"swallowing the unfathomable / still."

The Precarious Lyric in June Jordan's Ecopoetry.

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Abstract

June Jordan's ecopoetry historicizes the environmental crisis, occupying and unsettling the pastoral Romantic framework in which the landscape of the United States of America has long been glossed. In situating the environmental legacies of settler colonialism alongside the precarity of Black and Indigenous life, Jordan's work excised her from the existing political and formal conditions of ecopoetry replete with tropes of solitary escape and sublime encounter. By positioning herself as a witness who must hold and record racialised exposure to uninhabitable environments, her poetry widens and lengthens the scene of what constitutes environmental catastrophe, social crisis, and the lyrical address. Crucially, her poems disrupt and deconstruct the ecological racial order inaugurated by settler colonialism.

Introduction: Belated Concern

June Jordan's ecopoetry is unconcerned with imagining unstable futures and lamenting ecological crises as a future crisis, yet to be written. Rather, her poetry shifts the temporal trajectories of the ecological crisis(es) backwards, connecting colonialism's extraction of raw materials, and enslaved labour, to racially distributed exposure to environmental catastrophe. To put it another way, her work traces conditions of ecological collapse to the infrastructures of settler colonialism, establishing climate disaster as immanent to modernity. Thus, ecopoetry in Jordan's context refers both to an engagement with environmentalism and a widening of its range of critical concern. By animating details of loss already endured, Jordan purposefully disenchants narratives of climate change which "isolate the various climate catastrophes we face from broader historical production" (Hosbey et al. 1) and thus fail to interrogate the structural preconditions which generate climate disaster. This ahistorical position of infrastructural disinterest is intimately tied to the Western liberal pattern of registering tragedy at the point in which the security, property, and health of those included in the category 'human' are under threat (Wynter 264). Indeed, for those outside dominant frames of *grievability* (Butler 7), the conditions of extraction, dispossession, and unequal capital accumulation have long been "deadly enough" (Hare 2). Jordan's ecopoetry bears witness to the communities and alternative world-making practices that have been stamped out by the violent imprint of settler colonialism; this attempt to witness necessitates her departure from Romantic depictions of nature as an idealised refuge and host to sublime feeling. Jordan's poetic speaker emerges from a point of further precarity, which generates both attentiveness and enforced proximity to the violence enfolded and enveloped in the landscape.

The disciplines of Black Ecologies and Geographies insist that the sequences contributing to anthropogenic climate change are wider in scope than the mono-ideological focus contemporary environmental discourse suggests. Nathan Hare's 1970 essay "Black Ecology" makes evident that the disposability of Black life incorporates over-exposure to climate catastrophe, as well as an increased risk of premature death

because of poor housing conditions, police brutality, and inadequate access to medical treatment. In other words, racial disparities and life expectancy are environmentally embedded. Hare's understanding of ecological crisis traverses beyond natural disasters, looking at the broader geographic picture of racialisation and precarity in the US, and reconstituting the terms of crisis from singular, sparsely connected events into a recognition of the *ecological afterlives*[1] of colonisation. So far, scholarship which clarifies Jordan's importance as an interlocutor within Black Geographies has predominantly focused on correcting her omission from the project 'Skyrise to Harlem,'[2] which as Nikil Saval's lecture illustrates was partly a response to the Harlem Riots of 1964, and challenged the dominant urban planning practices of the 1960s (Fish 331). This corrective work is essential, but it has meant that scholarship has primarily focused on Jordan's architectural engagement in urban spaces. Jordan's refusal of the "Romantic impulse to demarcate and isolate nature and nature writing from social engagement" (Alston 45) cannot be contained to this project. Thus, this article attempts to bridge the gap between her thinking on the habitability and security of space, and on the history that produces these outcomes. Whilst Jordan has many ecopoems that could have been selected for this essay[3], including the particularly engaged "A Poem About Vieques, Puerto Rico" which explores colonial tourism and US imperialism as ecocidal infrastructures, this essay deliberately limits itself to thinking about

1 The term *ecological afterlives* brings to mind Saidiya Hartman's concept the *afterlives of slavery* which examines how the precarity of Black life is embedded in modernity. The term *ecological afterlives* examines how ecological trajectories, circumstances and events are produced by historical processes, and the focus of this essay is on the *ecological afterlives* of colonialism. To make this clearer, one example of an ecological afterlife of colonialism would be the monocultural landscape produced by plantation economies.

2 The 1965 edition of *Esquire* that published June Jordan and R. Buckminster Fuller's collaboration did not credit Jordan as a co-creator, writing: "R. Buckminster Fuller designs a total solution to an American dilemma." Additionally, they inappropriately retitled it "Instant Slum Clearance." In 2008, the Whitney Museum perpetuated this legacy by failing to credit Jordan's role in the project. Vermonja A. Alston's article "'Moving Towards Home': The Politics and Poetics of Environmental Justice in the Work of June Jordan" makes Jordan's participation clear by citing the lengthy correspondence between Jordan and Fuller.

3 In addition, "Morning on the Mountain," "Ecology," "You Come with Shells," "On New Years Eve," "Not a Sucicide Poem," "Poem About Police Violence," "Niagara Falls," and "Poem about the Streetwaters of the city," all fit into this particular description of Jordan's ecopoetic tradition.

Jordan's poems which concentrate on the United States' domestic relationship to ecocide, extraction, and security.

For the purpose of this article, Jordan's capacious formulations of ecopoetry have been heuristically condensed into two interconnected strands. Firstly, this article charts Jordan's adoption and disruption of the Romantic's lyrical fixation on nature's capacity to generate sublime feeling, that is extractable and abstractable, yet ineffable. Through asides, preludes, and polyvocal narration, Jordan's poetic form denaturalises the continued production of the sublime in landscapes that have violently dispossessed Indigenous people. Contact with these visceral histories makes it impossible for the speaker to continue to idealise the landscape of the United States as a refuge from modernity rather than the site of its brutal construction. Indeed, in both "Poem for Nana" (249-53) and "Poem for Joy" (445-446) the poetic speakers' acknowledgement of being profoundly and devastatingly situated within the enduring landscape of settler colonialism, stalls the process of viewing the landscape as a chaotic unknown beyond comprehension or adequate representation. Consequently, the article goes on to examine Jordan's speakers who are even more precariously situated and thus are further removed from the conventions of lyrical ecopoems. In the historical narrative poem "47,000 Windows" (59-62) and autobiographically framed "Poem About My Rights" (309-312), the speaker is removed from the generative possibility of the sublime, and even more forcibly, from access to nature itself. These poems collectively historicise and denaturalise the racialised geographies of the US, which are structured asymmetrically so that, as the financial, extractive, and territorial horizons of White colonisers constantly expanded, the spatial possibilities for Black communities remained solidly condensed.

The Abject Sublime

In both "Poem for Nana," and "Poem for Joy," the poetic speaker's perspective reconstitutes the Romantic lyrist's generative vision of the sublime as an "aesthetic experience, a form of ecstatic elevation, in which the mind [is] carried beyond its limits when confronted with what exceeded it" (Ibata 31). Indeed, the Romantics' consensual ascension

to sublimity, via physical precarity, is shifted by Jordan's poetic speakers who simultaneously occupy and witness a more threatening and tangible precarity. Whilst the speakers share the Romantics' physical precarity, as they are located on a precipice, the terror of the sublime is not produced entirely by spatial scale, and rather through witnessing the refracted images and unknown contours of Indigenous dispossession and genocide. In "Poem for Nana," which was published in the collection *Passion* in 1980, the speaker is unable to suppress the ongoing environmental and social devastation legible in the contours of the landscape. "Poem for Joy," published nine years later in *Naming Our Destiny,* stages a more condensed version of this unfolding recognition on which the sublime relies, through the occlusion of the violence wrought on and with the landscape. In both poems, the speakers are unable to repress the landscape's violent history, and the purity of the sublime turns abject as it is stretched to chart the historical phenomenon of precarity produced in the wake of settler colonialism's negation of Black and Indigenous life. If the sublime is an "addition which inflates and exceeds us," immediately "casting the memory to infinity" (Kristeva and Lechte 134), then the abject deflates this sublime, as grief and loss prevent full access into the sublime's affirmative, generative mode.

"Poem for Nana" begins with a question: "What will we do / when there is nobody left to kill?" (lines 1-2). In this first stanza, the collective 'we' has no location; the mass of murderers is not tethered to a particular site of harm. The shared plural pronoun implicates the speaker in the continued desire for violence, as their voice uncomfortably blurs with the settlers' impulse. In this moment, bearing witness to the landscape requires a brief moment of forced proximity and entanglement. The view from the precipice offers knowledge, but it is devastating because of the enduring resonance of the poem's initial address. In the second stanza, the speaker occupies a physical precipice that delivers two scenes of extraction, which ruptures the potential for solitude:

> 40,000 gallons of oil gushing into
> the ocean
> But I

sit on top of this mountainside above
the Pacific
checking out the flowers
the California poppies orange
as I meet myself in the heat
I'm wondering

Where's the Indians?
(lines 5-14)

The speaker can attempt to busy themselves by looking at the poppies, but truly understanding their own subjectivity arises from recognising the unavertable, bounded, and brutal nature of interconnection: one that situates the speaker between the current catastrophe—an oil spill[4]—and in the permanent wake of Indigenous genocide. These two temporal and spatial scenes of destruction are parallel landscapes that become overlaid: the oil is "gushing," it is an insurmountable constant stream, connected to, but shrunken by, the unknowable, unfathomable scale of Indigenous lives lost. Both the statistic "40,000 gallons," and the rhetorical question "*Where's the Indians?*" form refrains as the speaker returns to the ineluctable facts rendered from observing the land and sea. The oil keeps generating devastation—there are "40,000 gallons gushing up poison / from the deepest seabed every hour" (lines 20-21). The contamination and pollution stretch to enormous depths. The scenes of catastrophic loss are doubled, creating "a slippage of violence – fractionating from one form to another" (Davies 418), revealing the violence of settler colonialism as a continuously "unfolding process" (Springer 90). The landscape and its inhabitants are supposed to keep "swallow[ing]the unfathomable still" (lines 27-28) to get by psychologically, socially, and politically; they are expected to choke back and suppress this foundational destruction.

4 The geographic location provided in the poem suggests the poem could have been based on the events of the Santa Barbara Oil Spill of 1969 which killed thousands of birds and an unknown amount of marine life.

Looking closely at the landscape fails to provide the speaker with a comprehensive response to her persistent question, "*Where's the Indians?*" (line 13). The land can never be fully surveyed, the history never fully attended to, no matter how attentively it is gazed at. The speaker admits they are staring hard, desperately scanning the landscape to locate something outside of their field of vision to prevent the occlusion of violence from this iconically aestheticised "film-strip territory" (14). The mounting questions lead the speaker away from the landscape itself, and towards a more concrete response to their horrified repetition of *"Where are the Indians?"* (line 38). The question is belatedly and partially answered through an interspersed extended elegy for the Indigenous activist Anne Mae Pictou Aquash, or Naguset Eask, of the Mi'kmaq tribe from Nova Scotia. The speaker first introduces her at the scene of her brutal murder, conjuring her body as it lay face down. The poem bears witness to Aquash's life and protests through imagining a spiritual and bodily communion with her, holding her hand, and tracing her spine. Insurgent knowledge and sublime connection are gathered through their imagined shared physicality. The "pushed-back horror / pushed-back pain" (lines 72-73) are blurred; it is a collective shared experience belonging both to the speaker and the subject. Yet, this attempt to share in Aquash's suffering belies a broader problem which Virginia Jackson draws attention to in *Before Modernism* (2023) when she asks, "what if [...] replacing such figures of undoing with narrative is by definition 'ongoing, unfinished,' or even 'impossible'?" (119) Indeed, the narration cannot extract the violence from the land, or narrate on behalf of Aquash. Eventually, the vision of their embrace disperses, and the speaker returns to her original spot in California. Within the frame of the poem, knowledge of Aquash's life of protest allows mourning to move towards a recognition of responsibility. As Jordan puts it in her posthumously published essay "Some of Us Did Not Die" (2002), "to live is not just a given: to live means you owe something big to those whose lives are taken away from them" (1). Attempting to stop the machine of the racial *capitalocene* requires a grief capacious enough to contain the seeds of protest.

In "Poem for Joy," the speaker relishes extendedly staring at the landscape. They enjoy posturing the Romantics' experience of the sublime by seemingly occupying the eyeline and perspective of a hawk; the speaker is briefly able to encounter an untainted sublime, a beautiful terror available only through historical detachment. The poem begins with a sense of sublime encounter at the expansiveness of the landscape. This expansiveness is twofold, referring both to its spatial vastness, and to the deep time discerned in the Colorado Plateau. The poem opens almost as a pastiche:

> Dreaming
> Colorado where the whole earth rises
> marvelous high hard rock higher than the heart can
> calmly tolerate: The hawk
> swoons from its fierce precipitation.
> (lines 1-5)

There is a physicality to the fear generated by the encounter, the sheer scale of the rock spiking the heart's rhythm, the denseness of the alliteration painting the scene of jagged, rising rock formations. The extension of the word "higher" from "high" is a visual as well as a semantic pinnacle, conjuring the peaks and troughs of the region. The indentations in the first two stanzas of "Dreaming" and "And dazed" frame the landscape in terms of startled bewilderment, and the landscape maintains an unreal, dreamlike quality. By the third stanza, the speaker is incapable of continuing to find the terror of the landscape thrilling. The final indentation of the poem becomes more concrete as the speaker acknowledges arriving at a designated final spot. The unfamiliar landscape no longer generates an abstract feeling of strangeness but is tethered to a visceral history of dispossession. The towering rocks and emptied land attempt to capture the physical violence inflicted on the Creek Tribe of North America. The speaker tells this history through bodily metaphors scarring the landscape:

I reach
the birthplace for the stories of your hurt
your soft collapse
the feelings of the flat wound on the not forgotten graves
(lines 18-21)

The Creek Tribe is directly addressed, and the speaker refuses to immediately absorb their pain into their own narrative. Whilst the tribe's "soft collapse," gestures to an embrace, or exhausted sleep, the remainder of the images suggest much more gratuitous physical discomfort. The fresh morning cannot undo these dense, aggravated physical wounds, and the landscape is hellish, staging a repeated confrontation with death, and emptied possibilities. The unbearable, lingering closeness of physical pain is shaped by the perpetual nature of the violence.The speaker stipulates that resurrection is impossible, that nature and social relations won't be able to regenerate. The ubiquity of this enduring violence jolts the speaker's initial enjoyment in surveying the landscape, as the speaker is unable to move forward in time, to emerge from the repeated points of crisis. As they cannot contain the tragedy to a single precipice or climax, devastation repeats itself, and atrocity cannot be properly witnessed when the scale is incomprehensible, and the end is ongoing.

Expansive Horizons, Abbreviated Possibilities

Death chase me down
death's way
uproot a breast
infest the lymph nodes
crack a femur
rip morale
to shreds
—June Jordan, "*I guess it was my destiny to live so long*".

In the epigraph to this section, death "chases," like a policeman, "uproots," like the masters of the Middle Passage, and "crack[s]," like a whip. The image's signification here becomes doubled and then redoubled (Gates 112) as the speaker deliberately plays with the semantic overlap between carcinogens and the infrastructures of Whiteness. As J.T. Roane examines in "Black Creativity and Imagination at the End of the World" (2018), "*the end* in Black culture takes on a different frequency than the apocalyptic sense of singular, totalized destruction that repeats and edits millennialism in Western thought and in American popular culture [...] To make this claim a bit more forcefully, for Black people, the world ends regularly" (2). For Jordan, the existential imaginary underpinning the multiple ends of the world refocuses the insurgency of the crisis and the belatedness of any response to the devastation already endured. In both "47,000 Windows," and "Poem About My Rights," it is not the future's unknowability that grates on the speakers, but the visceral collapsing of past violence into the present day. In "Global Black Ecologies" (2022), Justin Hosbey, Hilda Lloréns, and J.T. Roane pertinently observe that "the seamless move from Indigenous collapse to European colonists' massive enslavement of Africans to transform the land 'of nobody and nothing' into a rent paying, wealth-generating imperial complex" has been naturalized as inevitable (2). These poems catastrophise the attempts to brush past the destruction of previous worlds, which has resulted in a distorted perception of climate change as a singular climax, detached from infrastructural conditions.

"47,000 Windows" was published in the collection *Some Changes* in 1971. It is a ten-part narrative history of the formation of New York City. The poem engages with the historical preconditions, embedded in the vulnerable trajectories of the colonised and enslaved, which enable, as the poem puts it, a "machinery for triumph / by a few" (lines 30-31). Jordan traces spatial restrictions from Indigenous displacement to the enslaver's desire for profit, and finally to the landlord's abject disinterest in the occupants' survival. The poem is accompanied by a lengthy prose explanation, which functions as a dramatic aside that addresses and informs the reader of what is to come, and further

contextualises why this subject is an effective synecdoche for the contradictions embedded in the geographies of American freedom.

This explanation ensures the reader is equipped with the context to understand the poem: it begins "The Lower East Side of New York City offers, in itself, a history of American contradiction, devotion to profit and failure of environmental design for human life." It ensures the reader is directed to look beyond the frame of the poem, to recognise that this is a reflection on human life and events, rather than just an act of the imagination, untethered from crises.

The speaker enacts a careful scrutiny of the deregulated landlords, who value profit over humans living in habitable environments with natural light. The landlords' appetites actualise conditions of deprivation and death; their greed is laid out in clear terms, as indecipherable from murder. The first section of "47,000 Windows" documents the time when New York began being big; when the city's physicality was used figuratively to justify profit at whatever cost. The speaker adopts and ironises the speech that naturalises the desire for more as inevitable: "made the city made me take / your eye for mine according to extreme / prosperity and appetite" (lines 16-18). Here, the city is cast as the place to throw aside loyalty, as a site for transgressing moral boundaries, and entering into the boundless pursuit of more wealth. Within this space, it is not an eye for an eye, as the adage usually goes—rich landlords can simply enucleate it, without any concern for reciprocal damage. They revise the popular adage of an "eye for an eye," offering a cheap moralism which attempts to erode their responsibility. Later on in the poem, this pattern is restated: as real estate rises, the lower-income majority are made very ill, in order to support the lifestyle of the wealthy. Profit is conceived of as a disease that inversely affects only those financially tethered to its carriers.

In the poem's third section, the mocking phrase the "welcoming coast of always America" (line 38) undermines the settlers' vision of themselves as a permanent, ineluctable feature of the continent, custodians of its safety, and authors of its hegemonic racial future. The seas seem to conspire with the colonial desire for profit as they gladly deliver a blur of people—future workers and renters—to the shores of

New York City. Here, the poetic speaker adopts the voice it previously scrutinised, narrating the crowds as arriving in an uncontrollable, violent manner. In four brief lines, the speaker condenses the history of transatlantic chattel slavery:

> Those other ones
> they came
> not trading things
> *but lives*
> (lines 39-42)

Chattel slavery constructed human life into raw material, and an undervalued commodity within the market system. The italicisation here attempts to re-differentiate human life from commodity. Yet, there is no prosaic or extended commentary on the terms of this encounter, and the speaker immediately returns to the history of the tenements, refusing to interrogate and integrate this history any longer. This omission of the speaker's intervention, means these lines haunt and drag on throughout the poem, doubling and connecting the figure of the disinterested landlord and the enslaver as agents of destruction and profit, utterly unconcerned with human life outside of its extractive potential.

In "Poem About My Rights," which was also published in *Passion*, sexual violence is understood as another tool for restraining spatial freedom. The poetic speaker is unable to venture alone at night, to move beyond the designated coordinates of a domestic space. Like the masses in "47,000 Windows," she is forcibly confined to domestic spaces; the outside world is not designed to accommodate her. At the beginning of the poem, this physical restriction is coupled with a double sense of loss: the structural conditions of gender and race impede her ability both to live safely, and to think alone by herself. The poem begins *in media res*, and in an elongated moment of despair at being unable, yet again, to move forward, she reflects: "Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear / my head" (lines 1-2). The "even" emphasises the regular and grinding rumination about whether to go outside. This ostensibly possible act is redrawn by the heavy threat of violence. This

state of confinement leads the speaker's thoughts around in desperate, expanding circles, where she both wills herself towards nature and then immediately recalls her obstruction from it. An absence of spatial and contemplative possibilities ties the speaker in distressing poetic knots, unravelling through constant enjambment in non-stanzaic formation:

> suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/
> or far into the woods and I wanted to go
> there by myself thinking about God/ or thinking
> About children or think about the world/ all of it
> disclosed by the stars and the silence
> I could not go there and I could not think and I could not
> stay there
> (lines 10-16)

By employing the conditional "suppose," the poetic voice immediately retrieves the hope and impossibility of venturing alone. The listing of impossible, unachievable locations, followed by the repetition of negatives, accumulates to emphasise the rigid immovability of the restrictions placed on the speaker. The tone here is desperate, there is nothing that can be done to mediate the conditions of anti-Blackness. The claustrophobia constitutes a physical limitation which initially stunts the possibility for the release of emotions.

This initial desperation is followed by the disclosure that the speaker has already been raped. The reader is thus situated between temporal frames—before and after—and the speaker recalls deciding whether or not to go outside. The tone shifts again after this disclosure, as the poetic speaker reflects "I am the history of rape" (line 77), "I have been raped" (line 92), and "I have been the meaning of rape" (line 98). She understands and explains the reason for the violence as a historically and culturally driven construction of the Black female body as a resource to be mined, in other words, as "unprotected female flesh" (Spillers 68). The speaker's highly speculated, hyper-surveyed body is attached to a schema of abnormality and thus positioned as a resource that must be extracted to the point of disposability. The Black female body is

constantly made fungible with the land and with labour. The speaker explains she was raped "be-/cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age / the wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic" (lines 93-96). The break splitting "because" suggests a failure or reluctance to articulate the terms of her own wrongness, as inscribed by the colonial gaze. The repetitions of "wrong" ramp up as the availability of her displaced body and her narration articulate the ubiquitous, repeated pattern of sexual violence as a form of coercion. The threat, and cultural permeance of rape, condition the speaker's ability to walk and think freely, to disentangle and detach herself from the colonialism of being. The unknown parameters of what a world without rape would look, feel, and think like are inaccessible, the scale of loss remains unknown. In this moment, the act of witnessing the landscape becomes impossible, steered only by absence. The poem creates a disjuncture between the careful mapping of the speaker's inner world, and the unreachable exterior setting.

Conclusion

These poems accumulate to collectively catastrophise the unfolding colonial infrastructures which have permitted the production of vastly unequal spatial relations. In an interview with Alexis de Veaux for *Essence Magazine*, Jordan analogised her poetry as a form of housework, a pragmatic tool used to nurture readers, "providing the wherewithal so that people can keep going [...] I would be very proud if people found in my poetry things that were as useful to them as a decent breakfast before they go to work." Jordan imagines her readers as an engaged, working audience, who would ideally find the poems immediately instructive in navigating the world as they begin their day. Her ecopoetry does not didactically stage the subjects seamlessly overcoming their infrastructural position, but, they are instructive in forcing current concerns about ecocide into a wider genealogy of suffering enacted by colonialism and transatlantic slavery. This attention towards collective struggle and shared histories forged in collaborative partnership with the landscape, gives historicisation a double significance here; it provides the crucial context to map the relationship between ecocide

and colonialism while also enabling a shared sense of resistance to emerge. Indeed, her ecopoetry continually takes us out of the aesthetic frame, or uses the aesthetic frame, in order to remind us of the ongoing nature of these converging crises. This article only attends to a small selection of Jordan's extensive collection of ecopoetry and essays, but this work could be extended in multiple directions. For example, it could follow the thread of Jordan's interest in petro-cultural and oil economies, or chart how contemporary work like Evie Shockley's "Cruise line"(2011) echoes both Jordan's poem "A Poem About Vieques, Puerto Rico" and her essay "Report From the Bahamas, 1982" (2003) Jordan's poetry refuses to enter into speculative engagement with the future—her work always reminds us that the violent infrastructures of modernity are always in process, time dribbles away, and a confrontation with the unfolding ecological legacies will always be too late for those whose lives have already been rendered disposable.

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"swallowing the unfathomable / still."

Biography

Scarlett Croft is a researcher and writer, currently in the first year of her PhD at Glasgow University. Her thesis critically maps the intellectual, formal, and imaginative interests of African American eco-poetry from reconstruction to the present day. Before starting her PhD, she worked in schools, and was a Research Assistant at Columbia University, where she was an Andrew Mellon scholar.