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RADICAL TEACHER

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DEI in a Time of Genocide or Re-Calling June Jordan's Years at Stony Brook

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JUNE JORDAN, CA. 1970. PHOTOGRAPH BY LLOYD W. YEARWOOD

Introduction

These poems
they are things that I do
in the dark
reaching for you
whoever you are
and
are you ready?

— June Jordan, "These Poems" from *Things that I do in the dark: select poetry (1981)*

Faculty on American college campuses must decide how to teach through the U.S.-sponsored genocide in Palestine. By teaching through, I do not only mean the syllabi we develop, the words we utter from the podium, or the feedback we scrawl on student papers. As bell hooks explains, college professors share knowledge in many locations and multiple formats (hooks, 2003). How faculty respond when their university threatens and arrests anti-genocide students and colleagues is a matter of pedagogy as well as politics. Our campuses have become a case study: who in the American university can and will speak about the violence facing our Palestinian counterparts in Gaza (United Nations, 2024; Abed, 2024; Democracy Now, 2025)? We pose the question and plot the data simultaneously. Colleagues with family, lineage, and homes in the region learn these terrible lessons in real time. "How difficult and treacherous our paths are, within this country and its institutions," writes Huda Fakhreddine about being an Arabic literature professor during the Palestinian genocide; "I can either be a tool of the very system that objectifies me, exoticizes me, and is not willing to bat an eye when my entire culture is being exterminated, or else I am a threat" (Fakhredinne, 2024). University proclamations of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offer little guidance or protection. "When so many professors all over the country have been intimidated, punished and harassed for speaking out in support of Palestinians" (Fakhreddine, 2024), the American university's commitment to social justice -- now openly articulated as "DEI" -- crumbles into a question.

Feminist scholars warned us about the tradeoffs associated with higher education's embrace of "diversity" (Ahmed, 2012). When consent is a condition of inclusion, careerism blunts conflict, and success requires silence, the DEI mission can be a prison as much as a platform (Mohanty, 2003; Benjamin, 2024). Institutional proclamations of anti-racism after George Floyd's 2020 police murder did not spur anti-genocide missives when Hind Rajab, Khaled Nabhan, and Ayşenur Eygi, along with at least forty-five thousand others, were murdered by U.S.-backed soldiers. Though similar currents of racism and militarism drive these deaths, both at home and abroad, our universities now have little to say. As one anonymous academic job applicant confessed in 2020, DEI can "feel like a trap" when championed by the same universities that crack down on scholars for speaking about Palestine (*The Professor Is In* Blog, 2020). Those on campus who can and will move toward human life at its most vulnerable may not be found in the DEI office, but they must be found. Following Fargo Tbakhi's call for "forms of speech that might enact real danger to the constellation of economic and social values which are… facilitating genocide in Palestine" (Tbakhi, 2023), Black Studies archives are a critical resource. Underneath and outstripping the post-2020 DEI apparatus, there is a tradition of Black Studies scholars who dare to publicly interrogate the consequences of U.S. racism, even in foreign policy, even regarding Palestine, on campus.

Stony Brook

On March 26, 2024, I discuss our university's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mission with applicants for a leadership position. Some candidates speak about hiring and retaining diverse faculty. Others describe recruiting students from resource-starved neighborhoods. Outside our virtual meeting room, nine students holding a sit-in for Palestinian human rights are handcuffed by police. None of us, neither search committee nor candidates, mention this.

On the same day, nearly six thousand miles away, at a place called Beit Lahia, packages of food aid plummet into the ocean approximately one kilometer from the shore. Compelled by hunger, human beings plunge in to retrieve humanitarian assistance delivered inhumanely. At least twelve people drown, their lungs filling with water, flesh trapped between earth and the sky. Our search committee that does not discuss the nine students sitting in on campus cannot mention the twelve Palestinians drowned near Beit Lahia. A commitment to the DEI mission does not make the protesting students visible or the bodies at Beit Lahia speakable.

In the year when U.S/Israeli bombs, famine, land-lust, communicable and chronic disease, sniper shots, fear and racism kill between forty thousand (40K) and one hundred eighty thousand (180K) Gazans and condemn a million more to a hellscape (Khatib, Mckee, Yusuf, 2024), U.S. universities fail to credibly and reliably discuss this reality. In eastern Long Island, my public research university struggles to provide programming that interrogates Israel-Palestine's history of violent statecraft. Instead, the university warns faculty and students that our speech may trigger charges of antisemitism or other bias. They remind us of the technologies we can use to report one another. The DEI office proffers platitudes about civility and community while shadowing students at rallies, events, and lectures, flanked by university police. As the autumn hardens, then melts into graduation season, campus administrators who champion DEI move smoothly from engaging with to surveilling, disparaging, and ultimately aiding in the arrest of student protesters. The revelation of this carceral trajectory for DEI is another lesson from the spring 2024 student intifada (Thier, 2024). If a robust institutional commitment to DEI does not allow American universities to parse the matted strands of history and power that congealed on water and sand at Beit Lahia, or to confront the associated deluge of

U.S.-backed atrocities (Sidhwa, 2024); it would seem, as the students have spat out at us, that the university has nothing of substance to teach them.

Then I remember that June Jordan (1936 - 2002) was here, at the State University of New York (SUNY) Stony Brook, from 1978 through 1989. A dissident poet, city planner, and university professor, June Jordan's years at Stony Brook were shaped by artistic and political desire, including a commitment to telling the truth about United States violence at home and abroad, and specifically about Palestine. She faced professional backlash for this. Her career was stalled, she later told a student, following the poem "Apologies to All the People in Lebanon," published in *The Village Voice* in 1982 (Shamsunder, 2023). Back then, June Jordan called the loss of professional opportunities "whitelisting."

> I have encountered new and considerable resistance to the publication of my work…I have been whitelisted by editors who have plainly enough written or said to me: "We love your writing but too many of us have problems with your position on Nicaragua. Or the Middle East." They don't say "We don't agree with you and so we will not publish your work." They don't say, "We don't believe you have a right to any opinion on this matter." These editors hide behind "many of us" who "have problems" with me. (Jordan, *On Call,* 1985:3)

As many of her publishers and editors went silent, June Jordan continued teaching at the state university. Our campus became a crucial location in her political imagination. One of Jordan's political essay collections from this period, *On Call* (South End Press, 1985), is dedicated to a Stony Brook student, Willie Jordan, whose experience of police violence became a focal teaching and action point. Stony Brook is explicitly mentioned in six of *On Call*'s eighteen essays. A poem from this period, "Taking Care," is dedicated to the "Poet Sekou Sundiata and to the Students of SUNY at Stony Brook" (*Passion,* 1980). Jordan taught at many colleges and universities throughout her life. Her years at the City University of New York (CUNY) are critically archived (Reed and Shalev, 2017) and her time at the University of California Berkeley finds form in the text, *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (Jordan, 1995). Although there is no such study or review of her presence at Stony Brook, our campus was also a place from which June Jordan critically approached the world.

> From Phillis Wheatley to Walt Whitman, from Stony Brook to Lebanon, these writings document my political efforts to coherently fathom all of my universe, and to arrive at a moral judgment that will determine my further political conduct. (Jordan, *On Call,* 1985: 2)

June Jordan is cemented into our campus legacy; institutional neglect will not take her away from us. Her insistence on "coherently fathom[ing] all of [the] universe" to arrive first at a moral judgement and then at political action is as clear a guide as any on how to navigate the crisis facing U.S. academia.

June Jordan arrived at Stony Brook as faculty in the English Department. She also taught within the Africana Studies program, led by poet and performance artist Amiri Baraka. As chairman of Africana, Baraka unapologetically brought poets, artists, and political thinkers to Stony Brook. Championing a radical vision of Black Studies as a field created to transform, not simply integrate into, college campuses, Baraka valued and recruited faculty apart from the standard university rubric of publish, perform, or perish. (Stony Brook AFS Video Archive, 1987). Students needed access to people with experiences and practices of liberation, not only theories. Praising one such Africana Studies colleague, Baraka noted: "[William] McAdoo is a man who has actually been in the revolutionary movement, and been locked up in the revolutionary movement, and struggled, so he actually knows what he's talking about. He's not just bumping his gums together as some of our people are…" (AFS Video Archive, 1987). To retain these sorts of teachers at a public state university, Africana Studies had to chart a path of institutional autonomy within the liberal university. Under Baraka's leadership, Stony Brook Africana publicly relished its faculty and students' intellectual independence. When South African anti-apartheid activist and scholar Fred Dube was attacked for teaching about Israel-Palestine, Baraka's Africana Studies program rushed to his defense (Asare, 2024). "They've been telling us that Africana Studies is too insignificant to have opinions," Baraka quipped during a Black History month presentation in 1987, "but apparently we're going to have them anyway." June Jordan was among many Black artists, practitioners, and scholars -- with opinions -- who came to Stony Brook in the 1980s.

Baraka introduced June at a 1987 Black History Month poetry reading on campus in this way: "The Poetry Center's been dead for a long time… it began to stink, so they cleaned it out, and put, you know, June Jordan in there" (AFS Video Archive, 1987). As Amiri Baraka's robust vision of Africana Studies enriched the Stony Brook campus, the university provided world-shifting scholars and artists an institutional appointment fairly close, in measure of miles, to New York City. Stony Brook, June Jordan explained in "Report from the Bahamas" (1982), is the "state university… where I teach whether or not I feel like it, where I teach without stint because like the waiter, I'm no fool. It's my job and either I work or I do without everything you need money to buy" (Jordan, *On Call,* 1985:43). When some publishers separated from June Jordan because of her writing and speaking about Palestinian human rights, Stony Brook University provided an institutional berth from which to write, organize, travel, and reflect. June Jordan's years at Stony Brook show us how to be in the university and live in the world, at once. Although the four lessons recalled below are only partial reflections of June Jordan's work in eastern Long Island, I gather them for the consideration of faculty, students, and staff at Stony Brook and other universities where the DEI mission is paired with the Palestine exception.

Lesson One: Prepare to Pay a Price

For June Jordan -- as for students and faculty today - speaking or writing about Palestine comes at a cost.

> In the 1980s the *New York Times* refused to ever again print Jordan's work; her New York City publisher vowed to let her books go out of print; and one of her literary agents removed her from the client list, mainly due to her increasing focus on Palestine. (Kinloch, 2006:162)

Jordan did not swallow the isolation of professional "whitelisting" without comment. "I am learning about American censorship," June Jordan wrote. "Apparently, there is some magisterial and unnameable 'we' who decided -- in the cowardly passive voice -- what 'is punishable' or not" (Jordan, *On Call,* 1985: 3). Faced with this professional censure, the withdrawal of opportunities, invitations, and networks, June Jordan gathered her own political essays into a book, named it *On Call,* and explained that there was no other outlet to share much of this work. "This book must compensate for the absence of a cheaper and more immediate print outlet for my two cents. If political writing by a Black woman did not strike so many editors as presumptuous or simply bizarre then, perhaps this book would not be needed" (Jordan, 1985: 1) Initially embraced by publishers as a Black Woman poet, June Jordan was now excluded because she had moved out of place. The roster of subjects on which she, as a Black woman poet, was allowed to speak did not include Israel-Palestine.

> The only supposedly legitimate persons allowed by the media to express any views whatsoever on Lebanon/ Israel/ Palestinians/ US-Middle East policies were whitemen. Everyone else was either an Arab (i.e. "Anti-Semitic") or "Anti-Semitic" or else self-hating Jews (i.e "Anti-Semitic"). (Jordan, 1985: 83)

Mercifully, June Jordan did not allow her world-work to be circumscribed by professional acclaim or criticism. She understood herself as an artist, a scholar, and a teacher apart from the titles and praise allotted by publishers, universities, or employers. Her politics, she explained,

> devolve from my entire real life, and real phone calls and meetings about real horror or triumph happening to other real people, none of it respects or reflects any orthodox anything, any artifice of position or concern." (Jordan, 1985: 2)

Rooted in relationships apart from academic or publishing hierarchies, June Jordan weathered the backlash of American censorship and the cowardly passive voice. "I am gaining important connections to people who are actually not so different as American censorship might have you believe" (Jordan, 1985: 3). A procession of writers and artists arrayed against the violent Israel-Palestine status quo -- Benjamin Beit Hallahmi, Yo'av Karny, Etel Adnan, Shula Koenig -- appear in Jordan's poetry, dedications, essays, and letters during this period. Cultivating these relationships was a source of sustenance, clarity, and encouragement when it came time to pay the price.

Even when speaking about Palestine exacted a personal toll (Magloire, 2024), solidarity friendships also bloomed. Lebanese writer Etel Adnan wrote to June Jordan during the period of publishing troubles. "You know that 'Beirut' divides the word in two. It is one of the most untouchable 'taboos' for some. That's why. They never forgive you for thinking that Arabs are human beings. It is the one issue that one doesn't tackle without paying a price" (Edwards, 2021: 265). Reciprocally, June Jordan honored this relationship in the 1983 "Poem for Etel Adnan Who Writes." The poem begins with a bleak epigraph about the loneliness of watching the world stand by while beloveds are martyred: "[s]o we shall say: Don't fool yourselves. Jesus is not coming. We are alone." It ends in an exhilarating call to revolutionary friends who are one another's redemption when the world sits silent. "Nobody died to save the world/ Come/ Let us break heads together" (Jordan, *Living Room,* 1985: 62-63). Detailing a shift from despair to directed action, this poem shares the inestimable gifts, glee as much as clarity, that solidarity friendships provide.

Lesson Two: Confront Power

June Jordan relentlessly spoke her truth. She did not do this alone. "It has been other women," she wrote, "who have helped me to outlive and to undo my fears of telling the truth" (Jordan, 1985: 84). If resistance is a muscle, June Jordan's regular exercise of dissent produced a mode of courageous truth-telling that was not limited to foreign policy. Even when winning national poetry awards, June Jordan used her platform to expose the publishing industry's power dynamics. In 1981 she wrote an essay lamenting the "exclusion of every hilarious, amazing, visionary, pertinent, and unforgettable poet from National Endowment of the Arts grants…"(Jordan, 1985: 5). The next year (1982) June Jordan was awarded the same NEA fellowship she had criticized; and in 1987 Jordan was still urging Stony Brook students to examine how the NEA fellowship (and other national poetry awards) furthered an exclusive and Eurocentric understanding of "good" poetry. When powerful institutions in her field lauded June Jordan, she did not claim that her name in lights was sufficient for systemic change. Instead, she seized the moment to expose the flaws of a system that made her a pathbreaker by excluding others. For June Jordan, confronting power was not a seasonal or limited exercise; she was consistent in using pen and platform to illuminate the injustices she saw and felt, even when she was implicated in the harm.

Again and again, June Jordan named her own complicity in death-making systems. With piercing clarity, she named herself, as a United States citizen, among the rolls of those who are guilty.

> Yes, I did know it was the money I earned as a poet that
> paid
> for the bombs and the planes and the tanks

that they used to massacre your family (Jordan, *Living Room,* 1985: 106).

For Jordan, calling out complicity was a way to pursue one's own power. By articulating that we are breathing when others are dead, that our children are safe in bed while other mothers are clawing at rubble, we hold the weight of our shared humanity. Every day we participate in unholy evil, but June Jordan knew that we need not consent, nor close our eyes, to this.

> Supposing everytime I hit this key
> somebody
> crumples to the ground or stops
> breathing for a minute or begins to strangle
> in the crib
>
> Supposing everytime I play this chord
> ribs
> smash
> brain-cells shrink
> and a woman loses all of her hair
>
> Supposing everytime I follow a melody
> the overtones irradiate five Phillipino
> workers
> burning their bodies
> to bone
> (Jordan, *Living Room,* 1985: 118).

Calling out complicity with death-making violence is not a slur. It is a way of telling the truth about our own power and our duty to exercise it. "Most important, I think, is this," June Jordan writes. "I have faced my own culpability, my own absolute dirty hands, so to speak, in the continuation of injustice and powerful intolerance" (Jordan, 2002: 8). What do we do with these dirty hands? On a university campus, when students awaken to their own complicity (which is also their power) they find ways to wash and wash and wash again. They find organizations to join, slogans to shout, funds to raise, monies from which to divest. If Stony Brook University administrators seek to shame, control, and criminalize all of this -- our students' impulse to live humanely within a broken world -- faculty must decide which version of power we will subscribe to and teach. What will follow if we dare to acknowledge our economic and political relationships around the world -- our ties to Haiti, to Congo, to Sudan, and Gaza? And as June Jordan repeatedly asked: by pretending we are innocent, what will we lose?

Lesson Three: Refuse to Confine Compassion

Another of June Jordan's poem collections from the Stony Brook years, *Living Room* (1985), traverses time zones, geographies, languages, and nation-states. The poems are about Nicaragua, Chile, Long Island, Soweto, Arkansas, and, yes, Palestine and Lebanon. Fiercely committed to speaking about the unity between people and the complicity of ideologies, Jordan refused to silo global violence in particular regions or bodies. The symmetry in the suffering of different populations was an opportunity to illuminate common sources of harm, and so pull up violence from the root. Accordingly, the book *Living Room* is

> dedicated
> to the children of Atlanta
> And
> to the children of Lebanon
> (Jordan, *Living Room,* 1985: preface)

What do the children in Atlanta and Lebanon have in common? The first and last poems in the collection explain. The first, "From Sea to Shining Sea," a rapid-fire report on the dystopia of the Reagan years, tells it:

> *This was not a good time to be a child*
> Suicide rates among the young reached
> alltime highs as the incidence of child
> abuse and sexual abuse
> rose dramatically across the nation.
>
> In Atlanta Georgia at least twenty-eight Black
> children have been murdered, with
> several more missing and all of them feared dead, or
> something of the sort.
> (Jordan, *Living Room,* 1985:16)

The last poem, "Moving towards Home," a response to the 1982 Israeli/U.S. massacre of the Sabra neighborhood and the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, also offers guidance. It begins with the *New York Times* quoting a grieving Lebanese mother.

> "Where is Abu Fadi," she wailed?
> "Who will bring me my loved one?"
> *New York Times* 9/20/82

The children may be separated by miles and oceans, but whether in Atlanta or Lebanon, their blood cries out to be mourned, to be cradled, to be counted. June Jordan's Palestine poems are also Nicaragua poems, are also United States poems, are always human poems. On this point, Jordan was insistent; we must refuse to confine our compassion within national boundaries and borders.

Lesson Four: Your Identity is a Portal

In March 2024, I teach Jordan's iconic poem "Moving towards Home" to my African American Political Thought seminar. The opening salvo of the poem rushes through my classroom, articulating our current conundrum: we are inundated by images of atrocity, and we do not know what to do or say.

I do not wish to speak about the bulldozer and the
Red dirt
Not quite covering all of the arms and legs

Nor do I wish to speak about the nightlong screams
that reached
the observation posts where soldiers lounged about

Following a litany of refusals, the listing of horrors, there is this stunning declaration:

I was born a Black woman
and now
I am become a Palestinian
against the relentless laughter of evil
there is less and less living room
and where are my loved ones?

Raised with DEI's focus on identity as representation, intersectionality, and seat-at-the-table politics, the students in my seminar are flummoxed. What to make of this dissident poet, born a Black woman, and now become a Palestinian? Is this a desertion -- an evacuation of identity? Is this appropriation -- taking on what is not yours? How can you be born a Black woman and become a Palestinian?

For June Jordan identity was a portal, a means to connect deeply with the world and with others. In the 1980s when she traveled to Nicaragua, to the Bahamas, to Lebanon and Palestinian refugee camps, she did so as a Black woman. She brought the fullness of her identity to each new geography. June Jordan's 1984 essay "Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There" begins with the claim that identity is an engine, something propelling her forward. "Like a lot of Black women, I have always had to invent the power my freedom requires," she writes. "All my life I've been studying revolution" (Jordan, 1985: 65). The reasons why June Jordan continued to talk about Palestine, traveled to Nicaragua, wondered about South Africa, were the rigors and revelations of her life as a Black woman. Seeing the world through her own eyes led her to reach farther than the borders given to her. "South Africa used to seem so far away," June Jordan muses. "Then it came home to me. It began to signify the meaning of white hatred here." (Jordan, 1985: 17). Moving through the world, poet June Jordan was compelled to ask particular questions and took the risk of traveling, going to see for herself.

> What I know from my own life after Lebanon is that I must insist upon my own truth and my own love, especially when that truth and that love will carry me across the borders of my own tribe, or I will wither in the narrow cold light of my own eyes. (Jordan, 1985: 84)

Reaching into the richness of one's own identity should carry the possibility of relating to people who are not your own but who have become your own. Our class seminar concludes with this question: what are the gifts and duties of your particular vista? What can you alone see and what does this require of you?

Conclusion

Amplifying ancestor June Jordan's work at Stony Brook University is necessary in these times. With the rise and fall of DEI as a framework that seeks to institutionalize anti-racism within universities and yet enforces silence about Palestine, we must speak frankly about where this logic falters and who it fails. In this way, we map our location and create space to revise. Thankfully, we do not begin from scratch. The lessons from June Jordan's years at Stony Brook --- prepare to pay a price, confront power, refuse to confine compassion, claim identity as a portal -- are an alternate model of how to teach justice and equity as bedrock values on campus. Bastions of intellectual and institutional autonomy, places like June Jordan's Poetry Center and Amiri Baraka's Africana Studies, must be purposefully cultivated. The archives are a resource. We need not be led by the nose nor discouraged by limited and repressive visions of what the university has been and what it can be; we have other examples.

June Jordan died in the year 2002, two decades before the student encampment protests of 2024. We can imagine what she would have said. In April 1985, Stony Brook professor June Jordan was invited to address Columbia University students demanding university divestment from apartheid South Africa. I reproduce some of the text of her speech:

> I want to tell you how much happiness you give, how much morale you restore, by your courageous and heroic protests here at Columbia. I want to tell you how much respect I feel and how much I admire the persevering heroism of your bravery. To me you are political heroes and political heroines coming of age despite national inertia, turpitude and cowardice. At this moment of outstandingly senile leadership and the politics of the senile cowboy leading the ignorant into a never never land of blundering lies and unconscionable idiotic outcries… you are young and brilliantly well-informed and centered on justice… (Jordan, 1985: 118)

During her Stony Brook University years, June Jordan was writing and thinking about revolution -- about what it looks like, who can speak it, what it means to fight for it. "A lot of people get scared by the word revolution," June Jordan explained to a Stony Brook student during a Q&A session; "my attitude about it is why use it, let's just talk about what you want to accomplish…" (Stony Brook AFS Video Archive, 1987). The same clarifying principle applies to the mantra of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education; what are these words actually trying to accomplish? With her poet's eye June Jordan paid attention to the Long Island Expressway, Beirut, Soweto, and Des Moines, Iowa. What was at stake? Nothing less than "[our] ambitions of self-respect and species' survival" (Jordan, 1985: 83). The breadth of June Jordan's geopolitical imaginary, her global "majority people of the

world" map of care, challenges a DEI sensibility where identity is valuable as a means of so-called minorities plunking down a seat at the blood-stained table (Jordan, 1978). Instead, June Jordan offers us her revolutionary traveling -- an ethic that propels us to reach toward the worlds we do not yet have, but desperately need.

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