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## CIVIL WARS

JUNE JORDAN

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A WIDE-RANGING  
AND BRILLIANT  
REPORT FROM  
THE FRONT LINES  
OF AMERICA BY  
THE BLACK POET  
AND ACTIVIST

CIVIL WARS  
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never taught children, and so forth), it would seem that the main qualification was *status as an intermediary*. No relative, no close friend, no adult who was once one of the "Negro children," the objects of sympathetic, horrified description, has been asked: What did you think then? What do you think now?

I will not forget my conversation with a "liberal" literary editor:

I: "Who's reviewing Kozol's book for you?"

He: "\_\_\_\_\_"

I: "Is he white?"

He: (surprised by the question) "Yes. Why?"

I: "It's unfortunate, given the subject matter, that there won't be a Black review anywhere."

He: "Oh. But the reader won't know the difference."

Let me tell you: there is a difference. There is a difference Black from white in this country. And the reader, the general public is not going to know the human meaning of that difference as long as *dialog-by-intermediary* rules the press and the rest of it. The white problem will never be solved as long as American Black life is an imagining, a TV spectacular, the product of rank intuition, the casualty of gross misrepresentation, and grist for statistical games. The white problem will never be solved as long as American Black life remains an object, a titillation, a scare, an unknown reality, and an unfamiliar voice. Black people have been speaking as subjects, as first persons, as the only persons we are—for longer than it took to "radicalize" Jonathan Kozol. Is anyone, is anyone white, preparing to listen?

## 6 Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person (1969)

In the fall of 1967, Herb Kohl called me at home, very late one night. He was supposed to begin teaching at City College the next morning and he had decided that was impossible: He needed to write, full-time. Would I, he asked me, take the job instead?

I was sure Herb was kidding. I had never taught anywhere, had no college degree, and what in the hell would I be teaching, anyway?

"Freshman comp," he answered me, calmly. "What's that?" I wondered. But Herb is pretty persuasive and, at the last, after he promised to check with the Chairman of the English Department, and then let me know the outcome of their conference, I agreed to take the class.

The Chairman said he would be very pleased if I'd join the faculty so I spent the night crash-rummaging among my books in order to choose a course curriculum reading list. The next day we began, the freshmen and I, with Whitehead's *Aims of Education*.

In this way I began my teaching career on a university level. At the time, the English faculty of City College included these poets and writers and thinkers: Toni Cade Bambara, Addison Gayle, Jr., Ray Patterson, Barbara Christian, David Henderson, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Mina Shaughnessy. Toni Cade Bambara walked with me to my first class. "Are you nervous?" she asked. I laughed, nervously. "Anything you have to give, just give it to them," she said. "They'll be grateful for it."

All of these people were soon to become much more than colleagues. City College was split between faculty and Third World students who wanted to inaugurate an Open Admissions policy, on one side, and faculty and students who viewed the Open Admissions concept as an intrinsic atrocity which, if implemented, would catapult the University into a trough of mediocrity, at best. Those opposed to Open Admissions argued, in effect, that the people, as in a democratic state, preclude excellence: excellence of standards and of achievement.

In every sense, from faculty petitions to student manifestoes, to the atmosphere in the cafeteria and the bathrooms, City College signified a revolution in progress. Nobody was eating, sleeping, thinking, or moving around anything except the issues at stake.

When the Third World Students raised the red and green and black nationalist flag on the campus flagpole and closed the campus until our demands were met, we opened what we called A Free University at Harlem's I.S. 201. It was exhilarating: we were furious and fighting. And we won.

I wrote this essay, published in the *Evergreen Review*, October 1969. It is, if you will, a position paper.

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All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.

—from *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

Body and soul, Black America reveals the extreme questions of contemporary life, questions of freedom and identity: *How can I be who I am?*

We lead the world stubbornly down the road to Damascus knowing, as we do, that this time we must name our god. This time, gods will grow from the graveyard and the groin of our

experience. There will be no skyborne imagery, no holy labels slapped around our wrists. Now we arise, alert, determining, and new among ourselves. I am no longer alone. We move into community of moment. We will choose. But not as we were chosen, weighed and measured, pinched, bent backwards, under heel. Not as we were named: by forced dispersal of the seed, by burial of history, by crippling individuality that led the rulers into crimes of dollar blood.

We, we know the individuality that isolates the man from other men, the either/or, the lonely-one that leads the flesh to clothing, jewelry, and land, the solitude of sight that separates the people from the people, flesh from flesh, that jams material between the spirit and the spirit. We have suffered witness to these pitiful, and murdering, masquerade extensions of the self.

Instead, we choose a real, a living enlargement of our only life. We choose community: Black America, in white. Here we began like objects chosen by the blind. And it is here that we see fit to continue—as subjects of human community. We will to bring back the person, alive and sacrosanct; we mean to rescue the person from the amorality of time and science.

History prepares the poor, the victims of unnecessary injustice, to spit at tradition, to blow up the laboratories, to despise all knowledge recklessly loosened from the celebration of all human life. And still, it lies there, the university campus, frequently green, and signifying power: power to the people who feed their egos on the grass, inside the gates.

Black American history prepares Black students to seize possibilities of power even while they tremble about purpose. *Efficiency, competence*: Black students know the deadly, neutral definition of these words. There seldom has been a more efficient system for profiteering, through human debasement, than the plantations, of a while ago. Today, the whole world sits, as quietly scared as it can sit, afraid that, tomorrow, America may direct its efficiency and competence toward another forest for defoliation, or clean-cut laser-beam extermination.

Black American history prepares Black people to believe that true history is hidden and destroyed, or that history results from a logical bundling of lies that mutilate and kill. We have been

prepared, by our American experience, to believe that civilization festers between opposite poles of plunder and pain. And still, the university waits, unavoidable, at the end of compulsory education, to assure the undisturbed perpetuity of this civilization.

We have learned to suspect and to beware the culture belied by phrases such as "the two-car family," or "job security," or "the Department of Defense," or "law and order." We do not deride the fears of prospering white America. A nation of violence and private property has every reason to dread the violated and the deprived. Its history drives the violated into violence and, one of these days, violence will literally signal the end of violence as a means. We are among those who have been violated into violence. Black American experience staggers away from the resurrecting lord of love. In his place, we must examine the life, through death, of Bigger Thomas. We know he was not paranoid. Crazy, yes. Paranoid, no. We know how his sanity died, and who were his well-educated executioners. And the Black student of his life brims hatred for the hateful choice allowed to Bigger Thomas, hatred for an efficiency that cancels, equally, the humanity of the oppressed and the oppressor. Even so, we confront a continuing tyranny that means Bigger Thomas may yet symbolize the method of our liberation into human community.

How will the American university teach otherwise? One favorite university precept is that of reasonable discourse. We ask, when Bigger Thomas stood there, Black-male-in-white-girl's-bedroom, what did reasonable discourse offer, to him? Who would have listened to his explanation of himself next to the drunken white woman, on her bed?

In America, the traditional routes to Black identity have hardly been normal. Suicide (disappearance by imitation, or willed extinction), violence (hysterical religiosity, crime, armed revolt), and exemplary moral courage; none of these is normal.

And, if we consider humankind, if we consider the origins of human society, we realize that, in America, the traditional routes to white identity have not been normal, either. Identity of person has been pursued through the acquisition of material

clues admittedly irrelevant to the achievement of happiness. Identity has been secured among watery objects ceaselessly changing value. Worse, the marketplace has vanquished the workable concept of homeground or, as children say in their games, home-safe.

But Black America has striven toward human community even within the original situation that opposed its development, the situation of slavery. Often enough, at the expense of conceivably better working circumstances, those enslaved pleaded not to be sold away from the extended family they had so desperately scrapped together, inside the slave quarters of a particular plantation. The intensity of Black desiring may be measured when one remembers that legal marriage was forbidden, during slavery. Yet the records boggle full of accounts demonstrating human fealty—as when the freedman saved his earnings over seven or eight years in order to purchase the freedom of his "wife."

Prospering white America perverted, and perverts, the fundamental solace and nurture of community even to the point of derogating the extended family discoverable among America's white and Black impoverished. As any college graduate can tell you, the extended family is "compensation for failure." According to these norms, success happens when the man and his immediate family may competently provide for greater and greater privacy. I.e., greater and greater isolation from others, independence from others, capability to delimit and egotistically control the compass of social experience. Faced by the humanly universal dilemma of individual limit, prospering white America has turned away from the normal plunging into expanded family and commitment. Instead, the pursuit of exclusive power—the power to exclude and to manipulate, plus the pursuit of insulating layers of material shell, have pre-empted the pursuit of community and ridiculed happiness as an invalid, asinine goal.

Blocked by white America, in its questing for community, as the appropriate arena for the appearance and shaping of person, Black America has likewise been blocked in its wayward efforts to emulate the inhumanity of white compensation. Thus, the traditional routes of suicide, violence, and exemplary moral

courage have emerged. They have emerged despite the spectacular absence of literature and history to document and support Black life. Or perhaps, precisely because the usual tools a people employ in the determining of identity were strictly prohibited, these alternative, bizarre, and heroic methods devolved.

But community does not form by marriage between martyr and a movie star. The hero is one, and we remain the many. We have begun like objects belonging to the blind. We have spent our generations in a scream that wasted in the golden ear. Giant, demon, clown, angel, bastard, bitch, and, nevertheless, a family longing, we have made it to the gates: Our hearts hungry on the rocks around the countryside, our hopes the same: our hopes: unsatisfied. Now we have the choice, and we must make that choice our own. We are at the gates.

Who are we?

There has been no choosing until now. Until the university, there is no choice. Education is compulsory. Education has paralleled the history of our Black lives; it has been characterized by the punishment of nonconformity, abridgment, withered enthusiasm, distortion, and self-denying censorship. Education has paralleled the life of prospering white America; it has been characterized by reverence for efficiency, cultivation of competence unattended by concern for aim, big white lies, and the mainly successful blackout of Black life.

Black students arrive at the university from somewhere. Where is that, exactly? Where is Black America, all of it, from the beginning? Why do we ask? How does it happen that we do not know?

What is the university, until we arrive? Is it where the teachers of children receive their training? It is where the powerful become more powerful. It is where the norms of this abnormal power, this America, receive the ultimate worship of propagation. It is where the people become usable parts of the whole machine: Machine is not community.

Is the university where the person learns how to become a valuable member of society? Even so, it is not, the university is not where the person learns how he is always a valuable member of an always valuable society of people. It probably

takes a college graduate to explain the "higher learning" that does not teach the unearned sanctity and value of each person.

Yet it waits there, at the end of coercion, the citadel of technique and terminology. At the gates, a temporary freedom plays between the student and the school. Choice confronts both sides. It seems. But like the others who have been violated, whose joy has been bled and viciously assaulted, the Black student can choose to refuse the university only at incredible cost. He needs power if he will spring free from dependency upon those who exploit, isolate, and finally destroy. If he will liberate "homebase," he must, for a time, separate himself from the identity of the powerless. No. He must learn to assume the identity of the powerless, in a powerful way. No. He must understand homebase. But where is that? Who is he, this student the university chooses to accept? Does the university have any idea? Fortified by the freaks, the heroes, the saints, the rebels in exile, Black students reject the necessity of miracle, where identity is concerned. Every saint and every rebel of Black America reinforces the determination of the majority to achieve a normal, ordinary access to person. The majority knows it is, by definition, incapable of the miraculous. And yet it admires the consequences of Black miracle in white America: All of us hunt identity.

And so, the Black student enters the gates. Choice of entry is delusional. He must go inside, or perish through dependency. But he rejects the university as it panders to his potential for neither/nor anonymity, or for dysfunctional amnesia. He enters the university and, snatching at the shred reality of freedom-at-last, or first choice, he chooses his family. *The black student clutches at family precisely at that moment when he enters the ultimate glorification of a society that has rejected him. Why is anyone amazed?* Before this moment family has been merely given or else taken away. Finally freed from the obedience, the slavery of childhood, Black students choose a family for the first time:

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face

to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." From our knees, we have fought tall enough to look into the question of the mirror. More than any other people, we cannot afford to forget the mirror is a questioning. And *face to face*, we eat together in the dining rooms, we dorm together, sleep together, talk together, love ourselves, together, face to face; the family mirror clears inside that chosen clarity. We, Black America, on the prospering white American university campus, we come together as students, Black students. How shall we humanly compose the knowledge that troubles the mind into ideas of life? How can we be who we are?

*Black studies.* The engineer, the chemist, the teacher, the lawyer, the architect, if he is Black, he cannot honorably engage career except as Black engineer, Black architect. *Of course, he must master the competence, the perspectives of physics, chemistry, economics, and so forth.* But he cannot honorably, or realistically, forsake the origins of his possible person. Or she cannot. Nor can he escape the tyranny of ignorance except as he displaces ignorance with study: study of the impersonal, the amorality of the sciences *anchored by Black Studies.* The urgency of his heart, his breath, demands the knowing of the truth about himself: the truth of Black experience. And so, Black students, looking for the truth, demand teachers least likely to lie, least likely to perpetuate the traditions of lying: lies that deface the father from the memory of the child. We request Black teachers of Black studies. It is not that we believe only Black people can understand the Black experience. It is, rather, that we acknowledge the difference between reality and criticism as the difference between the Host and the Parasite.

As Frantz Fanon has written, the colonized man does not say he knows the truth, he *is* the truth. Likewise, we do not say we know the truth: We are the Truth: We are the living Black experience, and therefore, we are the primary sources of information. For us, there is nothing optional about "Black Experience" and/or "Black Studies": we must know ourselves. But theories and assertions do not satisfy, anymore. Studies are called for. And, regardless how or where these studies lead, the

current facts support every effort to create study alliances among nonwhite, or nonprospering white Americans who, all of us, endure as victims of materialism versus our lives.

We look for community. We have already suffered the alternatives to community, to human commitment. We have borne the whiplash of "white studies" unmitigated by the stranger ingredient of humane dedication. Therefore, we cannot, in sanity, pass by the potentiality of Black studies: studies of the person consecrated to the preservation of that person.

On the contrary, "white studies" should do likewise: At this date when humankind enjoys wild facility to annihilate, no human study can sanely ignore the emergency requirements for efficient, yes, competent affirmation of the values of life, and that most precious burden of identity that depends, beggarly, on love.

The university may choose among 1,000 differences of response to Black demands, but if the decision bespeaks the traditional process of majority overrule, white choice will sputter to no effect. Like the rest of America that is no longer willing to endure hostile control, Black America will not accept any choice affecting their lives unless they control even the terms under consideration. And if it is true that Black rejection of majority overrule will lead to a white-predicted "bloodbath," it is also true that he who makes such a prophecy will bear responsibility for its fulfillment.

Poverty is a bloodbath. Exploitation of human life, for material gain, is unforgivable-letting-blood-flow for the sake of other currencies. Perforce, the natural element of Black children has been the American bloodbath. We know American violence, power, and success. Is the university prepared to teach us something new?

Black studies. White studies: Revised. What is the curriculum, what are the standards that only human life threatens to defile and "lower"? Is the curriculum kin to that monstrous metaphor of justice, seated, under blindfold, in an attitude and substance of absolute stone? Life appealing to live, and to be, and to know a community that will protect the living simply because we are alive: This is the menace to university curriculum and stan-

dards. This is the possibility of survival we must all embrace: the possibility of life, as has been said, by whatever means necessary.

In New York City, the metaphor of Harlem contains the symbol, and the fact, of City College. On that campus, the most recent miracle of Black America has become a manifest reality. There, Black and Puerto Rican students have joined to issue what they describe as the Fourth Demand. This demand exceeds the scope of lately typical negotiation between school and student. It speaks to community. It reads: "The racial composition of the entering class [is] to reflect the Black and Puerto Rican population of the New York City Schools."

Obviously, the fourth demand reaches outside the University province and into high school habits of student tragedy. In the predominantly Black and Puerto Rican high school nearest City College, the academic diploma rate steadies at 1.2 percent. Since Black and Puerto Rican students constitute the majority of public students, and since the majority of them does not receive an academic diploma, how can the City College reflect their majority status? Either the high schools or the College will have to change almost beyond current planning imagination. To meet the fourth demand, New York City lower schools will have to decide that a 65 percent dropout rate for students, of any color, is intolerable, and that a 1.2 percent academic diploma rate, at any high school, cannot continue.

In fact, how will the City College continue unless it may admit the children of the city? Will the City College of New York resort to importation of students from Iowa and Maine? The children of the city are Black and Puerto Rican; they are the children of suffering and impotence; they are the children coerced into lower grade education that alienates upward of 65 percent of them so that the majority of this majority disappears into varieties of ruin. If the university will not teach, will not instruct the lower schools, by its example, how will they learn? If the university is not the ultimate teaching institution, the ultimate, the most powerful institution to decree the hope of education, *per se*, what is it? And yet, the City College cries "curriculum" and worries about "standards" even while

the future of its conceivable justification, the students of the city schools, disappears except for a self-destructive trace.

Black and Puerto Rican students at the City College, nevertheless, insist upon the fourth demand; they insist upon community. Serving the positive implications of Black Studies (Life Studies), students everywhere must insist on new college admission policies that will guide and accelerate necessary, radical change, at all levels of education. Universities must admit the inequities of the civilization they boast. These inequities mean that the children of Other America have been vanquished by the consequences of compulsory, hostile instruction and inescapable, destructive experience. It is appropriate that the university should literally adopt these living consequences as its own humane privilege, for service. Such embrace waits upon the demonstration of majority conscience. Black America waits upon the demonstration of a conscience that will seek justice with utmost, even ruthless, efficiency.

Yet we do not only wait. Black America moves, headstrong, down toward Damascus. Everybody on the ladder, hanging on identity opposed to the hatred of life. And if we do not name the gods according to the worship of our lives, then what will we worship, in deed?