day. It is late afternoon. I say, you’ve got to be joking? He assures me he isn’t. He says, things are quiet these days, the tourists all come for the beaches. He asks, where are you from? I tell him I live in Los Angeles, but grew up in Bombay. He says, I am like you, I am also a migrant. We banter and chat about the travails of being immigrants in a world run by the white man. The white man rules the world, he says, and don’t even get me started on the Black man who rules my country.

Encounters in the Bahamas with the Black women merchants selling their wares prompt her to observe, “this is my consciousness about race and class and gender identity as I notice the fixed relations between these other Black women and myself. They sell and I buy or don’t buy. They risk not eating. I risk going broke on my first vacation afternoon. We are not particularly women anymore; we are parties to a transaction designed to set us against each other.”

The sculptor isn’t able to return “home.” He doesn’t have the resources to go anywhere else. He doesn’t hold the “right” papers.

“When these factors of race and class and gender absolutely collapse is whenever you try to use them as automatic concepts of connection.”

I can come and go, even if it is frequently only after my brown body has been subjected to suspicion, hostility, humiliation.

My mother sends me a WhatsApp message. Another young girl, only eight years old, has been raped repeatedly by a group of men, this time in Jammu, inside a Hindu temple, and murdered. The prime minister is silent.
68. Investigations substantiate that the abduction, rape, and murder of eight-year-old Asifa Bano were calculated, spearheaded by the temple caretaker/priest to try to drive her Muslim nomadic community out of the area.

69. Can you imagine? My mother says, we will not be silent.

70. I need to talk about living room, about Hafiz Junaid, who leaves his house in Haryana to go on a shopping trip to Delhi and returns home soaked in blood, lynched on the train for being wrong, a Muslim, a suspected beef eater, the horror, the horror.

71. When a colleague explains to me that I am misguided, that it is arrogant to insist that we use our privilege to write to keep alive the disappeared, the silenced, the slain, to make room for the disenfranchised, the disposable, I think "until quite recently, the regular rule of thumb for measuring excellence in higher education was pretty crude stuff indeed: the smaller the eye of the needle, the better the school. The more people your standards of admission could reject, the more people and cultures and histories and spoken languages other than your own that you could exclude from your core curriculum—or patronize—the better the school."28

72. I think forget Aristotle and the ubiquitous ethos, pathos, logos; we will use any means necessary. “We will have to gird ourselves for an arduous overthrow of American fantasies if we will reverse the values that now imperil our powers of self-preservation, equitable reform, and moral authority. We will have to turn back from long-ago legendary table where our legendary Founding Fathers sat, comfortably musing about all men having been created equal while most of them maintained other human beings, African women and men and children, in slavery, and while the needling eloquence of their pioneer deliberations did not permit them to perceive the absurdity of an avowedly democratic state in which most of the subjects—all women, per se, and all white men who neither owned property nor knew how to read
or write—would be automatically denied the political control that voting
confers. We will have to turn from that long-ago peculiar and hallowed
scenario and check out that consummate, still-standing, emblematic needle
on the landscape of the U.S.A.: what do you suppose anybody had in mind
when he, so to speak, conceived of the Washington Monument? And those
warning red eyes on the top of it: what do they see? What do they mean
besides beware and stay away and danger? What do they illuminate in the
nighttime terror of urban America? And does that preeminent American
needle point to us, the people, or to an indifferent stratosphere?"29

73.
I suggest via email that the writing program at my university invite Adam
Banks to our campus to give a talk. Our white male writing program director
responds promptly. He doesn't see how Banks's scholarship with its focus,
as he puts it, on computers and writing and Black rhetoric is aligned with
the issues that concern us.

74.
"And what shall we do, we who did not die?"30

75.
We will talk about living room, about Jyoti Singh, who leaves her home in
Delhi to go the movies and never returns after getting on a bus to go home.
Wrong. We will talk about living room, about Mahmoud Rafaat Badran, who
returning from a swim never makes it back home in Occupied Palestine.
Wrong, wrong. We will talk about living room, about Bettie Jones, mother
of five, grandmother of nine, whom police shoot and kill in the doorway of
her home in Chicago. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

76.
'cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age
the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the
wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic
the wrong sartorial I
I have been the meaning of rape
I have been the problem everyone seeks to
eliminate by forced
penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/
but let this be unmistakable this poem
is not consent I do not consent”31

77.
We will talk about living room decimated by the Dakota Access Pipeline. We will talk about Standing Rock, we will talk about what Winona LaDuke calls ”the Deep North,” the ”Mississippi of the North.”32 We understand the ruin of living room at Standing Rock is not an aberration, it is ongoing everyday existence for the indigenous inhabitants of this land we call ”home.”

78.
We will not lose our courage in fear of losing track of the plot. We will raise our voices to ask whose and what interests are served by the insistence on coherent plot. We will confront the abyss and write the void.

79.
We are the demons and the children of demons and we will not be silent or polite or well-behaved and we will not write/teach only what it has been decreed we write/teach.

80.
”Higher education has meant higher than most people. The best universities have continued the worst kind of class privilege. They have enshrined tyrannical reflections of Western white male narcissism. These blinding needles, these (trying-to-look-like) ivory towers, have erected themselves stiff and imperturbable above the multimillionfold folk realities of everyday suffering and rage. They even celebrate the height of their distance from such mass disturbances as homelessness and battered wives. Instead, they commit themselves to an exorbitant and sometimes fatal mythology of ‘pure research’ and/or ‘pure science.”33 We reject this kind of “higher.”

81.
We will talk about the ongoing everyday existence of the lives still detained at Guantanamo, their dreams and despair, and we will imagine the dreams and despair of their loved ones waiting, at home, in living room.
“Home,” she says, “means nobody else can close the door.” We will talk about living room bifurcated by the upholding of borders, by deportations.

Siddhartha Gautama, “You say, ‘Close your eye to the butterfly!’ / I say, ‘Don’t blink!’” This much I can promise you: I will not blink.

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Notes
2. Parmar, A Place of Rage.
5. Parmar, A Place of Rage.
6. Tehsin, “No Muslims Please.”
10. Waheed, “India’s Crackdown in Kashmir.”
12. Waheed, “India’s Crackdown in Kashmir.”
13. Murphy, “These Are the Palestine Children.”
15. Murphy, “These Are the Palestine Children.”
22. Moffet, “Poetic Justice.”
32. Labaree, “NoDAPL.”

**Works Cited**


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